

A Cup of Warmth

Geraldine Ann Marshall

Not much happens in Spirit Springs, Kentucky, except that mineral springs continue to collect in the middle of town within the hollowed base of the world's largest sycamore tree. Legend says that Daniel Boone's nephew—or was it Thomas Jefferson's nephew?—routed and hollowed so that ancient healing springs would collect in the base of the sycamore. Georgia thinks this is just an old story. Though she once believed in healing waters, she hasn't since Isaac died.

But folks still come, all those fancy Japanese-made cameras slung around their necks, expecting maybe to see some kind of holy shrine in the middle of Western Kentucky. They take pictures of themselves and their children by the sycamore. They dip cups and bottles into the mineral water, leave charms and pray for miracles. And most times they turn down the paved road branching away from the center of Spirit Springs. The road, put in 44 years ago come this fall, travels them past the changing T-shirt and antique shops to Della's Collectibles Shop, where you can find a bit of this and a bit of that.

Some folks are looking for souvenirs and some are looking for stories, but no one, but a few old-timers, knows the story of how that very road broke the friendship between Della Rush herself and her best friend, Georgia Ford. And reckon no one but Georgia knows how that road took the tiny piece of Georgia's heart that was still of a piece and broke it as surely as one of those china collectibles off Della's shelves would shatter if a shelf were felled.

Georgia stands now peering out the side window across the overgrown path to Della's big house and little shop. There is something happening in the shop. Georgia thinks how long it has been since she set foot in Della's yard. Why, nigh on forty-four years. Since the road. But before that ...•

Georgia studies a lavender and white morning glory curling up among the cobwebs on the shop porch. Georgia can remember when Della swept the porch twice a day to keep the cobwebs away, but the morning glories have been allowed to stay all the years she has known Della to keep her collections in what they'd once, giggling, called "the honeymoon cottage." Later it became the shop. Nigh on 79 years, Georgia thinks, not believing

it—or that she hasn't spoken to Della for 44 of those years. But before that ...

Georgia can hear her husband, Sidney, saying, "You two females are like hens a'runnin' from one nest to the other, just in case one of you's laid an egg in the last 10 minutes!" Georgia smiles, remembering how Sidney had chuckled and said, "Oh, go on, just don't forget about your old rooster here!"

Sometimes, when she's sure none of the children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren are coming to the door to check on her, Georgia likes to talk to Sidney, even though he's long dead. "Well, you old rooster," she says now, "something's happening at Della's. I'm wondering could she be sick? Mari, that's our great-granddaughter, you remember me telling you about her, don't you? Well, Mari says to me the other day, 'Grandmamaw, I think old Mrs. Della Rush is wandering in her mind a bit. I passed by the yard and she was standing there staring at the road.'

"Mari said, 'Are you okay, Mrs. Rush?'"

"And Della looked at Mari and said, 'Why, Georgia, why don't you answer your door these last few days? I wish so I could be of some help with Isaac. What does the doctor say?'"

"'It's Mari, Mrs. Rush,' Mari said, 'I'm Georgia's great-granddaughter.'"

"Then Della blinked and stared again at the road and said, 'Of course you are, child. The sun must've started me dreaming.'"

"Dreaming!" Georgia said to Mari then and says to Sydney now. "What right does Georgia Rush have to be dreaming of my son!" But then she says, "But if she's ill, perhaps I should go take some preserves or a pie and just leave it by the door for her. You know how Della loves sweets."

Over the past 44 years, Georgia has left many pies and preserves outside the door for Della when she's seen the shop closed and the blinds of the house drawn and known Della was down with the flu or cold. Cherry, strawberry, blueberry, anything but peach.

And when Della was up and about again, Georgia would usually find a teacup by her door to add to the collection Della started her on when they were young together, before Isaac was even born.

Della had said, "Georgia, collect something. It will broaden your horizons. Besides, you can keep changing what you collect to meet the latest fashion. James always says, 'Pretty things for a pretty lady.'" Georgia had giggled at this. She could imagine Della's handsome husband, James, saying such a thing to his petite, pretty wife. But she couldn't imagine Sydney saying it to her. "But Della," Georgia said, "I'm not pretty like you, and the only thing I can imagine collecting are children, green beans and tomatoes." But finally Georgia had agreed to collect teacups to make her friend happy.

And the teacups have been right for her, she thinks now. Teacups are not fashionable now to collect. They have been replaced by such things as Hummel figurines and even little stuffed animals. Georgia doesn't care about fashionable. She likes things that have a use to them, so she makes an effort to use the teacups, though she always puts them carefully back in place. What Georgia likes best is how the teacups collect the warm light of the late

afternoon sun. Then she takes one down and fills it with mint tea. She smells the sun-warmed mint and clinks the cup against the saucer and remembers the kitchen, once filled with the smells of supper cooking and the sounds of Sidney clomping in and pulling off his work boots and children running in, laughing or fighting, to pull off muddy shoes.

