

Through Jenny's Eyes

By

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The sky grumbles and the streets flood...kind of a metaphor for how I'm feeling if only I could let go. The storm and the fact that it's still early morning hold the darkness in place, interrupted only by occasional bursts of light, provided free of charge by Mother Nature.

A restless wind also has its say...snapping tree limbs like twigs.

Sweat pours from my head now and moistens my entire body. It couldn't be true, she was dead. I'd gotten the phone call two nights ago, that mama had died and it was up to me, being the executor of the will, to return to Claremont and tie up loose ends. So explain to me then, how is it that mama is standing no more than two feet away, staring at me and pointing her finger like it was all my fault? How could it be?

When I hear the kids, I sit up and realize it's just a dream. In less than five hours, I will be there, because I have to. I'm wishing more than anything that Tommy could be with me through this...and who knows, maybe he will be.

His death has exhausted me for years. All I could do was search for answers, try to find a different ending, try to make the pain disappear. Now they tell me mama has died. She disappeared for me years ago; I feel no loss, it should have been her.

I leave California with a heavy heart, but try not to let it show. My babies, Lindsay and Jacob are young and they are innocent, and I am hoping to bury my pain with mama, miles away.

We swap hugs and sloppy kisses and Joe drives me to the airport after we drop the kids off at day care. I tell him I will be fine-he has my cell and I've got his. We smile, and he reassures me that he is never more than a phone call away. I board the plane, and quite alone hours later, find myself finally passing signs for Claremont. Ironically, the weather here is just as bad-a gray, angry-looking sky, with wind and rain, blowing almost horizontally.

But I sit pretty much oblivious to it, more entrenched in the encompassing evil coming from inside that house...coming from inside my head.

I stare through the window of my rental, wondering if when the old house is demolished-the past will take its place in our sorry history and the haunting finally will end. I can only hope. Over the storm, I've no control...yes, I'm out of control you could say, my hands shaking as I light up.

I have moved some 3,000 miles away, living now with my family in Sacramento. There I am safe.

And yet there are pieces of me, still rooted here, never having been set free from this house. People talk about haunted houses as though they are something that exist only in movies or books. But I know better-I was here.

And now, as memories flood in with the same ferocity as the storm, I'm right back here again-30 years ago.

"C'mon you guys, time to get up! Breakfast is on the table."

"Okay, alright!"

"We're comin', mama."

Tommy was three years older than me, and all in all, a pretty good brother. Like most, we'd fight sometimes and he'd tease me as brothers do, but I knew I could always count on him; he would always be my big brother and take care of me.

"Jenny Louisa, if you don't keep your damned dolls off these stairs, I swear!"

"Tommy I don't wanna hear you talkin' like that, now, you got no business bein' both her brother and her mama and if her dolls are damned, you'd better watch out for them, too!" Tommy laughed.

"Oh, mama, now you know those dolls aint really damned, but those eyes-they do stare like maybe they're possessed..." Tommy and mama laughed a lot it seemed; I was usually on the sidelines listening and laughing too, sometimes having to pretend I'd gotten the joke-but it was them...they had something I figured I'd get in on one day, maybe someday when I was as old as Tommy, only I never could catch up, him being three years older and all. And I never did. Tommy died when he was just 17 years old. Some say it was an accident, but I know better; I was there. I was 14 and my big brother died in my arms.

"Sorry, Tommy, I don't even know how Baby Tina got there. I don't think I left her there..."

"Well Jesus, Jenny, now you're soundin' like mama! Like that damn doll's got a mind of its own and I swear, Jenny Louisa, you both better knock it off or you'll be havin' nightmares for sure."

I wore pigtails a lot and mama'd cut me bangs, and I guess I really didn't look like a little girl who spent most of her days with an older brother, swimming in a pond, climbing trees and joining in on his mischief, with only really a slight interest in my dolls, but it was true. Tommy really was more fun.

"Well I didn't mean nothin' by it, Tommy, I guess I did leave her there if you say I did-I just don't remember, that's all."

Our house seemed huge when we were young and I suppose there were plenty of places for my poor dolls to turn up. We had the whole upstairs to ourselves, including an attic above us which was great for sharing secrets and plotting childhood adventures. The porch was another of our favorite places... we'd sit there often as day passed into evening, and when either the mosquitoes would become too much, making their way through some hole in the screen, or as the sun would set and the air begin to cool, we would make our way back indoors.

