

BEARING CROSSES

by Penny Lewis

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DEDICATION



With love and laughs to my extremely tolerant Mother, Betty
my amazing Twin Sister, Pam
my not so ugly brother, Brett
my patient and witty husband, Dan
and our wonderful, talented children: Meagan, Leslie and Chris.
And to all of my friends and relatives who have their own crosses
to bear.

PROLOGUE



A smashed flat face like she'd been delivered from her mother's birth canal straight into a brick wall never stopped Jacey from attracting bar rats with forgotten names and producing their offspring. She had children in litters of two or three and half-heartedly raised them for a while until DFACS came and took them away. Two tow headed girls and a red headed boy, barely a year apart, comprised her current batch. She would probably not keep them much longer with narcotic agents always sniffing around.

The scratching outside the trailer was peculiar enough to make Jacey put down her People's Magazine and the bunch of grapes she had been nibbling and peek out the window. In the dim light, she could just make out a dark ball of fur scampering around on the concrete blocks that served as her front door steps. "Hey kids." Grateful to grab the remote and hit the mute on Dora . . . Lord any excuse to mute Dora! . . . She asked, "Did Ms. Nettie get herself a new puppy? Didn't think she'd want one after ole Duke up and died."

"Puppy" was all the three dirty faced kids, sprawled on the floor in front of the TV, needed to hear to make them spring up and race the short distance to the window. Junior tripped over an

ashtray sitting in the floor by the sofa and fell trying to keep up with his sisters. Dried Fruit Loops in a bowl scattered everywhere. The children climbed over Jacey on the couch and looked through the ratty blinds.

“Get off me!” Jacey swatted at Junior making him scoot off one of her legs and right on to the other.

“Where it? Where it?” yelled Junior flapping his arms, hands drawn to claws.

“I can't see it. Move, Maddie!” fussed Emmy.

Madison, whispered in excitement, “It's on the steps! It's on the steps. C'mon!”

“Stay near the trailer. You hear me?”

Jacey didn't wait for an answer, and as soon as they raced out the door, she flipped the TV from the idiotic, grating cartoon to “Wheel of Fortune” and sprawled back across the couch with her grapes.

Jacey ate the fruit singly, peeling each one first with her front teeth and chewing the thin strips of hull to an acceptable texture before adding the pulp, seeds and all. She filtered the seeds with her tongue, pressing them behind her teeth, and when they were free of the pulp, she scraped them out with her finger and tucked them into the pocket of her cutoff shorts.

“Ask for a B. Ask for a B, ding dang it!” She turned the TV up so she could hear Pat and Vanna, a little annoyed by the loud giggling and canine snarfling right outside. The kids were having a good time with the puppy. But, her brain was processing “I hope it's had its shots.” and “Don't buy a vowel!” at the same time. The whir of the wheel won out. The louder the kids got on the steps, the louder she turned the TV.

“N! Say N there's three of em. That'll get ya nine hundred buckaroos each!” Stretching her bare leg over the end of the couch and using her big toe, eyes never leaving the screen, she flipped on the porch light. “BANANA SPLIT MY PANTS! Ha!” One day, Jacey would get herself on that show and make thousands of

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dollars and win a trip to Puerto Vallarta, too. The Before and After category was her personal specialty.

At the commercial break Jacey used her big toe again to pull down a little on the blinds over the window behind the back of the cereal and tobacco stained couch. She didn't have to pull them much as the center slats were permanently bent in unison from children's horseplay and Jacey's tendency to peek out often looking for cops.

The girls and the puppy had made their way off the steps of the tiny trailer and were rolling around in the gravel whooping and hollering in the shadows. Junior sat on the steps, under the light, arms moving up and down in a frenzy. His excitement showed in the intensity of the flaps. Maddie pulled the furry creature into her arms as Emmy yelled "Give him back!" Defiantly, Maddie spun around catching the light and Jacey could see the . . . pup. Strangling a bit on the grape she coughed it down and threw open the door.

"Kids! That ain't a puppy. It's a bear. A bear cub."

The two girls squealed with delight while eight year old Junior observed, "He hungry. He hungry."

Jacey reached inside and retrieved her grapes, handing them to her son. "Here ya go."

