

How I Came to Live Next to My Momma

It'd always been the plan. Poppa's and mine. Ever since I was in grade school. "When you get all grown up," Poppa'd say, "let's you and me build an apartment right out back where the garage is sittin'. It'll be our project, but it'll be just for you."

"What will Momma have to say about that, Poppa?"

"Oh, she won't mind one bit. And she'll let you take Ernie with you, I suspect," he answered, soundin' more hopeful than not.

"You think I could take his cage, too?" I always asked, afraid that I'd have to live with him flyin' free all the time.

But Poppa died before I got through with high school. And I stayed in the house with Momma while attendin' the community college over in Wincaine. And Momma—well, Ernie was hers and she wasn't about to part with him, no matter what Poppa might've hoped. You see, Ernie was a grey parrot who'd been in the family since before I was born and who might well outlive us all. So far, he'd beat Daddy and a couple of cats before Henery.

As for makin' me an apartment, I'd pretty much given up on that idea and just settled in to how life turned out. After all, I still had my bedroom and Momma's tomcat Henery still liked to sleep at my feet—when he bothered to be at home—and I still favored Momma's coffee over

my own or what was served as coffee down at Stop and Go. Then, those two obnoxious and untrainable Lhasapoos showed up and my need for peace and quiet and privacy and a chance to work a jigsaw puzzle without pieces fallin' on the floor and gettin' chewed up like they'd been cut with a chain saw led me to reopen the notion.

It was only thirty yards from Momma's back porch door to the side door on the garage. There was a sidewalk that connected them, and there was a sense of privacy that came from havin' an agin' set of grapevines in between. And, since we hadn't put Momma's car inside the garage in forever, it really did make good sense to get on with makin' my own life without havin' to change a whole lot. Besides, Poppa had put aside the money from what he got from the coal company for havin' lung problems in my name and, so far, all that money was good for was to draw a small amount of interest and complicate my tax returns.

I didn't know the first thing about the innards of remodelin'. All I knew was that boys who weren't headed to college learned a lot about such things in what was called vo-ag-tech classes. All those subjects—whether they be about raisin' a prize heifer for the state fair or figurin' out how to get an old tractor engine in shape, were taught by the one and only high school teacher that I'd known to have that job: Mr. Throckmerten, a confirmed bachelor whose entire life was wrapped up in the big ole Quonset hut everyone referred to as the "shop." Most days—even weekends—you could find him there, workin' on this or that project with some of his students. I never knew the door to be locked and anyone could drop by for just about any reason. In fact, you might say he was the town's handyman-in-residence. If he couldn't fix what was wrong, he'd find you the person who could.

I'd gone over to the shop to see Mr. Throckmerten with Poppa often enough, but I'd never had a reason to go see him on my own, so it took gettin' up my courage to seek his advice. Too, I didn't know if I was lookin' for a bunch of different guys to work on the apartment for me or if I just wanted one to be in charge of everything. And what if one of the ones he recommended was someone I'd known in high school and had had a crush on? Then, how would I get out of takin' his advice?

Well, I wasted a good week's worth of what could've been peaceful sleep, worryin' myself silly over all of this before I set foot inside that "shop," and I shouldn't have. Mr. Throckmerten remembered me the minute he saw me and, when I told him I was fixin' to turn the garage into an apartment, he stopped me in mid-sentence and went over to one of his filing cabinets and took out an oversized envelope with Poppa's name on it.

"Your Poppa always said he hoped you'd ask for my help. He even had me draw up a set of blueprints—well, I should say it was a drafting class's project a few years back—so you wouldn't have so much to take care of."

"Does Momma know about this?" I asked before thinkin' what I was sayin'.

"I surely suspect she does," Mr. Throckmerten answered, as he spread out an oversized sheet of paper covered in blue ink and white letters. "After all, she had the idea for the big picture window to replace the garage door. See, here," he pointed to a long white line on what looked like the front side of the garage.

Well, I wasn't sure if I was relieved or not, since it looked like all the fun of plannin' this project had taken place behind my back. It also occurred to me that everyone was predictin' my

future for me long before I knew what I wanted. What if I'd gone off to a big college and never come back home? What if I'd been in a car wreck and couldn't take care of myself?

"Are you alright?" Mr. Throckmerten was lookin' at me sort of funny.

"This is all surprisin' me," I said.

"Well, take these plans with you and study them for a few days," he said. "Then, if you want my help, just come see me."

Momma and her ever-present life-long friend Mary Dee were sittin' at the dinin' room table playin' a game of dominoes when I walked in with that big envelope under my arm. Before I could get past them, Momma got up and gave me a big hug.

