

The Carpenter's Princess

The Carpenter's Princess
By Tanya Marie Lewis

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Mississippi

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Special Dedication to my parents,

I cherish the thoughts of you and I'm grateful
they are filled with happy pictures of laughter that
no loss can steal from the depth of my heart. I never
wanted anyone else as my parents other than the
two of you. The mourning ends, but the memories
remain forever!

For Mama "Buttercup", I remember the
promise!

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Part I

Laying The Foundation

According as he hath chosen us in him before
the foundation of the world, that we should be holy
and without blame before him in love.

Ephesians 4:1

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The Crew and Me, The Crew and I

Daddy's not coming home again. Before I heard those words, we were the fabulous four from Ft. Knoxville, Mississippi. That's what Daddy use to call us. Now, we're just three, not the fabulous three, just three: Mama, my older brother Mitch, and me. Or is it Mitch and I? Daddy would correct me, but he's not coming home again.

I'm Malena. I just turned eight yesterday so I don't know a whole bunch of stuff yet. Except them telling me today, "Daddy's not coming home again." He called me Princess. Mama calls me hardheaded and Mitch just calls me whatever he wants when Mama's not around. I thought Daddy moved to another house with three other people. Mitch is just a year older than me, so he doesn't know where Daddy is either. Mama was crying too much to tell us anything else. She cried, so we cried, too. Even though, we still didn't know where Daddy was. We didn't have grandparents we could ask. Daddy said they all went to glory before Mitch and me, Mitch and I was even thought about. We just have Mrs. Mable or the praying woman most folk call her, from down the road. She told us we could call her Grandma if we wanted to. But, she just Mrs. Mable cause' she ain't went to glory yet.

Mrs. Mable used some small words when she talked about Daddy. Died...Dead...Death.

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I wasn't fully sure what they meant, but I knew it wasn't good when all of Daddy's friends and some folks I didn't know showed up at our house. Most folks were crying like Mama had been earlier. I didn't know our little house could hold so many people. Probably why a lot of them went outside to sit and laugh. Seemed you had to go outside to laugh, cause crying was left for inside. Me and Mitch, Mitch and I still don't know what's going on. Old folks just keep hugging us saying they sorry to hear bout' our Daddy.

They said (the old people inside), "He was a good man."

I started to cry, because I didn't like what I was feeling. Where was my Daddy? I miss him right now this minute and he needs to come home. My Daddy more than a good man, he's the best man ever. He's tall and dark, like the color of ripe blackberries in the summertime. But smooth like my new patent leather shoes. He has little dimples on the side of his face that make his smile seem bigger than it is and pretty dark eyes like Bambi. They say I look just like him, except I got Mama's skin color. She's the color of the flaky skin on an onion. Ya'll know what I'm talking bout'? Mitch look just like Daddy though, skin color and everything-he got the dimples too. I guess Daddy couldn't give them to both of us and Mitch was first in line, so I didn't mind that much.

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I was sitting there thinking about that when I overheard Mrs. Mable saying, "Death came knocking too early for Mitchell, po' man just thirty-five years old." I feel really bad now. I must have been sleeping something hard because I didn't hear a knock. I don't know about Mitch, but I would have made sure not to let death in, that way Daddy would still be here. He would be here to put these folks out because I'm getting pretty sleepy and Daddy wouldn't let us be up this late. I'm mad at Mama now. She must have opened the door for death because me and Mitch, Mitch and I wasn't allowed to answer the door. That's probably why she crying like she is. Serves her right.

The next couple of days didn't get any better. More folks, more food, more confusion...and I still don't know anymore about this death thing than I did before. That first night Daddy didn't come home, Mama tried to explain what was going on, but I shut my ears to her words because it didn't sound like anything I wanted to hear at the time. Her conversation didn't excite me so I hid my little emotions in a place that ignored the pain I heard in her voice.

Mrs. Mable prayed for us and asked God to give us the strength we need to endure the transition. She seemed scared for us (that makes me want Daddy even more, so I can hide behind his back), I say that because she wouldn't let us out of her embrace and kept anointing our head with oil

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and cried seemed more for us than Daddy. I'm alright, but if she wants to do something for me she can give me a personal pecan pie that I don't have to share with anybody. I figured I'd be pushing it to ask, Mama would say it's rude to be selfish and not willing to share. Daddy too, but not without shading a smile somewhere we couldn't see. So, next time Mrs. Mable prays for me I think I'll slide it into the conversation and see what happens. I didn't have to wait very long because Mrs. Mable asked Mama if she could take us to the church house that night. I was excited, figured if Daddy wasn't home that's where we could find him.

Daddy loved the church house and we spent a great deal of time there throughout the week. He went on days we didn't have service-I never fully understood why he went to check on the church house if nobody was there. Mama said it's because he loves the fact that he's blessed to pray in a house that God built. I don't ever remember hearing Daddy pray and ask God for His power, but for His heart. Daddy believed if he had the heart of God-everything else would flow with it, because power without the heart of God was like authority in the wrong hands. Most of the time I had no idea what Daddy was talking about, but that didn't stop him from telling us things.

Anyway, he takes me and Mitch, Mitch and I with him to the church house, and sometimes he goes by himself. When I was a little girl, around

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two, Daddy started taking me and Mitch, Mitch and I to prayer with him. I won't lie to you-I hated it. We would go to the altar and lay on those hardwood floors and Daddy and I would cry for hours, while Mitch rested in the presence of the Lord. You know what that means-he was sleeping but he'd always tell me that like I'm stupid or something. Now back to Daddy, I always knew he was crying because God allowed him to touch His heart. I was crying because those floors hurt my little bones and I knew I couldn't move until they were finished talking. So, I pressed my little face into the wood like I saw Daddy do and cried and asked the Lord not to keep Daddy, me and Mitch, Mitch and I out all night. Sometimes He heard me, most times He didn't.

