

Filling Mama's Shoes

KATHRYN MITCHELL

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DEDICATION

For my family and for all families who treasure their history.

With special thanks to my family and friends who offered me support, encouragement, and lots of helpful feedback!

A NOTE TO READERS

This novella, like any book ever written, has its own story:

I was inspired to write this book when my aunt commented that my mother had been a prissy girl sandwiched between two tomboy sisters. I had recently lost my mother, and while the story of Naomi Webber Carroll is very different from my mother's story, I created Naomi with my mother in mind, reflecting the contrast between the strength of family and friends amidst the poverty that affected many children during The Great Depression. I initially wrote the story with a young reader in mind. However, something unexpected happened along the way.

As I completed each chapter, I read them to my elderly father. Naomi's story sparked memories that had lain dormant in the cobwebs of his mind, and he shared with me stories of his youth that I had never heard before. Dad had completed a memory journal for me years earlier, but Dad's best memories surfaced as I read to him about Naomi's adventures. Those memories enlivened him mentally, physically and emotionally.

My mother-in-law and her sister were my first beta readers. Just as my dad had done, my mother-in-law shared some untold childhood stories that she remembered after reading the book.

Once I realized the memory jogging power of the book, its purpose and audience transformed. I added memory prompts to the end of each chapter, and a new mission surfaced.

KATHRYN MITCHELL

After I published in 2015, I devoted many hours to reading the book to elderly memory care patients and realized that they needed reminders of who the characters were at the beginning of each chapter. With that in mind, I edited the book for that purpose and rereleased it in 2018.

I hope to write Naomi's life story, but in future books each chapter will be a stand-alone short story for greater ease in reading aloud to the elderly and for readers who simply enjoy a collection of short stories that tell a greater tale.

As you read this book, please keep in mind that memory prompts are provided at the end of each chapter as an aid, but they may or may not resonate with every person reading or hearing this story. Please allow yourself to get creative and invent your own prompts as you discover old memories. Also, be sure to capture those memories on paper or on audio or video recordings.

This book begins in present day where the reader finds that Naomi Carroll's short term memory is failing but her long term memory is very much intact. This is often the case with elderly people. It's a very upsetting state for anyone to be in, and it affects our loved ones emotionally, mentally, and physically. If you are a reader affected by short term memory loss or if you are reading this story to an elderly loved one with memory loss, I hope that Naomi's plight will serve as a reminder that sharing personal stories can be therapeutic.

If you are reading this book to a person suffering from Alzheimer's or other types of dementia, please keep in mind that accessing memories can be a struggle and the provided prompts might not help. However, your loved one might revisit a distant memory if you allow yourself to explore other related questions or if you share a memory of your own with them. And even if nothing generates their memories, your interactions with them can be beneficial to their cognitive and emotional health.

Please take note that not all memories are happy ones. A painful memory could surface and present a challenge. If you or your loved one is reminded of an unhappy event that is especially

FILLING MAMA'S SHOES

painful, please consider visiting with a licensed counselor or reaching out to a member of the ministry. Additionally, some people might not want to share memories at all, and if this is the case, please respect their privacy.

Also, keep in mind that while Naomi shares her story in an afternoon, many elderly people lack the focus to do so. They might repeat themselves as they share their story, and they might drift into another seemingly unrelated story. One of my favorite stories surfaced one day when my dad wandered off topic and began to tell me how upset the merchants on Main Street were in the 1950s when he decided to spin records featuring electric guitars rather than the instruments their Saturday customers were accustomed to hearing. He even drew me a map of the town, and I later visited the exact spot where he spun records from the back of his Jeepster. This was the first time I learned that my father had been a weekend street DJ. Who knew! And who knows what interesting memories you or your loved ones might share if you allow your neural pathways to freely make their own connections to the past!

I hope you enjoy the book and grow to love Naomi's family and friends as much as I do. And I hope more than anything that your own family story emerges!

1

THE DAFFODILS

“Glorious, you are the most stubborn woman I know.”

I look up over my thick glasses at her pretty round face. “Thank you, dear,” I say, and I return to digging my bony fingers into the ground around the roots of my daffodil cluster.

I see out of the corner of my fading eyesight that my precious Chelsea is giving me a look of exasperation. She inhales and says my name through a sigh, “Glorious.” She uses my name as if scolding me the way a weary mother might when a child walks into the house covered in mud up to her under britches. I cannot help but smile – just a little smirk. I am envisioning this beautiful young lady beside me with a brood of unruly children running circles around her long legs.

I don’t bother to amuse myself with this vision for long. These daffodils need my attention. But in my peripheral vision – what’s left of it – I see Chelsea pulling the hair tie from her long dark hair. She runs her fingers up and across her whole head, flipping her hair this way and that until she corrals it back into its hair tie. Then she sets her shoulders in a determined pose and starts in on me again. “I know you’ve always dug daffodils by hand ever since that very first one, but -”

FILLING MAMA'S SHOES

"These are Mama's daffodils," I interrupt to remind her. "Not just any old flowers now. Remember that."

