

Chapter 2



HALOED MEMORIES OF YESTERDAY

Romans 12: 10-11

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love, give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.”

Tattered Memories

It has been said that your childhood is but a closet filled with both tattered and peaceful memories on which your tomorrows are formed. Unfortunately, at age three, Mary's closet already had the beginnings of her first tattered memory after suffering the loss of both parents to tuberculosis.

Mary's childhood that began in the country, surrounded by loving parents, one sister Elizabeth, and two special brothers, Orville and Charles, would soon be torn to shreds by the loss of their loving father. This untimely death caused her family to be uprooted as they searched for a more suitable home. Thus, Mary went from being a country girl to a “townie” almost overnight, as her family moved into a rental property owned by a lady named Ella Thompkins.

Not only was the family in a state of grief, but had to learn how to survive in town, a dramatic departure from country living. Perhaps because of Mary's young age, her mother lived in constant fear that she would be stricken with tuberculosis like her father.

Consequently, as a precaution, a cow that had just delivered a calf, was kept in the backyard to provide a steady stream of milk for little Mary. It was felt that fresh cow's milk offered a natural remedy for preventing tuberculosis.

Therefore, when Mary required feeding, her brothers would carry her outside for fresh milk. After cleansing the cows utter, they would gently turn Mary on her back and touch her little lips to the cow's teat. Mary would nurse until her empty belly was full of the fresh warm milk.

When recalling this happening in her life, Mary remembers her mother teasingly saying that all that sucking on a cow's teat had made her mouth big. As Mary recounted this bizarre story, she wrinkled her nose at the thought of that awful tasting "warm" milk that she endured throughout her childhood. The thought of that warm milk offends her taste buds even today at age 91. Although she looks at this with a sense of humor now, she recognizes how challenging it must have been for every member of the family. Desperate times called for desperate action.

Just as the sad family of four had begun their new life in the city, and were still reeling from their tragic loss, Mary's mother contracted the same terrible disease and died a few short months later.

Unfortunately, the loss of both parents, the greatest tragedy to be faced by a loving family, had been placed into the laps of four of God's precious children. The sorrows of life that toll the hearts most solemn bell were ringing loudly within the four tattered little souls belonging to Mary, her sister Elizabeth, and her two brothers.

At this point, it is almost impossible for the human mind to comprehend the impact of loss placed on the shoulders of these four little children. Troubled, burdened, and blue, each little heart must have been beating to the rhythm only the weak, lonely and down trodden recognize all too well.

Thankfully, our lord that watches over even the tiniest sparrow both day and night never takes His eyes off His children, either. At this sad, hopeless moment in time, He already had a safe haven planned for little three year old Mary.

Hope Filled Tomorrow

While on a trip to visit her sister in St. Louis, Ella Thompkins, Mary's landlord, heard a voice speak to her in a way that called her to full attention and propelled her into immediate action.

"GO BACK AND GET YOUR BABY GIRL," was the command Ella heard that important day in another city, several miles away from little Mary. The voice caused her to recall a promise she made to Mary's mother concerning her baby daughter. It was just prior to her mother's passing that Ella had vowed to receive little Mary as her own daughter.

Therefore, it was because of obedience to her God, the decision by a total stranger named Ella Thompkins was to forever change the life of a little girl named Mary. At that moment, the human connection that establishes the glow in one's heart was turned on for an orphan girl, feeling alone, hurt and lost. Without delay, wearing a mind filled with joy and purpose, Ella returned to Springfield and immediately claimed Mary as her very own baby girl. From that moment on, Mary was received by an adoptive mother who would shower such unconditional love on her that it would fill that lonely, frightened little girl's heart forever.

Also, Mary will tell you today that it was because of her birth mother's kindness that relatives around the area took in her brothers, Orville, Charles, and sister Elizabeth to rear as their very own children. Although all four siblings were separated and lived with different families, they were all still in close proximity. Because of living in the same community, Mary, her brothers and sister stayed in frequent contact and remained close all their lives.

Shortly after Mary's mother had passed away, Ella Thompkins, Mary's new adoptive mother gave her a little rocking chair that found a home on the front porch of the house. Mary spent many hours rocking and talking to her birth mother, wishing for her return. One particular day, Ella happened by and heard Mary deep in conversation with her birth mother. Placing her hand gently on Mary's shoulder, she softly and tenderly said, "I'm your mother now." These comforting words must have been so monumental to Mary that she held tightly to that little rocking chair as a priceless keepsake for most of her life.

Portrait Of Ella

Mary described her adoptive mother, Ella Massey Thompkins, as being a mixture of Black and American Indian, possessing an enormously strong emotional make-up, and being blessed with a straight, thick beautiful head of hair. Ella's family members were slaves and owned by white southerners on the large plantations. Many of them were brought directly into this country in the hulls of the large slave ships. Recently, when Mary learned that run away slaves fled to live among the American Indians; it offered her greater insight into her mother's heritage.

Today, Mary describes her mother as possessing "Come-Upins". This word was assigned to her mother because of her strong, determined, tenacious spirit.

The fact that Ella Thompkins was able to read remains a mystery even today to Mary. Her mother recognized the need and used what ever printed articles were available, thus, teaching herself the act of reading. Given the fact that learning to read is a very difficult process, it is understandable Mary still marvels at this happening.

