

— The Gift —

I visited the farmers market the other day and bought some delicious southern delicacies: zipper peas, cantaloupe, and Oak Grove tomatoes. As I visited among the farmers, I thought of old kinfolk of my childhood days. Great Uncle Jack and Aunt Alma were salt of the earth, hard-working southern people. Uncle Jack did a little truck farming, mostly watermelons and tomatoes. Uncle Jack was not a wealthy man or well educated, but he gave me a gift that cost him nothing and will please and surprise me the rest of my life.

As we sat under a huge oak tree, eating red and yellow watermelon, a bird chirped above us. Uncle Jack looked at me and said, “Do you know what that bird is saying?”

Well, as a very gullible six-year-old, I thought surely Uncle Jack knew and I wanted to know too. He told me the bird was looking at me, saying, “Pretty girl, pretty girl.” Since then, and to this day, every time I hear that particular bird chirp I get a compliment even though Uncle Jack has been gone for years.

Now, wasn't that a wonderful gift from a country truck farmer?

FRIENDS

— Chicken and Dumplings —

Grandma Fisher, born Mary Corean Evans in 1901, had all the grandmother qualities a kid loves. She wore printed dresses, and always had something good to eat, like chicken and dumplings or a fresh cake. She dipped snuff, which was a very interesting habit for a grandmother. She had great stuff to play with inside and out. I'm not talking about toys. I mean closets filled with memories, old sheds to explore, and chickens.

I loved visiting Grandma, because she let me do things to help and she believed I could do anything. Whatever Grandma was doing, I was her helper.

One morning, I was helping her with breakfast when she asked me to go to the hen house and collect some eggs for breakfast **by myself**. I was delighted. I prissed out to the hen house, like I knew what I was doing. I started reaching in the nests and under the chickens for eggs. All went well until I upset the wrong chicken. That chicken jumped on me and all I saw were feathers and blood. **MY BLOOD!** Grandma flew out of the kitchen, slamming the screen door. She said something about "That old hen could have put her eye out," as she grabbed that chicken and in one quick motion wrung its neck.

As I said in the beginning, Grandma always had something good to eat, like chicken and dumplings.

FRIENDS

— Summer of 1968 —

Every summer as the tomatoes ripen and the heat rises I think of Uncle Jack and Aunt Alma in the summer of 1968. I can still see Aunt Alma pitching dry corn on the ground for the chickens with her wiry gray hair blowing in the breeze and her face wet and red from the heat. She worked on the farm just as hard as Uncle Jack, planting, hoeing, and picking, but I never saw her in a pair of pants.

She always labored in a printed dress. I don't think she owned a pair of pants even in 1968. She was Uncle Jack's constant and life-long companion. She didn't even drive. If she left the farm it was in Uncle Jack's truck. She preferred Jack to drive her where she wanted to go.

Before you conjure up an image of a suffering woman, let me elaborate. She read romance novels and *Reader's Digest* cover to cover, loved to tell jokes, and was a tomboy at heart. Uncle Jack was mild mannered and warm and not overbearing in the least.

They didn't have children but they should have. Pictures of three generations of nieces and nephews graced table-tops and walls all over their little frame home. You know how a dog can sense whether a person likes or dislikes dogs. Well, I think kids can tell if adults are kid lovers or if they just tolerate them. Uncle Jack and Aunt Alma never spent a dime entertaining their nieces and nephews nor did they plan special activities for our benefit. They just shared all they had. They shared the day, their day, in every way.

There were always homemade teacakes in the old butter churn that propped the door open. If we were lucky there would only be a few left. That meant we could help make a batch of teacakes. Flour, butter, sugar, eggs, and vanilla were all blended under Aunt Alma's watchful eye. She didn't own a measuring cup, so we had to get the texture and color just right and, of course, taste for sweetness.

If she made a clamor in the kitchen she would drop to her

knees and say, “Nobody move. I dropped the set out of my ring.” She only had a gold band. It took me years to get that.

Soon, the aroma of the hot teacakes filled the house. We gobbled them up right off the cookie sheet and washed them down with fresh milk poured in big goblets she called thumbprint glasses.

