

Under The Chinaberry Tree

A Collection of
Poems, Short Stories
and Anecdotes

by Rebecca Bryant Hervey

From Under The Chinaberry Tree

By
Rebecca Bryant Hervey



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Once... I Was A Child

☐☐ Watching my children travel so swiftly toward adulthood, eager to enter that ‘magic’ world of grownups, my memory travels back to ‘yesterday’ and that magic world of my own early childhood.

The very earliest memory I can recall is that of a baby in blue chambray rompers, drawing praise from a blur of big people with her first successful attempt at crawling. That baby was my cousin Mollie, on the bare wooden floor of my Grandma’s house in Swink, Oklahoma, where I was born. I pretended not to notice, probably because no one was paying any attention to me. Well! After all, I had learned to crawl a long, long time ago, and could walk and run, being almost two years older than Mollie Frances! Actually, I envied her. I can still feel the sting of that envy.

Then a couple of years later, I slipped unnoticed into a friend’s bedroom to touch the pink fur and feel the softness of her little girl’s pink bedroom slippers trimmed with rabbit fur! I day-dreamed many an hour just thinking about things like the “prettier, furrer” slippers I’d get just as soon as our ship came in. Mama always told me I’d get the things my heart desired just as soon as our ship came in, but no one was sure just when that would be. I didn’t really know what a ship was until a year later, when World War II began with the bombing of American ships in some mystical place called Pearl Harbor.

Meanwhile, I had a pretty red rocking chair to share with my sister Edna, along with a small rubber baby doll. There was a tiny bottle to fill with milk for her just as soon as Mama strained it after the morning milking. I’d wait impatiently while she strained the fresh, bubbly warm milk through a clean sugar sack. Then she’d pour a glass of it for me to sip ever so slowly, to savor every drop while she prepared breakfast for the family.

There were eleven of us in all... though I can’t clearly recall all of us being together at the table much. First, of course, was our Daddy,
1.

a very special person. Probably next to God, I figured, because no one ever dared to make him angry! He worked so hard and so long in the fields that I never had him to myself much, but one day I was not allowed to go with Mama to help a neighbor who was having a baby. Daddy said he'd look after me as he worked in the barn. I sat on the soft, worn planks of the barn floor, near the door where the sun shone in, and he let me play with the jingly coins in his coin purse with its golden chain. His nickname for me was "Sweet Marie", and he let me cut pictures out of the catalog with Mama's scissors. It was a wonderful day, but I felt a little sickly by the time Mama came home, and she ruined it all by giving me a dose of that dreaded cure-all, Castor Oil!

Oh, how I cried, sputtered, squirmed and fumed in my effort to keep that horrible stuff out of my mouth...until Daddy held a shiny nickel before my eyes... all for me, and down went the medicine. After all, in those days, I could buy an entire bag of candy and bubble gum, or a big bottle of Pepsi Cola for that nickel.

Next in line in our family was Mama, of course. Her nickname for me was "Punk". She was surely one of God's angels. She even looked like one, with her halo of curls and ever-dependable smile. She sang like an angel, and loved Jesus with all her heart. If anyone ever disliked her, I didn't know about it. She sewed all our clothes on her old treadle sewing machine, and the fabrics she used were most likely from the prettiest feedsacks she could select at the general store in Idabel. She cooked huge amounts of food on a wood-burning stove, underneath which stove she could incubate baby chicks early in the Spring!

Mama made her own lye soap in a big black kettle over a blazing fire in the backyard, straining and dipping vile-smelling concoctions until they formed a usable block with which to scrub overalls and such on a wood and metal rub-board. With all her load, she was even known to take in washing when times were hard. Looking back now, I figure she was just over forty years of age when I began to observe all this.

The older girls helped her rinse the hand-washed clothes ...twice in clear water and once in a blueing rinse, especially white things like shirts, blouses and pillow-cases. Lordy! She insisted that even aprons and pillowcases be starched and ironed... and also those pretty hand-embroidered cup towels we used in the kitchen. Our clotheslines, sagging under the heavy loads, seemed to cover half the yard! After all the clothes were washed and rinsed, Mama would dip out big bucketfuls of the suds and scrub all the floors in the house. Now there's a memory, because on washday she always had a huge pot of pinto beans and salt pork cooking, to go with the pans of cornbread warming in the oven. I can still summon memories of those delectable aromas! Clean wet wood floors. Simmering homegrown Pinto beans. Hot cornbread, topped with home-churned butter. Onions, radishes and fresh greens from the garden. Did she ever sleep? I'm sure she did, but I don't remember that until I was a teenager and would get the giggles listening to my parent's snore as they napped in the afternoon. Mama's was a mixture of a whistle and a soft puff, while Daddy's was a full-blown roaring snore with a growl thrown in now and again.

If Mama did happen to get sick and need help, my Grandma and aunts would come to help. Again, at canning time they'd come to get the peaches, greenbeans and such 'put up' in glistening jars we girls had to scrub, rinse and scald meticulously. When they were too busy to notice and scold us, we children would crawl among their chairs and our little hands would dart about to steal a slice of sugared fruit. Grandma Dunn would see us, but she'd just wink and smile her toothless smile. She wasn't really our grandma at all, but a dear neighbor who lived down the road through a pasture trail.

We loved talking to Grandma Dunn! We'd tell her anything, true or not, just to watch her tug at the sides of her starched apron, raise those white eyebrows and exclaim with great exuberance, "Well.... shut my mouth wide open!" It made us giggle and duck our heads, because we also liked to peek at the toothless cavern of her mouth, but didn't want to be caught doing so. One Spring day, Edna and I had been playing near her house by a shallow ditch, making lob-lollies in the sand with our bare feet. For this shenanigan, we'd had to

remove our hightop brown shoes and our brown cotton stockings, then roll our cotton long-johns up to our knees. For this we got a switching with a “smart willer switch”, but it wasn’t Grandma Dunn who tattled on us. Our muddy feet and clothing were enough to tell Mama of our misdeed.

This marvelous mother of ours not only had a garden for the kitchen, but was known at times to be a field-hand right along with everyone else, chopping and pulling cotton, and keeping lazy laggards such as we, at our jobs. Even I, a diminutive four-year-old, had a “pickin’-sack” to match my size and ability. I remember picking enough cotton to barely cushion my body, then spreading it in the shade of a big ol’ cotton plant to take a nap. That’s about all that was expected of me, anyway. I’d wake up when it was time to ride atop the wagonload of cotton to the gin in town.

