



T · H · E  
WOODEN  
HEART

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LaJoyce Martin



# The Wooden Heart

by LaJoyce Martin

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## Contents

Chapter 1	The Heart on the Tree . . . . .	9
Chapter 2	The Storm . . . . .	15
Chapter 3	The Letter . . . . .	23
Chapter 4	New Neighbors . . . . .	31
Chapter 5	The Drifter . . . . .	39
Chapter 6	Trouble at the Well . . . . .	47
Chapter 7	Mr. Webster's Surprise . . . . .	55
Chapter 8	The Death of a Dream . . . . .	65
Chapter 9	The Journal . . . . .	73
Chapter 10	The Listener . . . . .	79
Chapter 11	Mrs. Trouble . . . . .	87
Chapter 12	A New Worry . . . . .	97
Chapter 13	The Wings . . . . .	105
Chapter 14	Julius . . . . .	113
Chapter 15	The Revelation . . . . .	121
Chapter 16	Teacher Conference . . . . .	127
Chapter 17	The Ultimatum . . . . .	135
Chapter 18	The Rosebud . . . . .	141
Chapter 19	A Way Out . . . . .	149
Chapter 20	The Teacher's Call . . . . .	157
Chapter 21	A Trip to Town . . . . .	163
Chapter 22	Framed! . . . . .	171
Chapter 23	The Two-Timer . . . . .	177
Chapter 24	The Accident . . . . .	183
Chapter 25	Back to the Well . . . . .	189
Chapter 26	The Anniversary . . . . .	195
Chapter 27	A Changed Boy . . . . .	201
Chapter 28	The Third Event . . . . .	207
Chapter 29	Laying down the Law . . . . .	215
Chapter 30	Fevered Confession . . . . .	223
Chapter 31	Keeping a Promise . . . . .	229

## CHAPTER ONE

# *The Heart on the Tree*

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*I can't give you up, Daniel!*

Ellie Webster's wet cheek lay hard against the heart-shaped scar whittled deep in the bark of the tree that arched over the trail. With that pitiful sob, her arms tightened around the oak's insensitive trunk as if by clinging to it she could hold her lost love.

After half a decade, the carved heart that fenced his initials and hers still gave testimony to their young romance. Neither time nor weather had erased it.

She had been sixteen then. Sixteen, and too caught up in the moment to take a thought of the future, blind to the winds of fate that banked black clouds for tomorrow's storm.

"What a fool I am!" she cried, raining more tears upon the tree. "I have not heard a word from him in five years. I should give up! But giving up one's dream isn't easy. . . ."

A leaf fluttered down and lodged in her hair as if to offer solace. A squirrel, pirouetting from limb to limb,

stopped statue still to study this picture of dejection.

It was a quiet morning; the whole atmosphere awaited summer's dying breath. Even the birds sang pianissimo.

Once Ellie's heart had sung along with the field thrushes. Was that five summers—or an eternity—ago? The walk to the limestone well for water brought a thrill then. Now the journey never failed to remind her of that last look into Daniel Brock's clear brown eyes.

Here in memory's wake, Ellie's mind could find no defined birth of the courtship. Was her affection for him born the day he opened his syrup bucket and shared his lunch with her when her own lunch sack was stolen? He was in the third grade, she in the first. She could almost taste the stringy ham between the top and bottom of the flat biscuit. Or was it boyish concern she tasted?

Or did the first flame of romance start on the creek bank as he baited her hook during those adolescent years when time suspended a body between childhood and adulthood? Or when he picked cockleburs from her mittens to save her own hands the pain? Or when he talked to her about God . . . and what was good and right and honest?

As she reflected upon it now, it seemed that Daniel diffused into her life like a slow summer sunset. And as beautifully. She never questioned her love for him. It was just—there.

Sometimes it seemed but yesterday that they stood by their tree looking into each other's eyes. Then, at other times, it seemed a thousand milleniums in the past.

"Ellie," Daniel had said that day, "next to God, I love you more than anyone. Someday I will marry you, and we will be together forever." While he talked, he formed the heart on the tree with his pocketknife and linked the

letters together inside its perimeter as a sort of unspoken proposal. Ellie's wide violet eyes, framed with their smoky lashes, spoke more than her mouth ever could have said.

*Oh, Daniel! There'll never be anyone else. . . .*

Why hadn't he told her that this etched heart was his farewell gesture? That his family planned to join the wagon train to go west the very next day? Surely he had known!

Ellie pressed her face harder against the tree in a futile effort to block out the mental picture and lock it away from memory's prowling fingers. But her stubborn heart would drag it out again: Daniel's guileless smile, Daniel's bronzed face, Daniel's laughing eyes, Daniel's broad shoulders.

Had he really cared, he would have come to me before he left or at least left a message. He would have returned for me by now, her mind niggled, but her heart flew to his defense. He *did* mean it when he said he loved me! Oh, I know he meant it then! His eyes were true. But he has . . . forgotten.

*Can love forget?* mocked a demon of logic.

Life had hosted many changes since Daniel's going, changes that cost Ellie bitter heartaches. When she was eighteen, her mother died, leaving her to manage the household for her father and four younger (and thoughtless) brothers. One by one, life's anchors snapped without warning. All the scabbed-over wounds broke open and bled. She was sore hearted, numb, frightened. The keel of her ship lay splintered and strewn.

Now she felt like an old woman rolling a great stone endlessly uphill. Days and nights meshed into a whirlpool of thankless work and less affection. Her father was a