

Miss Ida's Moon

Vicki Combs

“Preacher? Preacher!”
Ida Mae St. Clair pushed through the side porch door into our kitchen, where Mom was cooking dinner. No knock. Miss Ida never knocked. She thought the parsonage was open to the public, especially to her because she lived across the street and, 70 years old, considered herself the matriarch of the neighborhood. If Miss Ida encountered a locked door, as she frequently had since we moved into the parsonage, she was direct: “You’ve got your door locked. How come?” Sometimes Mom would joke or change the subject, but on rough or hectic days she refused to answer, leaving an uncomfortable silence.

Moving over to the kitchen sink, Ida leaned on the counter. “Is the preacher here?” she asked.

Mom checked the squash before replying. “No, Ida. He’s in a meeting at the church.”

“Well, I wanted to tell him that Hubert Doss may not be at church on Sunday.”

Hubert Doss was a member and regular attender of Dundee Methodist, Dad’s primary church. Miss Ida attended the Baptist church, but she prided herself on keeping up with the daily activities of Dundee inhabitants.

Ida shifted weight so she could see what we were having for dinner—green beans, summer squash, and corn bread, with garden-ripe tomatoes and just pulled green onions. Church members kept our family of six well-supplied with fresh garden produce, helping to stretch the meager salaries paid by rural churches in Kentucky. Miss Ida never wanted to eat with us—Mom had asked her several times—she just wanted to know what we were having.

“Now I say, I say, Sister Lyle. You had company today. Who was it?”

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Mom's lips tightened. This was the real reason Miss Ida had come over. She couldn't abide not knowing what was happening or who was doing what. If someone new or strange came calling, she worked and wheedled until she oozed it out of people a little at a time. She just had to know. But Mom wasn't used to inquisitive neighbors, so Ida had to work a lot harder for information, and she frequently left frustrated. From the sudden glimmer in Mom's eye, I could tell that today she wasn't in the mood to satisfy Miss Ida's curiosity.

Our "company" had been a pastor and his wife from another county. They had been driving through town and stopped to meet Mom and Dad. After twenty minutes of getting acquainted, Mom had sent them down the street to Dad's church office.

"Oh, that was just a couple who wanted to see Wayne." Mom's answer was full of possibilities and, from Miss Ida's perspective, far from complete..

"Well I say now, what did they want with the preacher?"

"Ida," Mom said abruptly, "would you mind looking at my strawberry freezer jam? It doesn't seem to be setting up properly, and I'm not sure why."

"Well, how much sugar did you use?" And suddenly Miss Ida was lecturing Mom on freezer jams, how ripe the berries should be, what kind of jars to use, how much sugar and pectin. Usually her directions were specific enough to sound authentic but vague enough to not reveal all of her secrets, but that didn't matter because Mom had finished jam-making. That fall when we opened the first jar, I noticed that her jam had gelled just fine.

Miss Ida got on Mom's bad side the first time she called her "Sister Lyle." It was the day we moved in, and we were unloading the van when Ida hobbled onto the carport. A combination of arthritis, a slight limp and several extra pounds caused her to hitch her left leg when she walked.

"Are you the new preacher?"

Dad put his box down and walked over.

"I'm Ida Mae St. Clair, Preacher, but people here call me Miss Ida. I live in that white house there, across the street."

We eventually learned that Miss Ida was not technically a "miss." Her husband had died in his late 50s, and her two sons were grown and gone—one in the military and the other in Colorado. But I never heard anyone call her "Mrs. St. Clair" or "Ida Mae St. Clair" or "Ida Mae," just "Miss Ida."

Miss Ida had come bearing gifts: several jars of canned peaches, green beans, and cucumber pickles, which she pushed toward Mom and Dad with an abrupt yet shy, "Here." Her grey hair was pulled back in a wide bun and tied with a printed cotton handkerchief, but long wisps of hair had freed themselves to frame her straight mouth and soft blue eyes. A faded three-quarter-length cotton dress stretched over Miss Ida's low bosom and square hips, and over that she wore an apron with two large pockets, a floral print that contrasted with the beige of her dress. Her stockings were rolled, and her shoes were odd pointy flats, a style I'd never seen. In the days to come, we would frequently see the prints of those shoes in the soil of the small garden at the back of our house. Apparently, Miss Ida liked to check the progress of her neighbors' produce.

