

MOMMA

By Donna R. Jensen

I was born in 1942, and among my keepsakes is a book of ration stamps from that era. As I look back at my relationship with my mother it seems that her emotions and care for me were rationed. I was not alone in this rationing. She and my father were so wrapped up in each other and our secondhand furniture store that it left no time for family life or friends. My brothers and I had friends who visited and we rode bikes to see them. It was our parents who formed no friendships.

Our house was across the street from our business which consisted of two buildings and a lot of stuff that sat outside. Business didn't stay on that side of the street. It took over our garage and our house too. I came home from high school one day to find they had sold my bed. No problem. They brought over another. Nearly everything we had was for sale.

We worked every day of the week from early morning to late at night except for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter, or when it rained and we couldn't take out the display merchandise that filled the aisles of the both buildings.

Because of my father's interest in music and dance, my brothers and I were given tap dancing lessons as well as lessons on the piano, steel guitar, and trumpet. I got involved in acting through our high school's wonderful drama department.

I remember fishing for a compliment from my mother as a sophomore in high school. I said, "Uncle Stan said you were very pretty when you were my age and I look just like you did then." Her reply was not what I hoped for. I never tried again. I didn't feel rejected. It seemed I was acceptable, but certainly nothing special.

Momma was pretty much a prude. It was my father who told us the facts of life. That wasn't a good thing because he thought he was God's gift to women and enjoyed telling dirty jokes. I stood up to him and told him if I wanted to know something I'd ask. He had a mental breakdown when I was fifteen and when he and I were home alone one evening he told me that he and Momma had not gotten married until the year before. That was quite a shock to a teen in the mid-fifties! Was it true or part of his ramblings? My mother's struggle with wedding rings came to mind. She bought a cheap one at the dime store from time to time and threw them away when the finish came off and turned her finger green. I'd never given it any thought, not until now... *Yes. It was true!* Daddy never gave her a ring. He never *married* her... not until last year... They had gone to Reno last year for the weekend, looking for a location to start another business, they said.

They had taken my youngest brother with them and left my other brother and I at home. "*Mom you didn't even get a honeymoon! But you did get a ring. You told us you had renewed your wedding vows and Daddy got you a ring.*" In my heart I knew it was true but I needed Momma to confirm it. I didn't want to hurt her by confronting her... a plan formed in my mind.

The next day when we found ourselves alone for a few minutes, I said to her, “You’ll never guess what Daddy said now.”

Almost afraid to ask, with what he’d been saying to our customers, she asked, “What?”

“He said you never got married until you went to Reno last year.”

The look that came over her face showed it was true; but she immediately denied it. “What will that man say next?” Standing to her feet she went quickly back across the street to the store.

Although my mother had taught in a one-room school for five years before she married for the first time, (my father was her second husband) I don’t remember any words of wisdom she ever shared. I do remember memorizing the words to the children’s prayer about “...if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take,” and, earning a banana split for learning to play Pinochle. Her side of the family played that after holiday meals.

I was raised without God. He wasn’t someone we thought about or discussed. My very dramatic conversion experience to Christianity, when I was twenty-nine and living in Hollywood, was written about in another story so I won’t go into it here, except to mention how different the love of God was from what I received from my mother. When I was four, I remember being spanked and locked in a shed for a while one day to think about how bad I was. When God let me see just a little bit of the sin in my life, it came with such great love that it seemed to be bouncing off the walls of the auditorium and totally *engulfing* me.

My eyes were open then to the fact that my parents were unsaved. I made a big mistake when I tried to explain that to them on the phone. We lived twenty-five hundred miles apart and I was afraid the Rapture would happen and they would be left behind. The only time anyone had talked about Jesus in our presence was my father in the middle of a mental breakdown. So, talk like that was associated with mental illness. When I discovered Momma was talking to my brother about having me committed, I had a talk with the Lord. I apologized for using the wrong approach and asked Him to send them someone they would listen to. I also asked Him to use me if He could.

Seven months later during summer break at Bible School, I sold some of my things to get gas money to visit my family in Pennsylvania. At the end of my week-long visit, my brother Mickey went out with some friends while my parents and I had some ice cream at the kitchen table. As my mother cleared away the dishes, I spoke without thinking. “I wish I could pray for your healing before I leave.” They agreed with no hesitation. I was thrilled. It was the suggestion that they were not Christians that they had found offensive. I got my Bible and some Crisco since they had no other oil. Just then my brother returned with two of his friends. I was afraid the moment was spoiled but my parents suggested we go upstairs.

