



Mom and Dad's Waltz: **A Dance of Love and Sacrifice**

Rena Dangerfield

*I'd walk for miles—cry or smile
For my mama and daddy
I want them—I want them to know
How I feel—my love is real
For my mama and daddy
I want them to know—I love them so.*

(Chorus)

*In my heart the joy tears start 'cause I'm happy
And I pray every day for Mom and Pappy
And each night—
I'd walk for miles—cry or smile
For my mama and daddy
I want them to know—I love them so.*

*I'd fight in wars—do all the chores
For my mama and daddy
I want them to live on—'til they're called
I'd work and slave—and never rave
For my mama and daddy
Because I know I owe them my all.*

—(Lefty Frizell 1951)

I was born in 1951 in Peru, Indiana, to Martha Mary and Wallace Dangerfield, the sixth of seven children, and the fourth daughter. Due to the fact that there is a twenty years' difference between my oldest and youngest siblings, there were only my sisters Vicki and Rita and me at home until my little brother was born in 1958. My old-

est brother Tom had joined the Navy straight out of high school and was married and starting his own family shortly after. My next oldest brother, Larry, was honorably discharged from the Navy when he was discovered to be nearly deaf in one ear after only being in for a few weeks. He married shortly after being discharged. My oldest sister, Jane, was thrown out of the house when I was very young; I only remember her leaving, never living there. My sister Rita, the middle child, got out of the house as soon as she could by marrying the husband of the woman she baby-sat for. Most of my childhood memories of home revolve around Mom and Dad, Vicki, Rick, and me in the brick house in the tiny town of North Grove, Indiana.

My oldest brother, Tom, was the family hero. He was so handsome in his uniform when he came home on leave. He always came home in his uniform, carrying duffel bags, suitcases, and his guitar. The first night of his visit always entailed Mom cooking him a big platter of bacon and eggs, then they got out the little Decca record player and played the old 78's. Then pretty soon, Tom would get his guitar out and play Mom and Dad's Waltz. Mom would get teary-eyed and both she and Dad would be happier than I usually got to see them.

Mom and Dad's Waltz was written and performed by Lefty Frizell, and was a top ten hit on the 1951 hit list. William Orville "Lefty" Frizell was born in 1928 in Tuckertown, Texas, where his father worked in the oil fields. This was during the time of the western oil boom. Lefty worked in the oil fields shortly, then began to sing in local honky tonk bars until he was discovered and began making his living as a singer. Mom and Dad's Waltz was a number one hit in 1951.

I didn't know where the song came from as a child. I thought it was old then, too. It was always a part of my life from the earliest time I can remember. My Dad had

lots of old records and played them whenever he had too much to drink. They were mostly western songs or songs about work. He also loved westerns on the television we got when I was about nine years old. My mother preferred songs like Goodnight Irene, and sang them as she did her work. Mom and Dad's Waltz was the one song they both loved, but then Tom dedicated that one to them every time he came home.

Mom and Dad's Waltz became more than just a song to my family. It was the one time when feelings of love and warmth predominated over feelings of anger and disappointment. My Mom struggled to keep us fed and clothed on Dad's earnings, taking in ironing, doing mending for people, anything to bring in some extra money. Over the years, Dad brought less and less of his pay check home. He would come home drunk and mad, and Mom would confront him about the money and of course, it was gone. They would argue and fight, and eventually he started hitting her. When things got to that point, the visits from Tom and the music was the only thing that would bring things back to normal, at least for a little while. Eventually that didn't help, either.

When I hear that song now, I feel many things, mainly sadness. I look at our life then and realize how very unhappy they both were. My mother worked hard and had seven children by a man who repeatedly told her and us how she ruined his life, how he had intended to marry a woman who stood to inherit a big farm, and that his dad forced him to marry Mom because she was pregnant.

I asked my sister Vicki how the song affects her now, and she said she still can't even read the lyrics without getting tears in her eyes. "What the song means to me would be that it represents a small portion of life within our family that was actually meaningful and made sense. I think Dad's drinking brought a halt to those times... Instead of being a balladeer when he came

home, he (Tom) became a referee." (Vicki Overvold, personal communication, September 22, 2002). My little brother Rick told me he remembered hearing Tom play it: "I remember Tom performing this at grandpa's house many years ago in the living room; Dad also had silly 78's; such as woody woodpecker and others..." (Rick Dangerfield, personal communication, September 22, 2002). My sister Jane won't comment at all. I don't keep in touch with Rita, and the others are all dead now.

