



*SPEAK
TO THE
MOUNTAIN*

The Tommie Waites Story
As told to Dr. Bessie W. Blake

Foreword by Gordon Parks

Speak to the Mountain: The Tommie Waites Story

By Dr. Bessie W. Blake

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Mama bowed

“Deeeevil Children! Deeeevil Children! Look at these little devil children,” Mama moaned as my older sisters—Emily, age eleven, and Too-Too, age five—tried to calm her. A frightened three-year-old, I thought maybe she saw little devils in the room and I began to cry. She grabbed me in an attempt to pet me.

“But you’re God’s little angel. You’re my little angel child,” she whispered, clutching me so tight it hurt.

It was a few days before the Christmas of 1928. A biting cold had settled over Smithland, a farm village just northeast of Jefferson in Marion County, Texas. Times were hard. There were a few jobs at the old steam-driven sawmill and at the flourmill operated by the most of us depended on the cotton crop that had been shipped to market since the settlement was founded by Frances Parker Smith and his family around 1841. By the late nineteen twenties, the price of cotton began dropping from a high of eighteen cents on its way to a nickel a pound. Papa says, everybody felt the pinch—Blacks even more so. We realized less than a penny a pound for our labor on small rented farms carved from once huge slave plantations. In order to survive, every member of a tenant farmer’s family worked, including young children, and our family worked harder because of Mama’s illness.

My brothers—Herman, age fourteen, Major, thirteen and Alfred, nine—were out cutting wood they hoped to sell for a nickel a bundle to neighbors who were unable to chop their own firewood. My two older sisters were busy too. Earlee, nicknamed Too-Too, was helping in the yard with the wash and Emily was cooking our dinner. Mama had taught her to prepare a few basic meals like blackeyed peas and cornbread, and pinto beans and rice. My baby sister, Minnie, and I were too young for any real chores, but I thought I was old enough to have a job. I always competed with TooToo. If she was going to help with the wash then I wanted to do something. I kept whining until Papa pacified me by saying that I could watch Mama. Really, Emily was keeping an eye on her, but I was proud of my little job. I climbed into the big cushioned chair that had been turned away from the fireplace to face the bed. It was a comfortable room. Mama had seen to that; she was a good wife and homemaker.

Our house was small and sparsely furnished, but it was cozy. There was a large kitchen and three bedrooms: one for the boys, one for the girls and Papa and Mama’s room which also served as the company room and was decorated the best. In their room, everyday Mama would neatly tuck the corners of the white chenille bedspread between the mattress and the heavily carved bedposts, leaving the fluffy fringes to swing to the floor on the sides. Near the foot of the bed two army-green and rust tweed sofa chairs sat in front of the fireplace, reflecting the colors in the paisley wallpaper. Off to the left corner was a wooden chest where Mama stored her delicate items. In the middle of the wall to the right of the fireplace, sheer white organdy curtains hung at the front window and gave the room a soft look.

Mama was an only child from a privileged Black family. It must have been difficult for her to raise a gang of children on a dirt farmer's income but her house ran smoothly. She had the prettiest yard. Near the house there was no grass. She had swept the sand down to the hard clay and the ground was like a concrete patio. In the summer, barrels of mixed zinnias and bright orange marigolds sat at each corner of the long porch that stretched across the front of the house. A dogwood tree stood in the center of the area and red, yellow, and white rose bushes leaned against the fence railing that separated the inner and outer yards. The grassy plot that started at the fence and moved outward to the road was a blanket of flowers. In this area, where most of the women used old tires for flowerpots, mounds of sweet peas, petunias, and periwinkles sprang right out of the ground where Mama had planted them. Many of the petals had survived the October frost and toward the end of November a few of them still poked through the scattered dry leaves like bright lemon, orange and strawberry lollipops.

Mama kept the entire house as spotless as the yard, but she loved her floors. When the house was built, the lumber used for the floors had been given an extra finish called *planing*. It made the hard wood as smooth as glass. For us younger children it was like a skating rink. With sandy feet tracking in from the yard, we would slip and slide over them bumping into one another and the furniture. In order to keep the floors clean, Mama got on her hands and knees daily and washed and buffed them dry. Maybe she kept them so clean because Minnie was still a crawling baby.