Junior plucked off a juicy orb and held it out in open palm, the flapping interrupted. The cub snuffled it quickly from his hand. Emmy took a turn and then Madison, until all the grapes were gone. The little black cub moved closer to its new friends, sniffing for more.

"Mama, can we keep it?" begged Emmy.

"Please, Mom. Please!"

"Well, let's bring it in and at least give it some water," said Jacey. Carefully she picked up the cub which wiggled a little, but didn't put up much of a fight, and carried it inside. Madison closed the door and ran to find a blanket to make a bed while Jacey and Emmy rummaged in the fridge for bear worthy food. Junior

hopped from foot to foot, reaching out once to stroke the cub's head.

The excitement in the little trailer was cut short by a thud on the front door followed by a howl. A snarling, angry, mama demanded the return of her cub. Mama Bear hurled herself over and over against the trailer, rocking it on its blocks.

Horrified, Jacey muttered, "Shoot, shoot, shoot." Oddly, the one and only vice Jacey gave up with motherhood was cussing. She picked up the cub and pushed the kids down the short hallway. They scrambled into the tiny bathroom and slammed the door. The little bear cried out as she tossed it in the shower, sliding the glass door to seal it in. Jacey sat down on the linoleum with her back to the toilet and braced her feet against the bathroom door, the lock had been broken long ago. Madison stood on the toilet lid behind her mother while Emmy buried her face in Jacey's lap. Junior stood silent, closest to the door, straddling his Mother's legs, terrified as the pounding outside grew louder.

The inevitable explosion of the flimsy front door giving way was followed by the screaming of the girls. Mama was now inside the trailer and she was mad. She stood on her hind legs and let out a feral roar. The baby bear attempted to match his mother's call, but sounded more like a kitten mewling. It didn't matter. It was enough to let mama bear know exactly where she could find her baby. Growling and roaring she ran down the little hallway.

Warm and pungent urine ran down Junior's legs, darkening his jeans, some trickling on Jacey, as the big angry bear reached the hollow core bathroom door. The boy stared ahead, rocking with elbow bent and right hand opening and closing like a lobster waving. The bear clawed at the bathroom door, her howls echoing through the tin can of a trailer. Her scent, a musky mixture of wet dog and mad skunk, wafted under the half inch opening below the door.

Ms. Nettie had watched the whole thing from her living room window. Her trailer was across the path from Jacey's. She liked to crochet in the evenings while she kept a lookout from her recliner.

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There was always something going on in the trailer park especially at Jacey's. Ms. Nettie had seen the children playing with the cub when they first came outside and she should have called the police then. But she hadn't. She just muted the TV and watched.

When mama bear arrived, Ms. Nettie picked up her rotary phone and dialed 911. "That drug addict with all them youngins has gone and done a fool thang. You better git somebody out here quick . . . What? . . . She's got a bear ripping her trailer apart trying to get its youngin out and there's kids in there . . . I said a bear! . . . No, I don't drink! . . . Magnolia Drive. Lot 42. For crying out loud! It's two blocks from the precinct! . . . I don't know why! Why would any durn fool bring a bear cub in a trailer?"

Impatient now, mama bear snagged the thin luan, splintering it with one ferocious swipe. Standing on her hind legs, she began tearing away with both teeth and claws, soon reaching the second layer. The hole widened, framing the faces of the terrified family cowering within. The police arrived just as the door caved inward showering splinters, drool and fury.

Wild animals were rare in town and the deputies didn't carry tranquilizers. Rather than risk someone getting hurt, they shot the bear with bullets. Mama bear never turned towards the gun or the uniformed officers, concentrating on her task. She wanted her child. She didn't die with the first shot, but it was enough to fell her. She lay outside the bathroom whimpering, still pawing at the door. The little cub in the shower whimpered back, until a second shot stopped them both . . . Mama in death . . . cub in fear.

Three officers dragged the bear carcass out of the hallway and freed the family from the bathroom. The dead mama bear had a lone yellow Fruit Loop clinging to her fur that had attached itself like velcro from the dirty floor on the way out the door. A veterinarian was called to take the crying cub overnight until Fish and Game could open in the morning. A neighbor who loved to hunt asked for permission to take the Mama bear, but the Sheriff's deputy in charge claimed dibs and took it for himself . . . a trophy. Everyone wanted a picture of both of the bears, the living and the

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dead, and the long raggedly deep gashes and giant hole in the bathroom door.

