

MOTHER'S DAY AND REMEMBERING MAMA

Second Thoughts

By J. B. Leftwich

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There was a play, later a movie, entitled, *I Remember Mama*. On this day and two days from now, I, as many in my generation, will remember Mama.

My Mama. Blithe spirit. Maverick. Incurable romantic who faced with equanimity, and often with a bit of rebellion, the lots fate cast for her. A pretty woman, sometimes a beautiful woman. Deeply religious, and although a romantic, pragmatic in her beliefs.

She dreamed of more than she had, this hill country woman, this farmer's wife, this survivor of the Great Depression. Materially, she had little but always she found beauty, of flowers, of porcelain, even of majesty. And of the hill country of which, as a girl, she was a princess. Later she was a captive.

Much in her life was tragedy. A daughter, the only daughter she was to have, dead before she was two. And before that, a foolish, impulsive teen age marriage that ended in annulment after one year. Shortly after her baby boy, who lived only three days, was born.

Then a successful marriage. Three sons whom she loved. An expressive love when they were babies and were totally dependent. But a detached love as they grew. Rarely a touching love. The expressive, touching love came from her husband who understood her, but who would have changed her if it had been possible.

Although she couldn't touch, she demonstrated her love in other ways. The \$20 she saved for a new pair of eye glasses. Given to a son who needed a new suit. Her meager inheritance shared with another son who needed it. Special meals for her family. Personal sacrifices for her sons.

There were times she shared her interests with the one son who wanted to leave the hill country. Her dreams. Her unfulfilled ambitions. A letter she wrote to *Progressive Farmer*.

She was proud of her grandchildren. But detached from them. Except the one who needed her most. This one, bright but shy, who wanted to go to college but had little chance of doing so. When she received her college degree, her grandmother was proud. Prouder of her than of the other grandchildren who graduated without her help. They did not need her, so she remained detached from them.

In her way, she took pride in their achievement. But she never mentioned it. Their deeds were expected. They happened. That was enough.

She was a reader, an explorer of ideas. But as time went on and she aged, she retreated. Reverted to her childhood books. Fussed about contemporary literature. Thought it had little merit.

I remember Mama as a young woman. Trim and pretty. A head-turner. A lively conversationalist. Sometimes, regarded by her friends as a bit unconventional. But still a favorite among her peers. Probably because she was unpredictable. And interesting.

She spoke frankly. Out with it. Speak your mind. Take your stand. Often she spoke with more candor than diplomacy. At times, such candor would rebuff friends. But they came back. They knew she was intellectually honest. They knew exactly where they stood with her.

She was certain about her religion. Fundamental beliefs. Literal interpretation of the Holy Word. Little patience with a son who rationalized and sometimes questioned her religious concepts. But when her son chose a different religion, she said no more about it. No further discussion. Just an occasional off-the-wall comment that let him know she thought about it.

I remember Mama. The lively discussions. Often debates. Her incisive questions which could dissolve an ill-conceived premise. Late at night, by the light of the flickering fire, as the forelogs burned into coals. Her uncanny way of knowing what I was thinking. Her accurate predictions of what I was going to do. The bond between us that flamed with the fire. Always there, but always unspoken. No son ever said, Mama, I love you. She would have not known how to cope with it.

Her letters were to come later. After I had left home and gone to college. Letters that ended simply, Love Mama. The closest she ever came to saying, I love you.

Russell Baker, in his two-volume autobiography, recalled how his mother had prodded him “to make something of himself.” But although Baker became a famed journalist and best selling author, his mother was never satisfied.

My mother implicitly demanded that I made something of myself. But she never mentioned it. Nevertheless, the demand was there. Unspoken. You’re different, she would say. I never knew just what she meant. Peculiar? Odd? Strange? She never thought of any of her sons as gifted. But she thought I, as Russell Baker’s mother thought, could make something of myself.

Baker, in the opening sentence of his second autobiographical volume, states: “My mother though dead these many years, still roams free in my mind.”

So does mine.

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