"Oh, you got the plans, didn't you? Well, what do you think?" she all but cooed. "Mary Dee, you clear that table will you? We'll spread out the plans right here and now and see what needs to be changed."

"Momma," I said, "Momma, these are my plans and I'd like some time to study on them the way they are, if you don't mind."

"Oh, don't be silly. We all pitched in with the ideas your Poppa gave Mr. Throckmerten. Even Mary Dee put in her two cents' worth."

"That's right, I sure did," Mary Dee piped in, "and I have every intention of offerin' myself as contractor. Consider it said and done."

Those two women! When they set their minds to a project, it was nigh impossible to get them to listen to anything they didn't want to hear. They had those plans rolled out the width of the table before I could get my jacket off, with stray domino pieces keepin' the papers in place. Momma was kneelin' on a chair with her rear end stickin' up higher than her head, while Mary Dee draped her whole body across one end of the table. I might as well not have even been there for all the attention they paid me.

"Oh, Poppa," I said out loud, "why'd you have to go and die on me?"

Neither Momma nor Mary Dee seemed to have heard me.

"Poppa," I said a bit louder, "I need you now more than ever."

Still no sign either of them heard me.

"Well, if they're goin' to take over this project, they can pay for it, too."

That got their attention long enough for Momma to glare at me and for Mary Dee to shake her head.

"Why don't you make yourself useful and get us some iced tea?" Momma half-shouted, completely ignorin' what I'd said.

So this was how it was goin' to be, I thought. I figured I could disappear for the rest of the day and they'd not notice. So I did. I got in Momma's car and drove all the way to Wincaine and back before I knew it. Then, I went over to the only hardware store in town and spent a good two hours lookin' through the kitchen and bathroom cabinets. After that, I took off for the mall down past B'ville and had myself a nice dinner at the cafeteria beside of the Sears store. Then, I got serious about what kind of stove and refrigerator I fancied and left with a bag stuffed

with brochures and pamphlets and paint samples, and you name it. I stayed away a full six hours and returned to find Mary Dee and Momma still at the dinin' room table, but instead of studyin' the plans, they were back to playin' dominoes on top of them. Neither one of them asked me what happened to my gettin' the iced tea, let alone where I'd been all that time.

So, it began. They had their plans. I had mine. I knew about theirs. They weren't payin' mine no mind. I took my savings pass book down to the bank and traded it in for a checkin' account—the first one in my life—and started calculatin' what I was goin' to buy. Then, I went back to see Mr. Throckmerten who recommended a contractor that was new to the area but who came with good references. Perfect, I thought. Cut out all the personal complications. Keep it professional. Make it hard for Mary Dee and Momma to interfere.

Well, that first mornin' the contractor, Mr. Harden, showed up in the driveway and got out of his white van with his name and phone number printed on the driver's door for everyone to see, I figured any hopes for secrecy was done for. As he came up the sidewalk, I rushed out onto the porch to intercept his and Momma's meetin', but it was too late. Momma came around from the back of the house, shoutin', "Yoo hoo! Here I am."

Mr. Harden, as he insisted on bein' called, looked to be about Momma's age. When he talked, which was usually in monosyllables, it was out of the side of his mouth, where he kept what looked like an oversized, homemade toothpick clinched between his gums. And, from the start, he was partial to talkin' with Momma instead of me.

"This work, it's for your daughter?" he asked, while I stood no more than three feet away.

And Momma, well, she went along as though I was nowhere to be seen or heard. “Oh, I think she wants her privacy, a lot more than she needs—if you ask me—but she also needs plenty of light, so a big window for the main room and some skylights, if that’s somethin’ you know how to do.”

“I can,” Mr. Harden mumbled. “Got plans?”

“Oh, yes, in the house. Come on in and I’ll fix us a cup of coffee.” Momma was in rare form, holdin’ the door open for Mr. Harden and then pullin’ his chair out for him.

I couldn’t remember the last time we had a man—workman or otherwise—in for coffee, and here Momma was, treatin’ him like a long-lost relative who had been on the road for far too long. She took down her good china cups and saucers and laid out three or four kinds of the Pepperidge Farms cookies on a matchin’ plate. At least she’d set a third place for me—even if she intended me to be nothin’ more than a mute observer.

Just as I was about to sit down, Mary Dee popped through the kitchen door, carryin’ a plate of small sandwiches.

