

Magnolia Memories

A Short Story

by MaryAnn Diorio

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Jennie-Belle Crawford gazed steadily at the wedding picture, wiping away the tears that trickled down her cheeks. Although Bill had been dead nearly three years, the grief still lingered. His death had been so sudden. She hadn't been prepared.

Not that anyone is ever prepared for a loved one's death, especially that of a spouse.

Her eyes wandered from Bill's warm smile to the tall magnolia tree blooming outside her window. The magnificent tree was the main reason she and Bill had bought the house shortly after their marriage twenty-eight years earlier. They'd spent precious hours sitting beneath its blossoms. In winter, they'd watched their three small sons play hide-and-seek amidst its evergreen branches. When their firstborn graduated from college, they'd celebrated by the white-blossomed tree. And then, three long autumns ago, she'd watched as friends walked past the stately tree the day of Bill's burial.

A sob caught in Jennie's throat. Without Bill, her life was no more than an empty shell.

A rap at the door shook her from her thoughts.

"Jennie Belle. Jennie Belle Crawford. Open this door at once."

Jennie smiled at Old Miss Aubrey's familiar voice.

"Coming, Miss Aubrey." Jennie put down the photo and hurried to the door.

“My, my girl. ‘T’ain’t polite to keep an old woman awaitin’.” Miss Aubrey’s bright blue eyes twinkled.

Jennie gave Miss Aubrey a hug and drew her into the house. “I came as soon as I heard your knock.”

“Well, that ain’t quick enough for me.” Miss Aubrey removed her pale-blue cotton shawl and laid it across the back of the rocking chair.

“How about some iced tea?” Jennie placed a hand on Miss Aubrey’s frail shoulder.

Miss Aubrey smiled and grabbed both of Jennie’s hands. “Why, I thought you’d never ask.”

“Please sit down, Miss Aubrey. I’ll be right back.”

“Sit down, nothin’. I’m a-followin’ you right into yer kitchen.”

Jennie had known Miss Aubrey long enough to know that one didn’t try to change her mind. That was one of the things Jennie loved most about the old woman. She was determined. A feisty fighter. She’d had to be to get through everything life had thrown her way.

Jennie opened the cupboard and took out two tall glasses. Then she opened the refrigerator and withdrew the large pitcher of iced tea she’d prepared just a short time before.

“My, that looks good.” Miss Aubrey clapped her hands. “Never lived a day so hot in all my eighty-two years.”

Jennie held the pitcher in mid-air. “Are you really eighty-two years old?”

“Sure as you’re Jennie-Belle Crawford.” The old woman laughed. “Why d’ya ask? How old did ya think I was anyway?”

Jennie handed Miss Aubrey her glass. “I thought you weren’t a day over seventy.”

“Pshaw, child. You been a-dreamin’. It’s been twelve years since I saw seventy. Sixty-four since I lost my man.”

Jennie’s heart lurched.

“Let’s go into the living room, Miss Aubrey.” Jennie motioned for the old woman to precede her into the large, spacious room that was Jennie’s favorite. The cobalt blue walls formed a lovely backdrop for the blue-and-white striped sofa and chairs. Jennie had decorated the room herself, shortly before Bill’s death. He’d loved the room and had frequently complimented her on it.

A lump rose to Jennie’s throat. “Please sit down, Miss Aubrey.”

The old woman took the chair across from the sofa. Jennie sat opposite her.

“Yep, my Rex was the finest chap in Haleyville.” Miss Aubrey resumed their conversation. “We first met when I was only thirteen and he was sixteen. At first, my Paw didn’t like him a whit. But when Rex showed hisself to be a true gentleman, Paw began to appreciate him. Eventually, we married when I was sixteen.”

Jennie listened intently as Miss Aubrey recounted incident after incident of her life with Rex Aubrey.

“How long were you married?” Jennie interrupted when the old woman stopped for a breath. “Two years.”

Jennie’s heart tightened. “Only two years?”

“Yep. Only two years.” Miss Aubrey rubbed a finger across her eye. “And I still miss him.”

“So, you’ve been a widow for sixty-four years?”

“Yes, child. Sixty-four fruitful years.”

The word “fruitful” struck Jennie with force. What a strange choice of words for a woman bereft for most of her life of the man she loved!

Jennie leaned forward. “How did you survive, Miss Aubrey?” Her voice was almost a whisper.

The old woman placed her glass of iced tea on the table beside her, laid both hands flat on her lap, and looked straight at Jennie. “I almost didn’t, child. It wasn’t easy. In fact, there were days I cried so hard, I thought I’d die of dehydration.” She chuckled. “Then one day, somethin’ happened that changed my life forever.”

“What was that?” Jennie’s heart quickened.

“I learned to start lookin’ at life from God’s point of view, not my own.”

Jennie considered the old woman’s words. If Jennie were honest with herself, she’d been looking at life from her own point of view. She hadn’t even considered God’s point of view.

Miss Aubrey cleared her throat. “My nephew be a-visitin’ from Dallas next week.” Her eyes twinkled at the sudden change of subject. “He ain’t nothin’ like me. Took after the highbrow side of the family. He’s refined, educated, and, I might add, real good-lookin’.” She gave Jennie a wink. “Sure would like to have you come over for dinner to meet him.”

Miss Aubrey’s ulterior motive was written all over her lovely, wrinkled face.

“What are you driving at, Miss Aubrey?”

The old woman looked Jennie straight in the eye. “Ain’t drivin’ at nothin’. Just

shootin' straight from the hip. I think you need to meet my nephew. He's been lookin' for a good wife for a long time now, and I think the two of you would be just right for each other." She gave an emphatic nod of her head.

Jennie's pulse raced. When Bill died, she'd vowed she'd never even consider marrying again. To do so would be to betray Bill.

"Miss Aubrey." Jennie tensed. "I appreciate your wanting me to meet your nephew, but I don't ever want to marry again."

The old woman laughed. "So it was that bad, was it?"

Jennie knew Miss Aubrey too well to take her comment as an insult. "No, Miss Aubrey. Marriage to Bill was wonderful."

"So, what's holdin' you back then?"

Jennie looked down into the glass she held in her hand. "I'm still in love with Bill." Her voice quivered. "Besides, I feel that if I marry again, I'd be betraying him."

"Oh, nonsense, child. I got a hunch your Bill would want you to get married again if the right man came along."

Jennie stiffened. While she certainly didn't want to hurt Miss Aubrey's feelings, she was beginning to think the old woman was overstepping her bounds.

"Miss Aubrey, I appreciate your concern for me, but I will never marry again."

Miss Aubrey shifted in her chair. "Fine, fine, young lady. But you can still come for dinner."

Jennie smiled in spite of herself. "I'll think about it, Miss Aubrey."

"Understood." Miss Aubrey suddenly rose from her chair. "Well, got to be goin'. My best friend Evelyn is comin' over for our weekly Bible study, and I got some preparin' to do."

Jennie showed Miss Aubrey to the door, all the while wondering if the old woman truly understood.

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MAGNOLIA MEMORIES

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