Georgia looks at the teacups lined up on shelves in her big, empty kitchen. She has fluted, gold-rimmed ones, which Georgia thinks are too fancy for everyday use,

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ones covered with roses, some that say such things as souvenir of Bardstown on them, and one with a picture of President Dwight D. Eisenhower on it with a matching saucer with Mamie's picture. There's even a musical teacup that plays a rippling tune that Georgia has never been able to name.

The musical teacup is her favorite because it reminds her of how Isaac used to laugh with delight as Della showed him the new music boxes in her collection. How Isaac would've loved a musical teacup!

She knows that Della too was thinking of Isaac when she left the cup. Georgia wanted to return it, but she just couldn't. Besides, her daughter Rose was at the house when Georgia found the cup.

"I'm going to take it back," Georgia had said. "She must've been thinking of Isaac when she brought it."

"Keep it, Mother," Rose said. "She's trying to make up. For crying in a bucket! That peach tree was over 25 years old when it was cut down. It probably would've died soon anyway. After all these years, why not forgive and forget?"

"Forget! I know you were so little when Isaac—" Georgia got up and looked out the window at a crack in the asphalt where Isaac's peach tree had long ago stood. "But you can't have forgotten Isaac. You can't ask me to forget him!"

"Not forget Isaac," Rose had said

patiently. “Just forget this feud over that silly road!”

Georgia had started to mumble, “That tree was perfectly healthy. I gave it the best of care.” But she hadn’t explained. How could she explain to Rose what the tree had meant to her? Rose had only been 2 years old when the tree was planted. She couldn’t be expected to remember Isaac watching a little tree through the pain and saying to everyone who visited, “Ty Cobb sent me that tree!”

And Rose had been involved with her troubles when the road was built. She couldn’t have been expected to go to all of the arguments and town meetings where Della had campaigned for that road—to bring progress, she’d said. To bring tourists past her shop, Georgia had thought.

Oh, there’d been lots of people against the road, against cutting down the old trees along the narrow, brick road that had served perfectly fine for who knows how long. Georgia had listened to arguments for oaks and history, and been glad she had a reasonable side to take up with, a side that had nothing to do with a peach tree too big and too old to move that had once mattered to a little boy. But she had known and Della had known that the reason Georgia Ford attended every meeting and signed every petition against the road was because it would take Isaac’s peach tree.

Georgia had kept the musical cup, but she was glad Rose hadn’t been there the day she found the peach blossom cup. Georgia bundled the cup right back into its tissue paper and marched it back to Della’s shop door and left it on the step. Later Georgia saw Della open the shop and take the cup back in, cradling it carefully in her hands.

Della has never left another cup with peaches of any kind on it since. Della knows that Georgia has not forgiven her.

Now as Georgia starts towards the pantry to get the flour to make an apple pie, she hears shrieking. She makes it to the side window in time to see the door to the shop being thrown open. Objects are being thrown out of the open door. Georgia can see that the morning glories are being broken and can hear the sound of glass smashing against the shop porch.

“Lands! Who could be causing such a commotion?”

She wonders if Della could be being robbed. Suddenly a picture forms in her mind. A picture of Della, beaten, her old, bowed shoulders lying on the shop’s floor, a bruise forming across Della’s rouged cheek. It looks like one of those pictures in those cheap papers Rose sometimes buys at the new Walmart on the road toward Paducah. “I’ve been looking at too many of those papers, Sidney,” Georgia says. But still, she can’t get that picture of Della out of her mind. There’s another shriek, another smash.

Georgia is out the back door and across the path, and before she quite knows how, she is inside Della’s shop for the first time in 44 years. All of the light bulbs are burned out, and the windows are so grimy that it is like twilight inside the shop. As soon as Georgia’s eyes have adjusted, she grabs a cast iron rooster and raises it up high in order to confront the robber or beater or rapist.

But she’s looking at Della, who is looking at Georgia as if she doesn’t recognize

her. Della is aiming a deep dish, flowered bowl at the open door. Georgia realizes that the bowl will hit her before it sails through the door. Georgia ducks.

Right after the smash, she hears Della's high-pitched, nervous laugh. She still recognizes it after all the years, but there is a note of hysteria that Georgia doesn't remember. Then Georgia hears a man's voice.

"Now—"

Georgia stands up, holding the rooster. Maybe she was right about the robber after all. But the man, who crawls out from under a table, is wearing a good suit and new looking Florsheim shoes. She's certain about the shoes because she used to give Sidney new Florsheim shoes—his one extravagance—for Christmas every year. Georgia can't imagine a man wearing a good suit and Florsheim shoes in her picture of a robber, so she puts down the iron rooster.

