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Short Story
Approx. 2,500 words

Mama

Much as anything, I expect I dread seeing Ora Lee and Sister and them dressed up again in their funeral dresses, smelling like mothballs in spite of the airing. Looks to me like it's gonna be a regular thing: Ora Lee's mama's casket floating up everytime we get her buried good. Three times, counting this one. And everlast time, they're fit to be tied.

Got to where I don't expect no different. Same as her dragging up and down the hall at the house, framming on that blasted pan with the spoon Ora Lee give her to make a racket with in case she needed something. That was after we brung her home from the hospital last time.

I says to myself, to Ora Lee, too, and Sister, "Yall don't pay her no attention, and she'll quit that ordering yall around." They'd set a spell and make like they was watching the news on the television set, all the time listening to that racket drownd out Hugh Downs.

Wasn't long, though, before they was up and moving, toting egnogs and liquor off of beefsteak boiled in a jar for her to suck on with a straw. Her jaws was wired shut from getting broke when a tree I was sawing in the backyard come down on her head. She got pretty busted up.

Ora Lee and them didn't say nothing, but I could tell they thought I'd done it on purpose cause she kept hollering "Weasel" at me. That's what she called me.

My name's Ira T. Dupree, and I'm proud of it!

"They ain't nothing no prettier than a straight-legged baby!" Mama'd say. "All MY babies had straight legs. Scooter looked like he was leaning toward being bowlegged, so I give him a lamming dose of codliver oil, morning and night."

Her old speckledy eyes would settle on my legs everytime.

But they ain't no way I'd throw a tree on that pore ole lady's head and her already laid up from a stroke.

"Mama's living on borrowed time, Sugar," I heard Sister say to Ora Lee, ten times if she said it one, while they was washing supper dishes.

The leaders in Ora Lee's neck would get tight as banjo strings, and her big, wrinkledy lips would clamp shut, like she couldn't bear to dwell on it. She'd fold the sopping dishrag, neat as a pen, and flatten it out on the counter. Then she'd shake it out and put it in the dishpan with Clorox.

"Mama's seen a sight of woes, Sister," she'd say. "Since before Daddy passed away she's been fading. Got the pneumonia in 1954 and pleursy right behind it. Cancer of the tongue in 1979. Not to mention that bout with the flu when she had the hysterectomy in May, right on top of it. And, Lord, if that

wasn't enough, she come down with a stroke in 1980! I won't never forget us all just setting out on the porch after supper that night, August 16th, 1980, and quick as a wink, she quit what she was saying. Crickets ain't never sounded no louder! Mama's been through the mill!"

When she got hit by the tree in Eighty-one they figgered it was over. Called up Scooter to come. He must've knowed something the rest of us didn't, cause he didn't get in no hurry. Got to Valdosta Hospital two days later, bringing some lil ole shirt-tail gal he called Dawn from Orlando to slobber over while we set drinking coffee and waiting.

Well, long about midnight the third day, the doctor comes out looking bushed and sends one of us at a time in to say goodbye. Ora Lee and Sister had to pull theirselves together, hugging on each other, balling their handkerchiefs under their eyes, dabbing tears.

Scooter got up and stuffed his shirt in, turning that lil ole gal's hand aloose long enough to get decent.

I got a little tore up my ownself watching all of them bawling, smelling alcohol and listening to the late night shuffling of nurse feet. I hadn't never set foot in no hospital before, much less in the middle of the night. I'd of give a pretty to have been back in my own bed and it be over, listening to the crickets. But I figgered to see it through, and when it was over I'd have some peace.

When it come my time, I went in; kind've dreading it, though. Wasn't nothing showing but her eyes, mean as a snakes. I come up close to the bed and looked down at her, all wrapped up in white from head to foot, like a haint.

I just looks down at her and nods. And her eyes gets wild. I nods my head again and she sets in to groaning - don't have ary mouth. I looks back at the door where Ora Lee and Sister's carrying on, look back at Mama. And I swannee, if she don't look like she's fixing to get up and slap the face out've me!

I knowed she wasn't done for, right then. I says to myself, she wouldn't give the satisfaction!