I remember vividly the day I vexed her about her floors. I was toddling back and forth getting into everything while she cleaned baby brown potatoes from her fall garden. A light scrape with the spoon brought the skin off easily after the potatoes soaked for a while. The bucket of water that held them was irresistible. I liked the way the potato bobbed back to float on top of the water when I pushed down on one.

“Stop. You gon’ mess up the floor, baby,” Mama gently scolded.

She had just scrubbed and buffed the kitchen floor to a beautiful shine. Now, I was wetting it. Each time I ran up to the bucket, I stuck my hands in deeper and more and more water drained from my little fist onto the floor. Finally, she pecked me on the forehead with her spoon. The way I cried she might as well have grabbed the bucket of water and poured it over my head. More than anything she had hurt my feelings. Mama rarely hit us. She was so sensitive that when we cried, she frequently cried too. She petted me a little and told me again not to bother the water.

I probably remember the incident so well because it happened around the time Mama got sick. In her thirty-one years, she had never really been ill. Except for the miscarriage seven years earlier, even childbirth had been uncomplicated. She seemed to be healthy after the birth of my baby sister, Minnie, and, though the winter cold was bitter, she had no flu symptoms. Mama simply became nervous and began to lose a little of her strength each day.

Emily remembers vividly the illness and says Mama had a nervous breakdown. That's why she had to be watched. Although she would not harm herself or anyone else, she tended to wander away from the house. Whenever she started out the door Emily would calmly stop her.

“Mama, don’t go outdoors.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t go outdoors.”

Mama usually turned around, but sometimes she ignored Emily like the day she rushed past us into the December cold.

“I’m gone children! I’m gone!” she screamed.

“Mama please don’t go! Come back! Come back!” Yelling to the top of our lungs, we chased after her begging and pleading. The episode ended as quickly as it had started.

“Hush now. Hush. Mama ain’t going nowhere. Y’all keep quiet for me.”

Mama’s illness was a mystery. Some people said a vitamin deficiency caused her nervous condition. That may very well have been the case. I remember Papa and all of us children sitting around the table eating, but I don’t recall ever seeing Mama at the table with us. She must have been eating what was left over. Maybe she was malnourished.

Grandpa Ross tried to get a doctor for her but in the 1920s there were no Black doctors in Marion County and the White doctors were slow to treat Black people even when they had the money. Some of them just flatly refused to serve the ‘coloreds,’ as they called us. For others, serving the white community took priority over our needs. If there were no White patients in need and the weather was good, maybe one of them would make the trip from Jefferson to the house. It was not until she was bedridden that Grandpa Ross finally convinced a doctor to come take a look at Mama but he was not able to diagnose her ailment. Those old country practitioners did not have the tools and knowledge of today’s doctors. He prescribed something and returned to town.

When Mama’s condition did not improve after the doctor’s visit, Papa and Grandpa Ross began to truly worry. The midwives visited regularly with jars of tea and root portions. To me they were just company in the house. I couldn’t grasp the meaning of illness at my young age. I probably wouldn’t have remembered them at all if it hadn’t been for my first spanking from Papa.

“Shhhhhh! Don’t get on your mama’s nerves. You want her to have a nervous spell?” Whatever granny woman was sitting with Mama that day had poked her head into the room next door where I was circling round and round singing a tune. I stopped in the middle of the floor and shouted to the top of my voice:

“Nervous spell! Nervous Spell! Mama ain’t gon’ have no nervous spell!”

She told Papa and he spanked me. Upset about Mama’s condition, he grabbed me before he realized it. He seemed sorry immediately; he knew I was too young to understand.

Grandpa Ross came to see Mama everyday and watched her when Grandma Minnie or none of the women could come. Sometimes, Papa would have Emily keep an eye on her when he was working nearby, as was the case on the twentieth of December. The women who usually sat with Mama were busy preparing for Christmas and Papa had told Emily to look in on her while he did the wash in the yard but I thought I was in charge. I wanted to

do my job exactly right. So, I never took my eyes off Mama. I was so still I might have fallen asleep but she got out of bed.

