

Jan Nieman's winning entry in the Florida Weekly Picture Challenge, Aug 10-16, 2011

## Control

Yesterday, I overheard Mom talking on the phone to Aunt Flo, "Hank's got two weeks leave. No, I haven't told the kids yet. I don't want them to be bugging me. Besides, you know how the Army is. At the last minute something happens upcountry and all leave's cancelled. What? Oh, he's supposed to get in tomorrow."

It's the pits it's raining. It should be sun-shiny when Dad comes home. But, it's OK. I'm just going to stay close to this window and I'm betting I'll be first to see him.

"Breakfast, Amy."

Shoot! Mom's acting like today's nothing special. Well, I'm not leaving my spot. "Not hungry, Mom. I had cereal earlier."

I'm pretty peeved at her anyway. I can see not telling the little boys, but I'm almost eleven and I think she should have told me, at least. When Dad came home last year, we all met him at the airport and it was a big celebration with flags and everything. Mom hasn't said a thing about driving there today. So, I'm thinking he's probably going to catch a cab.

Even if it's raining, I don't really care. It's still going to be great having Dad here. Last time he got leave, everything was hunky-dory the first day, after than he and Mom just argued about everything. It was like they were making up for lost time.

First it was, "Flo, this faucet is still dripping in here. Can't you keep things working properly?"

Then she shouts back, “I couldn’t fix it myself, Hank, and there’s no money for a fifty dollar plumber.”

Then he turns off the water and brings his tools up from the basement. I sit on the bathtub and watch him until he nods his head. “You need a man around here, don’t you, Miss Amy.”

We both grin.

Dad jokes, “I think it’s time we went out for an ice-cream, don’t you?” I skedaddle rounding up the boys and we all pile into the Chevy. Dad and Mom come out of the house and they’re holding hands.

Dad says, “It’ll feel good to drive my own car again.”

But Mom is already in the driver’s seat. “Well, just relax. I’ve been driving me and the kids everywhere just fine, thank you very much.”

I can tell she’s really not thanking him.

He slides in on the passenger side and says, “Well, Marge, I know you did a good job while I was gone, but I’m home now. I can take over”

Mom gives him her “I’m losing my patience” glare and starts the car. This goes on and on about who’s going to drive. Who cares? Let’s just get to Ice Cream Mania.

I’m hoping this time everyone gets along better. Oh, hey, wait. I almost missed a car pulling up while I was daydreaming – can’t hardly see out this blurry window And, look, there’s Dad. I clutch the “welcome home” flag in my hand and, rain or no rain, I race down our sidewalk.

“Hi, Dad! Oh, Uncle Jim, I thought you were Dad.”

“Nope, it’s just me, Amy...Mom in?”

“Yeah, she’s in the kitchen.”

Dad’s brother heads down the hallway and I go back to my spot and watch the rain come down, down, down. I tune out their conversation, but, boy, are they loud.

I hear Mom screaming, “Jim, he can’t do this.”

Do what? My attention turns from the window to them. Then I remember Uncle Jim didn’t say anything when I thought he was Dad. So, that means he knows, too. Why isn’t anyone telling me?

He says, “Marge, calm down. You knew this could happen.”

This doesn’t sound good. I’m thinking the worse that the Viet Cong killed him on patrol. I leave my post for the kitchen and peek around the door. Uncle Jim’s butt’s against the sink. Mom’s at the stove flipping pancakes with one hand and her other is balled into a fist.

Uncle Jim notices me. He says, “Marge, don’t you think you should tell the kids? Amy’s right here.”

I’m not dumb. I know what’s going on. My stomach feels just like her fist. “What happened to Dad?”

Mom waves her pancake flipper at me. “Nothing, Amy, happened to Dad.”

Relief. “Then is he coming home?”

“Maybe later.”

“When? Tell me!”

She’s got this look on her face: buggy eyes, bites her lips and sticks her chin out.

“Amy, you’re just like your father. You’ve got to be in control of everything that goes on – gotta be in the middle.”

Is that true? I don't think I have control over anything. She's in a mood, so I ask Uncle Jim, "Is Dad coming home today? I've been waiting for him all morning."

His upper lip flutters and he lets out a puff like horses do. "Well, he is, Amy, but he's not coming here first. He's staying at our house for a little while."

"Why?"

Mom glares at me. "Amy, this is none of your business. Now, get out of here and go back to whatever you were doing."

I return to my window and decide I'll just stay here and watch for Dad. Uncle Jim is wrong. I know my Dad will come right here first. I try to catch conversation from the kitchen, but the outdoor storm and the one inside me drown them out.

Darn, nobody tells me anything.