

Daugharty/2

"Mama"

I was sawing in the backyard come down on her head. Sheeget pretty busted up.

Ora Lee and them didn't say nothing, but I could tell they thought I'd done it apurpose 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 ever'time.

But they ain't no way I'd th'ow 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 heared 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 git 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 dishr~~at~~ 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 wees, Sister," she'd say. "Since before Daddy passed away she'd been fading. Got the pneumonia in 1954 and pleur'sy 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 they wadn't enough, she come down with a stroke in 1980. I won't never forget us all just a setting out on the porch after supper that night, August 16th, 1980, and suddenly as you please, 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, kause he didn't git in no hurry. Got to Val'osta 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, adabbing tears.

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

I got a little tore up my ownself watching all of them bawling, ~~smelling~~ 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 agive a pretty to abeen 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.



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

I just looks down at her and nods. And her eyes gits wild. I nods my head and she set in to groaning - didn't have ary mouth. I looks back at the door where Ora Lee and Sister's acarrying on, look back at Mama. And I swannee if she didn't look like she was afixing to git up and slap the fire out've me.

I knowed she wadn't done for, right then. I sayssto myself, she wouldn't give me the satisfaction!

Shore 'nuf, 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 athought it was big meeting.

They run back and fo till they was plum wore out. Had me mowing 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



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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 wadn't none of'em nothing to look at. The older they got the more they got to looking like Mama.

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

That's was what I says to myself when I met up with Ora Lee at church, twenty years back. Fount 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 turnt on me. She plum dried up awaiting on her mama,,lil ole wormy looking thing! Big faced just like her Ma, too, where her hair slid back off'n her face. Went slap grayheaded from worry, I expect. And hard to git along with! If I said howdy-do at the breakfast table, she'd bow up and practi'cly th'ow hot grits in my face!

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

Scooter'd abeen another matter, now. He wadn'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..."



Y, he come to me for a handout a many atime. Toted off sausage after ever hogkillin'g 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'n the gov'munt, moren likely! Or stealing! Fisst'un lasts, he'll git eaught! 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 atelling him she could go anytime.

Like I said, he 'bout knowed something we didn't, though.

I come up the hard way, wworking out a living with my hands for me and Mommer after Pa died. And me nothing but a boy. Jamee old homeplace in Duran County, but a sight improved. Tore down Mammaer's big ole house and built Ora Lee a lil ole doll house to keep up. After they all come to beg off'n us, ten years later, I wished a many atime, I'd akept the big one.

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

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

Yea, I reckon I spent the better part of my life figgering life was waiting on me just around the co'ner. By the second funeral, I done knowed it wadn't.



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

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

But that's gitting 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 tun over my shoes and broke her jaw again, and ever time she'd snap back. Going on eighty! Doctor's up yonder in Val'osta 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 ~~sign~~ 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 git things straightened up for comp'ny 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 reg'lar offn it.

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



"Mama."

And it some wet! Ever'time 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 aburied her at Wayfare on the hill stead of Riverside in Sowell. I knowed better. It was wet ever'wheres. Besides that, I knowed nothing wadn't never gonna keep that old lady down. She was too orn'ry!

Got to where it was reg'lar as prayer meeting at Sowell Baptist Church that spring and summer.

"Miss Vashti's gonna be buried again thi'safternoon," Brother Travis'd say ever'time you turned around at church. Folk's got to where they'd júst kindj's yawn, but they come anyhow.

And, I swannee, Ora Lee and them'd take on like they done the first time: drag out them old gray-blue gaberdine dresses and perten up the veils on their lil ole silly hats.

"Sister, run go hang'em back out on the line," Ora Lee'd say, bawling 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 wadn't never one to try to change nothing. Just took'em like they come. Till that second funeral.

Shurf Hudson come all the way outffrom Sowell to the house that Firday 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



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meanesss.

"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 astanding 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 ggain," I says, standing there with my slop bucket, hogs asnorting 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.

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

"Okay'sum," I says.

Well, they set in to fixin' up for comp'ny again. And pretty soon ever'body 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 git in the fields, anyhow - and set in to entertaining the menfolks on the front porch while the womenfolks hung around the kitchen. I was a easy going man to put up with it.

Ever'time - 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



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the stove, and put up the food. Then they'd set around looking at old pi'tures 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 git out and out new pallbear'yers 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 gitting 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'em'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 thing of it, they wadn't all that many come up to ~~view~~ view the remains thissafternoon. Yessir, I'll allow by the next goaround, they won't be a tear shed, exceptin' Ora Lee and Sister's. They's a limit to what folks can take! It wouldn't surprkse me atall if they didn't ask me to start putting a little extre' in the offering plate, if this keeps up. From using so much 'lectricity in the church - the preacher, too. He's bout 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 of my life savings. Last time the undertaker did it for free, though. It told him if he'd adone it proper the first time, she wouldn't ariz. He didn't like it



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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 oughta tell you something about Mama!

Soon as ever'body took off, late that Sunday after the funeral, I took off afishing.

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

Not even during this go raond 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!