

# The porch swing

It was 1956 when Mary Alice Bedford realized that she was in love with Denny Martin. The teacher of the school had asked them to form two lines that first day, one for the girls, the other for the boys. They were only six years old. Mary Alice noticed Denny immediately on that first day, and he had smiled at her, letting her know that he noticed her too.

Through the years that followed, they went through all of the school events together with the teachers trying their best to separate them. They felt that it was better for them to mingle with everyone, not just each other. But after school, Denny always waited at the bottom of the stairway, to walk her home.

It was a long walk to Mary Alice's house, but it never stopped Denny from walking her home, knowing he lived in the opposite direction. He would walk back, passing the narrow road that led back to the school, continuing another two miles. Once he walked the two miles, he would cut across a large field, running to get home. His mother always knew why he was late. She remembered how it felt to find that first love in your life, so she never scolded him, and never told his father. She only smiled to herself, remembering the little boy that always walked her home.

Mary Alice and her family, were like most of the people that lived in that section of the country. They turned on their television sets, waiting for them to heat up and then the screen would come to life with game shows, westerns, or variety shows, often with humorous guests.

Denny would run to Mary Alice's house right after dinner. Mary Alice lived on a quaint sort of street, something you might see in a 'Post' magazine. The sidewalks were wide and the street was lined with tall trees that had been there a long time.

When Denny reached 'Cyprus Street', he knew he that he was almost to Southerland Avenue, the street that Mary Alice lived on. Hers was the second house on the north side of the street. He was at the corner and stopped to take a breath, standing under the Amber Street light. He could see the greyish light coming through the screen door from the television set.

He knew that he would do as he always did. He would knock on the door, then spend a few minutes saying hello to her folks. They would go through formalities as he waited anxiously to be alone with Mary Alice on the porch swing. He walked the few steps up to

the porch. He noticed the comfortable chairs and swing, remembering their first kiss and their last one. This was what he had been waiting for all day. If he was lucky, he would be able to kiss her once, before her Dad came and sat outside with them, inquiring about his studies. Saying goodbye for them was always bittersweet, but he would always say to her, "We have tomorrow."

Years passed and Mary Alice had signed up for studies at the local college. She was sitting on a bench waiting for Denny to meet her. He was working at his father's store, and told her that he would be there to sign up, once he was through. It was not long till she saw him coming down the street, running. She smiled, remembering all of those times he always broke out in a run when he saw her.

"I couldn't wait to get here, but you know that. Love me?"

"More than strawberry jam." She smiled at him and when she did, it seemed like her freckles got more pronounced, though he never told her. She was embarrassed about them and now as a young lady, she often tried to cover them with a light make-up. But if he could have made that decision, she would always look the way he always remembered her. And every freckle on her face would be just another piece of her in his heart.

One day, she asked him if he liked her better with the make-up. He wanted to tell her the truth but he also didn't want to make her feel that he didn't understand how she felt. He knew that they made her self-conscious, and he also knew that she felt better with them out of view.

"I love your freckles. The reason that I love them is that they are a part of you that brings back so many memories of the years that I've loved you. I think I know every one of them and the new ones. But I want you to be happy, so if you want to wear the make-up, I understand."

Mary Alice stood up and excused herself, asking him to wait for her. She went into the bathroom and washed off the make-up. As Denny waited for her, he hoped that she was not in the bathroom crying, where he couldn't get to her. He paced back and forth on the path, and finally heard her coming. When she got close, he saw her freckles and it brought a smile to his face.

"See what it does to me. You're beautiful, Mary Alice, always were and always will be." He looked around, and seeing no one near them, he hugged her tightly and kissed her, right there on the street. That memory would be with her always. She just knew it.

"Are you ready to go sign-up?" She asked him, content to sit there longer if he wanted to.

She noticed that he immediately looked down and then looked into her eyes. She knew now that something serious was on his mind, and she suddenly felt afraid. But she waited for him to tell her what she didn't want to know.

"I'm not signing up for college today, Mary Alice. I signed up for the Marines today."