By the way, I didn't see Daddy when Mrs. Mable and I went to the church house and didn't get a chance to ask about the pecan pie because she cried on the altar all night long, calling on the name of Jesus. I didn't know what was going on, so I did what my Father taught me to do-I waited in His presence.

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Mama woke me up on the fifth day, said I had to get dressed so I could go say bye to Daddy. I was happy and a little tired after last night. He wasn't coming home but she was taking us to see him. She said Daddy was at the church house, what did I tell you? I knew eventually he'd show up, though I thought he would have come home first. No matter, at least me and Mitch, Mitch and I will know a little bit more about what's going on even though I haven't figured out why Mama telling me we are going to say bye to him. I asked Mama if I could take Daddy's tote Bible with me. That's what he called it, the "tote bible".

Every time we went somewhere he'd say, "Wait, let me get my Bible." I asked him once why he likes his Bible so much.

He said, "Princess, I tote this thing everywhere. It's my protection." I guess Daddy didn't have his tote bible the day he left because it was in his room on the night table. Mama let me carry it she said that would have

made Daddy smile. I told you I was young, but I'm old enough to know Mama just referred to Daddy in the past tense. Daddy taught us things, said everything we learn wasn't meant to come from school teachers, parents had a responsibility to make sure children were trained before sending them out into the world.

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When we got to the church house, all the people who were at our home the days before were waiting for us. Pastor Simms was there, he's one of Daddy's friends, too. In church, Mama sat between me and Mitch, Mitch and I on the front pew. I kept looking around for Daddy but I didn't see him. And I'm starting to wonder what's in that big box with the flowers on top sitting in front of us. All of a sudden, Pastor Simms started preaching and it ain't even Sunday. He was talking bout' Daddy, so I listened.

He kept saying my Daddy was a fruitful man, a small man in size but big in heart. My Daddy was a big man to me; the way he could pick me up like a feather-swinging me around in the air so my ponytails could fly with the birds. But he did have a big heart, so I didn't say anything to Pastor Simms bout' it then. I'm getting scared now because Mitch is crying, act like he done figured out what this death stuff all about. Mama must have given her tears to Mitch cause she ain't crying, just looking at that box. She looks pretty, she looks sad and she's wearing that black dress Daddy like on her so much, which makes sense since she's here to see him too.

I looked around and Daddy still ain't showed up at the church house. That wasn't like him to be late for anything. Pastor Simms was still preaching saying we'd see Daddy again some day and talked some more about all his fruit. I can't recall Daddy eating a lot of fruit, but Pastor Simms seems certain that he had some. I'll just look for it when I get back

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to the house and put it up in a safe place in case he needs it when he get back.

The more Pastor Simm's preached the more folks cried. So, I busied myself looking through Daddy's tote bible while I listened. He had some dried brown roses in there, didn't know what they were for, just looked at em'. Then Pastor introduced some lady named Shirley, who came to town to sing for Daddy. She must have come to make some folks scream too, because that's what they did. I ain't never heard this much racket in the church house before in my life and it got worse when the man from the funeral party who was at the house the other day walked over to that big box. I couldn't wait to see what was inside. It must be a present for Daddy since we all here waiting on him and it ain't even his birthday.

The funeral party man opened the lid on that box and my eyes hurt at what I saw in there. My Daddy was in that box. Mama let out a scream from somewhere. I say somewhere because it didn't sound like her. It sounded like a hundred people screamed, "Oh Jesus," through her tiny body at one time. Folks started screaming and crying even louder than they did at our house. I didn't move and neither did my Daddy. It looked like him, but I say it ain't. Daddy was always happy to see us hugging and kissing on us. But he's just laying there now, that ain't the Daddy I know in that box. Not my Daddy!

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Last time I saw him was the morning before he didn't come home again. He came in my room before work like always. He hugged me real tight (tighter than most times) and kissed my forehead. He told me to be good and I said I would. That's what I'm doing now, being good for Daddy. I'm not going to cry like these grown folks. Maybe if I sit here being good, Daddy will get up out that box. But he didn't. Aunt Caroling, Mama's older sister who came down from Chicago to say bye to Daddy, took me and Mitch, Mitch and I up to the box.

Mitch just cried and said, "Daddy don't leave us. Please Daddy, get up, wake up Daddy," he screamed through a pool of water gushing from his eyes onto his upper lip. I can't recall my brother crying bout' nothing unless he was getting a spankin', but he was crying something awful now. I still didn't cry though. I was being a good girl. Looking at my BIG Daddy in that little box with his eyes closed shut and a smile on his mouth. I smiled too because he must have been smiling bout' me having his tote bible just like Mama said he would.

After that, they closed the lid on the box and my Daddy's face disappeared from my view forever. The funeral party men rolled Daddy's box outside to the gravesite where they began to lower it into the ground. That box wasn't big enough to capture the enormity of the life my Daddy lived, but no matter. Folks cried some more and helped push the box down with flowers. It seemed the more flowers they threw, the lower it went into the

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ground. I waved bye to Daddy until I couldn't see his box anymore. This death thing is too much for my little mind to comprehend. But, for some reason I'm not sad, probably because I have my Daddy's tote bible protecting me now.

End of Excerpt of The Carpenter's Princess by Tanya Marie Lewis. To purchase your copy click here

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