

## Margaret Adams Birth

### The Stranger

“Mother?”

“Hm?” My mother was tatting lace, which I knew was ultimately destined to trim one of the cotton flour-sack slips she made for me. I imagined that I might well be the only girl in my Depression-era school who owned a lace-trimmed slip anymore.

“Is Daddy going to be home soon?”

She didn’t answer immediately, but deftly worked the thread through her fingers and turned the shuttle so that it created pretty twisting images.

“He’ll get home soon as he can come home,” she enigmatically replied.

It drove me crazy, how cool she could remain when she didn’t know what was going on, or where Daddy was, or what he was doing.

Twice already during the past year, we’d had to pack up and move to a completely new town after he’d come home with the news that his current employer no longer required his services. I’d started the school year in seventh grade; by Christmas, we’d moved across the state border, and I’d suddenly found myself placed in the eighth grade, due to both my age and the topics I’d already studied; with the second move, in March, though, I’d wound up in the seventh grade again, in yet another school district.

“Mother?”

Exasperation marking her movements, she laid her lace-covered hands, still holding the tatting shuttle, in her lap. “What?” she snapped.

I took a step back. “Sorry—never mind.” I moved to a corner of the living room of our tiny rented house, and picked up the “Nancy Drew” book I’d checked out of the town library the previous Saturday. If I couldn’t physically get more than ten or twelve feet away from my mother in this room, mentally I could completely escape her ramrod attitude and frigid responses to me by imagining myself into the pages of a novel. Among my favorite fictional subjects was Nancy Drew, the teenage girl detective. Nancy Drew and I had plenty in common: We’d both traveled to many places in our young lives; we’d both encountered plenty of challenges (although hers tended to be in the form of adventurous mysteries, while mine were more mundane); and we were both close to our dads.

I recalled how Daddy had once told me, “No matter that you grow up and I grow old, you’ll always be my little girl, sugar-pie.”

Mother hadn’t approved. She’d quoted Ephesians 5:31 and pursed her lips. I was confident that she loved me in her own way—but sometimes it was hard to feel her love.

Daddy had winked at me behind her back and silently mouthed the words, “Ephesians six, two and three,” and nodded his head once as if that settled that.

A tense silence reigned in the living room except for the consistent ticking of the old regulator clock with a cherry wood case that was mounted over the sofa in a place of honor—because, despite the fact that I knew Mother would deny having an attachment to any *thing*, I just as well knew that the beautiful regulator clock was her most prized worldly possession.

When a knock came at the front door, neither of us was expecting it, and Mother and I both leapt out of our seats.

I sat back down and let her answer the door.

“May I help you?” I heard her ask the person on the other side.

That was followed by some murmuring, in words I couldn’t make out—but then my mother stepped aside, opened the door further, and gestured toward our living room. “Won’t you please come in? Why don’t you come take a seat and let’s see if we can figure this out.”

The woman who entered the room then was nobody I recognized from the town of Murphy—or, for that matter, from Mayhew or Aston, which were our neighboring communities. Then again, we hadn’t been

living in Murphy all that long, and even though I liked to ride my Schwinn all over the place, when I could, and go exploring, that still didn't mean that I knew every place or every person.

"I'm looking for Mrs. John Smith," said the woman. A mop of thick gray pin curls bounced atop her head when she spoke, and either she was quite flushed despite the damp coolness of the day or else she'd applied orangey-pink rouge none too artfully, for high, round spots of color marked each of her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," said Mother, "but we aren't familiar with John Smith—but then, we're still new here, ourselves."

"It's not Mr. Smith I want," said the stranger. "It's his widow—*Mrs.* John Smith. I hear tell she lives around these parts."

Mother shrugged her shoulders and shook her head apologetically.

"But aren't y'all Mae and Mary Lee Ornicutt?" asked the lady who somehow knew our names though we had no idea of hers. "I hear tell that *Mrs.* John Smith lives right near y'all."

Once more, Mother shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. Then she looked at me as if I might be able to help.

I took that as permission to speak up. "Does Mrs. Smith have any children or grandchildren round about my age?"

"You mean thirteen?"

I glanced at Mother. I was indeed thirteen. How had our gray-haired visitor known?

"No." The stranger shook her head, causing her pin curls to bounce more vigorously than before. "I don't believe that she and Mr. Smith were ever blessed to have children—but, if they had been, I'm sure they would have felt fortunate to have a lovely girl like you." She turned to my mother then, before I could take in her compliment and come up with an appropriate response. "Are you sure you haven't made the acquaintance of *Mrs.* John Smith through the part-time work you do through the County Extension?" she persisted. "She'd mentioned something to me about wanting to learn how to can the fruits and vegetables she planned to grow this summer."