"Yes, I know, Glorious. And that's absolutely awesome. But you have at your disposal this entire bucket of gardening tools." She stretches out her arms toward the bucket, presenting it like a game show model might. "These tools won't hurt the bulbs. I promise. Wouldn't it be easier to use a spade?" She scoots the bucket my way and pulls out a spade, waving it under my nose, tempting me with it like some piece of candy.

I pull my withered hands from the dirt and hold them up for her to inspect. I tell her, "These old arthritic hands find it much easier to dig in the dirt than to grip that handle, Chelsea dear. But thank you for offering."

"I'll gladly do that for you if you'd like," she says.

"Thank you, dear, but no. I've transplanted every one of these flowers by hand through the years, and as long as I'm still on this earth to do so, I intend to keep on being the one to at least dig them up. You can plant them at your mama's house for me this afternoon if you'd like."

"Glorious, Glorious, Glorious," she says with a moan and a sigh, tossing the bucket of gardening tools aside.

Even when she's annoyed with me, I smile when I hear Chelsea call me Glorious. Her mother named me that when Chelsea was born and I fussed about being too young to be a great-grandmother. "You aren't a great grandmother," my darling granddaughter, Julie, told me that day. "You're a glorious grandmother," Julie said, magnifying the way she said glorious. And with that she added, "So I shall no longer call you Grandma Carroll. You shall forever more be known as Glorious." And from that moment on, I had yet another name. And quite possibly the best name ever.

I thought grandchildren were the most precious things on earth, but when a grandchild has a child, the grandness truly does become glorious. Chelsea was my first born glorious child, and here she is half way through college. Where did the years go?

I think back to the day I became Glorious and how I rushed

straight home from the hospital to transplant a daffodil in Chelsea's honor. Remembering that afternoon, my eyes drift over to a special spot in my yard. I lift my fingers from the dirt and point momentarily to the spot before returning my fingers to the ground. "That patch over there under the mulberry tree is where your daffodils came from, Chelsea." I nod toward the tree, my hands now too busy wriggling away at the roots of the daffodils in front of me. "Yours were the first to be transplanted for the glorious generation, and I pulled from that patch every time one of you kids was born after that."

She squints in the direction of the tree and runs her fingers down her long dark ponytail. "I remember us transplanting the ones for Ginny and Eric," she says. And then she pauses. And then she laughs. "And I especially remember the ones that almost didn't make it through airport security." She nudges me with her elbow and continues to chuckle.

I laugh with her, but deep inside I want to growl. I stop my digging to say, "What has the world come to that we have to fear a potted plant? X-raying my flowers. Testing the dirt! What a bunch of bologna." I reach for the dirt again but then pause for a moment to think. "Speaking of bologna, did we eat lunch?"

Chelsea nods her head and gives me that smile that says she is partly amused and partly concerned. "Yes, Glorious. In fact, you ate a sandwich. But it wasn't bologna. Do you remember us eating?"

I try to remember this morning. I look at my clothes. I wonder if I dressed myself. I look around the front porch. "We're at my house, aren't we?" I ask.

"Yeah, digging up some daffodils to transplant," she says.

"We're transplanting these?" I gaze down at the partially dug up bulb in the ground in front of me, wondering what occasion has prompted this activity. A thought hits me, and I gasp with a burst of joy. "Who just had a baby? Is it another glorious?" Another exciting thought occurs to me, and I reach for her arm, wrapping my dirty fingers around her wrist. "Is it a great-glorious?"

FILLING MAMA'S SHOES

“No. Glorious, no. No new babies. We’re transplanting some of these into Mom’s new yard. Remember? You’re moving in with Mom and Dad this week.”

“I am?” I honestly don’t know what this child is talking about. Why didn’t anyone consult me?

“Yes,” she says. “And I’m home on spring break helping you move. Remember? Mom and Dad bought that house with the extra bedroom just for you. You know, it’s the room with the giant window seat that you liked so much.”

This sounds vaguely familiar.

“The window seat with the flower box outside,” she says in the tone of a question as if wondering whether I might remember. “You know, where we’re going to put all of these daffodils.”

I gaze out at about 200 daffodils lining my side yard. “We’re moving all of these?” I ask. My eyes travel along the sea of flowers and across the front of the lot, taking in the lovely view of the scrolling edges of my flower garden with its thickly lined, sunny yellow heads waving atop tall green stalks.

“No, Glorious,” she says. “We’re just taking some of the ones you want most.”

My eyes catch sight of something new. A realtor’s sign. It reads *Maggie Marshall Homes*. “My house is for sale. Is that right?” I ask, turning to her for an explanation.

She places her hand on mine. “Yes, that’s right. We’re selling this house so you can move in with Mom and Dad.”

“I knew that,” I say, even though it took me seeing that sign to remember. “Maggie Marshall Homes,” I read it out loud. “I know Maggie,” I tell Chelsea.

