

Simple Gifts

There was a knock at the door and Miss Macie knew immediately that it was her brother Nathan, who without fail drove from his home in Greenville to Columbia on the first Monday of each month to visit with her. Even though each visit was the highlight of the month, Macie could not bring it upon herself to think, nor say, that these Mondays were special because she had been taught and truly believed, that “the Almighty fills every day with all things bright and beautiful.” But she always felt renewed and revived when her “Nat” came to visit. Sometimes he would take her to the nearby cafeteria where she would choose from the largest selection of food that she had ever see, always choosing fried okra as one of her vegetables.

Macie was a widow who lived in what was called an “old folks home” – an old converted hotel with an individual bedroom and a bathroom for each resident. There was a shared parlor, furnished with some worn chairs, settees, and tables - always in need of a fresh coat of paint. Macie’s income consisted of a small pension from the state. It allowed her to live at “The Summit,” referred to as the “Slum-it” by its detractors.

Macie never had much money as she gave to others in need what little she earned. The Thornwell Orphanage, a Presbyterian home for children, had taken care of her from age six to the end of her high school years; and then her older brother, Matthew, had funded her advanced education at Limestone College.

Of the three professions available for women at the time, she had chosen teaching over nursing or secretarial work. While in college, she had a part-time job working in the library, dusting books and re-shelving them. She sent a portion of her earnings to her brother Nat. He left the orphanage when he was fifteen years old to help an aunt manage a boarding house in Pendleton. Aunt Nanny Harris provided him room and board and a small stipend, all of which he saved.

Macie's student life ended when she attained her B.A. degree/teaching credential. Unlike most other females at the time, however, she left college without the three other important initials, her "M.r.s." Upon graduation, she applied for and was offered a teaching position, the third grade, where most of the students could already read and perform basic addition and subtraction. She developed a reputation for being patient and understanding, becoming over the years the beloved "Miss Macie," teacher to three generations.

Being single, she was expected to board with a spinster or widow. However, she had specifically applied to the Laurens School District because her sister Mary and Mary's husband, Henry, lived there. Macie's teaching wardrobe was very austere, five dresses and two pairs of shoes, a simplicity of fashion that she maintained throughout her life. She never complained about how modestly she lived. Instead, she possessed an innate, almost regal serenity in how she met the world each day, and how she presented herself to its inhabitants.

Macie's younger brother Nat was only forty miles away in Greenville. He had the same disposition as Macie, equally as calm and pleasant. He felt very protective of her as she had been like a mother to him in the orphanage. They remained devout Presbyterians throughout their lives, and both could recite the questions and answers of the Westminster Shorter Catechism

verbatim. They quizzed each other on occasion, recalling that dinner at the orphanage was sometimes held until they provided the correct answers to randomly chosen questions.

Mary seemed happy to have her sister Macie living with her. She became a part of their family, and Henry told everyone that he was lucky to have two beautiful and intelligent women in his life. Henry and Mary's house was on the Main Street in Laurens. It was small, consisting of a parlor, a kitchen, one bedroom, a bathroom, and what was known as a "sleeping porch." It was a small room at the side of the parlor that had a cot that served as Macie's bed. She kept all of her earthly possessions in a chifforobe that was squeezed in next to the cot. She had a box of photographs of each of her classes of students, letters that she had received from family, students, and parents, and the Bible that she was given when she left the orphanage. The house had a front porch that was large enough to be considered another room, cooled in the summer by the shade of a large oak. There were five rocking chairs, two reserved for visitors. Even in the coldest weather, Mary, Henry, and Macie would wrap up in quilts, sit, rock, and wave to neighbors as they passed by.

Shortly after Mary died, Macie decided that it wasn't proper to live in a house with a man without being married – it just didn't suit her Presbyterian sensibilities. Henry seemed to understand, so they tied the knot. Macie wrote to Nat to inform him, writing that "all the old fools aren't dead yet – Henry and I were married on Friday. We considered a visit to the Justice of the Peace, but went to our church where Pastor Jacobs performed the ceremony and the church organist served as the witness."

At age twenty, Nat had fallen madly in love with Margaret Welborn who lived in West Pelzer. She was sent to "finishing school" in Virginia when she was sixteen; but Nat could not live without her so he took the train to her school in the Shenandoah Valley and proposed. She

accepted and they returned to West Pelzer and were married. Macie knew the names of their three children and their eleven grandchildren as if they were her own. She would ask about each one, remembering their interests, their temperaments, and any other details that Nat had very proudly related.