Finally, with the bears, the nosey neighbors, and most of the officers gone, Jacey was left with a broken front door, a bullet hole in her floor, three traumatized children, and a young lieutenant filling out his first “bear in the trailer” report. He said, “I guess you know, ma’am, that was a bad decision. A very bad decision.” Jacey nodded just as the child welfare lady pulled into the gravel drive.

Every decision Jacey would make after that would be worse.

CHAPTER 1

ROAD TRIP WITH PAM – THE YEAR WE TURNED 50



My phone rang and I could tell by the caller ID that it was my twin sister Pam. I'd been expecting her.

“Hey.”

“Mama called.”

“I know. She called me too, Pam.”

“Who calls people at seven a.m. on a Saturday morning?”

“Mama does. And you say that every Saturday.”

“Well, I'm not going!”

“Yes, you are,” I said. “You promised.”

“Fine! I'll go, but I'm not taking my new car. That's too many miles to put on it.”

“Okay, we'll take mine. Hope you don't mind. My CD player's broke, so you'll have to listen to NPR the whole way . . . and I think the radiator's . . .”

“FINE! We'll take my car.”

I knew she would.

“Well this whole thing is ridiculous. Did you tell Dan yet?”

Penny Lewis

I met my husband thirty years ago when I was fresh out of college. I had moved to Carrollton to teach shop at the Junior High. One day in the teacher's lounge we got in a discussion about music. I told my fellow teachers that my favorite all time song was "Mac The Knife." It was the number one song the day Pam and I were born and we loved it.

One of the teachers, Ms. Benjamin said, "Wow! I know this guy you need to meet. He sings that song better than Bobby Darin."

A few weeks later, Ms. Benjamin invited me to a party at her house and introduced me to Dan. He was an auburn haired handsome man with a neatly trimmed moustache. I found him to be sweet and he had a nice twinkle in his eyes. He exuded a quiet kind of charm and I detected a wry wit that appealed to me. It turned out that he wasn't really all that quiet, though. He was just in pain. He had been injured by a baseball to the shin during an adult recreation game earlier that day. The ball left impressions of its stitches deep into the nasty bruise. The emergency room wanted him to go home and elevate his leg and apply ice. But Dan had come to the party anyway to meet me. He still has traces of that bruise to this day. I call it our "love bruise."

Our first date was to the Lazy Donkey Mexican Restaurant where we learned as much as we could about one another over the loud Mariachi music. I found out that he came from a Catholic family of six children, that he was born in Pittsburgh, raised in Connecticut and had moved to Carrollton with CBS Records, later Sony Music, and that he worked at the new big record plant in town as the Quality Control Manager. He had a long twenty-three year career there until the plant closed in 2001 and he moved to academia.

Our second date was on me. Poor Dan agreed to help me chaperone a group of rambunctious students to an Atlanta Braves game at Turner Field. He was a good sport about it though, and I knew by the end of that day that I would love this man and I would love him forever.

Bearing Crosses

We married the following year and found ourselves expecting our first child three months later. I thought I might have a dark haired baby like Pam and me or, even better, a red head like Dan. I hoped that I would. Dan's brothers and sisters are gorgeous. But within a few short years we had three blond haired beauties to raise. God has a strange color wheel I guess.

We've had a remarkably peaceful and happy marriage. Our main conflict comes from Dan losing stuff and my music. Fact is, I have no musical talent at all. But I married a man who is very gifted. He sang in a musical quartet for years and has performed as lead in many local Community Theatre shows. And I'm very grateful that he passed those genes on to our three children.

I needed his help when I had the gall to start writing musical plays for children. I had quit teaching to raise our family. Bored out of my mind, I took over directing Primary Theatre for four to six year old itty bitties for our local Recreation Department. Plays for that age group were awful, so I became a playwright overnight.