“Oh, yeah?” she says.

“Yeah,” I say. “She’s a legend around these parts. First woman realtor in town. Brazenly outspoken. She’s made a lot of friends and a lot of enemies through the years.”

I pause as memories flash through my mind like a rapid-fire slide show. Tiny bits and pieces of the past that still linger with me, and if I just spend a few minutes focusing on each slide, I can

revisit those distant times.

“She’s *my* friend,” I say, memories warming my heart. “She’s old like I am.” I run my thumbs along my fingertips, loosening the dirt caked under my fingernails. Some small clumps of soil fall onto the ground. “Come to think of it, I haven’t seen Maggie in a month of Sundays. I wonder how she’s doing these days.” With a little effort I get to my feet and look around the garden. Over by the corner of the porch I point to a sparse clump of daffodils. “Those,” I say, nodding. “Those are some of the flowers that made it into Maggie’s garden.”

Chelsea pops her pliable body up to a standing position with no effort. “So Maggie has some, too? I thought these were just family flowers.”

“Oh, no,” I say. “These flowers have made their way into many a flower bed through the years. I gave some to Maggie after she lost that state representative race. That was back in 1980. I’ve probably told you that story a thousand times. I was her campaign manager. I’ll never forget that. It was me and Maggie, ready to change the world. Your great-grandpa had just passed away, and I felt so lost, and then Maggie said, ‘Let’s run for office!’ And I said, ‘Well, why not!’ So we did! But Maggie lost that race. And I knew she loved my flower garden, so after she lost that race, I came out here and dug up some of those flowers over there and planted them in her garden.” I look up at Chelsea and add, “I wanted it to be a surprise. And it was. Of course Maggie didn’t see them bloom until the next spring. Oh, I’ll never forget when they sprang up and she called me. She had no idea those things were in her garden.” The memory gives me a belly laugh.

I look around and point to another grouping of flowers. “And those over there mixed in with the hyacinths are the ones I call the travelers.”

Chelsea leans in toward me to get a better look. “The travelers?” she asks.

“Yeah, their cousins made their way up and down Route 66 in the Fifties, riding in coffee cans. They were house warming gifts

FILLING MAMA'S SHOES

mostly. Some went out to my sister, Sarah, when she moved to California. And then I took one to my summertime friend, Patsy, in Oklahoma. And then your grandma begged me to let her take some to plant as peace flowers during one of her war protests.”

Chelsea's left arm raises and her palm motions for me to stop. “Wait. What?” she asks. Her forehead is pulled into a puzzled frown.

I glance at her but don't answer. My eyes are drawn to the massive American Elm behind her and off to the side of the house where a child-pleasing swing still hangs. I'm too distracted now thinking about how I lost her grandma, my eldest daughter, my beloved Emily. And how I lost my husband. Lost both of them way too long ago. And I remember how those two clashed over their beliefs for the longest time - and how I stayed caught in the middle of that mess all the time. But who could fault either of them? My war protestor daughter and my war hero husband rarely saw eye to eye.

“You know what's strange,” I finally say, looking at Chelsea who still wears that same stunned expression. “Some of Mama's flowers landed in a field of peace somewhere while others were planted in front of the local USO. But I'm sure I've told you that story a thousand times.” I wave my hands as if erasing old woman nonsense.

“No,” she says. “I don't think I've heard that story before. Actually, I don't know if I've heard many of these.” Her tone sounds almost accusatory.

I lower myself down to my gardening chair again and prop my feet on either side of my digging spot and say, “That was the day your great-grandpa came home on leave from fighting on the Western Front. Made his first stop at the USO. Caught me with my hands in the dirt planting a bulb. He didn't expect to see me there when he arrived, and I didn't expect to see him there at all. He knew my sisters and I would be singing there that evening, and he wanted to surprise us. That was the day I realized how much I loved him.” I pause, remembering. “That was the day that

changed everything.” I try to hide my misty eyes from her. My shaky hand raises to catch an escaping tear.

Chelsea kneels beside me. “Glorious, I can’t believe how sharp your memory is! You can remember pulling flowers from each of these beds and where each of those flowers went and what happened on those days?”

“Oh, yes. I remember every detail about these flowers.”

Chelsea lets out a little laugh. “That’s amazing. I had no idea you could remember details like this.”

I think about that. I guess it does seem odd that I can remember every event surrounding the transplanting of these precious daffodils, but I can’t remember what I ate for breakfast or why we’re out here digging up these sunny flowers this morning. Or this afternoon. Have I had lunch yet? Maybe I shouldn’t ask. Instead, I dig my fingers back into the dirt and pull my daffodil up and out of the ground.

I hold it up for her to see how special it is. How truly special it is. But she wouldn’t know that if I didn’t explain, so I tell her, “This bunch here by the front porch came directly from Mama’s original flower.” I pause to inspect the roots and then return to my babbling. “Before landing here, they even made their way into my bridal bouquet.” I pause again. “That was one of the happiest and saddest days of my life.” I pause once more to remember. “But I’m sure I’ve told you that story a thousand times.”