They had cows too. If a cow got out of the fence, we were sent on a mission to collect her, with caution that cows kick sideways. We used long sticks to prod the docile cow back into the fence. Accomplishing this feat made us feel as if we had conquered a wild beast.

Uncle Jack and Aunt Alma used every part of a cow. What they didn’t eat they used otherwise. They had straight chairs with cowhide, hair and all, stretched across the bottoms of the chairs. Even the horns were cleaned and fashioned into instruments used for calling coon dogs. Uncle Jack taught us how to blow the horns. It was a lot like blowing a trumpet, but the sound was not nearly as sweet. It was dull and flat but, hey, with just one lesson we could blow a cow horn.

One day, we arrived just in time for dinner. Meals at Uncle Jack and Aunt Alma’s house were always an adventure. If it wasn’t fresh, it was home canned. She served smothered home-canned tomatoes, home-grown onions and okra with bacon drippings in a cast-iron skillet, fresh field peas, fried eggplant, barbeque, and sweet tea.

The meal, as country and conservative as it seemed, was definitely on the wild side. Remember those horns used for calling coon dogs? Evidently, they did the job because the barbeque was coon. Even though I thought it was delicious until I knew what it was, I haven’t had coon since, and will probably never be served coon again. But if I had to eat coon just to share one more day like those in the summer of 1968, I would.

Time passes and things change, but sometimes I lament the passing of time. It takes away people and in their absence the world is forever changed. There’s a generation dying that takes with it a way of life, a simple peaceful way of life.

— Anywhere But There —

In the old days, people married at a much earlier age than they do now. Melva was just sixteen when she met John in the hills of east Texas. Those hills held no majesty for her. It seems anywhere you grow up, come about that age, you want to be anywhere but there.

John rolled into town with a doodlebug outfit in October. Doodlebugs scouted for oil and Texas was just one of the many places John had been. A born Yankee, from Buffalo, New York, John caught Melva's eye right away. He lived in a boarding house and wore a different shirt every time she saw him.

Now, Melva had not gone unnoticed. The five-foot-three, black-haired, brown-eyed southern beauty had captured John's heart. The romance was fast and they were wed before the doodlebug outfit left town in February.

Melva was soon anywhere but there in the hills of east Texas. From the east coast to the west coast and everywhere in between, Melva and John doodlebugged and had babies—three of them. Somewhere along the way they adopted a Boston terrier to go with the kids.

John was particularly adventurous. Everywhere they lived he enjoyed the local flavor. He brought home every kind of edible bird, fish, or beast natural to the area for Melva to cook.

Of particular delight were their experiences in south Louisiana. As usual, they jumped right into the local food, fun, and flavor. At their first crawfish boil, Melva thought the adventure had gone too far when John began to coax her to try crawfish. She said, "They couldn't be fit to eat. In Texas, they call them mud bugs and insects."

Eventually, she succumbed to John's pleas to try the spicy boiled crustaceans and had an immediate change of heart. They were so taken by the exotic little bugs, they decided to share their culinary experience with John's Yankee brother when he came for a visit.

John sent Melva out to buy crawfish, while he and his brother did a little boating on the bayou. The east Texas beauty dutifully bought a sack of crawfish. The sack was made of very loosely woven burlap and filled with crawfish. She brought the sack of crawfish in the house and put it in the kitchen sink. With three kids in tow, she left the dog and the crawfish and was on her way to finish shopping. The east Texas girl had no idea the crawfish would be anywhere but there, in the sink, when they returned.

When they came home and opened the front door, the dog, barking hoarsely, greeted them. It was as though the dog had laryngitis. Taking another step into the house, they saw movement across the floor, over the sofa, and under the table. There were crawfish scurrying all over the house. The poor dog had barked herself hoarse protecting her domain from the pinching beasts.