On this visit Nat told her about his grandson who was becoming interested in politics and about another one who was learning to play the piano. They also reminisced about their life in the orphanage and about those who had passed on. Around five o'clock, as usual, Nat stated that it was time to return to Greenville. It would be getting dark by the time he arrived and he knew that Margaret would be worried. Macie walked out to the car and kissed him and gave him a deep hug. He then hugged her and told her that he loved her dearly and thought about her every day.

After having a supper of vegetable soup and a grilled cheese sandwich with other residents, Macie retired to her room. She thought about her day as she watched the sun disappear against the horizon. What a beautiful combination of red and orange, matching the brilliance of the fall leaves. It had been a blessed day — a visit with her brother, a trip to their favorite restaurant, an afternoon of reminiscing. It was a day that occurred twelve times each year.

With her heart full of love and gratitude, she said her prayers, asking that Nat arrive home safely. She also thanked the Almighty for all of the joys of her life; and, on this particular Monday evening, Macie pulled the covers up to her smiling face — and gently closed her eyes forever.

1234 words

Ditched

My twin Curt and I were standing on the front seat holding on to a very large steering wheel of an old, faded blue Plymouth. It was supposed to be our mother's car. Curt was pretending to be driving what my brothers and I called "the blue bomb." We were, in fact, moving and Curt seemed to be enjoying his navigational experience, unaware of the chaos that we both were creating. I had been playing with the pedals and the stick shift, evidently hitting the right combination and moving the gear to neutral. The car had started to roll forward on the slight incline that was our street. Curt turned the steering wheel back and forth and made noises like he was driving at the local speedway. When I peered through the very small back window, I saw our mother, MamaLu (large rollers prominently displayed in her hair) frantically running after us, waving her arms feverishly, and saying something that we could not distinguish.

It was a beautiful spring Sunday and MamaLu had started the day making sure that her five boys were dressed for church, suits and ties and shined shoes, for everyone. At the same time she was trying to put on a new frock she had made the day before – and in the midst of everything else, she was flouring chicken and frying it for lunch. She had given Curt and me the once over with her all-purpose dishrag, good for cleaning the kitchen table, for washing faces, for touching up spots here and there on clothes, and for "combing" hair. I was sure that she had deposited grits in my dark hair, so I ran my fingers through it several times. I was right. I removed as many white dots as I could. Curt and I eventually passed her inspection and were

sent to the car to wait on our other three brothers who also had to pass the “Sunday-School-and-church-appropriate” appearance test.

MamaLu was determined to drive a car, in this case the “blue bomb.” She did not have a driver’s license but she was determined to get one even though she could not pass the eye exam. She always had a perfect score on the written section! She had decided that on her next visit to the Division of Motor Vehicles that she would wait in line and recite the letters and numbers that the person in front of her had said (she had superb memorization skills). Her rationalization was that she really wasn’t ever going to drive a long distance, just to the grocery store, church, and one or two other nearby places. She always counted on the fact that she would have one or more of her five boys to help her stay in the correct lane or to avoid the ditch on the side of the road. Her strategy did not work as the DVM always changed the test for every person. In reality, they were getting tired of her numerous attempts, always unsuccessful.

Curt continued to maneuver the blue bomb along White Oak Drive, still making race car noises. Neither of us knew how to stop the car. Our salvation, however, was Curt’s sharp turn into a ditch on the right side of the road, thus ending our motion. MamaLu was breathless when she caught up with us, opening the passenger door, and holding us tightly. She kept repeating how grateful she was that we were not hurt. She sent us home with strict orders to sit on the couch, and to tell Johnny to turn off the chicken-frying burner on the tiny apartment-sized stove - no burnt chicken for us. She slid over to the driver’s side and tried to back the car out, without any luck. She had admitted to us on more than one occasion that gear locations were not her specialty.

Luck would have it that the person who delivered milk to our house twice a week drove by and observed MamaLu’s predicament. He told her to move over and instead of trying to back

out, he put the car in a forward gear and drove it out of the ditch and to our house. MamaLu thanked him profusely, even presenting him some money to put into the offering plate at his church (he declined). He was kind, but also delivered a slight warning about trying to do something that he knew was not possible for her.

By the time our father returned from early mass (he was a Catholic, we were Presbyterians), all of us were dressed and sitting in a slightly scared “American Gothic-like” pose on the living room couch. Our brother BB broke the stilted silence, blurting out the story of the driving adventure. Our father thankfully was not angry but emphatically stated that we were not to drive and that MamaLu would not be attempting to drive in the future. He would teach us to drive when we became legal. We skipped Sunday School and church, said a lengthy blessing (including thanks for a “safe” driving experience), and chowed down on some delicious fried chicken, rice and gravy, and fried okra, all good for the soul.

The Plymouth was put up for sale.

871 words