I know now, of course, that times were always hard, but we never went hungry. A bit ragged or patched, maybe, but clean as a whistle... and not nearly as sophisticated as folks in town, but we had a wonderful life and plenty to share with those less fortunate. Sunday afternoons we’d gather on the front porch, or the back if the rain blew in at the front, and sing our very hearts out! Yep! Daddy sang bass. He could also sing tenor. Mama could sing alto or soprano... and the rest of us just sang ‘also’.... wherever we could fit a note in. All my life, no matter what the circumstances, there’s always been a song in my heart, and I think all my siblings could concur.

Edna was nearer my age than Mary and Sarah, so it naturally followed that we played more, fought one another more, and got into more mischief together. We knew where Mama kept the big sack of brown sugar, and we’d mix it with bubble gum to extend the flavor of the gum. At night, of course, we really did stick our gum on the iron bedpost or on the windowsill to be rediscovered and chewed at some later date. We mixed sugar and chocolate, too, to make “playlike snuff” to load inside our lip and be like our Grandma Garrison. Her snuff didn’t taste nor smell like sweetened chocolate, though, so we’d back away when she wanted to give us a kiss.

We all had chores to do, and now and then we'd make a game of it unless we were enjoying a good argument of "Did not! Did too!" Edna and I had the job of shucking dried corn and grinding it for the chickens, then we'd use a hammer and an old piece of railroad track to pound broken china and crockery into a powder for the hens. We figured they used this powder to make the shells for their eggs... and you know what? I'm not sure about that yet! Do you suppose that's right?

When Edna started first grade she became a 'big girl' and had less time for me. I was only three years old... just a baby to her since she had become one of the school children. She spent more time with Sarah, and they'd trick me into going into the house and leaving them alone. Once they told me there was a 'mad dog' loose, and that I could't run fast enough if he came up, so I'd better go to Mama. Once I wandered, crying over this, into the woodlot where my brother Curt was chopping stovewood. Curt didn't want to be bothered with my endless questions, such as "Where did I come from, anyhow?" He decided to distract me by showing me how to build a fence around myself... stacking stovewood around my feet and on up to where it was over my head, with him handing me the pieces to stack. And then he left me howling! But he did come back to my rescue soon, a devilish grin on his sunburned face!

I wanted desperately to know where I came from... and I'd run to the mailbox in great anticipation to see if the postman had left another baby in there, since Mama had at least relented to tell me that I 'might have fit inside Daddy's shoebox' when I was born. She always avoided giving me the straight answers because in those days the facts of life were a great secret and shameful to discuss with children. Curt got tired of me asking him to lift me to look in the mailbox, so he told me that the devil had left me in the fireplace behind one of the logs! It's easy to understand why I learned early to spend a lot of time alone, daydreaming and talking to Jesus.

In Sunday School when I was three, Mr. Rainwater had taught us our first memory verse... "Jesus wept." He said that meant that it made Jesus cry because He wanted to live in people's hearts and that

people just wouldn't let Him. I told Jesus that very day that He could live in my heart. I couldn't imagine NOT letting Him live in my heart when I already knew that He loved me so much He would die for me. Jesus and I became the very best of friends, as we are to this very day. I learned to ask questions of Him instead of pestering all the busy folks around the house. He has always seen to it that I found the answer to my questions, in one way or another. (How I wish I had inquired of Him more as I grew up!) I spent many long hours talking to Him as I sat in my swing beneath a chinaberry tree in the middle of a weed patch in our yard. I learned to slide my little bare feet along the ground so they didn't get stuck by the grassburs that kept everyone else away.

On rainy days, if it was too cold for dancing in the rain in my little cotton slip and bloomers, I'd disappear to the back porch, hugging my pet cat Mary Jane. Together we'd watch raindrops falling into rainbarrels, making delightful dancing blobs and circles as they disappeared into the rest of the water. Mother hens clucked and worried and scolded 'til all their chicks were safe and secure beneath the porch. Those Oklahoma storms could really be scary, but when it simply rained, Mary Jane and I sat mesmerized and probably fell asleep there.

I hated storms at night, when it seemed every voice in the family was echoing fear and alarm, trying to get everyone out of bed and into the horrid, dank and frightening depths of the storm cellar between the house and the barn. I begged to be left in my warm bed, even if the house blew away. Rather than to be carried screaming into that stormcellar that smelled of onions, rotted potatoes, red clay... and probably snakes and snapping turtles, according to one mischevous brother! I knew for a fact there were spiders and frogs in there. Nonetheless, my brother Edward would carry me, whining, pleading and complaining all the way, out of the sanctuary of my bed to that thing they jokingly called a 'fraidy hole'. The house never did blow away. It was there when I went back to see it at age 30. The storm cellar had caved in.

Being the youngest of such a large family I don't remember a great

deal about my siblings, but I cherish the scant memories I have retained of my first six years of life with them.

Walking along the road to church between Mary, known then only as “Sister”, and Curt... “walking in the air” as I held onto their strong hands. They must have all had callouses on top of their feet from letting me cling to their hands or overalls with my feet on theirs, taking ‘giant steps’. It was Sister who taught me to recite poems at PTA meetings, and Sarah had taught me to print my name and to read by the phonics method before I was ever old enough to go to school. Sunday funny papers were my textbooks, along with stories from the Bible in a book Grandma had given me.

Every year at Christmas time I loved the hustle and bustle of preparation, the aroma of special mincemeat pies and fruitcakes and chocolate cake. The pungent smell of fresh cut pine or cedar Christmas trees, the tangy smell of oranges and bright red store-bought apples, and hard ribbon candy... it brings tears to my eyes now when I remember it. Candy canes peeking out of our everyday stockings filled with nuts and candy and fruit.

Toys were a rarity, except that the boys always got a new harmonica for Christmas, the girls would get a book or a doll or a new sweater. We made most of our decorations, such as paper chains to go around and around the tree, and paper birds and such, but we did buy swirly tin icicles to hang on the tree, and every year, after carefully hanging the ‘silver’ tinsel on each limb, we’d just as carefully take it off the limbs and put it back into it’s box.