“I was just passin’ by when I saw your truck, Mr. Harden. Heard all about you from some folks who work over at the school. Such good references. Oh, you can call me Mary Dee. I’ll be in charge of the day-to-day activities.” She then sat down where that third cup and saucer sat and helped herself to a cookie.

Well, this was just too, too much to watch. And, what I knew at that very moment was that I either had to stand up for myself or get out of the way. Poppa always said that I should know when to choose my battles, and I figured that this one was not goin’ to be won without

constant vigilance. So, I did what made sense—and what I'm sure Poppa would've done: I just let them have at it, figurin' whether I liked what they came up with or not wasn't my main concern. It was just gettin' out of this house that I cared about. Besides which, I held the purse strings. If somethin' got to be real objectionable, I'd just not pay for it.

Thank goodness I had my job with the library to keep me busy. In the winter, it could be slow, but come spring and summer, I got to drive one of the bookmobiles, which gave me more than full-time hours. I was at the library, itself, before seven in the mornin' and helped load on special-ordered books before settin' out on my route. Each day it was different, but by the end of a week, I'd crisscrossed the county several times over. Usually, there were two stops a day that lasted about three hours each. I got to see folks I hadn't seen all winter long and visit with them as long as we liked. And, when there was no one to talk to, I could get lost in my own readin' and not have a moment to think about what was goin' on at Momma's. By the end of the day, I was too worn out to care. It was only on the weekends that I even took a look at the apartment's progress.

And, I must give Momma and Mary Dee some credit for keepin' Mr. Harden on track. And, as for their ideas, they were fine by me, as long as I got to pick out the appliances and the paint colors, which didn't even need to be done until well into August. I'd given them lots of thought, though, so when Momma suggested she and Mary Dee and I spend an entire Saturday lookin' at the possibilities, I do believe she was offended when I told her it was all taken care of.

“What do you mean by that, I want to know,” Momma said.

“Well, Momma,” I said as nicely as I could, “I really appreciate all you and Mary Dee have done, but this part is personal.”

“Personal?” she said right quiet like and then, “Personal?” she all but yelled. “After all that we’ve done? What could be *more* personal?”

“But Momma. It’s not *your* apartment. There has to be somethin’ that says it belongs to me, and I’ve got my heart set on lilac walls and mauve carpeting. And the Sears man tells me it’s possible to get a bathroom done all in pink, right down to the shower stall and the bathtub matchin’ each other.”

Momma was shakin’ her head at all this and I couldn’t tell which she was objectin’ to more: my choices or bein’ cut out of what she referred to as the “fun parts.” And, I didn’t much care. I left her sittin’ at her own kitchen table, starin’ at some women’s magazine, while I went off to look at carpet samples for the hundredth time. There sure was a lot to think about: shag and velvet cuts, nylon and cotton blends, solids and two-tones, variegateds and tweeds. Whew! I suppose I could’ve used some support from someone who appreciated my tastes, but I surely didn’t need interference from Momma-the-Practical, who’d go for beiges and browns and for what other people might like.

So, I made that apartment my own, with the slickest looks I could find. Even went with brushed chrome and black for the stove and refrigerator. A built-in microwave to match. Then, I saw it: the most beautiful piece of furniture ever. Soft, white leather-like. And when I leaned back in it, I thought I’d died and gone to heaven. If I could only have one piece of furniture in the whole apartment, I knew this had to be it.

So, I wrote the check right then and there and it was the first thing to be delivered after the velvety-smooth, deep rose carpet was installed. It was a Friday afternoon, and finally, I could say I had moved out of Momma's into a brand-spankin' new place with its one never-used-before piece of furniture. A multi-use piece, at that, since the ads for recliners always showed someone layin' way back, sound asleep, as well as sittin' up nearly straight watchin' TV.

With just this one piece of furniture, I wouldn't have to worry about getting' my own bedroom set moved over until the new bedspread and matchin' curtains arrived down at the Sears store. I'd taken their decorator all the measurements and she assured me that every bit of it was goin' to fit perfectly, right down to the length for the curtains and the bedskirt—both of which came with the fullest ruffles possible. And the tiny little purple flowers in the print, well, they were exactly the same shade as the paint for the walls.

Of course, Momma and Mary Dee didn't think much of my all-new, less-is-better strategy, and set about tryin' to talk me in to takin' their hand-me-downs and goin' with them to yard sales, but I was havin' none of it. They'd had their turn. Now it was mine. And, if it took me an entire year to get my own little home decked out just the way I wanted it, well, it just would. Poppa would be proud, he sure would. He'd say I was growin' into myself.