"Okay, just put it away next time-it aint no big deal-now c'mere and come get a hug." I was always sounding apologetic for something stupid I'd done while Tom was always there to reassure me that it weren't no big deal.

These three years we had between us sometimes seemed like ages-Tom was smart about things and always seemed like he was willing to take on the world; he'd do whatever needed to be done, around the house, around the yard, and as we got older,

around the neighborhood, too. Maybe that was because our father wasn't around, I don't know. We didn't know much about him because anytime we asked mama anything about him; she'd quickly find a clever way to avoid the subject. Or, for that time when we'd caught her off guard, she told us it wasn't our business and it wasn't up for discussion. Now while I would've been fine to let this go just for the benefit of not getting mama upset and all, Tom felt this was his chance-he'd gotten his foot in the door and maybe-finally-he could pry some information out of her. He knew it was a risky endeavor-he knew mama'd meant it when she'd announced it wasn't up for discussion-but for the few times when you might say Tom wasn't so smart, you'd at least have to say that amid his stupidity there was extreme courage.

"But mama, we just wanna know about him, I mean he was our papa and I guess that makes it our business after all."

Mama looked Tommy dead in the eye...angry with him that he had disrespected her wish to let it go, but almost like this were her opportunity to release some of the poison she'd carried around inside for so long. She'd wanted to protect us, I suppose, but she also knew we had a right to know, even if in the end we'd have been better off never having pursued it. Mama knew Tom wouldn't let up-it was a subject that would keep surfacing until it was satisfactorily put to rest. That's just how Tommy was regarding things that mattered.

"Okay, if you both want to know all about your papa, then fine. I'll tell you whatever you want to know. But first you're gonna eat your breakfast...then we'll talk."

"Putting it to rest" was kind of like what I was supposed to be doing here now-I was here to see that house torn down-I was here to expel all the demons that found their way into our lives-possibly I was here to try and forgive mama-I don't know-and surely I was here to revisit sweet Tommy and to say goodbye ...again. Never did the phrase "rest in peace" mean more to me and never could it be more personal. I missed Tommy terribly, there was so much I needed to tell him-to thank him for-mostly I just loved him.

Tom and I both sat down for breakfast...mama always had us say grace before we started to eat-it was a simple "Thank you Lord for the food we are about to eat" which was a lot

easier to swallow than some of what our friends and neighbors sometimes got into, especially around the holidays. Sometimes it seemed like the blessing of the food would go on so long that the whole dinner would get cold-Thanksgiving, of course, being the worst because you were supposed to be thankful then, and so whoever was saying grace I guess felt obligated to go on and on, or it just was no good. Thank goodness we only had to deal with that a few times a year, and the rest of the time, we could just recite: "Thank you Lord for the food we are about to eat." Of course we could rattle that one off in our sleep, and as mama insisted we say it anyway, we did so and with no objections. That particular rule was easier to comply with than not to-it kept the peace in the house, which was always a good thing.

After breakfast, Tommy and I raced out of the house, as we always would, with one of us forgetting not to let the screen door slam. Mama always hated that banging, but I think she appreciated knowing where we were. She knew that slammed door meant we were headed for the pond, a morning swim being part of our summer ritual. Tom would always jump in first, and I would wait for him to let me know the water was fine. Again, just a part of our routine.

It was summer and it was hot. It didn't matter if it was morning; it just got hotter as the day dragged on. But this was a pleasant time for us, we had the sun on our faces and on our backs, no one was there to yell at us for anything, and we could just enjoy being kids. It was a good time. Sometimes Tommy would swim underwater and grab me by the leg like an underwater sea creature...I even grew to appreciate that as a part of our game, dumb as it was.

By the time we got back, mama was usually involved in something-whether she was sewing, doing her own thing (whatever that might be) or on the phone. Mama had a job in town for most of her life, soon as she was old enough to work from the stories we'd heard...she worked in a factory making caps for milk bottles. At this stage, it was only part-time-people had been getting laid off for a while because of cut-backs and she was lucky to have work at all. I guess she had seniority because of the years she'd already put in, so they kept her on as best they could. Sometimes they'd

call at a moment's notice and ask if she could work half a day...she always said yes. Now me and Tom, we'd try to sneak back in after the pond because we usually had left a mess when we ran out to begin with, but mama wasn't that dumb or that deaf.