“Mama’s gonna pray,” she said. As she knelt beside the bed I did as she had taught us: I did not make a sound.

Mama was a devout Christian. She read her Bible and prayed at least twice during the day and she taught us to pray. Even if it meant interrupting our play to bring us inside, prayer time was quiet time at our house and every night she took us over our prayers. Papa said her father, Reverend Major Ross, who was Smithland’s best-known minister, had made her overly religious.

I watched silently until Emily called out the back door for Papa to eat. He came into the house with Too-Too and glanced into the bedroom as usual.

“How long your mama been out of bed?” he asked Emily. I had no sense of hours or minutes, but from the look on Papa’s face, Mama must have bowed like that for a long time.

“I told y’all to get me.” He did not scream or anything, but even as a three-year-old, I could sense his annoyance. He turned his attention to Mama and began to gently tease her.

“Suge, what you doing on your knees. I should have brought me a switch in here.” He would play with her that way, telling her how her daddy had spoiled her. When Mama did not answer, he walked over and patted her on the shoulder.

“Suge. Suge,” he called again. Still, there was no answer. Papa just stood there for the longest time with his back to us. When he did speak, his voice did not crack, but it was so deep and low that we could barely hear him.

“Y’all, your mama’s dead.”

It was like someone had dashed hot water on TooToo. She ran out the front door screaming with Papa chasing after her. “Here baby, don’t do that! Don’t do that!” He brought her back and petted her until she calmed down. Emily stood in the corner of the room holding Minnie and crying softly but I did not cry. I just sat there watching Mama bowed by the bedside.

Herman was the first of my brothers to arrive home that day. As soon as he walked in Papa left to get Grandpa Ross. The dead were not embalmed in those days so they had to move fast. Grandpa Ross went with Papa to get a casket and they let neighboring families know about Mama’s death as they went.

In no time, people were everywhere. Men stood around in the yard, while the women were busy inside. They put Mama on a cooling board made by straddling two pieces of lumber across the quilting horses and draping the platform with a sheet. A group of ladies worked busily around her. After combing her hair back into the familiar braid, they dressed her in a pale pink sheer dress and placed her in the casket. That evening, every member of our small community passed through the company room for the last viewing. TooToo and I moved freely among the adults without notice. Though no one really discussed her death with us, we were not shielded from the reality of the event. We watched everything unfold without explanation.

The next day they took Mama away. Papa rose early to make sure we were all dressed and Grandma Minnie came to help him. I was dressed right down to my socks when they discovered that my shoes were too small. Mama had probably bought my last pair before she became ill and I had outgrown them. They tried but nobody had shoes to fit me. TooToo wore shoes borrowed from our cousin, Frankie Mae, and it did not matter whether Minnie had shoes or not because she was a baby and they could simply wrap her up and carry her. Everybody went to the funeral but me. I had to stay home with Grandma Minnie. I wished they had picked me up and carried me too. I am sure Papa thought I was too young for it to matter but it did.

People think that very young children don't understand death, that they don't grieve, but that is not so. As I watched them load the wagon, my eyes stayed on Mama's casket. Somehow, I knew she wasn't coming back. I watched from the window as the wagon eased slowly in and out of the muddy holes that dotted the lane leading from our house. As they disappeared into the woods, a bad feeling swelled inside of me. Much as I liked Grandma Minnie's food, I could not eat a thing. I sat by the window all day. It was the first instance I was aware of time. The family had been gone since early morning and the sun was beginning to set. I was worried they might not come back. When they finally returned at nightfall, I was beside myself with joy. I was all over the place, climbing in and out of my brothers' laps.

Papa gathered us all together later that evening. He said that we would still have a Christmas, but it would be small. We would not have toys or gifts—just a dinner.