I could write the script and the lyrics, but I needed Dan to compose the music. He would take a look at my written words and start fussing, "You have too many syllables in this one." I knew what I wanted. It was in my head. But Dan could never hear what I was hearing. This came to a head with *Pirates of the Carrollbean*. Dan waited until I was off shopping. He found my script and wrote the music while I was gone and couldn't argue with him. The music was absolutely beautiful. Dan played it for me on the piano when I returned. But the problem was these were supposed to be pirate songs and "beautiful" didn't work. I fired him that night and called my good friend and theatre partner Marcella Correa. She and I have worked well together ever since and my marriage became much more peaceful.

"Yes, I called him at work. He just rolled his eyes and sighed. He knew it was coming."

"If you called him, how do you know he rolled his eyes?"

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“Cause that's what he does. He's not really fussing though. He's probably excited that he'll have the remote all to himself for a week, eat fast food, and can golf to his heart's content.”

“So, in other words, he's happy to get a break from your cooking. Well, I guess we better hang up and get packed. Don't forget your camera.”

“Good Lord. Can you imagine what Mama'd say if I forgot it? Pick me up at eleven.”

I took a shower and packed and was ready to go. This was either gonna be the weirdest trip I'd ever been on or maybe the most boring.

CHAPTER 2

MAMA'S QUEST



Pam backed out of my driveway and turned right onto Stewart Street.

“Look here,” I said. “I printed out a Mapquest to get us there and I printed out a reverse one to get us home.”

“Not necessary,” Pam said. “I have a GPS.” As she pointed at the GPS, I noticed a faded bruise on the top of her hand that strangely matched a place on my own hand.

“I like Mapquest better. Gives me a whole picture of the trip.”

“I’ve got a cooler in the back with snacks and bottled wa . . . Oh look! There’s one!”

“Don’t stop! I’m not taking pictures til we’re out of town. Way out of town. I’d die if folks in Carrollton saw us doing that. May not take any til we cross out of Georgia.”

“I can see why Dan sighs a lot.”

Pam pulled over anyway and I hunched down in the seat to hide and handed her the camera. Yes, I know perfectly well that we are twins and that if anyone saw her they’d think it was me.

Penny Lewis

Her dark black hair was cut just like mine. We had the same hazel green eyes, and our faces, though not identical, were similar . . . very similar. But mine was rounder and Pam's slightly on the oval side. I think that should be enough of a difference, but it wasn't. Folks always noticed we were twins when we were together. Separately, they confused us all the time.

But instincts are instincts and I stayed on the floorboard. "Take it quick."

My sister had stopped in the Jehovah Witness Church parking lot on Stewart Street.

She opened the car door and got out, walking ridiculously, exaggeratedly slow to the other side of the road. I didn't have to peek to know she was taking her sweet time with the picture.

Mercifully after what seemed like forever, but was probably not, she hopped back in and tossed me the camera. As she drove off, I unscrunched myself and admired her work, saying, "I have to admit this is a pretty good start." The digital image revealed a rough-hewn wooden cross, painted white and the name "Kara" carved across the horizontal piece. The letters were unpainted, natural wood coming through, contrasting nicely with the paint above. On the ground beside it was a sad bouquet of dried and faded hydrangea and one rain soiled teddy bear. "Mom'll love it."

I called my husband to let him know we were on the road.

"Hey, Dan. We're off on our grand adventure."

"You be careful and have a great time."

"Okay, I made you some spaghetti. It's in the refrigerator."

"Where in the refrigerator?"

"Second shelf, beside the yogurt and the jar of pickled beets."

You have to be specific with Dan when it comes to expecting him to find things in a refrigerator or a freezer.

"Parmesan is on the top door shelf."

"Got it. Garlic bread?"

"Third shelf down in the freezer . . . the fridge freezer . . . not the deep freezer. It's already buttered and garlicked up for you. Just pop it in the toaster oven. Use some foil this time, please."

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Thankfully, we love each other's flaws. We find them endearing. Yesterday, in anticipation of being gone, I had cooked him a big breakfast. I was plating his home fries and sausage and about to take the biscuits from the oven when he joined me in the kitchen.

"How do you want your eggs?" I asked.

Dan looked right at the stove at the sausage and home fries and then asked, "What are we having?"

"Eggs."

"Okay, then two fried, over easy."

A few minutes later Dan returned to the kitchen and looked at his plate. "I see I have one sunny side up and one fully cooked egg."