"Is that you, my little darlings? You sure aint got no Indian blood in you, making all that racket!" (Then she'd tell us to clean up any mess we'd left and we'd do it quickly while we were still swearing it was all clean. Mama knew we were lying, but she was a good sport and she played along.)

Today was Sunday...and though we usually didn't attend any Sunday service, mama told us to dig out our Sunday best and to get dressed. By this time, we'd both forgotten that mama had agreed to talk to us about our papa, and now we had more important things to be concerned with, like why we were being told to dress up. Tom and I looked at each other bewildered, and as usual, Tommy rose to the occasion.

"How come we're going to church, mama? Somebody die or something?"

Mama laughed. "No, honey, nothing that bleak, Sarah Mae Jenkins is getting married. You remember that boy she'd been seein' for a few months now? Well they're having a baby before they're supposed to and now they got to get married, daddy's orders."

By this time, I had no idea what the heck mama was even talkin' about, so Tommy's job as big brother was to explain it to me. Tom had just turned thirteen and I was soon to be ten, but I didn't know much at all about sex, the rules of marriage or any of that, and it was hard for me to understand why anyone's daddy wouldn't be happy about them having a new baby. Babies were cute and sweet and so what on earth was that man's problem? Tommy did his best to explain to me why Jeb Jenkins might have a problem with it, and I kind of got it and I kind of didn't care. All I knew right now was that I had to find something nice to wear and we were off to Sarah Mae's wedding... And the main thing I knew, was that weddings were always fun.

So there we were, all decked out and feeling awkward and dumb and our mama entered the room like a vision. She was beautiful. I guess mama was always pretty, but boy, when she

got dressed up and put on some extra frills here and there, and got her hair all fixed up and nice, well she was really something to marvel at. I think I would have given almost anything to feel that pretty, but like I said, me and Tommy, we just felt dumb. Still we knew that once we got over how strange we felt, there was fun to be had...so as long as we didn't wander passed any mirrors, we'd be fine.

THE WEDDING

Of course there was Sarah Mae and Todd, husband-to-be. The preacher stood ready to perform, awaiting only a nod from Mr. Jenkins.

We were there, with mama; the whole two back rows were filled...half with giggling children, while a few of the older, more responsible youngins tried to hush them up. Our next door neighbor, Jake, was there and also our neighbors to the north, who pretty much kept to themselves. That was okay with us, 'cause they outnumbered us by quite a few and Tom and I didn't really think they were all that nice.

They had a dog...his name was Bo. He was a big dog, and nice enough with them, but boy could he scare the wits out of any kids just passing by. He was not fond of children and though some couldn't resist the urge to tease him behind the big fence, we'd decided long ago he was something not to reckon with. Tom used to say nasty things about him behind his back, of course, but never to his face.

We didn't have a dog, mama said it was maintenance enough having two kids. Sometimes we would snicker to each other that it was enough maintenance having a cranky mama, and maybe we could trade her in and get us a dog instead! Of course we didn't mean it...dogs can't cook or go shopping like mama could, and they couldn't tell funny stories or tuck in their little kids and give them kisses good night. So we decided we'd go ahead and keep mama after all, and "oh well" on the dog thing.

We did have this cat...she'd arrived at our back door one day when we kids were just little. She lived outside, coming and going as she pleased, but you could tell she enjoyed our company, and we enjoyed hers. We named her "Pepper" because of her coloring. Pepper enjoyed her time just laying in the afternoon sun, or even just getting pet as mama would sometimes sit outside with her coffee, enjoying the morning. She was low in the maintenance area, and therefore a welcomed part of our family, even by mama.

But back to the wedding, Mr. Jamesmar-who owned the general store was there with his little boy Jeremy. He was a nice boy, well-mannered like his daddy. There were others whose faces were familiar, though I didn't know their names, and then there were those folks we didn't recognize at all.

When both bride and groom said their "I do's," there were a few sighs of relief. A kiss and they ran out of church, with all of us following. Then came the party, the part we'd all been waiting for. No one except Sarah Mae's daddy really cared whether she was married or not, but everybody seemed ready to have fun.

The music was loud; it was foot-stompin', carryin' on kind of music, especially when some of the grown-ups had gotten some liquor in them. And liquor was a-plenty at any of the local weddings!

So the grown-ups all got sassed and we kids played hide-and-seek and spying games and pretty much enjoyed that we were in this "supervised" environment without any real supervision. Everyone was dancing, laughing, eating, drinking and drinking some more. The food was good.