We could still do those things in later years, but the ‘getting’ turned into more pleasure than the giving and preparing, and the things we got weren’t always so satisfying. I had no commercials on TV brainwashing me into thinking I could not live without a certain doll or toy or bike. My little rubber doll with its painted eyes was the dearest baby on earth to me when she was all I had. She wet her diaper when I fed her a bottle, and she cried with my own voice. She hushed when I rocked her to sleep in the little rocking chair Edna and

I shared. Since she was all I had, she was never left out in the rain, forgotten.

The tricycle I got at age four was extra special, because my brother Bob had found it someplace, broken, and brought it home and carved wooden wheels for it with his pocketknife, just for me! Bob was seventeen and just about ready to go into the Army. It was much better than new, having been made with such love.

My five brothers were ten feet tall to me, though David was almost a stranger. He was already grown when I was born, and in the Army. William had a wife, and though he was also drafted into the Army, brought her home one day to meet the family. I adored Billie! To me, she was so pretty. She had a guitar, and when she sang I cried because the songs were so sad and beautiful, and her voice so touching. To Edward and Curt I was something between a pet and a pest, but sometimes they could be very gentle, teaching me how to brush my teeth with salt and baking soda without crying, and carefully cleaning my fingernails with their pocketknives.

On my sixth birthday I awoke to find a red, doll-sized tin washtub and a little washboard on the pillow beside me, and Daddy was urging me to wake up and get dressed because we were moving to town that very day! It was plain to see that our ship wasn't going to come in on that dusty Oklahoma farm in 1941! After breakfast, I was lifted into the loaded wagon with Mary Jane under my arm and the little red washtub in my hand. Joe and John, Daddy's beloved old brown mules, pulled the wagon into town where water actually flowed from a faucet instead of coming from a well in a bucket. It really didn't taste so good, though.

Nothing, in fact, has seemed quite so delicious as those early days of childhood. No longer would Edna and I slip into the watermelon patch and feast with wicked delight when we should have been picking peas. No more sitting astride the gentle mules at syrup-making time, going round and round in circles, grinding the sugarcane. No more taking the long way home from Bethel Baptist Church and teasing Mr. Dunn's jersey bull till he snorted and stomped and scared me half

to death!

The indescribable aroma of bruised corn leaves as we played between the tall rows of green is but a sweet memory, like the earthy smell of freshly pulled peanuts at the end of summer. Our ship never did come in, actually, and it's just as well. We never really knew that we were 'poor' folks, but it was an un-speakable thrill on Sunday mornings to at last be allowed to wear my black patent-leather Sunday shoes, (polished with a leftover biscuit, mind you!) instead of those scuffed and dirty brown hightops I wore every day except in summer.

It was no problem for me that we didn't have enough chairs to seat everyone around the table! My special 'highchair' was a red-painted oil barrel with a cushion on it, 'off-limits' to anyone else. Well, you know? Maybe my ship has been there all the time, because its hold is still brimful of all these wonderful memories. I can look back and still feel my insides lurch as I rolled down the pasture hill in an empty feed barrel, spilling out of it somewhere along the way. Skating over the frozen pond in 'skates' made of wet rags wrapped around our shoes, holding onto the hands of my big brothers as we skimmed merrily over the ice.

Mustn't forget Mr. Magan and his general store where Mama bought feed and supplies. His name was spelled wrong, I always thought, because it was pronounced like McGann, but I didn't fuss. Warm, sweet memories for sure. Sometimes Mama would take me to town with her in the wagon, and leave me in the store with Mr. Magan while she ran errands down the block. One day he watched me staring wistfully at the big glass jars filled with candy corn, jawbreakers, peppermints and all-day suckers, and he said to me, "Which ones do you want to buy?" I'm sure a tear or two probably slid down my cheek when I said I had no money, ... not even a penny. He frowned and said, "Oh, come now, you've surely got something in your pocket, don't you?, and as I reached into my coat pocket I drew out a button that had come loose some time back. "There!" he said. "You're rich and don't know it!" He took the button in payment for a sack he proceeded to fill with a little bit of every kind of candy!

Overcome with shyness, but happily grateful, I took the sack from his hand and went to sit down on a sack of sweet-smelling cowfeed to enjoy my “purchase”. A mama cat and her soft, cuddly kittens joined me, and when Mama returned, there we all were, the cats and me, asleep on the sack of feed.

These memories make up a part of me. How could I ever forget my first ice-cream cone? As the man handed us the pointed cones piled high with the icy stuff, he warned Edna, Mollie and me...”Eat it all from the top, little ladies, else it’ll spill and make a mess if you bite off the bottom.” Well, we probably would not have thought of it, but since he mentioned it,... sure enough, we had to eat the rest of the cold, sweet mess with our heads tilted far back, trying to salvage it through the bottom of the cone as fast as it melted.

I’m quite sure now! My ship certainly did come in. In the heart of me there is a treasure chest of memories of a kind of childhood my own children and grandchildren cannot even imagine. I can share with them this story of the precious, fleeting moment when once... I was a child.

Follow A River

Have you ever wondered where rivers begin?
Or where they are going? Well, me too, my friend!
So I followed a river right to the top
To the cold, snowy place where it just seemed to stop.

It was really beginning, not ending at all...
Where the fresh-melted snow formed a waterfall!
In those icy headwaters it started as snow
And the sun on the rocks melted some, made it flow.

It formed icy puddles. Spread over the grass.
In sunlight it melted and grew, til at last
It poured over rocks at the top of the mountain
As sparkling and clear as a drink from a fountain.

From ev'ry high mountain the snow melted down
Into rivulets, streams, into brooks all around,
And they all ran together a river to form
And were joined by the rains of an early Spring storm.

That river was rushing! And crashing! And ROARING!
Who'd ever believe it was just water pouring??
It hurried so fast it was breaking small trees
That grew at it's edges as high as my knees.

It rushed over rocks til it foamed and it splashed,
Moving logs and old trees that splintered and smashed!
Then somewhere it calmed and sang a sweet song...
Entranced by it's wildness I followed along.

As it flowed 'round the mountain it's color was clear.
It reflected the sky and the trees growing near.
Then it PLUNGED to a valley and stirred up the soil.
It broke over stones in a rage and a roil!

It pushed ever downward that lovely spring day
Pushing rocks, trees and boats that had come out to play.
The smoother the land the more clear it became.
Clear as glass as it passed over sands in the plain.