Sure enough, she was up and about and rearing to go home in lessen two weeks. A miracle, the doctors called it. And Ora Lee and Sister set in to praising the Lord and putting bouquets of marigolds all over the place. You'd have thought it was big meeting.

They run back and to till they was plum wore out. Had me mowing the grass and hoeing the garden, setting the headboard of her bed up on blocks in front of the winder, so she could see out, and running back and to to town for bedpans and hotwater bottles and stuff. I couldn't hardly find the time to lay the corn by.

"Mama loves a clean garden," Sister said. "Mama loves smelling mowed grass."

Little Sister didn't have no place else to go since Mama left Brunswick and come to live with us in her last days. So

we took her in. And she was just as happy as she could be helping out in another woman's kitchen.

They ain't none of'em nothing to look at. The older they get, the more they get to looking like Mama.

Round as a biscuit,
busy as a bee,
Prettiest little thing
you ever did see.

That was what I says to myself when I met up with Ora Lee at church, twenty years back. Found out our names matched up when they called the roll in Sunday School: Ora Lee and Ira T. Had a pretty ring to it! Head over heels! Wellsir, that turned on me. She plum dried up waiting on her mama, lil ole wormy looking thing! Big faced just like her Ma, too, where her hair slid back off of her face. Went slap grayheaded from worry, I expect. And hard to get along with! If I say howdy-do at the breakfast table, she bows up and practically throws hot grits in my face!

Sister took after them, but she was sweeter. Course she's a sight younger than Ora Lee. She's coloring up just like'em now, but she didn't bother me none back then.

Scooter would've been another matter, now. He ain't worth the salt in his bread!

"Scooter's the manager of the Holiday Inn in Orlando," Mama'd say. "Ain't no hick farmer. No siree! He ain't the kind. Smart as a whip. Never was the kind to settle for the first thing come along. I told..."

Why, he come to me for a handout a many a time. Toted off sausage after ever hogkilling we had. Cane syrup. Peas and beans. I wish I had a nickle for ever bushel of peanuts he snuck off the place. A deadbeat's what he is! Living off of the government, more than likely! Or stealing. First'un last, he'll get caught! I done and had a bait of him away back before he growed his hair out long like a hippie. He took off right after he seen Mama at the hospital and them telling him she could go anytime.

Like I said, he about knowed something the rest of us didn't, though.

I come up the hard way, working out a living with my hands for me and Mommer after Popper died. And me nothing but a boy. Same old homeplace in Dúran County, but a sight improved. Tore down Mommer's big ole house and built Ora Lee a lil ole doll house to keep up. After they all come to beg off of us, ten years later, I wished a many a time, I'd kept the big one.

If I took a notion to have things to do with Ora Lee, long about midnight some nights, Mama'd clear her throat if the bed-springs squeaked ary bit.

And me and Ora Lee ain't no old folks yet! Going on forty, the both of us.

Yeah, I reckon I spent the better part of my life figgering life was waiting on me just around the corner. By the second funeral, I done knowed it wasn't.

I'd done give up smoking cause Mama couldn't breathe good. Give up my fishing, too. She broke out in a rash everytime she looked at ary thing with fins.

Wellsir, first thing I done after that second funeral was to get my can of Prince Albert and a cane pole; got me some cataver worms off of the tree and lit out with Ora Lee bawling like a baby.

But that's getting ahead of myself. Mama didn't die from the tree falling on her head. Hung on five years, five blessed years to the day, they said, after that. Inbetween, she had herself a heart attack, another stroke, fell out the back doorsteps and broke her hipbone, run over my shoes and broke her jaw again, and ever time she'd snap back. Going on eighty! Doctors up yonder in Valdosta said it was the beatingest thing they ever seen.

Didn't die of nothing. Sister just found her one morning looking up at the ceiling, like she was waiting for signs of first light.

Ora Lee and Sister hollered and carried on, knocking over furniture, and me trying to figger out if a snake got ~~in~~the house. Took the better part of the next day to get things straightened up for company bringing in food and setting around.

That was a sight of food! Got some of it still put up in the freezer after four months of eating regular off of it.