All the kids within about a 10-mile radius showed up-some of them we knew from school-others were distant relatives, some strangers even-just friends that got wind of a wedding. People came out of the woodwork. Weddings were well attended, generally speaking.

The sun was going down and it had been Tommy's turn to hide with the others when suddenly he appeared looking like he'd seen a ghost.

I ran to meet him and asked what was wrong. Tommy grabbed me by the arm and pulled me behind a big old tree.

"Jenny Louisa, you need to promise me that what I tell you

stays between you and me until I figure out what to do about it. Promise!" Tom would call me Jenny Louisa instead of just Jenny when he was trying to make a point or when something was serious-and I could tell by how he looked this time that he wasn't messing around.

"Promise!" he said again before I could close my mouth.

"I promise, I promise! What is it, Tommy? What's wrong?"

Tom sat down on the dirt and just looked straight ahead-"It's mama. She's over in the Wilson's barn with Jake, Jenny. And she's got half her clothes off.

"I heard someone laughing and I snuck over to see what was going on and then I heard mama. Thank god I didn't let them see me before I saw them-Jesus, Jenny, what are we going to do?"

"Tommy-what does that mean?"

"I don't know, Jenny, but we're gonna find out. I'm gonna get with mama tonight, after the party. You just keep your mouth shut."

Childhood was mostly a good time for Tommy and I, but I think we were forced to grow up too soon sometimes. It wasn't so much that we didn't get to experience all the pleasures of being kids, we just got to live through a few moments that no child should have to.

"Do you think she doesn't love us anymore?"

"Oh god, Jenny, no-mama loves us alright-don't you worry about that-she'll always love us-what's not to love?" and he smiled at me and put his arm around my shoulder. For just a moment, all his worry seemed to disappear. It was good having a big brother who understood things because god knows, there were a lot of things that made no sense to me at all.

THE FIRST CONFRONTATION

When it was time to go home, mama was pretty well-lit, so Jake helped walk her to the car. Our car was getting kinda old, but it was still reliable and got us from here to there with not much fuss. After putting mama in the car, Jake looked at the two of us and decided it would be better if he drove the lot of us home. He said he didn't mind, and he could pick up his own car tomorrow...he'd just have to leave a little earlier for work. Jake was probably drinking as well, but he seemed okay to drive and our houses were only a few roads down. Also, our other option-mama-was really out of the question, she was out in the front seat, quite unconscious. And so it was, Jake pushed mama over and drove us home.

Really he was a good man, quite a few years younger than mama, but always a kind neighbor, so it was hard feeling mad at him for anything, especially when neither Tommy nor I really understood just what Tom had seen or what it meant.

Jake wasn't aware that Tom had seen him with mama, but for Tommy, the ride home was awkward. I know he wanted to say something about what he'd seen, but didn't really know how to bring it up. So even though the ride home was only a short one, I think for Tom and I it was pretty long. Tommy leaned in to me at one point and whispered, "Looks like our talk with mama will have to wait till the morning." I just nodded and smiled. Right now mama sure was a mess.

WHAT ABOUT JAKE, MAMA? & WHAT ABOUT PAPA?

Morning came soon enough for me, but poor Tom, he'd had trouble falling asleep.

As for mama, we weren't sure what time we'd be seeing her or in what condition.

But as usual, much to my surprise, mama called us down for breakfast. Tom was still asleep and you could tell he was still really tired. I told mama he had trouble sleeping and she said she'd save him breakfast for when he woke up.

Mama looked surprisingly well; she was pretty as ever and humming as she put scrambled eggs on my plate. I asked her if she'd had fun at the wedding party for Sarah Mae and she said it was very nice. She then asked me the same. I told her we had a good time too and she asked if Tom was feeling okay.

"I hope he's not coming down with nothin'...did he seem okay to you?"

Just at that moment Tommy spoke up as he was coming down the stairs. "I'm fine, mama. And you?"

"Well there you are, sleepyhead! You say you're feeling okay?"

Tommy sat and just looked-first at mama, then at me, then back at her.

"Did you have a good time, mama? You seemed like you were having fun, laughing and all-"

"Well sure, honey, good food, good drink, good friends-"

He just kept staring.

"You got something goin' on Tom? You seem a little strange this morning."

Tommy sat quiet for a moment and said nothing. Again he looked at me and I looked back.

