

The Only Day I Ever Heard Mother Lose Her Song

By Abby Thomas

MY HEART IS BROKEN. As I walk away from the house I shift the baby to my hip so I can wipe the tears away. The wind blows the leaves across the packed dirt – dead leaves from dead trees – blowing along beside me on this long walk home. Well, toward one home. I'm walking toward the new home I've made with my husband, but behind is my other home where so many years were spent.

Growing up there hadn't been easy, middle of nowhere during the Depression with eleven mouths to feed, not easy at all. We were always the poorest kids in school, which is saying something. There were never seconds at dinner and I never owned a store-bought dress, but looking back it was happy. We can even laugh about it at times, because, to be honest some of it was funny. Daughters scrambling to go along to choose the animal feed, knowing that their new clothes would come from the feedsacks. We also can still get a good grin from remembering how we once tried to make hair curlers out of old tin cans and then were disappointed when they didn't work. Yes, we were a poor family, but, my were we happy.

Mother kept the house going. Other people were sometimes scared by her, and we'd be the first to tell you she's not a woman to cross, but that's not really how I think of her. For us Mother was proof that there's always joy to be found. When she was working her fingers to the bone, stretching provisions to their furthest, all while watching out for nine stubborn children, she always kept singing. She didn't sing to be heard, she didn't sing to pass the time, she sang from her heart, from way down in her soul, and the peace that overflowed from it. All of my memories from childhood seem to have Mother's song running through them. Her voice would drift from the house while we were in the yard. I could hear her singing at the laundry while we were cooking dinner. Her song could take away the fear of the darkness while we went to grandmother's to listen to the radio, all walking in a row behind Dad... Oh, Daddy!

The tears are flowing heavy now. My sweet Daddy! He was the sometimes silly to Mother's serious. The hard-working, kind, humble father who could always make us laugh. Who taught us, who played with us, who loved us, all to the tune of Mother's soft song. All he wanted was to take care of his family, he worked the farm and the sawmill just to keep us clothed and fed. Five days a week he went those seven miles to town and as the sun began to set he'd leave the mill and come home. But, oh, Daddy, why? Why did you have to stop last night? No firewood is worth that

cost. What was he thinking of when he stopped to chop that tree? Was he thinking of us? Was he thinking of Mother? Or was he just thinking about the chicken and cornbread he was going to have for dinner? Was he distracted? Did he make a mistake? If he did, did he know it? Did he think he could fix it? When did he realize he wouldn't be able to get out of the way? Did he feel any pain?

That thought makes me cry so I can hardly see to walk and I sit on the side of the road clinging to my baby and sobbing.

I'm so tired. Early this morning, before the sun, my brother came to fetch me, Mother was so worried. When I walked in the back door Mother was standing over some dishes humming to herself. When she saw me she managed a smile, but I could see the worry in her eyes. When Dad didn't come home last night she tried to keep the fear away—maybe he had just been held up. He had stopped to help neighbors before. But, as morning was nearing, the reasons and excuses were harder and harder to find. The search had started hours ago, but there we were sitting, waiting, with only Mother's song to keep us calm, until they finally returned. When they told us Dad was dead I cried, I cried because my heart ached. But Mother didn't shed a tear. She sat at the table and stared, but when I looked at her eyes something had broken deep down inside her.

Today something had been missing from our home besides Dad, and as I looked across a pasture at the setting sun I realized — this was the only day I ever heard Mother lose her song.