

Dorothy's Daughter

By

Gloria Ludlam Bennett

Abstract

I was home alone on the evening of September 14, 2015. Clay, my husband, was out of town on business, and our youngest daughter, Rebecca, had gone out for dinner with friends. To pass the time, I was watching TV and snuggling on the couch with our little Chihuahua. I had just finished grading a batch of essays and wanted to relax a bit before bedtime.

The house phone rang, which surprised me, because it was nearly 8 p.m. The only calls we ever receive on that line are sales calls, usually from someone trying to talk me into buying a timeshare or a vacation package. If it hadn't been so late, I probably would have ignored the call altogether. Instead, I hit the mute button for the TV, made my way to the kitchen, and reluctantly reached for the phone, changing the course of my life once again.

It was my brother on the line, my birth father's oldest son. *Family*. But why was he calling me now, after nearly 15 years of silence? Calls late at night usually follow some kind of tragedy. Right?

We spent the next few minutes catching up. But the main reason he called was to tell me that our father, whom I had not seen in more than 25 years, had read an article about me in his local newspaper, and this had apparently sparked his curiosity anew. He had asked my brother to find out if there was any chance he and I could get reacquainted.

I listened respectfully to everything he had to say about our father, but I didn't know if I wanted to give him a second chance, or another opportunity to make me feel bad about myself. His absence had left a gaping hole, which I had tried, unsuccessfully, to fill with various substitutes over time. Over the next couple of weeks, however, my brother continued to call. And each time, he insisted that our father was full of regrets regarding our past and that allowing him back into my life now could bring a sense of healing to all of us. That was something I had wanted for a long time, too, if I was honest with myself, so I finally gave him permission to give him my number. I hoped I wasn't making a mistake by reopening those doors.

Several months later, I went on a journey to re-establish contact with my birth father, and to legally claim my identity. As I passed through Blountstown, Florida, the place of my birth, I thought of my mother, and all the suffering she had gone through because she had chosen to keep me, to raise me herself, without any help from my father or his people. And I realized that I wasn't going through all this trouble just for *me*; I was doing it for Mama too. I was claiming *her* truth, as well as my own. I was on a mission to secure the rightful ending to my story, so there would be some record of my mother's sacrifices, even if it meant stirring up old memories. As the one traffic light in town turned green, I stepped down on the gas, moving forward. I studied the asphalt stretched out in front of me, the solid centerline looking like a yellow brick road to follow home.