An energizing warmth swept through me as I sensed the Lord was in this. They sat down, side by side on their bed. I read to them from James 5:14-15, “Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise him up and if he has committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.”

I began with my mother. “Mom, why don’t you take a moment and search your heart and see if there is anything standing between you and God. You don’t have to tell me. Just talk to Him about it.”

She thought for a moment and then replied, "I can't think of anything."

With great trepidation, I asked, "Mom, have you ever in so many words, asked Jesus to come into your life and save your soul?"

Again, she considered my question. "No, I don't believe I have." "Do you think you would like to do that?" I couldn't breathe until she answered. She thought again. Then she replied, "Yes, Honey, I would."

I took her hands in mine and led her in the sinner's prayer. We both wept. When she could speak, she gave me a big hug and said, "Now I understand what you are doing." After praying for her healing, I moved to my father and asked him the same questions. He gave the same responses. I knew that he was as sincere as she was.

In a letter, my mother told me that she and my Dad had come forward in the local church and made a public confession of their faith. They were both in their late sixties. Their faith could be seen in their lives. Over the next year my father became senile. God was just in time.

The following summer my brother and I, one on each side, assisted with my mother's baptism in the creek that ran behind her home. She had attended ten nights of revival meetings under a tent with sawdust on the ground and was baptized the next day. What a privilege it was to share that with her.

I prayed that my mother would live to enjoy her retirement. The last couple of years of teaching were so difficult, having to leave my father alone each day with his progressing senility. After she retired, I asked her to bring Daddy and live with me and my family. She replied, "I don't think we can do that. A lot of the time he doesn't know who I am, but here, he knows he's home." So, they struggled on.

After my father passed away, Momma moved into an apartment. She had one more good year before she suffered a stroke that put her in a wheelchair and in need of assistance with the chores of daily living. She wanted to live with her remaining son. He opted to put her in a nursing home.

If she could be cared for at home, I wanted her with me. And so it was, Momma came to live with us, much to the delight of my four children. Several more strokes took pieces of her mind and her physical abilities over the next seven years. At some point, my oldest daughter and I became confused in her mind. I took on the image of her mother and my daughter became me.

Momma's room and the living room stretched across the front of the house. Large picture windows that looked out on the front yard and the street, brought the outside in. The three-story brick manse had plenty of room for us and the forty-five foster-children we shared it with over an eight-year period after I was widowed.

My parents were my greatest fans as far as playing the piano and singing were concerned. One evening in early winter, I sat in the living room after the children were in bed, trying to learn to sing with an accompaniment tape. I couldn't get the first note right! I just couldn't find it... Over and over I started, stopped, and restarted the tape until at last I got it right and kept singing all the way through. As I finished the song, Momma called to me from her room. "That sure sounded pretty, Donna" *She knew who I was...* Those were her last words. When I was ready to go to bed, I listened for the sound of her steady breathing. Turning off the light, I went upstairs. The next

morning when I came down stairs to get Momma ready for church, I found she was already there. She had gone to be with Jesus in the night. Gazing on her I saw death at its best. She was lying on her side with one arm stretched above her head and one knee pulled up, appearing to have flown joyfully from this life to the next.

I wanted the children to see her as she was so they would lose any fear of death they might have and be happy for her. Everyone was still asleep. I began waking them in order of age from oldest to youngest. I told them Grandma had gone to Heaven in the night. They were to wait in their rooms until I brought down the youngest and we'd collect them along the way. So, as a group, we gathered to rejoice for Grandma.

My oldest daughter and I went to the funeral home with the things Momma was to be buried in. "You won't put much make-up on her, will you?" Melissa asked. "She never wore any."

"No, I won't," he promised. "Oh, and by the way, would either of you want to fix her hair the way she wore it?"

I remembered how Momma suffered from bursitis when I was eighteen, and I had gotten up a 5:00 A.M. for several weeks to fix her hair in a fancy "do" for work. "Yes," I can do that," I replied.

"Yes, Momma, there's one more thing I can do for you."