In spite of all the hardships and disadvantages Ella endured personally, her heart remained full to overflowing with love and generosity toward her fellowman. Color was not an issue for Ella. She believed firmly that racial hatred was built around fear and would ruin a person's life unless released. Everyone was welcome in her home; a lesson Mary learned well.

In order to make a living, Ella was hired to do washing and ironing for several wealthy families in the area. Her income for this difficult work was a whopping three to four dollars per week. Each day, Mary would accompany her mother to work and wait until the laundry was completed. While her mother worked, Mary would play with the family's children and be included in all activities. She would even accompany the family members as they rode in a horse drawn buggy to attend social functions. Both Mary and her mother were served lunch at the table with the family. At the end of the day, mother and daughter would pay three cents to travel back home by riding the local street car.

After returning home around 5:00 PM, Mary and her mother would have their evening meal and then sit by the lamp and read magazines that had been given to them by friends. Mary loved sitting on the floor at her mother's feet as they shared this peaceful time together.

In spite of Ella's meager income, she was labeled as a smart, savvy business woman because she was always finding a way to improve her cash flow. As a result of saving her hard earned money, she started buying the empty lots all around her little home. When she had purchased a total of three lots, she hired a carpenter for ten dollars per week to build homes on each one to be used as rental properties. At the completion of this project, she had added twenty one dollars to her monthly income. Using this approach, she eventually owned a total of 7 homes purchased by funds from her job of washing and ironing for others.

Since Ella held such a strong Christian belief, she could be found worshiping in church every Sunday. Mary recalls her mother having a beautiful, strong soprano

voice that would carry for miles. She would sing her favorite song, “In the Garden” with such emotion that those around would feel truly blessed. Her singing was just another vivid example of the important space Ella filled in the minds and hearts of those living in the community. Her personality was always as big as life itself.

Grandmother Arrives

Due to failing health, Ella's mother, Grandmother Moore who was called Mama by Mary, came to live with them. Mary adored this kind older lady and helped Ella with her much needed care. On day, Grandmother Moore noticed that her daughter Ella, in an effort to raise Mary properly, was disciplining her in too harsh a manner. She had been accustomed to brushing Mary's little legs with keen switches. As a result, Grandmother Moore boldly stated, “Don't you be spanking that baby. Listen to what she is telling you. Check to see if she is telling you the truth instead of switching her without reason.”

Consequently, from that day forward, the keen switches were thrown away and calm was restored. Mary does not hold any ill feelings against her mother because, in her mind, her mother thought she was bringing her up the right way. Her mother always loved her unconditionally, and having no children of her own, desired to improve.

When Grandmother Moore was ready to depart this earth, Mary was weeping loudly beside her bed. Grandmother opened her eyes and said, “Peeny Baby, you should not work so hard at this!” She then closed her eyes and took her last breath. This was her way of teaching Mary about death. She was letting her know they would not be lost from each other forever, but simply separated for awhile. After that, Mary chose to never weep at funerals, no matter how sad she felt. She made the decision to go to a private spot and grieve in her own way.

When Mary was just a little girl, she remembers how, not only Grandmother Moore, but Ella's entire family showed their love for her. Mary indicated that she must have been like a little strange dog they loved to play with and invite to their homes. She remembers visiting her cousins in Kansas City for extended vacations. Once, a lady and a teacher that lived next door to her cousins loved her so much they tried to take her away from Ella. They were so infatuated with Mary they showered her with presents, dresses, and excursions to Swope Park.

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That behavior brought a protective Ella to Kansas City in a big hurry. No one was about to take her baby out of her loving arms!



**Street car like Mary would have ridden on with her mother.
(Courtesy of The History Museum for Springfield-Greene County)**



**Nellie Price, Mary's biological mother, standing in back.
(Courtesy of Treshna Stephens, Mary's great niece)**



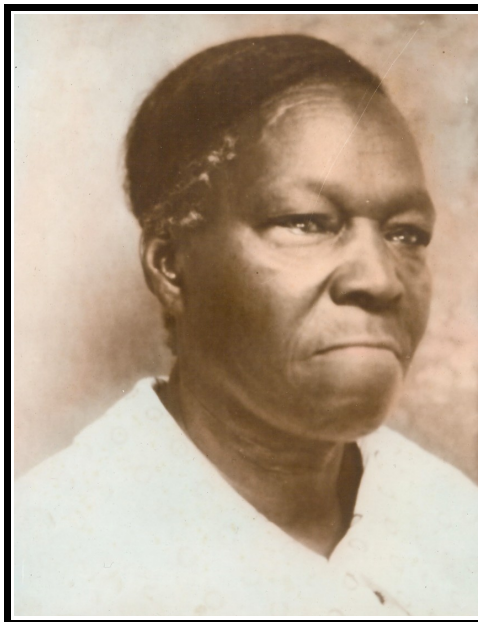
**Baby Mary on right with a cousin.
(Courtesy of Treshna Stephens, Mary's great niece)**

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**Orville Price, Mary's brother with wife and children. Charles, Mary's other brother deceased.
(Courtesy of Treshna Stephens, Mary's great niece)**



Ella Thompkins, Mary's adoptive mother.



**Grandmother Billings Moore, Ella's mother
(Courtesy of Treshna Stephens, Mary's great niece.)**