I jumped up and asked mama if she needed help with the dishes-this whole thing was getting to be far too much for me-but mama ordered me not to move.

"Okay, guys, what's going on?"

Tom knew he had to say something now, so he asked her how Jake was. Mama spilt her coffee and maybe burnt her hand a little in the process. She moved quickly to the sink and turned on the cold water. She didn't turn around, but seemed to be looking out the window.

"You got something to say, son?"

"I asked how Jake was."

"Jake is fine, and a good friend-he got us all home safe, aint that right? Something else on your mind?"

"No mama, forget it."

"Oh no you don't, Tom, you had the nerve to ask-now follow it through!"

"Okay, then, mama, what question should I ask? Where you were when they were cutting the cake? Where were you and Jake when us kids-your own kids-were playing in the field? What was so funny that you couldn't seem to stop giggling? Or should I ask where your clothes were and why they weren't on you where they belonged?-"

The room went dead silent. It was like time stood completely still.

Mama turned off the water. I reached for Tom's hand and held it tight in mine...he looked suddenly worried, as though he'd crossed some line, as though he'd said something he now wished he hadn't. His heart was beating fast, I could see it in his face.

"I'm sorry, mama-mama I'm really sorry-it's none of my business, I'm just a kid..." and he started to cry. Mama ran over and hugged him really tight and told him it was okay-she then held his face in both of her hands and told him, "Tom-you are my son-I'm the one who's sorry. I don't know how much of what you saw, but it never should've happened. Not that way. You're such a sweet boy, I don't ever wanna hurt you like this, do you understand me?" and she hugged him some more.

With her feet, she pulled my chair close to them both and then took a hand and pulled me into the hug. I think we were all crying now when suddenly Tommy started laughing and said, "Can I have a few dollars, mama?"

Everything was lighter now, I think we all understood that a mistake had been made, and we were all sorry that any of it had had a bad effect on any of us. We were like the Three Musketeers-we all had to take care of each other.

And while I had remembered that mama'd said the other day that she would answer any questions about our papa, and while I really wanted to know some stuff about him, I wasn't quite sure whether this would be a good time to ask or not. Maybe it would be, being as we were all into being pretty honest right now, even about stuff we weren't comfortable talking about, and we were also all kind of emotionally wide open, and maybe ready for anything.

Then again, maybe one great trauma in a day was enough, maybe any more and the emotional drain would either kill us or wind up with us killing each other. That's why I needed to consult Tommy. Of course poor Tom was looking pretty drained right now, so maybe it would be a kinder thing to just let it go 'till we had all fully recovered. After all, I knew it would be him, not me, who would bring the subject up to mama when the time came...it always was-and maybe that's why they seemed to have more of a special relationship, maybe mama respected his sticking his neck out in the world of grown-ups, sometimes for himself, sometimes on my behalf, and sometimes because there just was no one else to do it. I don't think I'd ever really been quite aware of how vulnerable he really was in doing that...until that morning, when I watched him break down and cry. For just a minute at that table, I felt like the big sister, and Tommy was just a boy.

And so the days of summer passed and things were pretty quiet.

Sometimes Jake would pass by the house and wave, and once, when our car had a flat, he offered to help mama change the tire. She accepted and Tom watched from the porch. They laughed here and there as Jake worked on the car, but when they were done, he went home and mama came inside. Tommy followed and grabbed himself a glass of iced tea.

"Jake is a good man, huh mama?"

"He is. But is this another one of those conversations like last time, Tom?-'cause we haven't done a thing besides him helping me just now-"

"I know, mama, and no, it's not like that...I was just saying that he's a good guy, that's all."

"Okay, honey, 'cause I don't want you to think-"

"Mama, I don't. I just don't want things to be weird around Jake-I mean he doesn't know, right?"

"Right. I've hardly spoken to him since...I think you know that."

"Okay, well I'm goin' up to bed, I'm tired. Good night, mama. See you for breakfast..."

"Good night Tom. Good night Jenny. Love you guys. Now make sure you brush your teeth."

By now a few months had passed since Sarah Mae's wedding and Tom seemed like he was his old self again. He and I decided it was time to take mama up on her saying she would tell us everything we wanted to know about our papa, and so before we went to sleep, we decided to bring it up at breakfast the following morning. Of course "we" meant Tommy, and we both understood that.