Now Chelsea sounds downright perturbed. “No, you haven’t. Seriously. You haven’t told me any of this. I’ve heard some stories here and there, but you’ve told me none of these. You were a campaign manager? My grandmother was a hippie? You sang at the USO?”

I gaze at her, wondering if maybe she just never listened to me at all. “My two sisters and I sang all the time,” I say. “You knew that, didn’t you? Good heavens, I taught you all of my childhood songs. Remember?” I delight in questioning her memory for once.

“Well yes,” she says. “I knew you liked to sing, but I never heard stories about the USO. Did you have an act? Were you like

FILLING MAMA'S SHOES

the Andrews Sisters, or something?"

"Sort of." I place the clump of daffodils into a pot and explain, "We'd been a singing act of sorts ever since we first sang on the radio back in 1936. That was actually the same year I uprooted Mama's original flower. You see, that flower was something real special. I -"

"Hold that thought," she says as she digs into her pocket and pulls out her cell phone. "I want to record this," she says. "You've got a lifetime of memories in that head of yours. And these flowers have a history all their own. I'm here all week with you, and while I'm here, I want to hear all about them."

I think back. Maybe she's right. These daffodils have been a player in quite a journey. They reconciled me with my sisters time and time again, and they've shed their grace on many a yard through the decades. Maybe it's high time we record the odyssey of these daffodils.

And so I begin. "Well, I guess I always thought of that original daffodil as being Mama's grace on earth, because it came to my rescue when I had made a real mess of things. I was just a silly little girl who missed my mama, and I was trying to help my family the only way I knew how. When Mama died, Irma took over managing the house, but she was just a kid herself, so she couldn't do everything Mama had done. Our house was orderly, but nothing felt the least bit feminine anymore. I figured I could fill in that missing piece. And I remember the day that I adopted that quest. I was nine years old, and while I was out hunting for flowers, the worst dust storm in history rolled right in on top of me."

As I begin to tell my story, the memories flood in so strong and detailed, it's like I'm right there again. Right inside the mind of that little girl.

Memory Joggers:

- Have you ever had a legacy item in your family? Did you possibly have

KATHRYN MITCHELL

an heirloom plant like Naomi has, or maybe an object that was passed down from one generation to the next? What's the story behind your legacy item or the lack thereof?

Notes: _____

2

THE BLACK MONSTER

Just before the black monster nearly ate me alive, I stumbled across the last flower my mama ever planted. I saw it while I was poking around down at the bottom of our muddy creek bed on one of the prettiest days that 1935 had given us. The daffodil stood at attention, all tall and elegant. It bounced back after each thump I gave it while I flicked the dirt off its frilly, yellow petals.

“A future flower for each of us,” is what Mama had said when she handed me and my two sisters a bulb to bury. It had been over two years since we planted those four bulbs along the upper banks of that ghost of a river. All of our flowers bloomed that first year despite the dustings that began to roll across the land. “Hurry, angels,” she would call to us when the dust billowed. We would rush into our house, or jump into our car, or duck into a nearby building to escape the dirt. “Hurry, angels!”

I could still hear my mama’s voice as I cleaned that one remaining daffodil, which had been carried away by a rare flash flood and left on the floor of this creek where little water ran lately. The Sun’s afternoon rays angled through a pocket of air just above my head, warming the northeastern banks of Quail Run Creek, which used to be a pleasant stream but lately had looked more like

a sometimes-muddy but mostly-cracked, dried up trail.

No one on the Plains knew why Mother Nature was punishing us. All we knew for sure was the wind seemed to be turning against us, scooping up dirt from one farming town and pitching it miles away onto another. Storms were aplenty, but few carried rain. This angry weather blew dried up earth across the countryside and carried our dust as far away as New York City. Day after day for two miserable years we kept praying for rain as we watched the ground dry up beneath our feet, but that rain almost never came.

I licked my right index finger and poked it down into the flower's trumpet-shaped middle. I dug out particles of dirt. My bobbed hair tickled at my cheeks. I shook my head and rubbed the back of my hand against my face to get rid of the itchy strands of hair. I realized my hair had grown past my chin, and that meant my daddy would be grabbing our big mixing bowl as soon as he saw my hair was getting "too long for a farmin' man to manage."

Daddy never let our stringy hair reach our chins before summoning us to "come sit beneath the bowl." His giant hands would grip the bottom of the bowl as he plopped it upside down, one by one, onto each of our heads, holding it securely in place with his left hand while working a rusty pair of scissors with his right. A few minutes later, he'd produce a precise, albeit boring, bowl-shaped haircut, just barely longer than any boy's. Then after uncapping our noggins, he would draw together with his thumb and index finger a clump of hair over our eyes and, with one final swoop of the scissors, fashion a set of uneven bangs on each of us.