"I don't care," I thought to myself. The fact that they all came back was Christmas enough for me. I fell asleep that night thinking about Mama. I could hear her voice whispering, *"Hush now. Hush. You're God's angel child."*

Mama had been the love of Papa's life. They had met at the Mount Carmel Methodist Church revival closeout back in 1910. Mama's daddy preached that Sunday and Papa lounged under the shady oak with the rest of the men who had dropped off the women folk in their families but weren't interested in attending the services themselves.

Their lives could not have been more different. While Mama enjoyed a sprawling eleven-room white frame house Papa, lived in a three-room shack where old newspaper and rags were stuffed in the cracks to keep out the wind and rain. He was one of seven children born to ex-slave tenant farmers and she was the only daughter of a minister whose father was supposedly a freedman during slavery. She was religious and he was worldly, but most of all her family was well off and he had nothing.

Grandpa Ross never talked about how he had acquired any of the good fortune that he enjoyed. People were more modest in those days. I'm guessing his father, Harvey Ross and mother, Lula, left him a good inheritance. All I know about his early years is he married my Grandma Jennie in the last quarter of the 1800s and they had made a good life for themselves and Mama. The furnishings in their house were imported from Europe and blue willow china and crystal filled the heavily carved dining room credenza. A black horsehair sofa, accented by white lace doilies that hung from the two small end tables, was the centerpiece of the living room. People who visited the Ross home were the most impressed, though, by the two-foot-high mahogany floor frames that displayed portrait-

sized photographs of the family.

From the photographs, you could tell that, except for the full lips, Mama got her looks from her mother. Grandma Jennie, a light skinned, petite, and somewhat frail woman, seemed mismatched with Grandpa Ross. He had the look of a pure African: a broad nose protruded over thick lips and his dark complexion blended into the black suit and collar he always wore. A stocky medium built man, his stature was not overbearing, but he was stern. His pompadour bangs were brushed back and partly covered the slight bald spot on the top of his head. The style highlighted the endless frown that creased his forehead and made people feel he was unapproachable.

Grandpa Ross' manner was as formal as his attire unless he was under the anointing of the Holy Spirit. He was a fiery preacher. Papa said all that running and hollering and jumping over the "bullpit" was too much for him, but the people loved it. Grandpa Ross was in constant demand. Always dressed in a black suit in the style of a tuxedo and wearing a matching black derby, he "rode circuit" between the three Methodist churches he pastored. The first Sunday of every month was reserved for Lewis Chapel, the second for Friendship, and the third for Mt. Carmel. Fourth and fifth Sundays were open for the numerous requests he received to speak at other church revivals. He was dedicated to God's work and his devotion did not end at dismissal time. Even at home, he could be found in the study reading the Bible or in his favorite yard chair singing hymns.

When Grandma Jennie died at the turn of the century, Grandpa Ross married her younger sister, Minnie. Mama, four years old at the time, loved her aunt and easily accepted her as a stepmother. They raised Mama to be a good Christian. She did not physically resemble her father but she had his spirit. By the time she met Papa, reading the Bible, singing hymns, and praying were already a part of her daily routine.

Like her father religion was Mama's devotion, but she was soon to become Papa's devotion. He loved her the minute he laid eyes on her. When she stepped out of the church door into the mid-afternoon sun, Papa says he could not stop looking at her. Mama's thick kinky hair was pulled back into a braid and tucked into a bun at the base of her head, revealing a round ginger brown face with wide eyes and full lips. In the fashion of the day, she wore a pale blue cotton floral print dress trimmed in white lace that stood high around the neck. She gently lifted the flaired skirt of the dress making the black high-top shoes barely visible as she strolled across the yard. Papa had been watching her from his shady spot under the tree. He said he could tell, by the way she moved, that Mama had never done backbreaking work.

"Here she comes. Here she comes," Papa murmured with his gaze fixed on her. "Here comes my wife," he told his best friend, Jace.

"Who? Bessie? Man, that's Reverend Ross' daughter. You don' want to play 'round with her," warned Jace, who, though he lived in Lodi, frequently visited family in Smithland and was acquainted with most of the people in the area.