How that river traveled! I hopped in a boat
That was headed downstream and we started to float
Past cities, past towns, under bridges, til yet...
Our river became part of rivers we met!

As waters kept flowing we came to the sea
With it's warm sunny beach that was waiting for me.
I played on the sand til the beach was erased
By the tide that came nightly and playfully chased
Such as I who had visited there from so far...Uh...
How long does it take to get back to Cuchara?

To A Friend

As a drop of dew in the morning sun
Is the sweet regard of a friend.
A simple gesture that says "I care"
Gives a lift to the soul within.

The dew in the sun never brings reproach
Nor stays 'til it's welcome's worn,
Just so, a true friend does not encroach
But knows when the heart's forlorn.

A dewdrop's a diamond on velvet rose.
Friendship's a gem in the hearts of those
Who, like myself, have a friend like you
To freshen my day like the morning dew.

Cookies

□ This is an analogy. At each mention of the word, ‘cookies’, I’d like you to mentally substitute the word...’Christians’. It may help us all to see one another in a ...sweeter... light.

God is the Baker. He makes many kinds of cookies. Vanilla, lemon, maple, chocolate... all kinds! (Even some nutty ones!) Some cookies have more salt than others, and some are more buttery. Some are sweeter, some spicy. Some are tender and melty while others are tough and chewy.

Well, when God puts the ingredients into the mixing bowl they are surely going to get stirred! The salt, sugar, butter, flour, eggs and all will be blended just right... eventually. Sometimes it takes a LOT of stirring and beating because the ingredients may be cold and hard. Something might have to be melted or chopped... even ground up!... but sooner or later these cookies will be finished products in the Baker’s hands.

Of course, that old spoiler satan stands by, trying to throw unnecessary things into the batter. Don’t you forget it! You’ll have to watch out for him. He may even talk you into LETTING him throw in something that’s not in the recipe... just because YOU may happen to LIKE that something.! We’re like that, aren’t we? We need to be hard-headed about that, yet soft and yielding so God can get on with His baking. He isn’t proud of half-baked cookies, and He will keep them in the heat until they turn out the way He intended.

God has a recipe for each of our lives, and it’s very important that certain ingredients be added at the proper time. You know, if you’ve ever baked cookies from scratch, that if you mixed...say... flour and eggs first you’d really have a mess! Everything must be done in order. God’s recipe assures us of being pleasing to Him. We can’t cut out an ingredient just because it’s too costly or scarce and still expect the same results. Letting the devil throw in his ingredients is NOT following God’s recipe.!

And of course, we know that baking time is different for various kinds of cookies. Those with soft and simple ingredients are baked and ready to serve in a very short time. More complicated ones are only half-done when they've been in the heat for a long time, but if we try to hurry the process the Baker may just have to start us all over again! We must be patient with God's process, and allow patience to bring about a perfect work.

Who's to say which cookie is best? God makes all kinds, and He loves all kinds... just as we are told to do. Know something? God the Baker may have to pound the batter to make it soft. He may have to set it aside to chill until it's firm. He may have to melt or break something... remove some shells. The fire that brings us to perfection may get awfully hot... but we have this wonderful assurance to see us through. **GOD DOES NOT LET HIS COOKIES BURN!**

Candle

My life is a little candle,
it gives a little light.

When troubles make the world seem dark
my candle shines so bright!

What makes my candle shine so?
What gives it such a glow?

It's this - I placed it in God's hand
and all the world should know
that when God holds a candle
He makes it shine so strong
that even in the darkest night
it gives the heart a song.

I'll never hide my candle
nor take from God's hand
for if I did it would grow dim
no matter where I stand.

And it would shed no light for me
or others that I meet.
'twould be shame to have a flame
that guided no one's feet.

I'm Only Mortal

Life is too short and my heart is too full
To carry a grudge very long.
We are imperfect, no one's always right,
So replace your grudge with a song.

What now, if God were disgusted with us,
And cut us away from His love?
We'd spend our eternity somewhere below
Instead of with Him up above.

So say to your brother or sister or friend,
"It's time that our thoughts take an upward trend.
"Forgive me for evil or unkind remarks."
And maybe quite soon you'll see enmity end.

Oh, it may not happen as soon as you'd pray.
Good things take ages to happen, some say.
But start the ball rolling and you be the one
To just say "I'm sorry, whatever I've done."

I'm only a mortal, we all make mistakes.
I'll try to do better." and that's what it takes
To mend an old friendship, renew human love,
For in this, there's help from the Father above.

River Of Life

Life is a river. Calm at times... flowing gently in little ripples over sand and small, pretty stones. Shallow, easy to travel.

It gets rough, sometimes turbulent. We're swept along clutching at straws to hold us up.

Dark waters threaten... boil. Turmoil! We cannot see which way to go. What to do? We clutch our straws, weak and limp though they may be.

Hold up your head! Don't let yourself be swept under! Rivers flow on. If we survive the turbulence and keep our heads there may be peace around the bend.

If not... well? Did we not survive before? Can we hold up our heads again? God is there! He will give us strength to fight the rapids, to go one and stay afloat.

There are sharp rocks in the river! God will be our guide. Our Navigator. He will steer our course through calm... and rapids, until we reach the shore.

Recipe For Peace Of Mind

Take one soul-ful of pride,
one mind-ful of bitterness,
one memory-ful of the past

Wrap tightly in a sheet of discarded self-pity.

Tie securely with a heavy rope of gloom
and cast it all into the
depths of nothingness.

Take one human heart, now lighter...
one human mind, now brighter...
one bowed head, trusting God.

Implant a smile where long there was none;
a twinkle to replace the tears.

Bind tightly with a heartfelt prayer
to Him, to take charge now
and through the coming years.

Watermelon Wisdom

□ Though I didn't and probably never would choose it, this particular bit of folksy wisdom has shaped my life. It's message: "Struggle makes the victory that much sweeter."

Mama's grave was still new. I was a nineteen-year-old mother myself, with an aging and bereft father who offered lodging on his ten-acre plot while my very young husband spent five months in Japan in the military. In midwinter, before I'd see another birthday, I'd give birth once more.

I had helped my father plant a garden, but for three weeks we'd not seen a drop of rain. My mother's cherry trees, planted only a year before, withered in the sun. Raccoons had filched what edible corn remained on the stalks. We could not risk draining the well to water the garden by hand, so we just held on and hoped... for rain that never came.

