Latchkey Darla

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Darla stood inside the storm door, framed like a frightened child behind the glass. Her legs felt wobbly and much like rubber and her hands trembled. If only...! she thought as a tear slid unceremoniously out of the corner of her right eye followed by one from the left eye.
Her mother turned and waved her a loving good-bye before she was at the end of the sidewalk on their lawn. Then she rushed quickly back to Darla, saying softly, "O honey, I wish I didn't have to work and leave you alone like this. It pulls the heart out of me."

They fell in each other's arms inside the door and wept together.

"I understand Mother dear. And just as soon as they're through building that sweet little This and That Gift Shop, Mrs. Channing said she'll give me a job there, working after-school hours, the Lord willing. I'll help bring in some of the money then, God willing."

"You're such a dear child!" Mrs. Keen exclaimed, brushing the tears off the cheeks of her fifteen-year-old daughter. "I'm not all that concerned about that extra money, Darla," she said, "although it will be a great help, to be sure. It's having to leave you here, alone. You're scared, aren't you?" she asked.

"Truthfully, yes. But I'll get adjusted to it. It's just that you've always been here when I'd come home from school. And now, suddenly, you're not. O Mother, Daddy did something to our beautiful, once-secure little nest and world. Why did he take up with that wicked, wicked woman? And how could he leave us? You especially? You've been such a wonderful mother and wife and . . . and . . . I can't believe that he'd be able to do such a thing and . . . and not be sorry for it."

"Sin blinds people, honey. You know that. Your daddy is blinded by sin. We must pray much for him and not allow any bitterness or hatred to seep into the wellspring and fountain of our heart, Darla. Prayer will keep that inner fountainhead sweet and tender. Now, I must be going or I'll be late for work. Please remember to call me as soon as you get home from school. And don't let anyone know you're alone, if they call you on the phone. Remember, I am praying for you! I love you."

"Oh, Mother, I love you too. I'm so happy and thankful that I still have you. And, of course, you know I'll obey all of your orders. Now have a good day. I'm glad you're working in the office at Blattners: that isn't too far from school. I feel really close to you, Mom, when I'm in school. This gives me a good, cozy feeling."
"I'll see you at my usual hour, the Lord willing. You can make a salad for supper again and have the potatoes ready for cooking.

Darla watched her mother drive away; then she closed the inside door and locked it securely before going into the kitchen and washing the breakfast dishes.

Getting dressed for school, her thoughts wandered to her father. Where was he? Hadn't he given any thought whatever to what his disappearing would mean and do to his family?, she wondered. Or didn't he care? If he didn't, it was, as Mother had said, because of the blinding effects of his sin.

She could still feel the keen, cutting sensation of pain that went through her when she read the brief but totally unexpected and devastatingly-shocking note left on the table for her mother and her to read.

Kitty and Darla, he had written.

This is a dirty thing to do, and neither of you deserve it; but I'm leaving for good. I found someone else; we love each other very much. Kurt

That was all he had said. But it was as if he had plunged a knife into her mother's heart. They came home from the midweek prayer meeting and saw the note propped up on the table. That was five weeks ago, she realized suddenly. He had taken his clothes and all his personal belongings with him. It felt like there was a death in the family.

She put the now clean dishes away inside the cabinet and gave the kitchen a last careful scrutiny then she got ready for school.

It seemed strange to her to have to lock the door as she left for school. Always before, her mother had stood in the doorway, waving good-bye to her as she left and telling her that she would be praying for her.

A great loneliness swept over Darla as she hurried down the sidewalk, carrying her books in her arm. She missed her parents; both of them. But, mostly, she missed the parting smile of her mother standing in the doorway, watching her as she walked to school.
She had felt so secure and snug in her home, never once giving any thought whatever that her parents would separate. Or even so much as think of doing such a wicked thing. She had always heard, and been taught, that marriage was a for-life contract, too serious to be entered into lightly; a sacred vow taken and made by two people -- a man and a woman -- and not meant to be violated or broken.

She prayed for her mother as she walked through the crackly sounding leaves that had dropped from the trees and been dried by the sun. Her mother had loved her husband, Darla's father, deeply, this Darla knew.

Some things were just too strange and too complex to understand, she realized as she walked; her father leaving her loving, kind, God-fearing and wonderful mother, for instance. Especially since the woman he had disappeared with was known to have broken up several homes previously.

"Hi Darla," a voice called from a side street. "Wait up and I'll walk with you. It makes it kinda' nice to walk with another latchkey kid."

"Latchkey kid!" Darla exclaimed as Brittany Smeltzer came up with her. "What is that?"

Brittany laughed pleasantly. "It's the name given to those of us who must go home to an empty house -- a parentless home -- from school. We have our own personal house key, see?" she said, pulling the key-holding ribbon around her neck from its hiding place beneath her bulky sweater. "I see you have your ribbon around your neck too. I guess I don't mind it too badly though. How about you?"

"I do mind it, Brittany. I miss not seeing Mother's face when I go inside. And, always, she'd sit down and ask me how my day went and did I have a good day. Such very ordinary and mundane questions. But they meant everything to me."