Papa ignored Jace's warning and without a moment's hesitation, walked right up to Mama. She looked to be about fourteen years old, which was ten years his junior but that was the age of his mother when she married. Matter of fact, it was common practice back then for women in their early to mid teens to marry men much older than themselves.

“I’m Tommy Malvin Martin,” he stated as if giving his full name would increase his stature. “What’s your name?”

“Bessie Ross,” she answered.

“Well, Bessie, I’m going to be your husband,” he informed her.

“I’m engaged to be married next Sunday,” she smiled politely.

“Then, I guess I’ll have to wait for the nigger to die before I can marry you,” he ended the conversation with a tip of his ten-gallon hat.

He appeared to be untouched by the exchange when, really, it was a stinging rejection. Papa was tall, tan, good looking, and knew how to relate to people. Because he could read, everyone considered him more intelligent but he did not give off airs of being better. He drank whiskey with the fellows, plucked the best guitar in East Texas, and boy could he dance. He was a blues singer and had developed quite a following. Most women thought he was a good catch. He wondered if Mama was really engaged or just trying to put him off.

Papa turned his broken-down wagon into the lane and drove his mother the ten miles back to their home in Lodi. Mama, on the other hand, climbed into a fine black buggy with Reverend Ross. True to her word, she married Joe Holt in the spring of 1910 and within the year gave birth to their son, Earsell. It was a tragic episode in Mama’s life, though. In their first winter together, Joe contracted a strain of flu that took his life. The baby, also infected with the virus, died within a few days of his daddy.

Back then it could take months for news to travel ten miles so Papa had not been sure whether or not Mama actually married. He only knew what was in his heart. It took more than a year to overcome the disappointment of her initial rebuff, but he finally decided to return to Mt. Carmel’s annual revival. When he saw her he was nervous as a polecat but outwardly he maintained his same flip manner.

“Little ole girl, when he dies I’m gon’ marry you,” he greeted her.

“My husband is dead,” Mama snapped. It was an awkward moment. Papa felt really bad. He certainly had not wanted her husband to die. It was just a figure of speech. He would have done anything to take back his words. The earlier arrogance gone from his voice, “I’m sorry... I... I didn’t know,” he stuttered as he watched her walk away.

Papa turned a deaf ear to opinions about socializing with the Ross family. He learned from Jace which were Grandpa Ross’ churches and on the Sundays he did not have to take his mother to church, he could be found patiently waiting for Mama to be dismissed from service. Little by little he got to know her. Fortunate for him, Grandpa Ross was more open to the courtship than he would have been earlier. He understood that few men of his day were interested in being second husbands. A woman—even a widow—who had been with another man was considered an unsuitable bride. Since Mama was also interested in Papa, Grandpa Ross gave them his blessings. Following a short courtship, Papa and Mama were married in April of 1912 and decided to live in Smithland so that Mama could be near her family.

It’s a good thing Mama’s family was nearby. In sixteen years she bore eight children

and only one was a still birth. I am sure it was the support of her family that helped her bear seven healthy children in a time when miscarriages were common. We lived on Grandpa Ross' land. With no trees to block our view, we could easily see his house from our front porch. By the time I was big enough to play outside, the older children had already cut a trail straight through the field to his house. Mama's Uncle Levi also lived nearby and his sons, Ed and Robert, stayed just on the other side of Grandpa Ross.

Mama could call on any of her family members whenever the need arose, but she rarely asked for assistance. She respected Papa's role as provider and it made him adore her even more. He worked several jobs in order to buy nice things for the house. When he was not farming, he either chopped wood for sale or wove baskets and repaired chairs in the backyard. There was not a house in Smithland without his baskets or his cane bottom chairs. Women carried their wash to the lines in his laundry baskets, packed church lunches in his picnic baskets and, though he never peddled produce himself, his baskets went to market loaded with greens, onions, tomatoes, peaches and eggs. Even the children used his peck-sized baskets for picking blackberries.

