

MOSS

“Ma named me Moss when I was born, cuz that’s the first thing she saw—moss hangin’ from a huge live oak down here in Florida. I’m lucky it weren’t a kumquat!

“I turned ninety last month sometime. Not too sure of the actual day. Ma weren’t real good at dates. I grew up in a nice little place near the Everglades. We was raised on gator meat and possum. Ma could turn shoes into chowder if she felt like it. We was never hungry. Dirty, maybe, but we always had somethin’ for our gut. Course, young-uns today want games all the time. I see them talkin’ in the air walkin’ down the streets. And all that jewelry stuff pokin’ out funny places. We was learned by our Ma and Pa.

“I could skin a skunk in five minutes. Still can, but don’t like to. My bones won’t let me go huntin’ no more and my gun feels pretty heavy these days. Best thing ‘bout the market is gittin’ fresh strawberries just about any time a year.

“Since I was next to the oldest, I helped raise all them eight kids. Course by the time I got meself hitched, I was sick ‘n tired a kids.”

“Wait, Gramma Moss. I have to change the batteries on this recorder.” Lisa slipped two new batteries in and closed the lid. “Okay, you can go on. Talk about when you were little, though.”

“You heard all that lots a times. How we had no ‘lectricity and took baths once a week in the wooden tub? Did ya hear about when my pa went to jail?” Moss let out more of a holler than a laugh. “He got caught takin’ a mule from ole Mr. Henry and that dumb animal died a day later. He sure fooled my daddy.”

“Actually, I think you should talk about how you met my great-grandfather. I can’t remember that story.”

“That were a mighty long time ago, sweetheart, but it’s so fresh in my mind—I can still smell the orange blossoms. Yup. We was goin’ to the same church picnic—even though he were a full-blooded Seminole. His papa hid himself in the swamps till the government got through sendin’ off the others. He fooled ‘em, he did. Good lookin’ man, your great-grand-pop. Tall he was and dark. Didn’t smile a whole lot, but he were a good man. We had nine little ones. Course, you know all that. Your Mama’s the only one of my chillen left. She was a might surprise. I was almost an old lady when she were born.” Moss clucked, as she shook her head. “No one should have-ta bury their young’uns. Nope, it weren’t supposed to be that way. The good Lord let me live too long. Get me a tissue, honey.”

Lisa turned off the recorder and went into the bathroom for tissues. Gramma Moss’ room-mate was snoring rhythmically in a baritone voice. Her mouth was open and if Lisa hadn’t heard the noise, she might have thought she was gone. Her skin was pasty and wrinkled like a raisin.

“I think I’ve tired you out enough for one day.”

“Well, I’d like to hear ‘bout you. Your mama says you gonna be a doctor.”

Lisa smiled and nodded. “A pediatrician.” Glancing over at the old lady, she added, “a doctor for children.”

Gramma Moss grinned and shook her head. Two teeth were missing from the front row. “That’s mighty good. Smart like my hubby. Hope to live to see it happen.”

“Oh, I think you will. I graduated last year and I’m interning now. Gosh, it’s getting late. I’d better head home. Can I come back next week?”

“Think you’d better, if we’re gonna get through all eighty some years. I ain’t gonna last forever.”

Lisa bent over and kissed the brittle white hair over her grandmother’s ear. Then she tucked the lap blanket around the wheelchair and gathered her things. She stared straight ahead as she walked down the hallway to the outside door, breathing shallowly to avoid the body odors, which permeated throughout the building. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw the wheelchairs lined along the wall, vestiges of humanity waiting for death. Most, unaware of their surroundings or uncaring. Where were the families?

That night at dinner, Lisa sat with her parents as they chatted about their day, but she couldn’t get the picture of the woman who she was descended from, out of her mind.

“Mom, why don’t we bring Gramma Moss here for a week-end?”

Hazel dropped her fork on her plate. “What brought that up? She’s happy at the home. She told me herself.”

“It’s just so...so depressing there, and her mind is still clear and—”

“She wears diapers, Lisa, and sometimes she smells.”

Lisa shoved a piece of broccoli around her plate. “I guess. It was just an idea.”

Her father finally spoke up. “How are you doing with the history thing you’re doing? Does she remember anything?”

“Everything.”

“That’s great. I bet she likes telling you her stories. God knows, we’ve heard them enough times.” He exchanged glances with his wife.

“One more time about the stolen mule and I think I’ll go mad! Here, Lisa, have another piece of chicken.” Lisa rose from her chair, after placing her linen napkin by her dinner plate. “I’m not very hungry. I want to read my new journal, so excuse me.”

After an hour, she laid the magazine aside and looked over at the bookcase at the far end of the den. She went over and took down one of the early family albums and looked at the pictures from the early 1930’s. There was a snapshot, discolored from age, of Moss as a child—plump, with curly black hair and a frock down nearly to her ankles. She was barefoot and holding a small kitten. So many years ago. The only other picture of her was on her wedding day. Yes, he was a handsome groom with his high cheekbones and black hair. There were no smiles on their faces. They just stood and stared ahead. Gramma Moss was at least six inches shorter than her new husband, but she had an innocent look on her face and held a small bunch of orange blossoms. Lisa leafed through the other pages, noting the family groups and tried to identify the strangers staring back at her. Finally, she went to her room, switched on the news, and changed into her nightgown. She had a plan.

That Friday, she took off early and borrowed a friend’s van for the afternoon. When she arrived at the nursing home, Gramma Moss was sitting in the large lobby in front of an old upright piano, drumming out the melody of an old hymn with one finger.

Two other ladies, who seemed coherent, were nodding and one of them thrummed along. When Moss spotted Lisa, her face broadened into a jack-o-lantern grin and Lisa felt her eyes well up.

“How would you like to go see the orange blossoms today, Gramma Moss? They’re in full bloom.”

“I think I’d like that a mighty lot,” she nodded. “Ladies, you’ll just have to excuse me for a wee bit. My here grand-daughter, the doctor for babies, is takin’ me out to smell the blossoms.” She unlocked her wheelchair and headed over to the front desk. Once arrangements and sign-outs were attended to, Lisa pushed her grandmother to the van and helped her into the front seat. She stopped breathing, just in case, as she shimmied her back in the seat and buckled her in. It was a tropical spring day and when they arrived at the orange orchard, the sweet perfume of the blossoms wafted in the breeze. After helping Moss into her wheelchair, she pushed her over to a low branch. The old lady closed her eyes and leaned into the full blossoms, drinking in memories along with the fragrance.

“Yes. It were just like this the day I said ‘I do.’ I carried a bunch in my hand.”

“I know.”

A half hour later, Gramma Moss, asked to go back to the home. As Lisa was about to leave, Moss motioned with her finger. As Lisa leaned over, Moss whispered in her ear. “Thank you, honey. I can go peaceable now. He’s waitin’ for me.”

The funeral was a month later. Lisa placed a bouquet of orange blossoms on the grave site. Moss was at home now. There would be no more tears. And no more stories.