Of course that wasn't the case before Mama died in that awful car accident with Grandma and Grandpa. When Mama was still with us, she let our hair grow long, and people in town would say, "Oh, Mrs. Webber, your girls look so pretty today," or "Oh, Martha, just look at those little angels." We were her angels.

Now, she was ours.

Curious about the annoying little strand of hair that kept rolling across my cheek, I ran my fingers down to the tips of it and felt a

FILLING MAMA'S SHOES

slight curling at the end. Surprised, I pulled the curl in front of my eyes and admired it a moment, thinking that it sure would be nice if I had lots of those little curls all over my head.

Returning my attention to the flower, I inspected the blossom to be sure I had all the grit worked out of it. The little daffodil appeared to smile up at me, so I smiled back. The flower was so dainty, so soft and so feminine, and I was wishing to be just like it. Wishing to be just like my mother. "Hurry, angels." Mama's words again rolled through my memory.

"Nay-oh-mee!" The thoughts of Mama's songbird voice gave way to a screeching holler that I recognized as my older sister's. "Nay-oh-mee!" The voice grew louder, closer and more anxious.

I left the flower, scrambled up the southwestern side of the creek and caught sight of my sister, Irma, running toward me. Irma's overalls hung loosely around her thin frame. She was tall enough to look like a fourteen-year-old even though she wouldn't turn twelve for weeks. She wore those dreadful overalls every time she could, and they made her look even taller and skinnier than she already was.

Running behind her were our neighbors, Chester and Buddy Carroll, ages twelve and ten, each with a dead rabbit flopping and dangling from the grip of their dirty palms. And behind them was my younger sister, Sarah, also dressed in overalls, her arms flapping as if attempting flight, which seemed appropriate since, as usual, she echoed Irma's screams like a Myna bird as they ran.

The group's eyes widened as they drew nearer to the creek, and each of them ran as if fleeing from a fire, as if their lives depended on intense speed. But in the distance to the south, our little town of Mesa Valley, Texas appeared calm after the townsfolk spent a blessed day of good weather attending church, sweeping floors, dusting furnishings and scrubbing clothes following weeks of being assaulted by blowing dirt.

"Nay-oh-MEE!" By this time all of the kids were calling my name. I noticed that even Buddy, who always liked to call me Naom-EYE, was yelling out my real name. And instead of just

looking annoyed with me like she always did, Irma looked concerned.

I was quite used to Irma looking like she was exasperated with me. I was just a bit out of place within my trio of sisterhood. While Irma and Sarah played baseball, I wrote poems. While Irma and Sarah climbed trees, I ironed my dresses. And while Irma and Sarah tagged along with the neighbor boys on a rabbit hunt, I took myself down the creek on a solo hunt for flowers. I always was an oddball, I reckon, and I found myself on the receiving end of many a glare from my older and younger sister because of it.

So it was no surprise on that day that Irma would look irritated with me, but that day was different. Irma was annoyed, no doubt, but her face told me she wasn't just frustrated with what she called my "prissy ways." Her face showed worry. It showed fear. The approaching herd of kids halted, and Irma's arm stretched out in front of her with one long finger pointing northward, skyward. "Nay-oh-"

Her voice was drowned out in the squawking sounds of what must have been ten thousand birds flying south in a great rush. Their wings flapped in chaotic panic as they flew past me only a few feet above the ground, causing pulsating drafts to whip at my hair, which was now alive with static. I screamed and ducked and covered my head with my hands. And turning toward the north, I saw the latest beast Mother Nature had unleashed. It boiled black like smoke, tumbling toward me in rolling columns at speeds faster than my daddy normally drove. Within seconds it engulfed the flat-topped mesas and continued its journey into the valley below. The flurry of birds whooshed by, leaving me to face the dark monster by myself. I turned back toward the kids who were running toward town now, Irma visibly screaming an unheard plea over her shoulder for me to hurry as she dragged Sarah along behind her.

I found my feet and began to pound the thinning souls of my shoes across the dusty ground. I could see my small house in the distance. Not too far, I thought. Not too far to run in time.

FILLING MAMA'S SHOES

Hurry, angel, hurry! I felt a silent breeze blow against my bare legs, and my dress lifted as the first swirls of dirt pitted my skin. Remembering my manners, I gripped my dress in an effort to keep it from blowing upward in an unladylike fashion, which was something Mama taught us girls, but it seemed I was the only one who still cared about such things. I ran as rapidly as my heart would allow me to run but not as fast as my sisters could run. My speed was limited even more by my insistence on maintaining a courteous control of my full skirt. I admit that seems a bit crazy, but that was me. That was Naomi Webber.

I watched Chester open the gate on our weathered fence. He motioned the others in. He looked across the barren field toward me, and I tried to make my legs move faster. Within seconds, the air surrounding me transformed from clear to hazy and then to black. Pitch black.