"You get used to it after a while, Darla. It's just a matter of time, and adjustment. I felt dreadfully sorry for you when I heard what your dad did to you and your mother. I thought, those first few months, that I'd die when Daddy left us. And my mother didn't deserve that either; just like yours doesn't. And didn't."
"How . . . did you know? About. . . ."

"Your father leaving?" Brittany asked, filling in where Darla couldn't seem to finish.

"These things have a way of making news, Darla. Don't ask me why; they just do. But we can't stop living, you and I. Nor our mothers. We must go on, smiling, working, achieving and planning and keeping our faith in God. If anything, it should draw us closer to God. I know this is what it has done for me."

"I'm experiencing the same thing, Brittany!" Darla exclaimed. "Since no longer having an earthly father to look up to and ask things of, I've been going to God, like a little hurt child, and taking it to Him. He has been healing the hurt and the pain inside of me and He lets me know that He loves me and that He will never leave or forsake me."

"Isn't that a great feeling!" Brittany remarked. "So what do you do after school, Darla?"

"Go home, naturally. I help get supper prepared so when Mother gets home it doesn't take long to get the meal on the table. Too, I clean the house and do some baking. I'm into baking breads. Yeast breads, that is."

"Sounds wonderful," Brittany answered. "Maybe someday, God willing, you can help teach me how to make some. I'm not the world's greatest cook, I confess. But my crafts are bringing a good price down at The Olde Barne. I'll be happy to teach you how to make some crafts."

"Oh, Brittany, that sounds wonderful. I'd love to learn. It's so much better to stay busy when one is lonely and . . . and scared."

"After a while, even that isn't too acute either, Darla. I found out that as I pray and read the Bible the Lord buffers all my pain and shock. Mother and I are growing in the things of God since we have learned to trust Him and to take all our hurts and hard-to-understand things and our needs to Him. Well, here we are. Let's walk home together this afternoon, the Lord willing."

"I'll love that, Brittany. Bye for now."
They separated inside the big building, each going to her separate home room, feeling good and thankful to God for a mutual Friend and a mutual faith.

As Darla walked out of her homeroom when the afternoon dismissal bell had rung, she heard someone call her name. Turning, she saw the blonde head of Mindy Fortner bobbing down the hallway toward her.

"Hey, what are you doing these days?" Mindy asked, panting for breath. "I hear you're one of us now."

"Wh... what do you mean, 'one of us'?" Darla asked with a puzzled look on her face.

"Another Latchkey Kid. Sorry to hear about the dirty thing you dad did. I know how you feel. Only, in my case, it was my mom who took off with someone else. But say, it's kinda' nice being on your own after school for a couple, three, four, or five hours. Sometimes even longer."

Darla gasped. Her mother would never leave her alone that long. Never. That's why she had taken the job she had, so that she, Darla, wouldn't be alone for more than an hour and a half, at the very longest.

"Why don't you come to my house, Darla? A bunch of us get together -- at someone's house -- every afternoon after school. And do we ever have fun! No one there to boss, one one there to say "you can't." Um! Um! Talk about freedom! And you should see what we watch on television!"

Again Darla gasped. "Thanks, but no, Mindy. I love the Lord too much to do any questionable thing. And I feel its sinful and terribly wrong and evil to hide anything from one's parents. I have all the freedom I want by staying transparent and being 'open and above board,' as the saying goes, with my dear mother."

"Oh, so you're one of those goody goody sissies; a mama's girl! A religious fanatic! Well, I have news for you; we wouldn't want you, not since I know how you feel. You'd spoil all the fun and the good times the fellows and we girls have together. Enjoy your mama" Mindy mocked. "And be sure the
apron strings are good and tight, since it's quite apparent that you're tied to her apron strings. Bye bye, mama's innocent, goody goody girl!"

Mindy's head went up high in anger and defiance as she marched grandly down the hallway and was soon lost in the throng of milling students.

Darla walked away in silent thoughtfulness and prayer. She felt sorry for Mindy. She honestly did. She, perhaps, had never had the slightest shred of religious training and knowledge; so, naturally, she knew nothing besides her way of living. Well, Darla decided, with God's help and through much prayer and fasting, she was going to see what she could do to help Mindy get out of the slimepits of sin and shame and up into God's wonderful land of freedom from sin by becoming converted. She could put this latchkey kid's afternoon meeting in reverse, by inviting Mindy over to her house and allowing her to help prepare supper and teaching her how to make yeast breads and rolls. And talk to her about Christ too, as they worked.

Darla felt happy with the thought. Mindy may not want to come, she realized; but, again, maybe she would. Yes, it was possible that the pretty but flirtatious blonde just may come. Darla had a feeling -- a strong feeling! -- that she would.

She hurried home to pray, and to carry through on her mother's orders for supper. She was thankful there was nothing she was hiding from her mother.

"Only because of Thee, O blessed Savior!" she cried joyously and rapturously. Yes, Christ made the difference in how one lived and behaved, she thought, visualizing a new Mindy. A changed Mindy.