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MAMA BOUGHT ME A GREEN DRESS

By Jimpie Doyel

I associate a pretty little green dress with a small white flower print and a square lace yoke with a profound change in my life, Mama's death. The green dress had been purchased with the money that could not buy her life.

When I got home from school on Friday, September 13, 1940, Mama was lying down resting, which was unusual, but she said she was tired. She had washed (scrubbed on the scrub board) thirty-nine feed sacks. She was five months into her tenth pregnancy. She cooked a hot supper instead of having the usual leftovers, and after dinner she popped corn.

I had a bit of a stomachache, and she thought I should not eat dinner but said that I could go to bed on her bed. During dinner she came in to check on me, and I remember the good feel of her hand on my forehead. Later I moved to my bed and got to have some popcorn.

Sometime after midnight I heard Mama telling Daddy not to waken any of us but that she knew she was going to die. I was fifteen. I didn't want Mama to die and I didn't want her to see me crying. I was afraid that she might think that I was thinking that she was going to die so I didn't get up.

Daddy came into the room where my four sisters and I were sleeping, opened a trunk and got a clean gown for Mama. I don't remember him waking my two older sisters, Lois, eighteen, and Mae, seventeen, or do I? I seem to remember him telling them to sit with Mama while he went for the doctor.

Telephone lines were down so he had to drive three and one half miles to get a doctor. On the way he

stopped by a neighbor's, Mrs. Cagle's, and she came right over. She and the girls built a fire in the fireplace and put the iron kettle on to have hot water. Things seemed more normal with Mrs. Cagle there, a fire going in the fireplace, and the sounds of general conversation, but I still didn't get up.

Daddy got back and the doctor was right behind him. It must have been a couple hours that the doctor stayed. Mrs. Cagle left, and Lois and Mae went back to bed. I could hear the fire crackling, and it sounded quiet like Mama and Daddy had gone back to sleep. But Mama wasn't sleeping. The door between our rooms was open and I heard her call my name. I had quit crying. I thought everything was going to be alright and I went to her bedside. Mama asked me to rewet the hot cloth on her stomach and the cold one on her forehead. A ladderback caned chair was beside her bed, and I could sit by her, seeing both her and the peaceful fire.

She started to talk to me, first to thank me for getting up with her and changing her cloths. Then she said that all she had ever done was to have babies and now she had to leave them for others to care for. She had given birth to nine of us and the tenth one was dying with her. There were six years between the sixth and seventh child. The last three were one, three and five years old. She was most concerned for the little ones. She asked me if I would see that they always had someone to care for them. Mama had always been honest with me and I knew that she was now. I knew her request was sincere, but I did not feel then or now that she was extracting a deathbed promise

from me. I don't know why she asked ME to be sure they were always taken care of instead of asking my older sisters. Did she hear me crying? Did she know my fears? Maybe she felt that Lois and Mae were closer to having lives of their own. Most girls got married about their age. College wasn't for us or anyone in our community. I would like to think that she thought she could depend on me.

It was peaceful sitting there although it was sad. It reminded me of sitting on the porch with her after a storm and watching the lightning in the distance. I had been a person who wailed, as compared to just crying, but as I sat there and kept changing her cloths, the wails did not come, only quiet tears. Daddy's breathing sounded like he was asleep. He had his back to Mama but probably was awake. He liked to sleep with his head at the window, which is why they slept with their heads at the foot of the bed. I imagine that on that September night in Alabama he needed the fresh air. I don't remember it being hot. The fire in the fireplace felt good.

After daybreak we let the fire die down and built a fire in the kitchen stove to cook breakfast so we still had hot water for Mama's cloths. I don't remember eating breakfast. I wanted to stay with Mama, but the Saturday chores were to be done. Lois was sweeping the yard. We did not have grass growing near the house, only hard earth, and included in the "Saturday getting ready for Sunday" chores, we always swept the yard using a broomsedge broom. Broomsedge is very long golden staw with feathery tops. The tops were used as the sweeping end of the broom. We always let an area grow up in broomsedge and cut enough for a new broom when we needed one.

Lois told me to go to two neighbors and tell them that Mama was sick, but as she swept she said, "No, wait; maybe she will be alright." But then Daddy had to go for the doctor again.

Mrs. Cagle and we children were in the room with

Mama when we heard their cars coming. Mama asked which doctor was coming. She was hoping it would be Doctor Godsey. That would have given her some hope. We answered her, and then she said the last words that I ever heard her say. She said, "Goodbye, I'm gone." We left the room when Daddy and the doctor came in. At 8:45 the doctor pronounced her dead and Daddy told us.