I stopped for a moment, stunned and silent in the darkness, and then grabbed the front of my dress and raised it to my face to cover my mouth and nose. Surely no one could see my underwear through this thickness of dust. Dirt swirled around and filled my eyes, but I began to step ahead at a steady pace in the direction of my house. Not too far, I thought. Not too far to walk in time.

I struggled to stay on my feet as the wind whipped me sideways. A few steps into my labored journey, my toe made contact with a rock, and I fell to my knees, losing grip on my dress, skinning my palms and elbows, and rolling over to a seated position. I stood up again, repositioned my dress over my nose and took just one step, tripping against another rock. Or was it the same rock? Was I going the same direction now? Had I turned backwards? Which way was the wind blowing? It seemed to be coming at me from every direction.

Panicked, I yelled through my dress for my daddy. I wondered if he was caught in the barn when the storm hit. I wondered if he had gone to town and left me in Irma's care. "Hurry, Daddy, hurry!" I yelled into the dirty blackness, and then I fell to my knees once again.

KATHRYN MITCHELL

Tears welled up in my eyes creating small globs of mud in my eyelashes. I had seen many a dust storm, but I had never experienced any like this one. None so dark. None so consuming. None so scary.

I sat on my haunches, my dress pulled up to my face in a most improper manner, the back of my skirt blowing in the grainy breeze. I sat. And I sat. And I sat. And I thought again of my mama who became an angel soon after the first dusters began rolling over our town two years earlier. I wondered if she was watching me from Heaven now, if she could possibly see me through all this inky blackness. Tears squeezed out of my eyes and made streaks of mud down my dirty face and matted my eyelids together.

I was wearing the last dress my mama made. Mama made it for Irma, but Irma outgrew it almost immediately. It still came close to swallowing me, but I wore it anyway. Sarah had almost caught up to me in size, but I was determined to keep the dress for my own.

Alone on a forsaken piece of earth I now sat crying with eyes closed and hands still cupping the skirt of my dress over my nose. I thought about the day Irma first wore my pretty dress. She and Mama danced around the living room together. Sarah and I joined in, and then Daddy wandered in not expecting to see us dancing, but he swept Mama up in his arms and danced her around in tiny circles, saying, "Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers have nothing on us." Mama was the most beautiful dancer in the world, and Daddy was as handsome as a movie star. I couldn't imagine a more graceful couple than my folks were that day. Now I couldn't imagine ever being that happy again.

Holding one hand over my nose, I ran my other hand across my ruffle, feeling every inch of the entire bottom of my skirt. It somehow comforted me that my dainty ruffle remained intact.

I tucked the back of my dress up under my legs and leaned forward, cupping my mama's last creation over my nose as a thin defense against the elements. I wondered why the world had to be so mean. And as I gagged on a clump of grit in my mouth, I also

FILLING MAMA'S SHOES

wondered if the world might be coming to an end. A dusty, dirty, unladylike end.

Memory Joggers:

- What do you remember about The Dust Bowl or The Great Depression, or if you are too young to have lived during that time, what do you remember relatives saying about that period of time?

Notes: _____

A STORM TO REMEMBER

“Daddy!”

“Keep yelling, Naomi!” Daddy’s muffled voice strained against the scratchy air, but it was so good to hear him.

“Over here! I’m over here!” I scrambled to my feet, pried open my eyelids in an attempt to see my daddy’s figure coming toward me, and then mashed them shut once again as spiteful particles of the earth etched my eyes. I dropped back down to the ground where I couldn’t see much better, but I could at least feel my way toward my daddy’s voice. “Here! Here! I’m over here!”

“Nay-oh-mee! Nay-oh-mee!”

His voice drew closer, and I began to crawl toward it. “Down here, Daddy!” And then my hand met with his worn, leather boot. “Daddy!”

“There you are!” He kneeled and squeezed me close against his chest, drawing a quick electrical shock between us. Then he swept me up into his arms and buried my face in his shoulder. “Keep your face covered, Little Bit.”

We only walked a few steps before my daddy stumbled and decided we needed to devise another way of reaching our house. He lowered me to my feet, knelt down and said, “Cover your nose

FILLING MAMA'S SHOES

and hold onto my shirt collar. Don't let go. Just keep walking beside me." I did as I was told, and I spent the next twenty minutes taking baby steps toward our home as Daddy crawled, carefully sweeping the ground and the surrounding air ahead of us with his hands before each step.

As soon as he announced that he had found our gate, he quickened our pace and headed across the yard toward our back door. A chicken squawked, flapped wildly and flew directly into my face. I screamed and batted at the startled bird.

"It's just a chicken, Naomi," he said, stopping to feel my face and shocking me once more. "I'm surprised she hasn't blown into the next county by now. Or maybe she is from the next county." I smiled at his joke. "Are you alright?" he asked.

My heart was pounding, I was filthy, but I was in my yard. "Yeah, I guess so," I finally said.

Daddy began yelling to Irma. Irma opened our kitchen door and hollered back, sounding panicked and relieved all at once. "Are you both okay?"