Seeing tomato vines curl and die was bad enough, but the watermelon! What's a summer on a farm without watermelon? I just could not sit and watch the melon vines die. Daddy was in town with the mules and wagon late one evening. He'd never know... I hoed shallow trenches alongside the melon rows and filled them with precious water from the well... but he did know.

Daddy could be a very harsh man. Here he came strolling up from the barn where he'd loosed and fed the mules. Twilight couldn't hide my deed, but this time my father was not harsh. He even sympathized with my intent but said it was not good to pour water on top of the ground for melons. "You could water them all you wanted to and make 'em grow, but they wouldn't taste worth a plug nickel."

"On the outside they can be real nice and green but the fruit inside wouldn't have no sugar... it'd taste more like water." He said if a melon was worth it's salt it would send roots down deep into the ground and find it's own moisture, and would survive in spite of the

drought. “They’ll surprise you”, he said... but also suggested an experiment. The vine nearest the well was mine to do with as I pleased... as long as I didn’t water it in the hot sun and blister it.

I was so sure he’d been wrong! With late-evening watering each day my vine grew three times bigger than the other vines. Summer came to an end with only a few brief squalls of rain. At harvest time, when the curl on the bloom end of the melon had dried and turned brown, I had two twenty-pound watermelons! Their bright skins gave tantalizing promise of exotic sweetness inside. The other melon vines only produced what Daddy called “ice-box melons” hardly bigger than a canteloupe... their rinds dark and dull.

Though my father hated smug arrogance, mine was hard to conceal! The melon popped with that familiar sound of ripe succulence as the knife drove into it... revealing a very juicy, though very pale... and almost tasteless fruit inside. Well, yes, I ate some just to save face, but it was almost like eating the white part next to the rind. The ice-box melons lasted well into autumn stored in the concrete storm cellar, and oh! were they sweet! Red as apples inside. Sweet as only a perfect watermelon can be. The man of few words did not gloat. He only raised an eyebrow and said, “You see?” I saw.

A New Day

Day is breaking.
How will you greet the dawn?
Will you curse the light
And draw the covers o'er your head?

Or be thankful for this, another chance
to right the wrongs of yesterday?
Then wash your eyes...
and be quick.

Are there clouds?
Perhaps they'll bring the rain,
Or maybe just remain
to shelter us from the heat of the sun.

What are your plans?
You'll take the day as it comes.
We must, you know...
Be it bright or gray, lovely or cruel.

If you cannot find one good thing
to greet your sight
Then there is something wrong
And only God can make it right.

Rise from your bed.
slip softly to your knees.
You need not say a lot to God
except, "I'm here... help me."

He understands.
He knows our secret longings and our fears.
The meaning of our tears.
Entreat Him. He'll not turn you away.

Feminist Past Militance

You've heard me proclaim, "I'm not militant".
Well, let me explain my phrase.
It's wanting some definition....
"Militant" represents just one phase.

The word, to me, sounds warlike,
And I've already won the battle.
So why should I flaunt a uniform,
And engage in bitter prattle?

A militant wounded tigress,
Reacting in panic and pain,
Seeking only retaliation,
Strikes wildly and makes no gain.

It's really not manhood in general
That I'm contending with.
It's foolish ideas we've all been taught
That propagate a myth.

Don't follow, like cows in a dairy herd,
The one with the loudest bell.
She could be reacting through bitterness
While missing the point, as well.

Some women who read the Bible believe
We're taught to revere our mate...
But the Maker revealed as He introduced Eve,
Man alone couldn't carry the weight!

As feminist I am a nurturer,
A bearer of points of view
Not mingled with tears of defensiveness
Nor sot with romantic dew.

Here and there is a man with a sensible mind
Who knows woman's value and worth,
And doesn't exploit or belittle...
Would God that they covered the earth!

So here on my soapbox of pen and ink,
I stand to expound in verse,
"Be strong, be assured, and be WOMAN with joy!
Defensive and angry is worse.



Beauty

"Beauty is as beauty does," my mother always said.
But still, the thoughts of "prettiness" revolved within my head.
Did I have a pretty face? Could I win a prize?
Beauty, then, to me was something seen with just the eyes.

Years went by and as I noticed wrinkles on my face,
I tried so hard to keep them off but they would not erase.
I noticed also grey hairs growing in among the brown,
And though I left them there I shuddered at the way years rolled
around.

Where is Beauty? What is Beauty? Did it pass me by?
No, as I look out at life with one contented sigh,
Beauty is the green grass growing 'neath my feet...
And sand and stones and rolling hills, and flowers, fragrant sweet.

Beauty is a chubby, dimpled hand, a toothless smile.
Beauty is an aged face that's seen a life worthwhile.
It is in the loving touch of someone dear to me
And it is in a letter from someone across the sea...

It's in the eyes of children in their innocence at play,
And when they kneel at night to thank the Father for the day.
Beauty is a feeling of a heart ablaze with love!
The wheeling of a bird in flight, the cooing of a dove.

I'll no longer search for Beauty for it's here within my heart,
And though I'll someday fade away and from this world depart
I know that I have had a life of beauty all along,
Since once I was a little child, when first I heard a song.

Beauty is as Beauty does, I don't deny it's true,
For there is value in those words. I tell my children, too.
God filled the world with Beauty, and I could guarantee it...
When we stop searching and be still and quiet... we can see it!

Death And Life

Bitterness! Hatred! Jealousy!
You have clung so long to my eyes.
Leave me not! Let me not see myself
For what I am.

You are as leeches.
When you are pulled at and disturbed
You hurt me and only dig in deeper.
So cover me.

Without you I am stripped.
Without you I'd admit my faults
And have peace with my brothers...
but I cannot.

It hurts to let you go.
Yes, I know... the hurt would go away
After I humble myself to be true,
but there's my PRIDE!

I'd see my own faults
Before I disclaim my fellow man,
But I'd be stepping on my own toes
And that brings pain.

You are my friends!
You guard me from self-examination.
You let me decry the wrongs of others
And see not my own.

Ohhh... you would go?
Why? Because I have seen you?
Discovered you within my heart?
How well I know!

Go then, you demons!
The hurt is only to my pride
Which I so long have clutched to me.
I will survive.