Papa's best work was reserved for Mama though. From the white oaks that grew in the woods near our house, he would carefully choose a branch and soak it in the creek overnight. As soon as it was pliable, he started by making the basket handles. After bending the wood into the desired U shape, he tied the ends with wire and lay the piece in the sun. Once dry, the wood held its shape even after the wire was removed. He then took a knife and sanded away the rough edges until there was no danger of splinters. The finish was as smooth as if he had used sandpaper. While the white oak was still wet, he gently lifted thin layers of wood and cut them into strips that were later used to weave the finest baskets in the county for Mama. He even carved a beautiful table and chair set for her kitchen.

Yes, Papa was a responsible family man, but good times at the dance halls were still a big part of his life. He continued to perform despite Mama's disapproval.

"Boy, I don't like being here by myself," she'd complain. We always laughed at the nickname. At a time when Black men were routinely called "boy," Papa did not allow anyone—Black or White—to address him that way. He knew White folks were not going to call him mister, but he refused to be called "boy." They badgered him though, like the day at the cotton gin when fifteen-year-old Wilbur, the owner's son, decided to teach him a lesson. He stepped down from the platform where the scale and hook was mounted and walked over to Papa, who was next in line at the weigh station.

"What's your name, boy?" Papa didn't answer. As often as he came to the gin, Wilbur knew his name.

"Boy, is this your cotton sack?" Silence. When Wilbur grabbed Papa's sack to lift it to the platform, a forceful jerk sent him reeling backward. Surprised and angered, he met Papa's gaze in a glare then hastily retreated to the weighing platform where his father had been watching.

"Who's next?" the gin owner barked, annoyed by Papa's response to his son's heckling.

"It belongs to Ol' Bud Russell over there." Wilbur sulked, but he did not call Papa

“boy.”

Nobody called Papa “boy”—nobody but Mama that is.

“Boy, you stay out all night. What if something happens with one of the children? What am I supposed to do?” He certainly did not want her to go to her father for help. He considered it for a while. As much as he loved his music, some changes had to be made.

“You got a point, Suge. What if I come home no later than midnight? That way I’ll only be gone for three or four hours.” Mama agreed to try it. She did not want him to give up his music altogether but he had to stop staying out all night. Papa promised to make it work but the arrangement didn’t last a month. One evening he was out stroking his guitar and howling Skip James blues. He even moaned a few spirituals Blind Willie Johnson style. Next thing he knew the sun was coming up. He rushed home but it was too late. Mama was standing in the middle of the floor crying. Herman had been sick all night and she was in a panic. Papa said he felt so guilty, he told her a big lie.

“Come here. You see that tree out yonder. I been sleeping there all night. I didn’t want to wake you up.” She accepted his explanation and it made him feel guiltier. He decided then and there to give up performing for dances. He never played the guitar publicly after that night, but when friends came over to the house they were in for a treat—especially if Uncle Elf, one of his close buddies, plucked the banjo. Not only did Papa play and sing, he would throw his guitar down in a minute and dance a jig. I don’t know anyone who had as much rhythm as Papa.

After Mama died, Papa stopped dancing. Without her he was lost, but I was too young to understand the devastating blow her death had been to him.

A woman smooths the rough edges

“We a family and we gon’ stay together. We gon’ work together like a team and we gon’ make it. I’m not gon’ leave y’all. I’m a take every one of y’all with me and do all I can for you. Now, if you jump up and leave, I’m not coming to get you,” Papa told us. I suppose he was speaking for the benefit of my older brothers—Herman and Major—or for Emily. The rest of us were too young to get his meaning.

“*I’m not going to leave you either,*” I thought. “*Why would we want to leave Papa?*” Though his words were confusing, they filled some of the loneliness in my little three-year-old heart.

On January 2, 1929, we celebrated my fourth birthday with freshly baked teacakes and lots of hugs from Grandma Minnie. A couple of days later, we moved off Grandpa Ross’ land. Papa’s love for Mama had made him agree to live in the house her daddy had built. With her gone, his pride would not let him stay.

It seemed life without a mother would be unbearable. Our new home was only five miles away, but it was a different world. We pulled up in the loaded wagon to a dreary sight indeed. Everything had a gray cast: the weathered house with its rusty tin roof, the rotting wood railings of the fence and the storehouse that sat like a low-lying fog among the bare trees. Even the sky was gray.