"You okay?" called Sarah from somewhere behind my older sister.

"I think so," Daddy replied, almost chuckling, his nerves shot and his voice raspy.

"I'm okay," I yelled from behind my cupped palm and grimy dress.

"Careful now," Daddy cautioned. "We've reached the steps."

I felt my way up the steps as Irma's hand landed on my shoulder and guided me inside the house. I heard Daddy crawl through the door and push it closed. Both of us began to cough, coughing up so much dirt we could taste it. A cup of water was clumsily placed into my hands, and I drank without question as I marveled that the darkness inside our house was almost as dense as the darkness outside. A single light bulb hanging from the ceiling over the kitchen table glowed but illuminated no more than the area atop the table. The entire rest of the house was engulfed in murky darkness.

“Boys? You still here?” Daddy asked the cloudy room before releasing another hearty cough.

As if in answer, a sneeze came from the shadows, and the room offered a collective “God bless you” to allergy-prone Buddy Carroll.

“Is everyone alright?” Daddy asked.

“Aside from Buddy’s infernal sneezing I think we’re all okay, sir,” Chester Carroll’s squeaky voice replied from somewhere beyond the weak glimmer of the lamp.

The gloomy room then filled with various comments assuring our father that we had survived the worst dust storm yet. He sighed, coughed again and felt his way to a resting spot on the kitchen’s wooden floor. I heard our ten-gallon barrel of lard scoot an inch against the floorboards as he leaned against it. I knelt down and crab walked toward the sound of his continued hacking. I added a cough of my own as I found his chest and snuggled up against it. His big arm reached around me and made me feel safe, even as we sat helpless against the environment.

“Mr. Webber, do you think me and Buddy could make it home if we headed out now?” Chester asked, his voice alternating between high and low notes. It had been doing that a lot lately.

“No, Chester. Don’t go out there yet,” Daddy said.

“But sir, I’m worried about my ma and pa. I’m sure they’re worried about us, too. They went with the girls to Pampa today to get some seed. I wanna make sure they made it home.”

“You’re safer here. You go out there and you might not make it home. At least here you’re safe, and you’ll be back together with your folks as soon as this storm passes.”

“How long do you think that’ll be?” Chester asked with worry running all through his voice.

I felt my daddy take a deep, albeit dusty, breath, and he answered after clearing his throat. “Hard to say. I’ve never seen one this mean before.” After a pause, he added, “Or this black and oily. Makes me wonder where this one hailed from. Can we get anything on the radio, Irma?”

FILLING MAMA'S SHOES

"No, sir," Irma called out. The direction of Irma's voice surprised me and suggested she had taken refuge in the living room. "All I got was static when I tried to listen in. And it shocked me when I touched it. Hard!"

"It shocked her hard," Sarah's voice repeated from the same location.

Daddy cleared his throat again. "That static is especially bad out there right now. Come to think of it, if the chickens aren't careful, they might get roasted trying to find their way back to the hen house."

The room filled with the sounds of our laughter, and I felt my daddy's chest bounce as he chuckled at his own attempt to lighten the mood. "Hey, Chester," he said.

"Yessir?"

"Did you say your parents went to buy seed?"

"Yessir."

"I thought you already planted your crops."

"We did, sir, but the darn rabbits got into it as soon as it started sprouting. We couldn't get them out in time. It's all gone. We have to hope we can start over."

Silence was exchanged. I wondered what Daddy was thinking. Our planting was barely done. Would the rabbits be in our fields next? And what did Chester and Buddy do with those dead rabbits they were carrying when the storm hit? I winced at the thoughts of rabbits bleeding out on our kitchen floor and hoped the boys had the decency to leave them outside.

"Sir?" Chester's voice deepened. "When can we go home?"

I felt my daddy swallow against the top of my head. "I'd guess maybe about another hour? The air is getting a bit thinner now."

And it was. I looked all around me and realized I could see my daddy's legs and boots and almost make out Chester's and Buddy's faces crowned with their black, thick, wavy heads of hair, but that was as far as my visibility would carry.

"Hey, Mr. Webber's right," Buddy said. "I can see Naom-EYE." He pointed at me with his right hand and pointed at his

eyeball with his left. He loved to make fun of my name. I suddenly wished the air would thicken up again so he would disappear from my sight.

Chester elbowed his little brother. "Stop it, Buddy."

"Thank you, Chester," I said.

Buddy just elbowed Chester back.

I had known the Carroll boys as long as I could remember. They lived a short distance down the road from us but seemed to spend about as much time at our house as they did their own. Daddy never seemed to mind, though. He liked having boys around.

Chester was a tolerable type. Always polite and calm. But that Buddy was the most annoying kid I knew. He was the type of kid who made you want to smack them even though you know you shouldn't. He never sat still, and he loved acting like a loon. His younger sisters never came over to play, and I figured that was because they preferred their quiet house when he was gone.