Staring at them with those beady black eyes were hundreds of crawfish all over the house. Dinner was in motion under the beds, behind the drapes, and on the furniture. Melva enlisted the three kids and the dog to doodlebug the house in search of crawfish. These kids, bred from a Yankee and an east Texas girl, had no crawfish experience. Picking up the armed, live, future supper was trial and error at best. Amazingly, the crawfish were bagged and boiled in time for dinner, except those crawfish that were anywhere but there.

FRIENDS

— The Test —

Flower power, pheasant tops, bellbottoms, peace signs, blue jeans, and halter tops were the fashions of the late sixties. All were new and different fashions for the time. Waif-like models such as Twiggy pranced the runways flaunting the latest styles. Newspapers showed pictures of women burning their bras in protest, while fashion magazines published tests that the fashion conscious could take to determine if going braless was right for them.

One such test was discussed in the company of three generations. A teenage girl, Melissa McConathy, argued that it was okay to go braless, if you passed the test in the magazine. Her mother, Mary, argued it was not acceptable to go braless under any circumstance, regardless of the tests results, and the grandmother, Lula, listened quietly and then asked what the test was.

The test was simple. If one could place a pencil under her breast and it fell out, she could go braless fashionably. If her breast held the pencil, she should wear a bra.

Old Mawmaw Lula chuckled and said, “Good God, I could hold up a broom handle with mine,” breaking up the discussion with laughter.

Fashions come and go, but a good sense of humor is always in style.

IN-LAWS

— Small Towns —

There are many small towns dotted throughout America that are just an exit sign to those passing by on the interstate. Small towns don't get much notice. Sometimes even their homegrown deny them, claiming the nearest larger town.

Big cities have National Football League teams, college basketball, museums, big-ticket concerts, and fast-track companies, each having a significant appeal. Everything about a big city is just that. Big. Don't get me wrong. I love visiting New York or Dallas and taking in their big city sights but I'm sold on small towns.

I grew up all over this country attending at least twelve schools from east to west and north to south all before I finished eighth grade. The first time I ever lived anywhere four years straight was during my college days at Louisiana Tech in Ruston, Louisiana. After marrying, I moved to my husband's tiny hometown, which made Ruston seem like a mecca of activity. Admittedly, it took a little adjustment but I was determined to make it my home.

Now, at the time, in this little town, there was no McDonald's, Wendy's, or Johnny's Pizza. Fast food was simply not available. The absence of fast food and the slow pace probably added years to my life. If you wanted to have lunch or dinner with friends you had them over for a home-cooked meal.

The atmosphere of home entertaining is the most conducive to building close friendships with ballpark talk a close second. Small-town churches still have dinner on the grounds, allowing every member to showcase his or her culinary skills and conversation to linger into the afternoon.

Weddings, births, and funerals are big social events in small towns. The poor florist, if there was one, didn't get much business for weddings. All of the garden club ladies fretted and labored for days collecting and arranging flowers

for bridal affairs. Births were preceded by baby showers and followed by a steady stream of casseroles, baby dresses, and women that just had to hold and smell the powder-fresh baby for a while. Funerals inspired a procession of labeled glass casseroles filled with everything from field peas to blend of the bayou.

The heart and devotion of small town folks came home to me one October night. I was six months pregnant with my last child and only daughter. I received the news my father had died unexpectedly from a heart attack. I left in the middle of the night for south Louisiana, leaving my son in the care of friends and my mother-in law and all the patterns and fabric for my maternity wardrobe spread across my guest bed.

While I helped my mother with the funeral arrangements, my friends Carol Mulhern, Hazel Calvert, and Kay Parnell began a labor of love. They laid my carefully selected fabrics out and with precision cut out the patterns. Each a talented seamstress, they stitched my maternity wardrobe with a love so rarely found and friendship only known through time and opportunity. My opportunity was living in a small town.

FRIENDS

— Kids Say —

Art Linkletter said it best when he wrote the book *Kids Say The Darndest Things*. Children can double us over with laughter with their innocent comments and curious questions without a clue of their ability to entertain. Having taught school for several years, I have the antics of children etched into my memory.