The man smiles at Georgia as he crosses over to Della and puts an arm around her shoulder to guide her into a chair. "Now, Aunt Della," he says, "Look here, Mrs. Ford has come to visit."

Della stops laughing. A little sigh escapes and she leans into the chair and closes her eyes.

"Little Billy Goat?" Georgia asks.

The man laughs—a big belly laugh. "I reckon I am," he says.

Georgia feels a blush coming over her cheeks and knows it's noticeable because she never wears rouge. "Oh, Billy," she stammers. "Why, of course, you're a grown man with I guess children of your own. But Della always called you her Little Billy Goat when you and Isaac were boys ... I just came because" Georgia feels like a foolish old woman. She quits talking and looks at Della, whose eyes are still closed.

Billy shakes his head. "Now, Mrs. Ford, no need to apologize. I should be apologizing for disturbing you.

"You see, Aunt Della's doctor called me up in Evansville six weeks ago. 'Bill,' he said, 'you've got to make some alternative arrangements for your aunt. She can't manage at home alone anymore.' So I talked it over with my wife, and as Aunt Della doesn't have anyone else, we're moving her in with us. We've got lots of room now, as our grandson who was living with us while he got himself together again ..."

He shakes his head, but then he says proudly, "He's in college now studying to be an engineer."

Georgia feels startled. Little Billy Goat with a grandson who's studying to be an engineer! Lands, she thinks, Billy's Isaac's age. But, of course, Isaac will never be older than 7, and now Georgia sees that Billy is not young at all, but has gray hair and wrinkles. Suddenly coming without warning like summer thunder, she remembers a conversation between Isaac and Billy, who was always visiting Della. How Della doted on that boy!

"What do you want to play—cowboys and Indians or Army men?" Billy had asked. "I'll get Aunt Della's ketchup bottle for blood."

Isaac was sitting on the front porch, drawing a picture in the warm dirt with

his bare toe. He looked so pale that even his freckles seemed transparent. “I don’t want to see no more blood today,” he said in an unusual, flat and stubborn voice.

“But we always have blood.”

“No more blood,” Isaac said again, and then, as if on some horrible cue, another nosebleed started.

Georgia rushed out and brought Isaac in, laid him down with a cool compress and called the doctor that they’d just seen yesterday when he met them at the hospital in Paducah. Georgia had held Isaac’s hand tight. Isaac had looked while the young nurse took his blood, but Georgia had looked away. She had never been in a hospital before.

Georgia can still remember the doctor’s exact words when he came to the house after she called.

“Mrs. Ford,” he had said, “I was going to call on you tonight when your husband could be with you, but as you called” His voice trailed off and he cleared his throat. Georgia motioned the doctor into the parlor. She remembers clearly how he waved away a cup of tea and how badly she herself had wanted a cup of warmth as she sat in the parlor, suddenly shivering, although it was June and already humid.

She sat, waiting. She remembers thinking how the doctor twisted his hands one around the other, how this scared her as much as anything because she’d never seen a doctor act anxious before.

“The blood test we ran shows a very high white count,” the doctor said, “and from the symptoms ... Isaac has leukemia.” He had stopped then and cleared his throat. “Mrs. Ford, children with leukemia live for two or three months. There’s nothing we can do. I am so sorry.”

Georgia thinks now that she must’ve seemed stupid.

She had said nothing for a few minutes, then she offered the doctor another cup of tea. Rose had toddled

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into the room, fallen and started to cry, and all that Georgia could think about was tea.

Georgia realizes that Billy is talking to her—the grown Billy. She guesses she should call him Bill now.

“Aunt Della agreed, and I came to help her pack. I suggested we take these things to some antique shops, and that’s when she started throwing them. I’m sorry for disturbing you, Mrs. Ford.”

Georgia smiles. *I’m sorry for disturbing you, Mrs. Ford.* Georgia remembers that Della thought it was her job to teach Billy good manners. “Why, that brother of mine,” Della had said, “don’t care a fig for the finer things, and that woman he married—humph! But the boy, well, as much time as he spends with me and James, will know better. Manners are everything.”

After Isaac became too tired to play outside, Billy and Della would come over every day until even that became too much for Isaac. Della didn’t have the shop then, only her collections. “I’m sorry for disturbing you, Mrs. Ford,” Billy would say, “but I thought Isaac would like to see this new paper about Ty Cobb.”

How Isaac had loved Ty Cobb! At first Georgia had been appalled. Baseball players were such rough men, and Ty Cobb—why, lands, he was the worst of the lot. But after Isaac got sick, Georgia had desperately wanted him to still believe that he would grow up to be a baseball player. But children know, Georgia thinks now. Isaac knew even when she didn’t believe that he would die. The letter proved it.