"Nope. That is, in fact, two fried over easy eggs, but they messed up."

Dan said, "It's the spatula. You should use the little one with the holes." Dan always blames the spatula . . . never me. It's why I love him.

I told Pam this story after we hung up. Pam likes to make fun of my cooking, so I probably shouldn't have given her more ammo. I don't think I'm as bad as she and Mom think. After all, Dan never complains, and he eats everything I cook and asks for seconds.

Mom called my phone when we were about an hour into our journey.

"You girls make it out of there okay?"

"Out? Out of what?"

"Atlanta. I don't know how you drive through there. I wouldn't do it. All those big trucks! And changing lanes all the time . . . Everyone speeding like they are racing to a fire. I just can't do that."

"Mom, we are taking back roads. Won't do us any good, whatsoever, to be on the freeway. And I've never seen a road side cross memorial in downtown Atlanta, anyway. We are sticking to small towns and small highways."

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“Good planning. Camera working okay? You getting lots of pictures?”

“We are. Be sure and check your emails every night. We’ll be sending them to you. You will need to double click on the attachments to open them.”

“I know how to open an attachment, Penny.” Mom was a tad indignant.

I asked her how she was spending her day.

“I’m putting up some jam from the grape orchard. And maybe some salsa. Tomatoes were real good this year, especially the Brandywines.”

“Mom, I love your salsa. Please make lots of it. Jam, too.” My mouth watered at the memories of both. Not everyone is a fan of Mom’s salsa. It’s really thin. But I love it that way. It’s different from the stuff you buy in the grocery store and it’s fabulous as a dip. And her jams and jellies are to die for. Common old store bought grape jelly is not so good. Mom’s grape jelly is spectacular. It has a tang like blackberries. Dan looks forward to new jars coming to our pantry and the grandchildren hope to find a jar with their Christmas gift each year.

Pam reminded Mom that she would have peaches soon to share. The deer usually stole all of Pam’s peaches, but this year she had taken multiple measures to ensure she had a crop from the little tree that grew in her front yard. She wrapped all of the limbs in aluminum foil so they would reflect the sun. Little plastic flower pots nestled around each growing peach, wired in place with coat hangers. That was Mom’s idea. Then Pam placed a scary looking owl on one limb and an obnoxious singing Christmas tree on the ground. In a wide circle, my sister had placed motion activated strobe lights that also made a loud shrill whistle when approached. But her coup de grace was a huge mangy stuffed dog soaked in dog urine that hung by the neck from a lower branch. I didn’t ask where she had gotten dog pee from and I didn’t want to know . . . ever. I can’t imagine what the neighbors thought when they drove by Pam’s house. But, like Mom, I was eager to share in some of

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the peaches in a few weeks. And it looked good that she might finally have some as the deer were staying far away.

“I can come to Rome when the peaches are ripe and help you make some jelly,” Mom offered.

“Hey, before I forget. Can you girls pick me up a Brave’s schedule while you are on the road? They have them in convenient stores.”

I whispered, “I think she means convenience stores.”

Pam said, “Mom. Just Google ‘Brave’s Schedule’ and you can get it on your computer and print it.”

“Oh . . . like they’d put that on the world . . . wide . . . web.” You could tell from her tone that this was an absurd idea.

Pam snickered. “Mom! If it exists on this planet, it will be on the internet. And nobody says world . . . wide . . . web anymore. Trust me. Just Google Brave’s Schedule.”

“Well, now, you know I don’t know how to do that stuff.”

I could tell that Pam was having fun. “I tell you what,” she said, “I’ll Google it myself tonight when we get to the motel. Then I’ll send it to you by email. You can open an attachment can’t you?”

“Don’t be smart. Of course, I can. I told you that already.”

“Good. Just open the attachment and print it. Presto! You’ll have a Brave’s schedule.”

“Okay, I’ll do that. But do me a favor, please.”

“What’s that?”

“Can you email it twice? Judy wants one, too.”

Pam and I howled with laughter when we finally got off the phone. Our mother is adorable. Later that night, Pam sent her two emails. One was titled “Mom’s Brave’s Schedule” and the second email was titled “Judy’s Brave’s Schedule.” I knew she’d be calling to ask us how to forward the second email to her friend Judy. And, of course, she did.