I looked down at my blackened dress and wondered if this amount of dirt could ever be washed from it. I wondered if there was enough water in the world to clean up after a storm like this one. With the assurance that all of us had survived the worst duster we had ever seen, my thoughts turned to Miss Bennett, and I said, "Do you think Amarillo is about to be hit by this mountain of dirt?"

"Probably," said Daddy.

"Do you think -"

Daddy cut me off. "Don't worry about Miss Bennett. She will be fine."

I shushed myself, knowing that Daddy grew tired of me bumping my gums about her all the time. But I missed the soothing sound of Miss Bennett's voice. She had been my favorite teacher and Mama's best friend. They loved to tell their childhood stories to me and anyone else who was interested in listening to their chattering, which often excluded Irma and Sarah, who were more interested in poking sticks at worms than listening to two

FILLING MAMA'S SHOES

women prattle on about their “silly stories.” But I never thought their stories were silly at all. I ate up every word those two ladies uttered because of the fact that they were just that – ladies. And while Mama would let Irma and Sarah poke sticks at worms, she would also insist they spend ample time acting like little ladies. And they didn’t seem to mind doing it, either. At least not when Mama was with us.

In a farming town filled with hardened men and tough prairie women, I paid special attention to those whom I regarded as ladies - cultured and genteel. I wanted to be like them some day. And then my mama was gone, killed in that car crash during a nasty, blinding duster. A year later Miss Bennett was gone, too. Without warning she moved to Amarillo at the beginning of our 1934 summer break. And with the loss of those two ladies, so too went my hopes for refinement as well as any hopes I had that my sisters wouldn’t take to smoking a corn cob pipe someday.

Now, in the vague darkness of my home I sat with my family, listening to everyone’s thrilling accounts of their first sightings of the monstrous duster, Sarah’s accounts typically being nothing more than a rehashing of Irma’s reporting on the matter. But I loved all the stories, and if I could have seen to write, I would have grabbed a pencil and paper to chronicle our tales and send them to Miss Bennett right then – that is if we could have afforded the postage. Money was so tight Daddy couldn’t even afford to buy Irma new shoes, and Irma had been complaining about aching toes, so postage for my growing pile of letters to Miss Bennett was a luxury.

I ran the fingers of my right hand down my left arm, feeling the dirt particles shift and roll across my skin. Even as I listened to Daddy repeatedly thanking God for our safety, I fumed silently that we shouldn’t have to put up with this torture. These storms not only kept us peppered in grit, they robbed us of Mama and everything sweet that came with her.

I sat up and tried to make out the shapes of all the objects and people in my house. I was relieved to find no signs of bloody

rabbits lying anywhere about. The kitchen seemed to be in usual order, neat and tidy the way Irma always insisted we keep it, although it didn't have any flowers in vases like Mama used to keep around, and it was covered in a thick layer of grit.

It's strange how everything can be so much the same and yet so different after you lose someone. It wasn't just the flower vases that were missing. It was the books Mama kept out to read to us in the evenings. It was her knitting basket and her sewing basket that sat open with lovely projects draped across them until Mama completed each one and started on another. It was the way Mama brushed our hair each night as we sang. It was the way we sang - all three of us while Mama listened and sometimes joined in to keep us on key.

That lonesome curl flicked at my cheek again, and it made me think of how nice it would be if we could get back to the way things were when I was little. When Mama was alive.

And as if he could read my thoughts, Buddy bowed his head in what looked like an act of sympathy. But before I could capture any real feeling of compassion from him or for him, he made an awful face at me and silently pointed a stiff finger at his eyeball again. To make matters worse, somewhere in the distance a sister belched, and my father didn't even seem to notice.

My spirits began to sink further. Yes, we were safe for now. Yes, I was thankful. But I remembered a time when folks weren't always talking about failed crops - a time when we had postage stamps in the house - a time when my sisters and I harmonized as Mama led us in song - a time when Mama filled our house with softness. And I couldn't seem to stop what spilled out of my mouth next.

"I miss Mama."

Daddy pulled me in close. "We all miss her, Little Bit. Life was warmer with her here." His voice trailed off with, "She was always my saving grace."

I heard snuffles from somewhere in the living room and wondered if they were coming from Irma or Sarah or both. I saw

FILLING MAMA'S SHOES

Chester's and Buddy's heads bow in respect, and this time Buddy kept his head down.

In that moment I felt I had to do something. I couldn't salvage the Carroll's crops, and I couldn't find cash for postage stamps, but come dust or darkness, I would find a way to restore grace and charm to a home that desperately needed it.

Memory Joggers:

- *Do you remember a time when you were very concerned about a storm? What happened, and who was with you?*
- *Did you have any neighbor kids who hung out frequently at your house when you were growing up? Did you possibly hang out at someone else's house frequently?*
- *Chester and Buddy hunted rabbits for dinner. Did you or anyone in your family hunt? If so, what and where did they hunt?*
- *What do you remember about listening to the radio when you were young?*

Notes: _____