Aunt Jessie, one of Papa’s older sisters, came from Texarkana for the move. She busied herself trying to fit four rooms of heavy furniture into the three shabby rooms. The front room, Papa’s bedroom, would still be the company room but, with only a bed, tin heater, and two straight-back chairs, it would be less comfortable. The wardrobe chest, a dresser, and two full-sized beds were crammed into the back room where Aunt Jessie, my three sisters, and I slept. My three brothers slept in the kitchen on cots that were stored against the wall during the day. Except for Mama’s sofa chairs that Papa could not part with, excess furniture was given to neighbors. The prize chairs sat on the front porch and slowly rotted from exposure to freezing winter rains and blistering summer heat.

Aunt Jessie was not a talker but everything about her said comfort. Once the house was in order, she stayed busy cleaning, washing, sewing and patching my brothers’ pants. In the spring she started a small vegetable garden and tended it everyday. She was a good cook too and always smelled like food. Whenever she hugged me, I loved the lingering scent of fresh baked bread, sweet potatoes and spices as much as I liked sinking into her soft plumb body.

Having Aunt Jessie in the house made me feel secure. Papa and my older brothers were always petting Minnie because she was the baby, but Aunt Jessie took pains with me—always hugging me and calling me baby. On her first trip home to Texarkana she bought me a pair of shoes. It was like she knew I was heartbroken about not going to Mama’s funeral. Those shoes brought joy to my little soul. I put them on just to dance around the house. Aunt Jessie’s love was exactly what I needed and, though she must have pampered my sisters and brothers too, I felt her affection was mine alone. She had a way of making

me feel special.

TooToo, Minnie, and I hung around Aunt Jessie, always asking for food or pestering her for stories about growing up with Papa in the olden days.

“Humph. Don’ know no stories,” she’d grunt. We never got a single story out of her. She was too quiet for storytelling. When she did speak it was about her home in Texarkana.

“Sho’ hope that storm didn’t tear up my garden,” she’d wonder aloud. Other times she worried about possible damage to her house.

“Twisters up yonder near me. Best be checking on things.”

Aunt Jessie didn’t tell us that she was married to Joe Houston or that she had no children of her own. It was Papa who told us about her husband and how much she missed him. Frequently, he had Major take her by wagon to Lodi where she caught the train. Of course, Major was glad to take her. One of the favorite pastimes for the young men of Cass and Marion counties was going to the station to watch the travelers, dressed in their Sunday best, board the train with its shiny black steam engine. Aunt Jessie always took the “Number 8” north to Texarkana in the morning and, a few days later, returned in the afternoon on the “Last 7.” Though it was easy travel compared to the seventy-mile bus or wagon ride some folk endured, the trips back and forth took their toll on her.

A little more than a year had passed when Aunt Jessie decided it was time to go. My heart was broken. To no avail, Papa explained that she had promised us only a year and had overstayed her time. The day she left I cried and Aunt Jessie looked sad, but despite my pleas, her reply remained the same: “Honey, I got to get back to my things.”

After she returned home, Aunt Jessie continued to be an important part of our lives. She visited two or three times a year and for a long time sent clothes and other items she thought the family needed. Whenever the mailman delivered a package stamped “Texarkana,” we could hardly wait for Papa to open it. She had packed something for each child and, always, there was a special gift for me. Most times it was a store-bought dress, but one box contained a pair of shiny patent leather T-straps. I put them on almost everyday and thought about how much I loved Aunt Jessie.

For the first time there was no woman in the house to smooth the rough edges. Grandma Minnie would have taken a greater role, but Grandpa Ross had become ill shortly after Mama died and she was tending to him. Besides, Papa’s pride prevented him from accepting her help. Determined to raise us without the help of the Ross family, he put Emily in charge of the housework. It was a responsibility too huge for her tender years. At eleven, her mind fluctuated between romping with us younger children and catching the eye of one of the boys on the neighboring farm.