So mama called, as she always did, and Tommy and I raced down the stairs as though it were Christmas. We weren't even worried that it might be uncomfortable, because mama had already agreed to talk to us about it, and that was half the battle as far as we were concerned. In fact, the rest laid completely on her shoulders...all we had to do was listen to what we thought was information we'd wanted to hear for a long time, and which up 'till now, we'd been denied. Little did we know.

I opened my mouth for eggs, and Tommy opened his to speak.

"Mama?"

"Yes, son?"

"Remember that time you said you would tell me and Jenny anything we wanted to know about our papa?"

"I do."

"Well do you think maybe you could tell us today?"

"Why not? Today's as good a day as any I suppose. But are you sure you want to know this stuff? You too, Jenny?"

I was kind of shocked that mama was asking me, so I answered as best I could.

"I think so, mama. I guess we just wanna know what happened that he's not really our papa now."

"Okay, so first of all, he is your papa and he always will be, even though he's not around.

Heck, I see him sometimes in both of you...things Tommy does and faces you make, ways you both act.

Yeah, he's your papa alright. And his not being here has nothing to do with you guys, he really liked the two of you... but it was the two of us, me and him, that wasn't working."

"But why didn't it work, mama?" I jumped in. "Couldn't you make it work?"

Here Tommy jumped in and said, "Do you even remember him Jenny? You were just nearly three when he left, aint that right, mama?"

"That's right Tommy, and you were just nearly six."

"I guess I don't really remember him I suppose, I just wish he was around."

"Okay, guys, so tell me then, exactly what is it you want to know?"

"Gee, I guess we just wanna know about him, what he was like, and what happened that he left?"

"Okay, but not all of it is pretty, some of it is pretty ugly in fact, just so you know.

"When your papa and I first got married, we were young and very in love. He was very good to me and we had a lot of fun together. And I guess I was good to him too; I did all the things a good wife should. Then we had the two of you, and it seemed like life couldn't get any better than that. He was a good daddy and he loved you guys very much.

"But somewhere along the line, money started to get tight, and your papa started drinking. As time went on, he started drinking more. And as more time went on, he started getting mean when he drank."

"What did he do that was mean, mama?" I asked her.

"Well, Jenny, mostly he wasn't very nice to me. Usually he would just say mean things to me that would hurt my feelings, and then one night, he didn't come home. I was worried sick something awful had happened to him, but he showed up and staggered in the next morning when the sun came up.

"A few days later, when I'd gone to town to pick up some groceries, some of the townsfolk were whisperin' behind my back. I finally figured out what I thought that meant and turns out, I was right. Your daddy had cheated on me and it seems everyone except me knew about it."

Again I wasn't sure what all of what I was hearing meant, but I could see the subject matter was making mama uncomfortable. Nonetheless, she continued.

"I don't think it was so much that he didn't love me anymore-when he wasn't drinking I knew he still did-but when he was drinking, it seemed almost every other woman looked good to him too, and that just doesn't work out too well in a marriage. At least it couldn't in ours. I knew he was sleeping around, but I really didn't know what to do about it."

"What did you do, mama?" I asked her.

"Well, honey, I didn't do anything much for quite some time. I just sort of knew about it, but we didn't talk about it, and like I said, when he was sober, we got along with day-to-day life pretty well. I guess I chose just to sort of "sweep it under the carpet", and he probably didn't even remember most of what happened while he'd been boozing it up. We went on like that for about two years or so.

"Then one day, it had been really hot outside and your papa'd been gone for several days, which was getting to be the norm toward the end...and he came staggering in with a woman on his arm.

"I couldn't speak...didn't have a clue what I should say anyway...so I threw a pot at him and hit him in the chest. Of course that didn't go over very well, his first reaction was to call me every hurtful name in the book he could think of in his altered state, but when he called me a whore, well I guess that's when I really lost it. I'd never slept with another man since I was with your daddy, and here he was with a half-dressed, drunk-as-a-skunk sassy on his arm in our kitchen!-well that did it. I don't even remember how long it went on from that moment, but I threw everything I could get my hands on at the two of them in a screaming, crying rage."

Tommy looked at me and cracked a smile which mama saw.

"It may sound funny to you, Tom, I guess, but it was one of the worst days of my life."

"I'm sorry, mama, it's not that it sounds funny and I'm really sorry you had to go through all that...it's just that...well I guess like an old lady falling on the ice...it's not really funny, but the picture you get in your head kind of is. I'm sorry mama, really."