In her article, "It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation" (2000), Patricia Hill Collins highlights six dimensions of family that illustrate and perpetuate oppressive social systems in the USA. She shows how social hierarchies of gender, race, class, and nation intersect within the model of family as it is idealized in the American culture. Rather than look at individual social systems for the roots of oppression, she intersectionality looks at how these systems work together to perpetuate oppression. Oppression is intertwined with the notion of the 'ideal family.' Hill Collins demonstrates this in her analysis of each dimension. These dimensions are closely tied to the feelings all my family has had concerning both the song and the space it occupied then and now in our lives.

The first of these dimensions is the manufactured naturalized hierarchy within families. The family has a gendered hierarchical structure with the male breadwinner at the top, the mother as the care-giver to the children and home, and children subservient to both. Children's roles are further divided based on age and gender. My Dad was the boss in the family, yet we all knew that Mom was the leader. She didn't flaunt it, but we knew. He felt no one respected him, but that only began when he became cruel and violent. Mom behaved like a good wife, and did what she could to keep the children fed and clothed. He was the final authority, but she was the one we children could depend on for hon-

esty and fairness. I never saw my father do anything at home except work crossword puzzles and watch television. My mother waited on him, as did we girls. Our family was divided in time, with three older siblings, Rita, and three younger siblings. We three at the bottom were like so many stray kittens, without a voice or knowledge of our older siblings' experiences with our parents. Our job as children was to keep out of harm's way and behave. Tom was the first-born, and a man, so his position was one of honor in the family. He also bore the burden of keeping the family intact as best as he could.

Another dimension of family, the place, space, or territory that the family occupies, describes the home as the "idealized, privatized spaces where members can feel at ease" (Hill Collins 161). The little town I grew up in, as well as the old brick house with all its drafts and inconveniences, is one place that is forever woven into my perception of home and family. We were one of the poorest families in town. My sister and I were permitted to play with other children, but only one family allowed us into the house. We were the daughters of the town drunk, and only partially suitable as playmates. We were also young girls, and objects of pity, so we weren't completely left out. None of our friends were allowed in our house. Our space was limited by other town members' assessments of our worth, or lack of danger. They didn't want us polluting their children by too close a contact. Unfortunately, our home, with the privacy afforded it, was a dangerous place.

Family membership with its rights, obligations, and rules is another dimension of family. The rules were relaxed when Tom was home. As children, we saw Tom's visits home as a time when the normal rules were relaxed. We stayed up late and danced and sang and ran around the house like wild things. Everyone was laughing and happy, and Dad could drink without yelling or

hurting Mom. She was safe when Tom was present. In the town, Tom's visits meant we would be honored by visits from neighbors who wouldn't normally set foot in our house. Tom was popular with many of the townsfolk, having been friends with their children or done work for them as a boy. I saw him as privileged for having known Mom and Dad before the poverty and fighting began. His obligations to our family included helping Mom and Dad financially, supporting our mother emotionally when Dad got violent, and taking an interest in the younger children. He made us feel a part of the family.

Blood ties of family, race, and nation are a dimension of family. "Blood ties" suggest that "concepts of family and kinship draw strength from the flow of blood as a substance that regulates the spread of rights" (Hill Collins 163). The song encouraged unity, self-sacrifice, and unconditional love, feelings members of our family had to practice constantly. My mother got pregnant before marriage and was thrown out of her home as a result. She had to live with my grandparents until my grandfather forced my Dad to marry her. She was a dutiful wife, providing a clean, well-run home, meals were always ready when Dad came home, and we children were behaved. She was obviously a good wife as far as her sexual obligations to my father were concerned, since they produced seven children over a twenty year span of time. We were all white in my town, but there was a social hierarchy there that placed us at the very bottom, or nearly so. The lowest would be the seasonal migrant workers from Mexico who lived out at the Cain farm every summer during tomato harvest. Their children would attend our school for a few weeks during harvest, coloring pictures usually while the rest of the class worked. It was about all they could do, since most of them spoke no English and no effort was made to teach them what we other children were learning. One warning I

remember hearing as a girl was to stay away from Mexican boys. A favorite derogatory remark about loose-moraled girls was that they'd probably been "lying in the ditches with a Mexican." Whenever some of the Mexican people came into town, all eyes were upon them. My Mom used to sell them my Dad's beer at a dollar a bottle to get money for food and bills.