He noticed immediately the effects of the news, on her face.

"Why didn't you come to me first?" She asked him.

He watched the tears now running from her eyes, down her cheeks. And he realized at that second that he hadn't told her because if he did, she could change his mind just by asking him not to go. He knew that this moment for him was more painful than anything he had known in his life because he knew that he hurt her. Then reality hit him like a pie in the face in a comedy show. 'Maybe she wouldn't wait for him.'

She looked up at him, and he took his handkerchief and wiped away her tears, holding her close to him. He stroked her soft brown hair.

"What do you want me to do? How long will you be gone? *What if you don't come back to me?*" She realized she had blurted out these questions quickly, but intently. She was now searching his face for his answer.

"I'm sorry. I should have told you before so that we could talk first. I just woke up this morning and my father was telling me stories about when he fought in World War II. Mary, I was so electrified and you know how I feel about my father. I felt so focused and so certain and felt such an urge to go and sign-up. I should have talked to you. I was driven in a way that I've never been driven, Mary. I wanted to serve my country. I felt the feeling surge through me, and I couldn't stop it. I should have talked to you first, but I didn't even think of it."

"You didn't even think of me? Perhaps you were afraid that I would disapprove? Is that the reason you changed all of our plans without even speaking to me about it?"

David noticed her wiping her eyes, the tears still falling. Her eyes were now red against her pale skin.

They had spent the day together but when he drove her home, she asked him to sit on the porch with her for just a while.

He gladly did so and held her for a long time. She was glad that her parents were gone. She wondered now if she should go away to college. Maybe she also needed to do something different, something quick and she decided at that moment that she would go to school in another state.

The next few days were quiet between them and he felt her withdrawal from him like a cold winter wind, blowing through him. She told him she didn't want to see him off at the station. She felt disconnected from him and betrayed.

He felt determined but regretful, hoping that she would forgive him for not making her a part of his decision. On their last evening together he said to her, "Mary Alice, if I had made you a part of my decision, would you have said you were behind me all the way, or would we be in the same place that we are now?"

She already knew the answer. She sat next to him, twirling the blue topaz ring that he had given her for her birthday. "I suppose that I would have been just as upset, but at least we could have talked about it. I might not have felt so cut off from you."

He saw her face and knew she was still hurting over it. "I'm going to write you, whether you write me or not. I hope that you do because it will make my time easier, especially if I am shipped off to Asia.

Mary Alice knew he would more than likely end up in Vietnam. She also knew that she didn't want them to part badly. 'I can't let him go thinking he has lost me completely,' she thought.

But on that last day, she refused to go to the station to say goodbye. She told him that she just couldn't handle it. Her father went in his place, trying to soften it, between them. He loved David like his own and wanted to make sure that he didn't leave without one of them there to say goodbye. He stood there with Denny's parents, his mother softly crying.

Mary Alice had gone onto college, out of state, and did her best to make new friends. Her parents sent her the letters that Denny had written her, hoping that she would resolve it in her mind. She couldn't bear to read them, and put them away in a drawer, tied with a ribbon.

After two years of school, she decided to go home for one semester and then start again. She had done well in her studies and her scores were exemplary. But she knew that the magic had gone out of her life. She dated, when asked, but never found that 'fit' she had always known. She had no interest in any of the guys that asked for her company. She was glad to be home.

She had been home for a couple of weeks, and had refused to talk about Denny with her parents. She knew they were just trying to help. She grabbed the stack of napkins her mother had given her earlier, to put in the buffet. When she opened the drawer, towards the back of it, she noticed stacks of letters. She pulled them out to see what they were and saw that they were from Denny to her father. She didn't want to pry into her father's affairs, so she merely questioned him about them afterwards.

"You knew I was writing him. This is not something done behind your back. In fact, I think that you need to read the most recent letter I received from him".

He walked over and pulled the letter from the stack, and handed it to her. "Read this. I hope that when you do, you will remember what love really means, especially in the worst of times. When I was in Belgium in World War II, every time I got a letter from your mother, I knew in my heart I would make it through because she was waiting for me". He said nothing more, now realizing that his words would impact her.