Dear Ty,

I am your best fan. But I maybe will not get to read about you past this season. I have a sickness, and though everyone tells me I will grow up to be like you, I know I won’t. You see, I hear Daddy crying at night. Mommy never cries. I think she does not believe the doctor, but I do because I feel sick a lot. I like your nickname, The Georgia Peach, because my mom’s name is Georgia. She is pretty.

Your fan,
Isaac Ford

The package came at the end of September, three months to the day that the doctor had said Isaac had leukemia. “Doctors can be wrong,” Georgia had said that very morning to Sidney.

In the large package was a baseball signed “Ty Cobb” and a peach tree sapling. A short note said only, “Keep fighting, kid.”

“How odd after all the mean things you hear about him that he would do such a thing,” Della had said.

“You never know what’s in a person’s heart,” Georgia told Della. “No matter what’s said about that baseball man, I’ll bless him.”

She had planted the sapling in the front of the house where Isaac could see

it from his bed. A month later, Isaac was looking at the peach sapling when, still fighting, he died.

Georgia hears another sigh from Della's chair. Della has opened her eyes. Her eyes are clear now. "Georgia," she says, "I'm going to live with Billy. Take what you want from the shop."

Georgia shakes her head. "For Rose and Mari."

Not knowing what else to do, Georgia picks up the iron rooster and turns for the door.

She hears Della's cane hit the floor and the struggle of Della to come toward her. Georgia stops.

"When Isaac died," Della says, "I sobbed like a baby at the funeral. I never understood you standing so straight and silent. But then when James left me for a younger and prettier woman, I opened this shop, and I never shed a tear until the day in the tourist season went by when no one came. Then came the chance for the road—the road that people would take because it was new and looked to be going somewhere, and tourists are always in a hurry. But they would slow and stop for another charming shop, come in and admire and comment on my good taste."

Georgia looks around the shop. She sees that though the curtains are faded now and the dishes and figurines are coated with sticky dust, all is carefully arranged. Arranged as a woman might place the toys, worn shoes and treasured baseball in the room of a beloved child.

"Billy," Georgia says, "Della and I will go and have a nice warm cup of tea while you get things together here." She takes Della by the arm.

In her kitchen, Georgia sits by Della and shares the tea. She gives Della her best, gold-rimmed cup, and she takes the musical teacup. She thinks that it is only Della who she can tell about the peach tree after all. Only Della who will think Georgia is not a crazy old woman.

"After Isaac died," she says, "I thought I would die myself. I thought all winter that I would leave Sidney and my baby girl and just lay down and die myself. But then by some grace that little tree not only lived through the cold winter, but actually came into bloom that spring. And I thought, I can live through another year so I can tend that little tree for Isaac. And I gathered the blossoms and leaves and brought them in, and it was as though I could smell that mix of dirt and grass and meadows little boys bring into the house. I could forget the smell of sickness and blood that had taken Isaac away from me.

"And then as the years passed, the tree bore the sweetest peaches. The hours in the kitchen making preserves and pies from those peaches brought Isaac back to me. I would say to Sydney and Rose, 'These are Isaac's peaches.' I dreamed of Isaac healthy, climbing that tree, and grown, standing with a sweetheart below that tree, and sometimes, while Sidney slept, I stood on the porch while the night breeze whispered through the branches, 'My mom's name is Georgia. She is pretty.'"

Della has closed her eyes. Little sighs escape with each breath, and Georgia

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wonders if Della has followed such a long statement. But she is nodding. Georgia remembers her and Della having a picnic by the sycamore on a morning long ago. Georgia was tired, pregnant. They had shared tea then and one of Georgia's pies, and Della talked about her handsome husband, and Georgia nodded while Isaac slept safe in her belly. They dipped the teacups into the health-giving waters for good luck. The waters had sloshed into the cups, making up a messy tune of watery notes with no need for a name.

Georgia looks at the outline of her reflection emerging as she takes the last swallow of tea. Her face is covered by tiny lines from the old china cup. Crackling, Della called the lines, like they were something valuable. Age lines. Georgia smiles at her reflection. She doesn't need any help with age lines from a teacup. She has always been, she thinks, a plain woman. Not pretty or stylish like Della. She thinks how peculiar that she and Della, so opposite in looks and what they wanted in their lives, had ever become such friends. Well, she thinks, hearing her reedy voice release into something that resembles a once girlish giggle, it has certainly been an odd friendship, and this has been an odd day. But then, life is filled with odd comforts that make all the difference in the end. Georgia winds the musical teacup and listens.

Geraldine Ann Marshall is working on a novel based in Spirit Springs, Kentucky. She has had five books published, along with stories and poems in magazines and anthologies.