Family genealogy in terms of inheritance and the family wage is another dimension of family. My inheritance was one of failure and lost hope. My paternal grandfather had a decent home and property. He was old and poor when I knew him, but not nearly as poor as we were. I met many members of my extended family at grandpa's birthday dinner and they all seemed poor or lower middle-class. I only knew some aunts and cousins on my mother's side of the family, and they were all poor, too. My mother always joked that her maiden name was her family's legacy—Poor. Just plain poor, she would say. I think that the poverty grew worse from generation to generation, since I've seen old photographs that depict relatives who appeared to be better off.

Family planning is another example of the dimensions of family which intersects with larger social hierarchies. My mother was forced to marry my father because she was pregnant. There was no access to birth control for poor married women in those days (it was probably illegal then), so our family grew at a "natural" rate. My mother had my youngest brother when she was forty, and would have continued to have children had my father's drinking not continued to increase, as well as his violence. The townspeople considered our large family another sign of our worthlessness. Decent people only had the number of children they could afford to raise and educate. Girls desperate to get out of their homes could always use pregnancy as a means to obtain "freedom," since illegitimacy was looked down upon, and mar-

riage nearly always followed. I don't know if my mother used pregnancy like that, or if she simply believed my father would take care of her. Certainly, my grandfather decided my parents' fates by forcing the marriage.

Our family song told us that our love for our mother and father was the reason we all needed to make sacrifices. All the sacrifice mentioned in the song—walking for miles, doing chores, fighting in wars-sounded possible. When Tom was standing in our living room singing those words, I thought he meant them. We had all sacrificed for the family: Dad, through his forced marriage; Mom, through her hard work and dedication to home and family, as well as her physical and mental suffering at Dad's hands; the older children, by providing a safe place for us younger children to visit when the violence at home got out of hand; we young children, through our hard physical work, our lowly status in the town and school system, and the danger we were often placed in our private home space. We were "white," which made us better than the migrant workers in the eyes of the townspeople; but we were the lowest of "whites." We were white trash, and were barred from many homes and activities accordingly. Self-sacrifice was all my mother and father knew of life, and it is no small wonder that the "family anthem" was a waltz of that emotional bond which instilled in each of us the dignity of that sacrifice. It was about the only dignity any of us could feel.

When I was thirteen, my mother was killed while crossing a road on foot. She had left the 'safety' of home and was divorcing my father. My brother Tom died next, a victim of cancer. He was a radarman for twenty years in the Navy. He was a recovering alcoholic at the time of his death. My father died alone and ignored, from complications brought on by his alcoholism. My brother Larry, the other Dangerfield man who could not perform military

service, died of pancreatic cancer. He, too, was a recovering alcoholic at the time. My older sisters Jane and Rita eventually severed most of the ties with the family. My sister Vicki and I reminisce about the old days with more pain than anything else. My little brother Rick, who was only eight years old at the time of our mother's death, insists he remembers little, though he sent me a copy of Mom and Dad's Waltz the same night I told him I needed one. He had it right there with him. He is also a twenty-year veteran of the Navy. He told me he had noticed that Lefty Frizell picked the theme of 'home' for many of his songs.

The old song now is more of a ghost song for us younger siblings. We scratch our heads and wonder how it could ever have been so important. Vicki, Rick, and I know what our family was like when we were growing up. The three of us, far from being self-sacrificing members, were more like the sacrificial lambs of the family, cast out into a frightening world when our mother died. As the youngest members, our sacrifices were lost on those we made them for. All we did was help to maintain the outward appearance of a family functioning. Only with time and age and worldly experience have we come to see that sacrifice was the theme of our whole family, and we had all used sacrifice as the justification for a great many of our own choices in life.

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