

The Sky Fell on Mama

BY NORMA WATKINS

MAMA CALLED SAYING Daddy had fallen out of bed and she thought he might be dead. She phoned me all the way on the other side of town instead of Billy who lives practically next door. The clock said two a.m.

“I have Lacy’s children with me, Mama. Why don’t you call Billy?”

“Billy’s not steady enough.”

“Call 911,” I said.

“I will as soon as you get here. Pile those children in the car. Lacy won’t mind.”

Lacy *would* mind. She didn’t trust Sally and me with her kids. We walked into her hospital room after the first one was born and the first thing out of her mouth, before we could say, “What a darling baby” (though it wasn’t: bald, red, squalling), the first thing out of Lacy’s mouth was, “Wash your hands.”

I’m losing my grip on the subject here. Lacy didn’t trust us, or anybody, with her kids and this was the first time we’d gotten them for the night. But I knew what Mama meant about Billy, who had most likely washed up somewhere on the far side of an ocean of alcohol.

“Call 911 now, Mama. We’re on our way.” Sally groaned from her side of the bed and I understood. My mother was tough: tough on her kids and on the wives we managed to keep. We crawled into our clothes, got the kids up, and drove over. I had the keys to her condo, so we went straight up. Mama stood at the

end of the hall carrying on like a banshee. Sally stayed out there to hug her. The children started crying because the hollering scared them. I went in to see about Dad.

Mama slept on a pallet in the living room with the TV on the floor at her feet. Don't ask me why. I did ask once and she said because it suited her and kept her back from hurting. Daddy slept in the back bedroom. I found him half in, half out of bed, like he'd tried to get up. Cold when I touched him, already turning blue.

How did I feel? A great emptiness, is the best way I could put it. Sadness for all the years he put in; grief that he died like this, maybe calling for help, and trying to get up. Mama at the other end of the apartment, deaf as a rock, and refusing to wear her hearing aids, TV going all night. His last thought was probably: *of course*.

I went back up front. Mama and Sally were still out in the hall. "He's gone," I told them.

Mama hollered louder and started doing the tearing-the-hair-out thing, although she wasn't tearing her hair out, just scaring the children and waking up everybody on the 8th floor.

I tried to interrupt. "Did you call 911?"

Mama stopped, like someone put in a plug. "No, I did not. I did not want to face a bunch of strange men until you got here, which took long enough." She started with the screeching again. "Now I'm alone."

Fire rescue came. There was nothing to be done. They loaded Daddy onto a stretcher and I followed them to the elevator. Mama stood at the other end of the hall, yelling. "God, why didn't you take me? I'm the bitch."

Which was nothing but the truth.

Fire Rescue tried, but Daddy and the stretcher wouldn't fit in the elevator and he had to ride down propped against the wall.

We got through the funeral okay, though Lacey said she cannot let us have the children again. What were we thinking taking them into such a scene? People came to *our* house after the service because Mama wouldn't have a bunch of strangers in her apartment. Which should have given me an indication.

I checked on her. Every day she marched herself down to the diamond shop they ran on Flagler, getting things settled, she claimed. Driving the workers crazy. She ended by selling the business to Sam Sherwood, Daddy's assistant. I got a lawyer to look over the contract, but Mama still claimed she was cheated. Without the shop, she turned her full attention to being weird. A night didn't go by without a call.

"Somebody's been in the apartment."

"I'm sure they haven't, Mama."

"Stealing my jewelry."

"You probably misplaced it. You need to get some of that junk out of there."

That got her going. "This is not junk. These are my valuables, and I tell you somebody's coming in here when I'm out."

I didn't describe how Mama lives except for the pallet on the floor. She refused to use the laundry at the other end of the hall. Said washing machines destroyed your clothes. She strung clotheslines across the kitchen from cabinet to cabinet and hung her blouses and skirts to dry. Since Daddy died, she wouldn't open the hurricane shutters, so it was dark as the inside of a stomach. Mail was piling up, along with boxes of who-knows-what she hauled home from the store. The only clear space in the apartment was the pallet she slept on, the TV, and a path down the hall to the bathroom.

Yesterday, she put another dead bolt on the front door and installed a video camera. She's called 911 so many times, they've quit responding.

So she calls me. Claimed the president of the building was screwing the lady upstairs, the one Mama never liked (“A whore when she arrived,” Mama said, “and a whore to this day.”). They were conspiring against her and had figured out a way to duck the video camera and go through her underwear.

It got to be three calls a night, beginning around eleven. Sally said it was Mama or our marriage so I turned off the landline and gave Mama my cell number. If I remembered to turn the phone off before bed, we got through the night. In the morning, there were usually five calls waiting.

This morning, when I called back, she said, “I could have been dead.”

“But you aren’t, Mama, are you?”

“You don’t care about me,” she said. “Never did. I’m going to jump off the balcony.”

I might have worried if I thought she could get the hurricane shutters open. “Go ahead and jump, Mama,” I said.

There was silence.

I asked what I ask every morning. “Do you need anything from the grocery store?”

“Bring me a jar of those white grapefruit sections,” she said. ∂