The pears was just turning by the third go round, and Miss Louella, down the road apiece, scrapped up enough for a pearpie to bring over.

And it some wet! Everytime I got the tractor to the fields, it'd bog down. Ora Lee and them bet a pretty Mama's casket would've stayed down if we'd buried her at Wayfare on the hill instead of Riverside in Sowell. I knowed better. It was wet everywheres. Besides that, I knowed nothing wasn't never gonna keep that old lady down. She was too ornry!

Got to where it's regular as prayer meeting at Sowell Baptist Church:

"Miss Vashti's gonna be buried again this afternoon," Brother Travis says, everytime you turn around at church. Folks is got to where they just kind've yawn, but they come anyhow.

And, I swanee, Ora Lee and them takes on like they done the first time: dragging out them old gray-blue gaberdine dresses and pertening up the veils on their lil ole silly hats.

"Sister, run go hang'em back out on the line," Ora Lee says, squalling all the while, standing in the door with her stomach pooching out, looking, for all the world, like her Ma.

That's when I knowed if her mommer did stay down, she'd still be dragging around the house in Ora Lee till I laid down and died. And I wasn't never one to try to change nothing. Just took'em like they come. Till that second funeral.

Shurf Hudson come all the way out from Sowell to the house that Friday morning to tell us she'd done riz again. When he got out've the car, I figgered it was something to do with some of Scooter's meanness.

"Nosir," he says. "I don't hardly know how to tell yall, but Miss Vashti's casket's done riz from all this rain."

Well, Ora Lee and Sister was standing on the porch, fretting before he got it out good. Then they set in to wailing like the first time.

"Tell'em to go on and bury her again," I says, standing there with my slop bucket, hogs snorting around my feet. And it raining some hard!

"Ira T. Dupree! How dare you?" hollers Ora Lee.

"Well, Sugar, what you want me to do?" I hollers back.

"We'll have a proper funeral for Mama if she comes back up twenty times, or else! Sunday evening, three o'clock, p.m., June 10, 1986," she lets loose, to the day. Sister's just screaming, nodding her balled-up head.

"Okaysum," I says.

Well, they set in to fixing up for company again. And pretty soon everybody come back, hugging necks and toting food. Two days that went on, just like the first time.

I took off from work, it still too wet to get in the fields, anyhow, and set in to entertaining the menfolks on the front porch while the womenfólks hung around the kitchen. I was a easy going man to put up with it.

Everytime, just like it was the last, Ora Lee and Sister'd set in and air out the house after the funeral. They'd put out a washing like you ain't never seen, scrub out the house, toothpick

the stove, and put up the food. Then they'd set around looking at old pictures and talk about old times. They'd sort out her clothes they'd done boxed up to give away, and dry up just in time for the next one.

Had to get out and out new pallbearers for this one. If the rain don't let up, we'll be going out've the county for folks to bring in food and flowers. I can tell they're getting plum wore out and disgusted with giving up their Sunday rest to come to the same old funeral, again and again. Got to where some of them's staying on for night church to keep from having to load up and go all the way back to the house and turn around and come all the way back. Come to think of it, they wasn't all that many come up to review the remains this afternoon. Yessir, I'll allow by the next go round, they won't be a tear shed, excepting Ora Lee and Sister's. They's a limit to what folks can take! It wouldn't surprise me atall if they didn't ask me to start putting a little extra in the offering plate, if this keeps up. From using so much electricity in the church, the preacher, too. He's about run out of stuff to say that'll fit in.

You think Scooter's put out ary dime for one of them funerals? Nosir! Not a red cent! Didn't show up but for two of'em. I'm the mister put the cashmoney up. Took it out ov my life savings. This time the undertaker did it for free, though. I told him if he'd done it proper the first time, she wouldn't have riz. He

didn't like it none, but I reckon he figgered it being the first time that ever happened in South Georgia, he'd make it good.

First time! That ought to tell you something about Mama!

Soon as everybody took off, late that Sunday after the second funeral, I took off fishing, like I said.

Me and Ora Lee ain't hardly spoke till yet.

Not even during this go round when I put my foot down and took off fishing again. A man's gotta put his foot down, now and again, I always say.

Come on, fish, and bite!