Mary Alice had looked up at her father, knowing he was as 'serious as a heart attack.' He walked away, then stopped, and hugged her. He left her to the letter. She opened it. It was dated May 9, 1969.

Dear Sir,

Just a note to say hello and let you know that I'm still here, keeping the faith.

I'm hoping to ship home soon. It seems like such a long time since I left my Mary Alice behind. I hope by the time that I get back, she will have forgiven me. I just finished writing her a letter and when mail call comes around, I always hope to hear my name called. Your letters make things better for me. And thank you for that tobacco I asked you for. I wanted my friend, Tony, who took a bullet for me, to have it. It is his favorite and he keeps talking about how good it would feel to roll one up.

I hope things are going well at home. Give my love to Mary Alice. I think of her every day, every second, practically, hoping she'll say yes to me when I get home. Tell her that I love her more than strawberry jam and that 'we have tomorrow'. And give her a kiss for me. My heart never forgets her. Sorry this is short, we're gearing up. Best Regards, Denny

Mary Alice felt like something had broken like a dam inside of her. How could she have only thought of herself? She began putting her thoughts together later in the evening, hoping to convey in the best way that she knew, that she was waiting for him and she still loved him. By bedtime, she finished the letter and signed it, 'We have tomorrow', Love, Mary Alice.

A week later, Denny's parents received notice that he had been killed fighting a battle that would become known as 'Hamburger Hill'. He had saved 5 of his comrades from death, and was shot trying to get one more man to safety.

Denny's father had relayed the message to Mary Alice's father and showed him the letter. He immediately noticed that Denny had been killed the day after his last letter to him. Denny's father stood silently next to Mary Alice's father.

They shook hands and then went their separate ways. When Mary Alice came home, her father met her on the porch and told her the news. He handed her a letter that Denny's father had given him, one that was found in his personal belongings, now sent home.

Her father held her for a moment, then went inside. She sat on the porch swing, her hands trembling. The date was May, 9, 1969.

Dear Sweetheart,

Getting ready to head out and wanted to drop you a line. I don't know when my next chance will be to write.

I hope that you write me after you receive this letter, but I think that I've said that to you with the many letters that I've sent you.

But I love you, Mary, always have, always will. I want to marry you when I get home. I tell you this now, so that you can have time to think about it and forgive me. When things get rough, I remember your freckles, and that smile of yours that can bring sunshine on a cloudy day.

Before I sleep, wherever I am, I imagine walking down your street, seeing your front porch just ahead of me. I remember all those hugs and kisses we had to steal when no one was around. And God, I love you, Mary, with every thought, it grows and flows on and on.

Take care of yourself and remember that 'We have tomorrow' and all the tomorrows if you still love me. I send you a million kisses, and I'm always devotedly, your Denny

Mary Alice never wore make-up again. She finished college and became a teacher. When her father passed away, she moved in with her mother because she needed her care. After her mother's passing, Mary stayed in the home she had grown up in. She never got rid of the swing and never took company with another man. Her life was filled with her memories of the man that she had loved her whole life.

In those quiet times when her memories became too difficult, she would sit on the porch swing and read Denny's letters to her, remembering everything. Her last words before she fell asleep were always, 'we have tomorrow'.

The years raced by and she refused to go in a home or somewhere that she could be cared for. One evening, she was sitting on the porch swing, holding Denny's letters in her hands. Just holding them brought her solace. She remembered everything.

She looked up, noticing that there was a man near the street light. She wondered who it was. And then she knew. She saw Denny's face and his form as if it were only yesterday. He began to walk towards her, and she sat transfixed. As he approached, she suddenly felt very peaceful.

He smiled at her and sat next to her. "We have tomorrow, Mary Alice. Then we'll never be apart."

He reached for her hand and she felt the feel of his fingers around her own, a feeling she had never forgotten.

"Will you marry me, Mary Alice?"

"Of course. I've been waiting for you all of my life".