I'll raise my head!
No, not is selfish pride as before.
I raise my eyes to Jesus, my Lord.
Him will I serve.

Bitterness, hatred, jealousy...
Die your ignoble death and be gone.
I am a new creation, and I am His.
You cannot hold me.

Catfish Wisdom

□ A man of few words was my Georgia-born father. The lessons he taught by example were the ones I learned best. Though we'd never been rich by any means, Seth Bryant felt it necessary to guard us against the dangers of overabundance. Such an elegant and delicious prospect... overabundance! Yet I had learned that lesson once by not letting a watermelon vine send its own roots deep to find natural moisture... and thus, nourishment... that it needed in order to be 'worth it's salt'.

The next object lesson came when I had four young children, and again, an absentee husband. As he'd always done, my father appeared on my doorstep when I needed help. His visits would last until my crisis passed, and then, as he said, he had 'other fish to fry' and he'd go on his way.

I was still very young... twenty-five... and living in a rent-free house beside a country highway, with four rooms and a 'path'. Needless to say, life was a struggle. The two older girls caught the schoolbus at seven-twelve each weekday morning. My toddler son was almost as big as his three year-old sister. All four had survived mumps... not at the same time, but consecutively, only then to be stricken with a tormenting cough called 'croup' as the mumps subsided. Without the faithful and uncomplaining help of my mother-in-law it would have been indeed a hopeless situation. Overabundance? Just give me 'enough'!

Spring arrived about this time, and along with it my father, who at age 77 could easily walk the three miles to my house from where the Greyhound bus had let him off. He dug a garden with a shovel. Though terribly rocky, the earth was dark and fertile. Not good for root crops, he reckoned; sweet potatoes or Irish potatoes wouldn't do well amid the rocks. Not even carrots, which we both loved. We planted corn and field peas, alternating them in the same rows. Daddy said this combination would draw nitrogen from lightning when storms came, and would make the crops grow better. I took everything he said for gospel.

Daddy caught a lot of fish... crappie and white perch... from the small pond at the back of the pasture, with a bamboo pole and a hook on some black string. I learned to enjoy making quick work of the scales and fins the way he taught me, on a flat oak stump in the backyard. One very hot day my father returned from the shrinking pond with only a yellow and very fat old catfish. Chuckling, he said the fish was so fat and old he'd only taste like mud, but he wanted to show us how the Indians in Georgia used to plant corn. Our corn was already knee high but we chose the stalk nearest the gate for this lesson. Even my baby son watched as Granddaddy planted corn 'the way Indians used to do!'

Digging deeply as near to the corn roots as possible, Dad pointed out the 'air roots' or stabilizers, around the bottom of the stalk. He said they were like a bunch of little tiny toes, and they kept the cornstalk from blowing over in a strong wind. He told us corn has a taproot just like trees, that reaches deep into the earth to find nourishment, also helping the plant stand firm in a storm. Thus, the fat yellow catfish found it's burial site about one foot beneath this particular cornstalk. "Now, watch and see what happens", is all Daddy said as he removed rocks to make room for the fish that would fertilize the plant.

Summer sizzled... as it always does in this east Texas area. A three-week drought was dramatically broken by a cool week-end of soaking rain. Our crops responded gratefully. Every plant was lush and beautiful, especially the one we called 'the catfish corn'. While other cornstalks matured and reached as high as my father's hatbrim, the catfish corn was almost eight feet in height and still growing. It was as big around as my wrist! Its huge pale-green ears were still putting on a little more weight while the other stalks would be harvested the very next day.

Suddenly there was no time to stand and admire anything! A thunderstorm had arrived from the southwest as if it were in a hurry to drop its burden of rain and get on across the land. "Get in the house! Be quick about it!", my father shouted to the children. What a rain! Would it never stop?, I wondered. Daddy was watching it through a

window inside, commenting, “Boy, this is good for the corn and peas! Lots of nitrogen being created!” He had been orphaned at a young age, he told me, and traveled alone and unschooled for many years before marrying my mother Vergie, yet he’d learned something new each day, he was proud to say.

During lightning flashes I’d take a peek. It sure didn’t look good for anything at that moment! Pea vines whipped and lashed about the cornstalks, as wind, water, and now hail the size of big shooter marbles pelted them from every direction! Leaves were shredded to rags, but the stalks stood firm in the rocky soil... all but our once handsome prize, the hapless ‘cat-fish corn’.

It’s lush, overfed leaves that Daddy had described as ‘broad as a two-by-six’ lay pasted lifelessly into the wet mud. Desperately unwilling for this to be so, I dashed barefoot through the downpour, sinking ankle-deep into the mud, trying to shore up the fallen plant with sticks and string. I can remember tasting salty tears as the effort proved futile.

In the watery mud that had been it’s birthing place, the overweight stalk had no underpinning now of it’s own. The stabilizer roots could not hold its tremendous size. The taproot had greedily feasted where the catfish dinner began, and went no further into the earth. We had removed the rocks that might have anchored it, to make room for the fish. There was the lesson: our attempt to help the stalk of corn outshine the rest had taken away its natural resourcefulness. We had innocently robbed it of its strength to survive.

Sure, if only the storm had not come. But storms come. The morning light saw ragged-but-right pea vines waving on tattered cornstalks with ears now bursting to be harvested! Not only had they survived the storm but were obviously benefited by it. One more lesson learned, we gathered all the ears of corn, and then recycled the big cornstalk into the pigpen.

“Lord” Means “Master”

Do you realize “Lord” means “Master”?
Do you know what the title implies?
It doesn't mean ‘friend in need’ alone.
Far deeper the meaning lies.

“Lord of my life, I love thee”,
We sing unthinkingly.
Is He really the master of your life,
Who bled on Calv'ry's tree?

Do you give Him your full devotion
No matter the consequence?
Or do you just pray, “Lord, help me!”
In troubling circumstance.

We can't even fathom how much He gave
To be able to help us so!
Does the life you live make you feel the cause
That He did to Calvary go?

Do you feel unworthy to call His name
Or think of His wounded side
While the life you live is so void of Him?
Then let Him be your guide!

Who else, after all, can know so well
The troubles this life can hold,
And have the solution right in His hand
To bring you peace untold.

Just lay at His altar your earthly dreams,
Perhaps they're not meant to be...
And if you insist on running your course
You could meet more misery.