"How—" my mother began to ask. How had this woman known that Mother earned a little extra pin money by teaching other women how to sew and can food, through our local County Extension?

Before Mother could fully formulate her question, though, our puzzling guest turned to me. “Are you sure *Mrs.* John Smith hasn’t visited your classroom to volunteer her time by helping to teach creative writing? She was a lady journalist up north, you know, and when she married Mr. Smith, she retired and rewrote all of those news stories as fiction pieces. She’s sold quite a few of them to *True Confessions*, I hear. . . . I understand that you like writing stories too, Mary Lee.”

I turned to my mother—but should have realized no help would be forthcoming from her. “I . . .” I didn’t know what to say. The more our visitor spoke of Mrs. Smith, the more I felt as if we ought to know our alleged neighbor very well; and yet, oddly enough, the more this steel-haired woman with the loud cheeks and the bright-red-lipstick-stained lips spoke, the more I also felt as if we should recognize her.

“Mrs. Smith hails from up north?” my mother asked.

“Oh yes,” replied the stranger, “all the way from up to Atlanta.”

“How do you know she lives here?” Mother demanded. Unspoken—too polite to be voiced aloud, but nevertheless implied by her strident tone—was also the question of who our unknown visitor was and how she knew so much about us.

This was a mystery, I thought. It was a genuine mystery—although, unlike Nancy Drew, I didn’t expect our mystery to extend beyond the confines of our little rental’s living room, nor did I expect it to be neatly solved before politeness would dictate that our uninvited, confused guest should leave. *How would Nancy approach this mystery?* I wondered. “If you don’t mind my asking, ma’am, when is the last time you heard from Mrs. Smith?”

The stranger clutched her pocketbook, which rested in her lap, and gazed heavenward, as if for guidance. “I don’t recall exactly,” she demurred, “but I feel sure that it was recently.”

We, ourselves, had lived in Murphy only for a few weeks; although, in one of our previous situations, we’d lived somewhat nearby—in the same county—it had been two or three years before, so if we had ever met Mrs. Smith, it absolutely must have been quite recently or else all those years ago.

Mother shook her head yet again and appeared as helpless as I have ever seen her.

It struck me that, even though my mother was an adult, she didn’t have any better notion than I did of how we should handle this strange woman now that it was clear we couldn’t help her and equally as clear she

had no intention of taking her leave any time soon.

The three of us sat in an awkward silence that was broken only by the ticktock of Mother's regulator clock.

Ticktock.

"What's that?" asked our guest, sounding suddenly, inexplicably nervous.

"What's what?" I replied.

Ticktock.

"That sound—what is it?"

Ticktock.

For whatever reason, Mother sat unmoving, completely unresponsive, so I pointed toward the pendulum-style clock on the wall behind our visitor.

The silver pin curls set to bouncing again as she craned her neck to gaze at the clock. "Well, would you look at that!" All at once, she reached out, grabbed me by the hand, and pulled me toward her, then turned both of us around so that she could kneel on the couch cushion, facing the clock. With one hand, she continued to hold me tightly, while, with her other hand, she began to reach toward the clock. "Would you look at that!" she exclaimed again. "It's exactly the right time!"

Puzzled and scared as I was by our odd guest, I felt all the more puzzled and scared by my mother's response.

"No!" Mother hollered, and she sprang from her chair and lunged at the hand that was reaching for her beloved clock. In her concern for her clock, she'd apparently forgotten all about me.

"It's time!" our visitor announced with a crazy laugh—a laugh that, I noticed, sounded nothing like the breathy, high voice in which she'd been speaking.

Even though I understood that it was rude to do so, I stared at the woman, trying to figure her out—and stared at Mother, who continued to attack our guest. She grabbed at the woman's hand, then at her dress sleeve, and finally at her hair . . . which promptly came off!

Faster than I could process what was happening, the woman released me, stepped away from the couch and the clock, twisted out of my mother's mad clutches, and began to strip. The wig was already dangling from

my stunned mother's left hand. Unbuttoning the bodice of the dress revealed a light blue chambray work shirt underneath and, lower down, beneath the dress skirt, a pair of rolled-up dungarees.

"Daddy!" I shrieked as I launched myself into the now-outstretched arms of the man who still wore the clown-like makeup of his playacting costume. I began to laugh hysterically as I felt silly that I hadn't figured this out long before. "You funny Daddy!" I laughed some more. "You tricked us!"

Daddy held me close to him, and I thought I'd never been happier to see someone I loved than I'd been when he'd shed his disguise and revealed himself to us at last.

When I lifted my head from his shoulder, though, and saw Mother standing behind him—her lips pinched, her arms crossed over her chest disapprovingly—and I thought back to how her instinct had been to safeguard her precious clock and not her daughter . . . I had to wonder if I'd ever really known her.