"It's okay, Tommy, like you always tell your sister, 'it aint no big deal.' I'm just glad that you guys weren't awake when it happened and you didn't get in the line of fire, cause like I said, I really wasn't in my right mind at the time."

"Okay, so then what happened?" Tommy asked.

"Well they ran out the door and later that evening when your papa was less drunk, he came back alone. I told him either he needed to leave or I was gonna call the law on him. Surprisingly, he didn't give me much of an argument, in fact, he hardly said two words. He grabbed a few things and left, and I didn't see him again for several months. In the meanwhile, though I felt sad sometimes remembering when things were good between us, I was glad that he had left without any trouble.

"Then one day in November, he came back while we were all asleep.

"And I wonder now if I should even be telling you this--" she sort of mumbled to herself..."Hey Jenny, honey, how about some iced tea for your brother and me, huh sugar?"

"Okay, mama."

Once I'd left the room, Mama quickly got with Tom and told him she would talk with him later, but she really didn't think this was stuff I should be hearing. Of course I didn't find out about that conversation until quite some time later, from Tom.

"Here, Tom, take it! Can't you see I'm about to drop the whole thing?"

"Sorry, Miss Perfect, sorry I wasn't paying complete attention to you and nothing else!"

"Okay, alright, you guys, settle down. How 'bout we go outside and sit on the porch-it's a nice day."

And we got up with our tea and headed for the porch. Mama was right, it really was a pretty day...the sky was a brilliant blue, with only an occasional cloud here and there, and there was a gentle breeze.

"Too bad you couldn't bottle up a day like this, huh mama?" said Tommy. Mama shook her head and smiled.

"Beautiful, just beautiful."

We sat together not saying much for quite a while until I, surprisingly, spoke up. "So were we done about papa? Weren't we right in the middle of something?"

"Yeah we were, but you know what? We've covered quite a bit for one day, and I for one would rather just enjoy this beautiful day and continue that conversation some other time. What do you say?"

I looked at Tommy, and he looked first at me, and then at mama, and said, "Sure, mama, whatever you say. Let's enjoy today together, as a family." And so that's where we left it, at least for the moment.

"Hey, Jenny!" Race to the pond?"

"Now Tommy, you know I can't run as fast as you..." and before he could put his tea down, I was gone. Tom laughed, and then, on a more serious note, he leaned over to mama and said they weren't done. Mama knew she'd have to tell Tommy the whole story, and looking back, I think her judgment was right in keeping the next part of her recounting of the story from me. Not only wouldn't I have completely understood it, but if it had then been explained to me, surely I would have been very sad for mama. As for my papa, I guess it wasn't as big a deal for me to know all about him as it was for Tom, maybe because Tom had spent more time with him before he'd left, and had more to miss. I was mostly just glad I had mama and I think especially Tommy. Not that I didn't love mama as much, but Tommy was my best friend. I could tell him anything, and he also shared stuff with me. Tommy made me feel special, like I was important to him, and that-to me-was a very big deal.

Tom seemed a little distant over the next few days, and I never did find out if something had been bugging him then... but I guess we all have our moments.

CAFÉ RIALTO

Life went on pretty much as usual, until one day, a new shop opened in town. There was a grand opening slated for the weekend, about which everyone had gotten a flyer in their mailbox. It said: "Come one, come all, and bring your appetites!"

Well no one in Claremont ever really had anything important they were doing, unless it was going to work, or church-for the holy-rollers-so we expected a lot of people would probably show up. And of course we were right. It turned out to be another very pretty day, and the walkway in front of the new place was bustling with curious faces, anxiously awaiting getting in the front door.

Once in, we could hear a few ooo's and ahhh's ...it actually was quite nice, a new little café of sorts, with I guess what you would call a dessert bar staring us all down, smack in the middle of the floor. When everyone outside had made their way inside, the door was closed and a short, stout gentleman all dressed in white with a baker's hat on, began to welcome everyone and introduce himself. His command of the English language was quite good, despite his thick Italian accent.

"I'd like to thank you all for coming, I actually didn't expect such a wonderful turnout, and I may have to go back and bake some more desserts!" He laughed heartily. "Let me introduce myself...my name is Salvatore DeMarco, and this is my café, Café Rialto. We have a complete menu of lunch and dinner meals, but our real pride is in our desserts. We bring you the

best from around the world, and would love you to tell us what you think. Today, our grand opening, we offer you each a dessert plate, free of charge...please help yourselves and feel free to sit and enjoy. Again, thank you so much for coming, and please come again and tell your friends!"