When I taught kindergarten I would always line the children up at the door and read the menu before we walked to the cafeteria. The lunch menu read:

Turnip Greens
Cornbread
Chicken Pot Pie
Peaches
And
Milk

As the children walked by, one little girl tugged on my dress. When I acknowledged her she said, “Miss Conty, I’d bet’d not eat none of dat chicken pops pie. I done had them bumps.”

On Halloween one year, some the other trick-or-treaters looked really gruesome. My daughter looked at the fake blood dripping down one child’s face and looked back at me and said, “Don’t worry Mama. It’s only make ba-leed.”

My mother-in-law, Mary McConathy, taught for many years and has volumes of classroom stories to tell. One I always liked to hear was about a young child asking the meaning of an unusual word.

The child asked Miss Mary, “What’s pie-sha-die?”

Well, Mary was perplexed. “Pie-sha-die,” she repeated. “Honey, I don’t know. Is it something you eat?”

“Oh, no m’am,” says the child.

“Well, who says that word?” asked Miss Mary.

The child looked impatiently at Mary and said, “You know. Everybody says it.”

Mary, still stumped, asked, “When does everybody say pie-sha-die?”

“You know, Miss Mary, every night when you say, ‘If pie-sha-die before I wake.’”

My daughter, Caroline, has always been quite active and talkative. We often called her the Pink Tornado because she loved pink and everywhere she had been looked like a disaster after she left. You can see why I was delighted with childproof locks on my Chrysler New Yorker. I knew when I locked the doors the Pink Tornado could not get out. Needless to say, the four-year-old Pink Tornado became quite frustrated having to wait for me to unlock the doors so she could exit the car.

One day, as she was waiting not so patiently, she said, “Mama, how do the locks know I’m a child? Do they sniff my hand?”

How can anyone be a part of a family and not have stories to tell? Remember, the only thing you can leave behind are bulbs and kids and maybe your family stories if you tell them.

Not Your Norman — Rockwell Christmas —

You know the picture perfect Norman Rockwell-looking Christmas all the Hollywood movie directors sell us every year? Even the set design for the movie *Home Alone* reeked of a *Southern Living* cover story.

Sometimes, I think we buy into the idea that Christmas is all about a perfectly decorated home, lavish gifts, elaborate table settings, and a meal it takes a week to prepare and the rest of the year to digest. Now, don't get me wrong. I love to decorate for the holidays. It wouldn't look like Christmas without decorations. Why, I'm certain I would hang my Christmas ornaments with double pneumonia rather than have my family bear a naked Christmas tree.

Even though I think the whole gift-giving thing is out of control, I would surely be a Scrooge if I didn't enjoy giving and receiving gifts. And as far as the food, you can rest assured I will eat enough Christmas day to guarantee a diet and exercise plan on my list of New Year's resolutions.

All this said and aside from the true meaning of Christmas, I began to reflect on why I love and I do love Christmas. As I gave this a little thought, I realized it's the traditions and memories of my family and not the picture-perfect Norman Rockwell Christmas that warms my holiday heart.

My home place, as the old folks call it, is on the Pearl River in Slidell, Louisiana. I love driving down the road to Mama's house. Old oak trees draped with Spanish moss stretch their branches over the road, forming a grand arch. The river is brown and cold in the winter, but that doesn't stop Santa on the bayou. Yep, I said Santa on the bayou. Every year someone in the neighborhood is Santa.

One year, Daddy was Santa. He went all out. He rented a Santa costume, complete with spectacles and padding, and even wore makeup for the rosy-cheeked effect. He practiced his ho-ho-ho for days. He decorated his boat with lights and

loaded his bag with candy. On Christmas Eve, he was filled with the Christmas spirit. He went from pier to pier letting children and all attractive females sit on his lap and tell Santa exactly what they wanted for Christmas.

Now, Santa on the bayou is not offered milk and cookies. He's offered beer or bourbon. So when Santa finished his boat parade through the neighborhood, he had a little more than Christmas spirit.

After Santa on the bayou, we build a big bonfire, so Santa can find our house in the swamp. This is one of those male bonding things. They hover over the stacking process and argue about how and when to light it. Kids roast marshmallows and canvas the sky in search of a glimpse of Santa's lights.