After introductions, Ida followed my mother into the kitchen, gripping the door facing to pull herself up the two steps that led from the carport to the side porch door. Inside, she immediately said, "You and Brother Lyle are a lot younger than the other preachers who've been here."

That was true. Mom and Dad were both in their 30s, and I remembered the silver-grey hair of the minister that Dad was replacing. Ida glanced at Mom to gauge her reaction. Then, with a sly grin, she said, "Well, Sister Lyle, I guess we're going to be neighbors."

"She knows I hate that," Mom would declare regularly during our three years in Dundee. "She knows my first name. She just does that to aggravate me." But in gentler moods, when she heard about some kindness Miss Ida had bestowed, usually from her garden, Mom would say, "She has a good heart."

Miss Ida was famous for her garden, and for her skill in canning its produce. We could tell from the precise, weed-free rows and lush foliage that her garden held secrets. Her cabbages were huge, usually 10 inches in diameter, but the leaves were tender and sweet. She grew pods of plump green peas, fat stems of broccoli and stalks of spiraling brussels sprouts, bushels of honey-sweet corn, pole beans and bush beans, yellow squash and zucchini, potatoes, okra and cucumbers. Zinnias, marigolds and nasturtiums finished each row, coloring the garden with crimson, fuchsia, lemon and bronze.

When we asked Miss Ida how she grew such a beautiful garden, she said she planted by the moon and the stars, the moon mostly, a mysterious system that, for

Ida, yielded the county's largest and most bountiful vegetable garden.

And Ida was generous, sharing her harvest and her canned goods with people who were sick, feeble or didn't have room for a garden. If visitors came by our house when we weren't there, Ida would tell them where we had gone—even if she didn't know—and then take them across the road to her garden, where she picked and bagged whatever they needed. In the process, she would steadily inquire about the visitors, where they were from, who their family was, how they knew us, and then she would share information about us and any other residents the visitors might know. By the time we returned home, Ida was waiting with a full report. Mom and Dad often worried what friends and conference members thought of our over-interested neighbor, whether they were offended by her questions. But when they called, they always commented on the helpful and generous woman who lived across the street.

“Miss Ida, what is ‘planting by the moon?’”
I was holding a metal gallon bucket that Ida was quickly filling with late-harvest beans.

“Well now,” she replied. “It’s hard to explain.”

“What does the moon have to do with planting?”

“Well, the moon has to be right, and the stars have to be in the right position.”

“But what do you mean, ‘the right position?’” From science classes and observation, I knew that the earth’s rotation and orbit made stars appear to move around.

Pausing and straightening for a minute, Miss Ida said: “It’s something my mama taught me. I can’t explain it, it’s just somethin’ I know. And I use the book.”

“The book?” I loved books, but I hadn’t heard that they could plant gardens.

“Th’ almanac,” she replied, running the two words together.

I didn’t know if she was keeping secrets again or if she really couldn’t explain how she planted, but her system worked, and that was enough for Miss Ida.

The door problem solved itself. One afternoon when most of us were in the back of the house, Miss Ida opened the porch door and shuffled through the kitchen.

“Preacher? Preacher!”

At the door to the den, she stopped. She had found Dad, all right.

Trying to change for evening services but finding the bathroom occupied, Dad was standing in the den, wearing only a shirt and underwear, holding his Wednesday evening sermon in one hand and his just-ironed pants in the other.

“Good afternoon, Miss Ida,” Dad said calmly.

But Miss Ida was already gone, and the side porch door was banging behind her. We didn’t see her again for two weeks. Apparently embarrassed by seeing the preacher in his drawers, she stayed busy in her garden. After the underwear incident, whenever Miss Ida came to the house she knocked or shouted first—

“Sister Lyle? Preacher?”—and then she waited until someone opened the door. Mom was amazed that such a persistent source of frustration had been so easily resolved.