With Emily, we spent days turning the house upside down as we played hide-and-seek or leapfrog from bed to bed. On other days she had no time for us at all—especially when some mannish boy her age sneaked away from his chores to our house. Then we spent hours in the yard making mud cakes and stick dolls, or we were free to roam as long as we didn’t go into the woods. Whether the day was spent ransacking the house or frolicking outdoors, without fail, we scrambled to get the house in order just before Papa arrived.

No, Emily was not a housekeeper, but she was faithful about cooking our meals. Mama had taught her to cook before she died and Papa encouraged her to continue.

“Sister,” his nickname for her, “Gimme another cup of coffee. Best coffee in the country,” he’d brag. Or, “Ooowe! These biscuits are light! B’lieve I’ll have two more.” The food couldn’t have been that good but Papa never complained about anything she fixed for him. She rushed around the kitchen grinning and seemed to enjoy cooking even though she had to stand on an apple crate to reach the stove.

On the days he didn’t have to go to the fields—mostly Sundays and occasionally on Saturdays—Papa prepared the meals. We children were thrilled by his Saturday afternoon announcement: “When I get this little piece of cotton out, we going to the Stratford,” his favorite fishing hole. TooToo and Alfred wanted him to go “sanding” at the pond instead. That way all they had to do was muddy the water, force the fish to the top and dip in a croaker sack, catch them, clean them, fry them, and eat them. I didn’t want to do either. Oh, don’t get me wrong, I loved the crispy hot fish fried right on the banks of the bayou. What I hated was all the standing around waiting on the fish to bite, and I was scared to death of the snakes that hung around the water’s edge.

Papa also served up some hearty Sunday dinners. Sometimes he killed chickens and smothered them down in brown gravy or, in the fall of the year, he’d slaughter a calf or a pig and cure it for the heavier winter meals. These were farm animals we had named like pets but we were not squeamish about their death. “Well, Ole Joe is going to give up his life for his friends today,” Papa would joke, and come mealtime Ole Joe tasted pretty good. For Sunday dessert, Papa sometimes baked a pound cake that would make you hurt yourself.

A good cook he was but apparently Papa didn’t know anything about shopping to replenish the empty cupboard. Aunt Jessie had left a well-stocked kitchen but, all too soon, the food began to run out. Our weekday meals got skimpier and skimpier. At first we awoke to healthy portions of bacon, eggs, and biscuits with syrup, but before long Emily was boiling cornmeal for a breakfast cereal. Meat and eggs vanished from our table along with the fresh vegetables that Mama and Aunt Jessie once plucked from their gardens. For dinner we generally had a pot of peas. Emily scooped them from the crib floor and washed them without looking for weavers or other wiggling bugs. If insects floated to the top of the pot, she dipped them out. Otherwise, we ate those peas.

Emily might have been too young for the burden of running a house but she always looked out for us. She loved her family and if anyone bothered us, they had a fight on their hands. If anything needed cursing she’d do that too. She cursed like Suge Porter, an aunt on my mother’s side of the family, who had earned a reputation for cursing like a sailor.

If a boy could do it, so could Emily. She’d put on some pants and go at it. She and Alfred, two years her junior, were buddies. They cut wood, fished and worked the fields together. She even helped Alfred break a wild donkey; they beat that poor creature until he submitted. She also protected her Bubabe, her nickname for her baby brother.

One day on his way home from school, Bubabe was cornered by Meddling Tuge, the boy who bullied everybody. When he told Emily what had happened, she and Bubabe got busy. They cut two green sticks as thick as a stalk of sugar cane, hammered nails through

one end and hid them overnight. When they were about to leave for school the next morning Papa spotted them.

“What y’all gon’ do with them sticks?” he asked.

“Papa, them boys made Bubabe cry yesterday and we gon’ get’em.”

“Y’all better leave them sticks here. Y’all gon’ kill somebody.”

Emily was so angry she wasn’t allowed to get even with Meddling Tuge that she cried. Once Papa was out of earshot, she also let loose a couple of choice curse words.

That was Emily: she was passionate about her family and I looked up to her. She didn’t pretend to be a mother but she did her best to take care of us.

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