Well obviously Mr. DeMarco didn't know much about the people of Claremont; he did not know that any excuse for a party, free food, or anything along these lines would always be well attended. But that's okay...he was new.

That morning, Tommy, mama and I ate some of the most delicious desserts I'd ever eaten in all my life, opening our mouths only for the next bite. We sat there smiling at each other in delight, completely enjoying Mr. DeMarco's free, grand-opening offering.

Time passed as time does, and the three of us had what seemed like lots of such moments, not always with desserts, but just together enjoying whatever simple pleasures life had to offer.

Contented, But With Restless Heart

Life moved forward somewhat uneventfully in the months that followed...once in a while, Tom and I would again head to town for a treat or just for something different to do. It seemed a little that we were outgrowing some of the things we used to endlessly enjoy, and once in a while we got a little antsy and wanted more. In a conversation at the café one afternoon, the subject of our papa again came up.

"What do you think, Jenny? Should we try to find him? Maybe contact him?"

"Who you talking about, Tommy, papa?"

"Well yeah...! I just was thinking, we are getting a little older now, and mama did say he liked us a lot, and if it would make mama uncomfortable to see him again, she wouldn't have to. You and I could find him and arrange to meet him somewhere, maybe here even."

"I don't know, first of all, how do we find him? And what do we say to him when we do find him-'Hi...this is your son Tom and your daughter Jenny...how've you been?' That sounds stupid, I feel like the flavor of the month or something."

Not really sure what my last comment about flavor of the

month meant, Tom simply answered by saying that we'd at least think about it, saying it would give us something to do.

Tom had an adventurous kind of soul...it was just part of his nature. Me? I was more content to keep to the straight and narrow; I liked my comfort zone and generally made a rule of it not to venture far from it. But of course, that always was where Tommy came in to change my well-laid plans. So we agreed to think about it, with Tommy probably doing most of the thinking...which was quite alright with me.

Then, in what seemed like no time at all, he was asking again. And again. And again. Somehow the thought of him meeting our papa had gotten well under his skin, and he couldn't seem to shake it. I finally asked him what was the plan, how would we do it?

He smiled slyly at me and said, "I thought you'd never ask!"

This particular plan was empowered by two things. One was the fact that the subject matter was important to my dear brother, and any time that was the case, he just couldn't let something go. The second factor was of course that sense of adventure of his...finding papa, arranging to meet with him, doing it all on the sly without mama's knowledge or permission...this all fired him up.

And knowing the risks that were involved made it also kind of delicate, because there were potentially a lot of feelings involved, a lot of anxiety about what those feelings should and would be, and a lot of fear also that maybe papa had moved on with his own life and didn't really care about us anymore and maybe wouldn't even want to see us again. What would that be like for me, Tom wondered, and I wondered what it would be like for him. It was scary, but I think we both knew that if we didn't confront it now, together, that there was also the chance that one day we would get on with our own lives, separately, as adults. Perhaps we'd stop caring about him... and possibly not care whether we ever saw him again.

So it became important that we took this step at this point in our lives...and between now and that day when we all finally would meet, very little of anything else occupied our minds.

THE SEARCH BEGINS

Tom finally had it all worked out, and needed to go over it with me. We arranged to meet in the attic...that was still a place where mama would never come-she respected our privacy there, knowing that since we were little that was our special place where we would plot and scheme and tell our secrets. Everyone should have a special place like that according to mama, and violating our privacy there was something she would not do. If she thought we should tell her something, she would talk with us about it-explain why she thought we should tell her and then she'd either give up and let it go, or start crying and tell us how hard it was always trying to know the right thing to do as a single parent and all this kind of stuff. We never were really sure whether she was sincere when she got going in that direction or not...or whether it was just a clever manipulation. I guess it depended on how important she thought knowing was in any given situation, and usually she was pretty good at when to pursue something and when to let it go. In any case, we all appreciated the sanctity of the attic, and were grateful to mama for letting us have it.

That evening, after supper, the two of us met there. Tom looked at me pretty intently, but with excitement in his eyes, and pulled out a sheet of paper. "This, my dear sister, is the plan. It is either fool-proof, or will prove that we are fools, I'm not sure which." And he smiled with pure delight that he was both so