

Ma Was No Romantic

By Dessy Walls

Ma was no romantic. She was too practical for that.

She'd probably tell me to pull myself together and concentrate on my studies. So your heart's been broken. You've been dumped by your first girlfriend. It happens to everybody. Put it behind you and get on with your life.

Ma wasn't saying this to me. It was what I knew she would say when I told her. Right now I was saying it to myself because she wasn't there to say it. I didn't want to see Ma or Daddy. I wanted to hide my head away.

I was walking the seven miles home from where the girl had stood at the door and told me it was over. I was hoping the hard road would scrape some of the edge off my pain. Half a mile so far and it wasn't working. It was getting worse.

She'd met someone older. That was a line from a song; funny how we dig out lines from songs to try to soothe our broken hearts. Well she hadn't so much met someone older as gone back to someone older. He was her ex. Ma would say what did you expect. You're not nineteen yet; the girl is twenty and girls are so much more emotionally developed.

Ma didn't know about the break up yet but that's what she would say; probably because I'd told her about the sex. No, I wasn't having sex. I was the most confirmed virgin in County Cork (and there was a lot of competition). But the girl had told me she had had sex with that ex guy when she was his girl and I'd told Ma about it. "Some people mature in that way faster" was her practical response. "You stick to your own pace."

I hadn't told Daddy about the girl's past. He didn't like her much anyway and that might have crowned it. Although he had thought he would like her. The day I'd brought the girl home to dinner Daddy had been very excited about the whole thing. I hadn't yet emulated him as a scholar but maybe, in my choice of girlfriend I'd show the same class he had. Daddy was a romantic. I think he imagined a clone of my mother walking in. She'd be attractive, intelligent and socially charming. Two seconds after meeting the girl he decided she wasn't any of those things.

Ma had a different approach. Whether the girl was the answer to all her prayers or a catastrophe she would be welcomed as a guest in our house. Half way through the meal the girl asked Daddy if he knew a particular guy at the oil refinery where Daddy was a manager.

"That man doesn't work at Whitegate oil refinery", he said.

"Oh yes he does", she answered without much grace.

"If he worked there I'd know him", he assured her.

“He works there but maybe you don’t know him? There’s hundreds working out in the plant and you are in an office all day.”

“I know everyone who works there”. I had never seen Daddy dismiss anyone so sharply.

Ma on the other hand was being polite and I suspect was kicking Daddy under the table because he left it at that and Ma asked the girl a bit about herself. Not surprisingly the girl told me afterwards she liked my mother very much. That’s all she said about the evening. Daddy didn’t say much about it either.

Now that same girl had broken my heart and I was walking the seven miles home. A mile gone and six to go yet still no ease up in my misery. Think about it. Every week for the last three months I’d counted down the hours to when I would meet her; the hours between kisses. Though it never went further than kissing and cuddling, there was lots of that. The girl gave enough hints she wanted more but I didn’t recognize those hints ‘til years later.

That song was still in my head. It started “Who’s the one who tied your shoes when you were young and told you not to run?”

I’d sung it when Ma and Daddy had come to the hall to hear the first songs my band had learned. They’d reacted encouragingly to the other songs we played but that one they said was sentimental crap. No, they didn’t use that word but they conveyed that meaning very insistently. Crap; who’s the one who blah blah blah etc. etc. ... the predictable answer each time being Mama. And it was the only song I’d sung myself at that session. Crap! Ma didn’t like cheap sentimentality and she said so. Appreciation of what your mother had done for you could be better shown in practical ways, like studying hard. Daddy agreed.

Now as I walked that lonely road of heartbreak another line of that song was going through my head ... “Who’s the one who gave her shoulder when you told her your first love was over she met someone older ... Mama ... Mama”

Sentimental crap!

The tears were rolling down my cheeks. But I didn’t need anyone’s shoulder; particularly that of an unromantic unsentimental practical parent who would tell me to pull myself together.

I was so lost in my self pity I didn’t notice the car pulled up beside me. They were coming home from an early picture show and Ma had spotted me. My heaving shoulders were the give away that all was not well. If I’d seen the car coming behind me I’d have controlled myself but it was too late. They would know by now what was wrong. They were aware I had a date that evening. Ma got out, opened the back door and let me in.

Then she got in beside me. She never said a word but just rocked me in her arms. Daddy drove on with just the odd glance in the mirror. I sobbed. She waited ‘til I was ready to speak.

“She went back to her ex boyfriend.”

“It must hurt very badly”, she said

“It does”, more sobbing

“But it’s not about you.” Ma said stroking my hair. “The girl had broken up with that boy. She was probably in love with him but before they’d a chance to make it up again she was distracted by the attentions of a good looking charming young man.”

“Who me?”

“Yes you.”

“Don’t be silly Ma. I’m not good looking.”

“Of course you are, and intelligent and charming. I’m your mother and I know. This pain will pass.”

I sobbed on her shoulder and Daddy handed back one of the big handkerchiefs he always carried. It was needed because by this time I was pouring liquid from every exit in my face all over my poor mother who didn’t complain; a nineteen year old blubbering baby in her arms.

I didn’t bawl like that again for almost forty years and then it was with those same loving arms around me though now thin and frail. This time I was crying because Ma was saying a final goodbye to me and the other eleven she had reared and loved so well. And liquid was pouring from every exit in my face and she still didn’t complain; a fifty eight year old blubbering baby in her arms.

The Saturday after the girl dumped me I was still feeling rotten. Ma persuaded me to go out and be where the young people were. She ironed my suit. A thing she’d normally have hoped I’d do myself. She polished my shoes and laid out my best shirt and gave me a gift of some cool aftershave. As I left the house she stood at the door smiling and said “Single and fancy free; enjoy it.”

Ma was no romantic. She was much more than that.