Jesus Christ has the best solution
His wisdom never fails;
If you can give your whole life to Him,
No matter what storm assails,

You'll find there's strength you'd never dream,
And peace beyond compare.
Just tell the Master to chart your course
And give Him every care.

It's true.. Jesus is a friend in need,
But He can be so much more
When you realize "Lord" means "Master"
And let Him hold the key to life's door.

A Silver Spoon

□ Among the gifts received for my twelfth birthday was a lovely sterling silver spoon, given by someone who loved me very much and wanted me to have some of the finer things in life. The solitary spoon is the only piece of sterling flatware I have ever owned, and that is why it has such meaning for me.

It arrived on a bright summer day, carefully wrapped to protect it's newness, received with trembling excitement and wonder as to what such a tiny but obviously important package could contain. Graceful and delicate, its innocent lines unmarred. Brand new. Promising. Just mine!

For years it was kept wrapped in its tissue paper, still in the box... taken out only to be shown or polished now and then. As I grew older the spoon could be found lying useless and dull somewhere in the back of a drawer.. ignored, though still wrapped and carefully cherished, never exposed to the world. Then, suddenly it was taken from its cocoon and put to use with the regular kitchen flatware. After many years it became bent and battered, though never broken. It could still be used but it was not always used properly, as its giver had meant it to be.

Still, it was the only one I had, and I kept it, but one day I seriously thought of doing away with it. What good was it? Tarnished. Scarred. Bent almost beyond straightening...(I had purposely bent it to be held in a baby's hand.) It was certainly nothing to point to with pride anymore.

Then I remembered just in time... It was given in love, and though scarred, it was made of durable material. It could be straightened and polished enough to at least be useful. So I put some real effort into getting the spoon into shape again. I had done it before, but only half-heartedly. This time I realized that it actually could have been destroyed, and I could never replace it!

Proudly I showed the newly polished spoon to my loved ones and returned it to use with the flatware, vowing always to remember how the shine always returned with just a little care. If I were again to wrap the spoon and store it away, it would be of no use to anyone... but even if daily use gives it more dents and more scars, it is still my treasured possession and will always be used and polished 'til it's worn beyond any earthly good.

You see, of course... the spoon reflected my life. A shining, innocent life given in love, guarded and protected, reached a point where it was not taken seriously and used properly by its owner. It became unlovely and tarnished... through both labors of love and neglect. Its shining hopes were forgotten, dulled by time. I did indeed consider doing away with my life, because in it I could see no beauty, hope, or promise. But someone loved and needed me! To my loved ones I was irreplaceable, and valuable if only I would make an effort to bring out the sterling qualities... God's original purpose for my life.

Use Me, Lord, Today!

Stepping through a chaplain's door
I thought that I would find
A road that leads to destiny
Paved with peace of mind.

But as we spoke of many things
The feeling came to me...
He thinks my problem is a fear
Of things I cannot see!

My mind is filled with tension, yes,
But in my heart there's peace...
Knowing there's a place for me,
And my quest shall not cease

To find the thing He'd have me do
Be it e'er great or small
And all because He died for me
I'll strain to hear the Call.

All because He died for me
I cannot sit content
And 'righteously' sing praises
To the Savior God has sent!

"Peace He doth give unto me!"
Can't you understand
How in one moment I feel peace
Yet show a trembling hand?

"Oh, how I love Jesus!"
I once sang religiously,
But then, "I gave My life for you,
What hast thou done for Me?"

How can I sit complacent
When He died upon a tree?
Just saying I love Jesus
Is not enough for me.

I was giv'n a voice, a mind and hands
To do my Father's will,
So tho' these earthly problems plague
You see I can't keep still.

“Work for the night is coming.
Work through the morning hours.
Work while the dew is sparkling.
Work 'mid springing flow'rs.”

Who knows WHEN the night is coming?
That's why I cannot wait
To do my Master's bidding
And I'm pushing at the gate.

I want to call to Him, “I'm here!,
A supple lump of clay
For You to do with as You will...
Please, use me, Lord.... today!”

The Sparrow Tree

□ I heard the tree! Heard it chirping, fluttering and singing as though it were alive! The tree was growing in the yard not far from my upstairs balcony, and I had seen it many times, but had never before heard it singing. What a wonderful sound... like a hundred birds having a party, though not one bird could I see.

Now, I've seen orange trees, full of bright orange oranges, and lemon trees, full of bright lemony yellow lemons. I've seen apple trees full of both green and red apples... even yellow apples, but I've never heard one of them singing as this tree was singing!.

This tree happened to be called a "Live Oak" tree... is that why it was able to sing? I wondered. Peering closely as I could from the balcony I saw what appeared to be hundreds, maybe thousands, of tiny acorns growing on this Live Oak tree... but why was I hearing the singing of birds I could not see?

Thinking about birds, I remembered the bag of birdseed from which I'd been scattering a morning treat for the sparrows that came to perch on the balcony. I love to watch them! They're all so different, even though alike. Some are gentle. Some are very hungry and determined to get as much as they can even though it makes a big mess. There are very young sparrows, and some are quite old. Watching them, I'm reminded that our Heavenly Father created each and every kind of bird all over the world! Isn't He wonderful? Isn't He clever? Isn't He creative? Say... God IS the Creator!

I tried to number all the different kinds of birds I had seen or heard of in my life. Too many for me to think about! From the parakeet in a cage in a pet shop, to those enormous ostriches roaming free on the plains far away in other countries.... our Creator God had a special plan. He had a purpose in mind for making each and every bird just exactly the way He made them.

Bringing the bag of birdseed onto the balcony, still listening to the

chirping tree, I scattered handfuls of seed around and went back inside to look through the window, waiting for the birds to arrive. Suddenly the tree itself seemed to explode with the sound of hundreds of tiny wings....Aha! I think you've guessed. It was not the tree itself singing and chirping, but the sparrows inside it, hiding and waiting in happy anticipation for the spreading of birdseed for their morning feast!

Now I call it my "Sparrow Tree"... and as the tiny sparrows gather in it's branches where they can't be seen, I know they're there when I hear them. Do you know that the Bible tells us that our Creator God sees each and every little sparrow, and cares about it? Think of that! It's in the book of Matthew, chapter ten, verse twenty-nine. Every little sparrow, every bird, both big and small.... every little creature all over the world. God sees them and cares about them because He made them!

