

Born Loved: A life unplanned

The Early Years

I was born loved. My mother, Deloris “Dody” Clayton, the daughter of a small-town preacher, was pregnant with me at sixteen years of age. Her mother, Reverend Sarah Clayton, handled it with acceptance and love. I found out when I was thirty-five years old that she told my mother that they loved children, she could stay there and have her baby, and that she did not need to marry the father. What an enlightened, accepting attitude for a preacher in 1950 that was! When I asked my mother if that was true, she told me it was accurate, much to her surprise. Expecting judgement, exclusion, and hatred, she was met with love, as was I.

As an infant I was in a tug of war, but a tug of war in the best possible way. My mother’s three younger sisters, Alva, Norma, and Janey, all wanted to hold me, often at the same time. My Grandmother Clayton has shared with me that my mother used to cry that I was her baby, and it was her turn to hold me. Quite an enviable position to be in as an infant. I don’t remember it, but I have seen dozens of pictures to prove that my Grandfather James Clayton’s favorite pose was him holding my infant body straddling a deer head on the wall.

While the Reverend was fine with my mother not marrying, the U.S. Army had other rules. My father, with a nudge from a judge, had joined the Army, completed basic training, and was enroute to South Korea by way of Seattle, Washington when news of my mother’s condition reached him. My Grandmother had acceptance, but the Army had orders. He was dispatched back to Mercersburg, PA to marry my mother, make her an honest woman with dependent benefits in case he died in Korea, and then was sent off to defend democracy in a frigid winter. I was born just after midnight on October 3, 1950, but word did not reach my father until October 6, 1950, which is the date he celebrated my birth.

My parents were babies and having babies when they had me. At my birth my mother was 17 and my father was 19 and fighting for his very life in a tank in Korea, growing up quickly. By comparison, my mother was protected, warm, fed, with much family support. When Dad came back from Korea, and Dody and Merle moved from Army base to Army base. Dad was

deployed twice to Korea and twice to Vietnam. Then they truly had responsibilities.

Two and a half years later my sister Georgia Kay showed up. No one checked with me about it, but I was all right with it. She was cute, and I still got plenty of hugs, Cocoa Puffs, and Frosted Flakes I needed, so it was cool. She watched cartoons on Saturday morning with me and we plotted together to get around the rules. Then a weird thing happened. My youngest sister Deloris appeared, and every picture of us has my arm around my sisters. I locked onto the big brother role, with lots of encouragement and praise for it from Mom and Dad. Now that wasn't the weird part. The weird thing was that my grandmother the Reverend gave birth to yet another daughter. I did not realize that preachers even had sex. She declined to discuss that with me even in my teens. So, I now had an aunt younger than I was! I told you it was weird.

Army posts were big on sports for soldiers and dependents. When I was six years old my dad took me to Little League tryouts. I always had a ball of some kind in my hand and did well. I was drafted early and my dad proudly started filling out papers and produced my birth certificate. The trouble was that a player had to be eight years old, so back I went to pick up ball for two more years. This was not to be the last time I circumvented rules to play some kind of sport.

When my father was deployed overseas, we always went back to Mercersburg to be around support in case bad news came that dad was not coming back. We also went back when dad went to Officers Candidate School to become an officer after a decade as an enlisted person. He barely qualified under the age limit. They called him "Pappy" because he was so old, 29. We did go with him to Germany twice, over on a ship and back on a plane, Military Air Transport. We were too young to realize that it was only a decade after WW II and buildings were bombed out everywhere. We vacationed in Italy, camping on the beach in borrowed Army tents, floating in the Mediterranean Ocean on olive drab air mattresses.

My recollection was that my parents treated me well, but not each other. The constant bickering, accusations, and unrest were taxing on the children. I escaped to sports, my sister Georgia hid in her room and made straight As, and my sister Deloris escaped into the television. She was our

TV Guide. Ask her what was on Tuesday at 7pm, and she could tell you all four stations. Yes, four. It was a much simpler time.