Oh, and food! It's usually spicy, and in my family the men cook. Talk about good! We may have oyster bisque, sauce piquante, jambalaya, roast pig, crawfish etouffee, shrimp creole, or whatever they dream up. It's like a competition. They each concoct a special recipe for Christmas Eve night. The smart women in my family taste and praise each dish, swearing it's the best of its kind. Ending the evening, the Catholic side of the family goes to midnight mass and the Protestants go to bed.

Christmas day starts early, about 5 a.m. Daddy used to wake us all early to see what Santa left under the tree. Then he'd make hot eggs and biscuits, because it would be at least 2 P.M. before Christmas dinner would be ready. Not at noon like a Hollywood Christmas.

My family tries to please everyone with the Christmas meal. We have three kinds of everything: cornbread dressing, oyster dressing, and Yankee dressing; mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, and rice; broccoli, green beans, and pea salad; fried turkey, baked turkey, and ham.

You see what I mean. After a meal like that, who in their right mind would want to get on the scale? Well, my ex-in-laws have what they call a weigh-in every year. All the males weigh and have their weight recorded on a permanent record attached to a closet door. All in good fun, many

challenges, bets, gains, and losses are marked in family history with this tradition.

Children are the best part of our traditions. My kids have selected an ornament of their choice for the Christmas tree since they could talk, and with a little help before then. My tree may not look like a designer Christmas tree, but each ornament is a memory of a special time. To record each Christmas, all the grandchildren are gathered for the annual Christmas photo, and new babies are gingerly placed in an opened gift-wrapped box for their first Christmas photo.

Hollywood may not see my kind of Christmas or your kind of Christmas, but the memories and traditions of family means Christmas. This season, enjoy and cherish your family memories and traditions.

FRIENDS

— The Duel —

Edwin Craft sounds as if he could have just stepped out on the veranda in south Georgia. He has a voice like no other. It ranges from deep and smooth to high and loud, with a southern accent so thick you'd swear he was a plantation owner from 1860 misplaced in time. His southern drawl is perfectly suited to his appearance. Edwin wears a gentleman's beard, a smile, and mischief in his eyes.

I have known Edwin for more years than I care to count back. His wife, Lana, is the only woman on earth who could possibly live with him and still love him. When I was married to Jim, he and Edwin were partners in mischief. They both love to hunt, cook, argue, and drink Crown Royal. From time to time we would have dinner together.

Edwin is a bit prone to bragging and exaggerating. One night, he was bragging about how he could cook the best pork chops in the South, bar none. Well, Jim, being as competitive as he is and a great cook in his own right, challenged Edwin's word. He might as well have taken a glove off and slapped Edwin across the face. The duel was on. Lana and I were seconds, and the weapons were pork chops.

The first round was set at Edwin and Lana's home in Oak Ridge, Louisiana. When we arrived, the table was set for the duel, and Lana had proved a worthy second by whipping up homemade mashed potatoes and field peas as extra ammunition. Edwin had the thick, juicy, smothered pork chops ready to defend his honor. As soon as Lana picked up her fork, the count began.

When I took my first bite of that tender, mouth-watering, perfectly seasoned pork chop, I knew my southern gentleman would be wounded in this duel. It was absolutely the best pork chop I had ever tasted. The texture was fork tender. The cut was a perfect one and one-half inches, cooked. The seasoning was scrumptious.

After tasting the perfect pork chop and giving Edwin

sufficient praise to warrant bragging rights throughout the South, we asked for the recipe. That's when we found out the duel was rigged. Edwin knew, without a doubt, his pork chops could beat anybody's. Do you know why? That southern charmer had been practically hand feeding a hog for months and had it slaughtered just in time to prepare for dinner. There's not a grocery store pork chop anywhere that well prepared before the cook even touches it!

Jim considered the duel a draw, since he wasn't willing to raise a hog to make the competition fair. Edwin claimed all-South bragging rights for his pork chops. They still love to hunt, cook, argue, and drink Crown Royal.

OUTLAWS