How much more He cares about you and me, and all people on the earth, and we can call upon Him and He will answer and help us. He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to be the Way that we can know Him. Jesus is the ONLY way we can know God, and He loves us so much that He gave His life for our sakes. He wants us to be just as eager for Him as those little sparrows in my tree. Singing and waiting in happy anticipation for Him, and hurrying to find anew every morning the things He has provided for us because He loves us.

Doll Of My Dreams

□ It was the same Christmas season that I got a spanking for taking my sister's dare to run across the snowy yard in my bare feet. I'd always been a sickly child, but that year I seemed fine. It had snowed just enough to give us a white Christmas in Idabel, Oklahoma, and Edna and I were enjoying it to the hilt.

She was almost ten. I was six and a half. The year was 1941. She'd said I was too much of a baby to take off my boots and run across the snow barefooted. Making her promise not to tell on me, I zipped across the snowy yard in my bare feet just as Mama stepped out the front door to call us in to breakfast.

I got the spanking for risking my delicate health. Edna got her satisfaction. She'd already decided that I was too big to believe in Santa Claus, so she informed me in wicked big-sister whispers that it was really Mama and Daddy who filled our stockings... and not only that, but we were so poor I would definitely not get the big baby doll in the pink silk dress I'd been hoping and praying for. I was sure she was wrong on both counts, but we'd see.

Christmas Eve night I cried myself to sleep after staying awake long enough to observe my parents in the living room filling our long cotton stockings with the customary goodies of Christmastime. And I saw there was no big baby doll in a pink dress. There was only a very small rubber doll that drank from a bottle and wet its diaper, same as the year before. But finally sleeping, I dreamed.

In the dream, Santa Claus had not been able to come down the chimney because of the hot coals in the fireplace, so he had placed on Mama's trunk in the garage, wrapped in white tissue paper, my heart's delight... a big, beautiful baby doll that filled both my arms! Her shiny blue eyes opened and closed. Her painted dark hair was molded into a curl on top of her head; and her dress! Oh... I could actually feel the silk of it! I awoke in the still of dawn just from the excitement of feeling that silk dress between my fingers... only to see

that it was my own silky blonde hair I was holding in my hand. There was no doll at all.

Stunned, I crawled from beneath the handmade quilts and tiptoed alone into the chilly living room where the coals in the fireplace were cold and gray. Well... maybe it was also a dream that I had seen my parents fill the stockings instead of Santa Claus... and maybe... but no. There was the little rubber doll with its staring, painted eyes.

I couldn't get my stocking off the nail on the mantle, so I settled for a sticky-sweet thing called a coconut hut covered with dark chocolate that I really didn't care for. It did nothing to stop the tears of disappointment from sliding down my cheeks. And that's how Mama found me. Cold, forlorn and tearful on what was supposed to have been the happiest day of the year. Softly she scooped me, the last of her nine children, into her lap. Gently she rocked and crooned to me as though I were still a little baby.

She called me her baby, too. She said not to cry, because William and Billie were coming that very day from a faraway place called Houston, and they were bringing their real, live baby girl for me to play with. William, my beloved brother Bill, was almost grown when I was born, and I had not seen him for an entire year. I wanted to be happy that he was coming, but my heart was too heavy with disappointment. I could hardly make myself eat any of the delicious country breakfast Mama and the older girls had set on the big round table.

Mama's own homemade sausage came from the noisy pigs we'd been feeding. There was a huge platter of scrambled eggs from the hens Edna and I fed every day, with gravy and biscuits, buttered with what we'd churned ourselves in the big crock in the kitchen... and homemade blackberry jam! But I wasn't pouting, as Edna accused. I was simply heartbroken.

Bill's shiny black Chevrolet pulled into the driveway back by the garage and I dried my tears to greet him and his pretty wife, and their baby girl whose blonde hair and blue eyes matched my own. They

were already in the house, hugging and kissing and unloading presents from the car when I got up from the table. Everyone had been handed a gift but me. It was more than I could bear. I slipped quietly to my bed and buried myself beneath the quilts to cry.

Bill didn't understand my heartache, but he found me and said he wanted me to bring in one more package from the garage for him. I didn't want to go out in the snow, but I'd do most anything for my brother, so I pulled on the black rubber boots and my coat, and trudged dutifully out to the garage. There was no gift-wrapped package in sight, such as everyone else had received, only a bundle of white tissue paper with a hint of pink inside, lying on top of Mama's steamer trunk.

My heart leaped, yes it did! But by now I was afraid to claim it for my own. Without looking inside the bundle, I took it into the house to Bill. After all, it could have been meant for his own little girl... Bill tweaked my nose and laughed at me. "Well, silly! Don't you want it? What's wrong with you?" He lifted me in his big hands and swooped me up so high my head bumped the ceiling, then set me down with a firm thrust of the white bundle into my arms.

Edna stood holding the sweater she'd received after boasting that she was too big for dolls, and watched my misery turn to unbelieving delight as the tissue paper fell from my hands to reveal the life-size baby doll with blue eyes that opened and closed. Her rosebud mouth had two "real" teeth, and there were dimples on the back of her tiny hands and on her knees. Blissfully, with trembling fingers, I felt for sure this time the silk of her dress embroidered with tiny flowers and edged with lace. The pink dress! The doll I'd prayed for and hoped for and believed for ever since I had seen her in the store window in town!

Wouldn't any little girl squeal with delight and dance around the room? I wanted to. I really did want to, and I know all the family expected it of me... but all I could do was hug her tightly to my heart and hide my face in her loveliness until I was told by the puzzled onlookers that my tears were making ugly circles on the pink silk dress.

The Story Of The Chinaberry Tree

In a swing under a Chinaberry tree in Oklahoma, tiny Rebecca Bryant spent hours with her new Friend, Jesus. As a 3 yr. old she had told Him that He could live in her heart.

She grew up far from the Chinaberry tree, but the memory of those special times as she sat in the swing, talking to Jesus, has never faded. Such times gave inspiration to these stories she writes today.

Her hope and prayer is that you will be inspired to trust Jesus as your Friend and Lord, and put complete confidence in Him to see you through all the days of your life.

Find a secret place and talk to Jesus... He will always meet you there!

It's no accident that this book has come into your hands. It's what God wanted.



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