In March of our second year at Dundee, Dad came home one day and announced that Ed Graham, a prominent member of Dundee Methodist, thought that we should have a bigger garden. Mr. Graham and his wife Mildred owned a quarter-acre lot, mostly fenced, located across the street and down a block. The lot was opposite from the Masonic Lodge, a church-like building with an 80-foot spire topped with a goat, an unusual weather vane that people said was brought over from Dundee, Scotland, in 1872. Mr. Graham told Dad that, if we were interested, he would plow and disc the property after he prepared his own fields. We were interested.

As weeks went by, we worried that Mr. Graham had forgotten his offer. Everyone around us had already planted early-season crops of peas, cabbage, and brussels sprouts. But one Thursday afternoon when we stopped by the property, there he was, perched atop a faded red tractor. He was pulling large-bladed discs over the field, turning and folding the earth into fat ribbons of chocolate. When he began the second pass, Mr. Graham switched to smaller blades, sifting the chunks of chocolate into the rich brown flour of friable soil. By supertime he was through, and the field was ready to plant.

Plowed, the L-shaped plot looked immense. From the street end, it sloped gently toward the base of its L, so we planted potatoes in the lower left part, the short bottom of the L. We planted

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all weekend and then weekdays after supper—flat, cream-colored seeds of summer squash, smooth hard ovals of bean, and hard yellow kernels of corn. We planted okra, zucchini, white half-runner beans—“the best bean,” Mom said—and pole beans. We hilled tomato plants, mounded cucumbers and squash, and sowed larger spaces with cantaloupe and watermelon.

One afternoon while we were planting beans, Miss Ida stopped by to observe our progress.

“Why are you plantin’ your beans?” she asked. “The stars aren’t right for planting beans.”

“We have to plant when we can, Ida,” Mom replied. We kept right on planting.

As spring became summer, we hoed and weeded—for a while. But the garden was too large for us to keep up with, especially later in July and August when the heat and humidity set in. Compared to Miss Ida’s, our garden was weedy, wild and disorderly. Despite our late start, however, the garden produced. Bushels and bushels it produced. Soon, the fertility of the preacher’s garden was a hot topic in town. The more beans and squash and tomatoes we harvested, the more frustrated Miss Ida became, especially when people began stopping by to admire the productivity. All summer we picked and canned and froze and gave away, and still our garden kept giving.

By the end of July, Miss Ida was fit to be tied. The weedier our garden became, the neater and cleaner hers became. If someone erred by complimenting our garden in front of Miss Ida, she quickly replied, “They don’t know much about

weedin' and hoein', though, do they?"

“Now I say, Sister Lyle, exactly what days did you plant your beans?”
The third time Miss Ida asked, Mom gave her the same answer she had before. “I really don’t remember, Ida. We didn’t have time to keep track.”

The munificent bounty of our garden remained a mystery to Miss Ida, and to us. Whether the garden had been blessed by the moon and stars, by the virgin soil of the property or by the fresh manure Mr. Graham had tilled into the soil when he plowed, we never knew for sure.

That winter, Miss Ida fussed and fretted about the coming spring, planning and charting, studying her Farmer’s Almanac. But she needn’t have worried about potential competition from us because we didn’t plant Mr. Graham’s field again. Dad had received early word from the District Superintendent that we might move to another church in May, so we decided to plant the smaller garden at the back of our yard instead. With the smaller garden, the new minister and his family would enjoy a few summer vegetables while settling into the community.

The week we were packing to leave, Miss Ida brought over a large pot of green beans and some fresh corn bread. Looking at Mom, she said, “I figured you wouldn’t have time to cook up any beans this week.”

As Mom took the beans, she gave Miss Ida a quick hug. Embarrassed, Ida stepped back a little. “It’s sure going to be quiet around here when you all leave.”

For a while she watched us pack, then she said, “Now I say, now I say, Lenette, what about this new preacher? Does he have a big family? Is he a young one or an old one?”

Vicki Combs is an Associate Professor of English at Brescia University. She is a student in the Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program at Spalding University.