Grandma got there just after Mama died. We lived with Grandma, but she had gone to town to spend the night with Aunt Inez, her daughter. Daddy had called her from the doctor's and she came as soon as she could. She and Mama would probably have had a better relationship if each could have had her own home. I was in the room with Mama when Grandma walked in. She didn't have to tell me how she felt. Hurt was on her face. In that instant I knew that she had loved Mama. She walked to Mama then hugged me and the others in the room. She said, "I just wish I had not gone away." I wondered if she thought that somehow Mama would still be alive if she had been there. But she probably knew that the doctors had said that Mama could not live through the pregnancy.

The house got full of people. Everyone was busy at something. The ambulance came for Mama and took her away in her clean gown. It was a pretty lavender one with little white flowers on it that she had made for me for Christmas. She made Lois and Mae one, too, but it was mine that she had on. The undertaker brought it back torn all the way down the front. It was still in her trunk years later. Grandma offered to sew it up for me if I wanted her to, but I didn't want to wear it again.

Mama's mama got there and her brothers and their wives. Even Aunt Genella came. She and Mama probably looked a lot alike when they were young, but Aunt Genella had lost all her teeth and never learned to wear her dentures. Uncle Lester and Aunt Lillian brought hamburgers. Even though they were a

rare treat, they didn't taste good that day.

About one o'clock my good friend Mildred called. (The lines were down between us and the operator but others on our line could ring us.) When I told her about Mama, she and her mother came to our house. When she got there, she gave me a stick of gum. It was the one thing that tasted good that day. It was sweet as usual and it seemed that Mama should still be alive as usual.

It was late in the day when they brought Mama back in a coffin. Somebody had taken the bed down and they put her coffin where her bed had been. Wakes were always in homes. Friends came different hours of the night to "sit with the body."

Mechanically we did what we had to do. Morning came again, and with afternoon came Mama's funeral. I didn't get to wear the green dress with small white print and a lace yoke because the lace yoke was not appropriate for a funeral. It was only the second "readymade dress" I had ever had. Mama had bought it when she and Daddy took a trip to Birmingham a few months earlier. I learned later in life that the trip was an attempt to get an abortion to save Mama's life. When she couldn't get the abortion, she used part of the money to buy the green dress.

A lady in town whose husband Daddy worked for at the paper office brought black dresses for Lois and Mae to wear. All the dark colors just added to the sadness. They had not put one of Mama's dresses on her. They didn't bury women in their own dresses then. They called her dress a shroud, but it was the one pretty thing about her and the coffin. It looked like a formal. It was white chiffon trimmed in pink satin tape. I wish she could have had it before she died. I thought it would look good in heaven.

There was a crowd at the funeral, even people standing. Nothing seemed as usual, and from deep within me the wails erupted. Uncle Kenneth reached over, patted my knee and said, "Try not to be so

loud." The younger children had started to cry, too. Somehow we got quieter. The minister, a personal friend who rushed ninety miles from Birmingham after his own church service, was not able to say all that he meant to say. I know that he tried to give us each a personal message, but all that I actually remember him saying is, "I'm sorry, Irv (my Daddy), I just can't go on." He sat down and the choir sang, "Farther along we'll know all about it. Farther along we'll understand why." Their song had meaning for me.

In the next few days as each morning came we had to tell ourselves again that Mama was gone. The three small ones were a comfort to each other. I heard them discussing that Mama was in the ground. They were concerned that worms could get to her. I didn't know what to say, but the three-year-old assured the other two that God would not let worms bother her.

The effect of Mama's death on me was immediate. I learned then to cry quietly like a lady. The day after the funeral we all sat down to breakfast together. After we ate, Daddy talked to us about how Mama wanted us to continue our lives. I wonder what their conversations had been on this subject. I can still feel the hush and see Daddy wiping back his tears. Lois had felt that she should quit school to help at home but told Daddy that she would not. We each made promises to ourselves that day and we went on living, but it wasn't the same.

The green dress that Mama bought with money that could not buy her life is gone but will always be in my memory. Mama has been gone for over forty-three years, yet she is still with us. Daily something reminds me of her. As I walked through the snow today, my steps made a definite "crunch" sound, which reminded me of a sound that the fire in the fireplace sometimes made. Mama would say it was going to snow because the fire was "tromping snow." The sadness of losing her has turned to joy of having known her a while as my mother.