

A Eulogy

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Among my earliest memories of Momma, are times when I heard her sing. She loved music and it was so much a part of her everyday life. But, because she was a person of great faith, I remember clearly the many times that I heard her sing hymns. As a child, I was astonished that she knew so many songs—and that she could remember all the verses. Some of the hymns had five or six verses, and I can never remember her faltering or hesitating. She sang every Sunday in the choir at Beech Mountain Missionary Church. And her amazing alto voice blended so purely and in such haunting harmony with the women who surrounded her—family members all: Aunt Erlene, Aunt Vania, Cousins Ada Jones, Lucille Moore and Elizabeth Nunley. Whenever I happen upon one of those songs, I am reminded of those wonderful times, and of Momma's joy in praising God through song.

The one thing in her life which was closest to her heart was family. Growing up, as she did, in difficult times, she learned early on the importance of depending on—and of loving and supporting her sisters and brothers. Anyone who knew them would say that they were an especially loving and devoted family. They genuinely enjoyed spending time together, and it always seemed to me that they had a way of reconnecting at just where they left off. Even if they were not always able to see each other as often as they wished, almost all of them were able to reunite each year for Mother's Day—and to celebrate Mammaw Storie's birthday. It was a day that all of us looked forward to. On one level it was chaotic—a yard full of children running, playing and yelling—after all, we were 23 grandchildren. All having the time of their life. Those Stories were such incredible cooks—I can not imagine where they ever found the time to cook all that food. The tables almost groaned from the weight of those plates, bowls and platters. And the desserts. Just thinking about them causes me to feel that I have put on weight. What a litany of beautiful names—the Sisters: Beulah, Louise, Vert, Ivalee, Jewel, Carol and Nellie Pearl—the Brothers: Charles, Jack and Chester. Just repeating them fills my heart with joy. For one magic afternoon each spring, they were reunited. The memory of that special day lasted throughout the long year until they were

together again. They laughed and told stories of childhood long past. They shared their struggles and sorrows and the small victories which they experienced while apart. Clearly, they loved each other and truly were there for each other.

Momma was a person who loved deeply—and she was a person who was deeply loved. I have often thought that it was the reality of this love which enabled Momma to make it through so many difficult moments in her life. By any criteria, she had a challenging life. Grandpa Storie did when she was a very young child. Mammaw Storie struggled to provide for her family. They all had to pitch in, and at times barely made ends meet. They worked hard. I remember Momma telling stories of working for others, hoeing tobacco, picking beans and Galax. They farmed and raised everything they could to feed the family. That work ethic—which began early in Momma's life—stayed with her as long as her health permitted. I remember her working long days at school or later in the factory, coming home and cooking supper and then working on the farm or in the garden. She planted, harvested, cooked and canned. Many a cold winter evening we enjoyed soup that she had canned with Mammaw Cook.

When she married Daddy, she really did gain another family. Throughout the rest of their lives, Poppa and Mammaw welcomed Momma into their family—not as a daughter-in-law, but as their daughter. And so, her family expanded. She gained a new sister, Joanne and two brothers, Bryant and Gary.

Momma loved to read—and in those few free moments she had, she loved to lay on a quilt in the sun. Towards the end of the school year, she asked Jackie, Debbie and I to pick out a book. During the course of the summer, we four lay on the quilt with her and she read to us. I have often thought that her love of reading and her willingness to share that with us was the key difference which transformed the three of us into inquiring young minds. Certainly, it changed my life completely.

Momma was an amazing cook! She made so many incredible things—but I especially remember her incomparable desserts. Strawberry shortcake, banana pudding, gingerbread cake. My personal favorite was an amazing raspberry cake with vanilla pudding and meringue. Of course, the recipe required two cups of raspberries. As it happened, our cousin Loy Trivette had a raspberry bush. Poor Loy, she probably wondered why she never had any raspberries. Or else, generous and loving person that she was, she probably knew and didn't care.

Momma had one friend though, to whom she was especially close. She was a confidante and companion. She was full of life and energy. This was her sister Ivalee. I doubt that Momma ever had anyone closer in her whole life. Aunt Lee was far more than an aunt to us. She was our friend and like a second mother to us. After her death and Momma's divorce, Momma found a greater love in Uncle Ed. They were blessed to spend many happy years together. Those years were a source of new hope for Momma, and of healing for her. To her great delight, her family extended again and now she had new sons and daughters: Chuck, Sharon, Steve, Mike and Sam. She was blessed to have wonderful grandchildren: Eric, Jonathan, Kevin, Daniel and Mandy, Jamie and Jeri, Trevor, Amber, Tabby and Adam, Gavin and Meghan. And in this wider family, Jackie, Debbie and I found another Father in Uncle Ed.

Perhaps the single greatest source of hope and strength that Momma knew was the love of her Mother. Foy Ethel Jones Storie was an incredible woman. To this day, I think that she was, perhaps, the most amazing person I have ever known. She was truly full of love and compassion. I never knew anyone who did not like her. Kind as she was, she could be fierce, when her children or grandchildren were in need. Of all her children, Momma and Aunt Lee—so much alike—were often in need of her love and support. She gave it without hesitation, without even pausing to think what anyone else would do or say. She loved them and stood up for them through thick and thin. How many times, over the years, she took Momma in and cared for her when Momma had no place else to go.

Momma told me that the death of her Mother had been one of the most difficult moments of her entire life. And yet, I told her that for Mammaw it was the most amazing gift. After a long and often happy life, Mammaw died peacefully with Momma holding her hand.

It would be impossible to acknowledge everyone who loved and supported Momma throughout her life. Each of you made a difference for her. And there are so many others who are not with her today who loved and cared for her. But there were a few people who made a huge difference.

Jackie loved and cared for Momma during perhaps the darkest hours of her life. Momma was alone, confused and vulnerable. Her life seemed to be falling apart. There were hurts, wounds, disappointments and frustrations. Jackie took her to work every day—day in and day out—for years. She worked the farm and gardened with Momma. She made sure that Momma had everything that she needed. Momma would not have made it without the love and help that Jackie gave her. Jackie was an incredible gift and blessing to her.

Uncle Ed was the greatest surprise and blessing of Momma's life. Together they built a life together which I believe was good and fulfilling for both of them. They enjoyed many happy years together. And their home was always open to all of us. They continued the amazing welcome and generosity of that home—a home that had welcomed generations of family and friends since it was built by Grandpa Marion and Grandma Julia. But thanks to them it was a home at which Stories and Davises and Cooks were equally welcome. It was not only their home, it was our home too.

As the years progressed, both Momma and Uncle Ed aged and began to experience the frailties which so often accompany the advancing of years. Once again they were blessed by amazing love and support. Jackie, Debbie and I all lived far away. And so it was that Uncle Ed's children loved and cared for Momma and Uncle Ed as they began a slow decline. Each of those children cared for them

in their own way and made sure that they were safe and that all their needs were met. Although Momma was blessed to have so many amazing nephews and nieces, she always felt close to Aunt Ivalee's children. And when they became her own children, she loved them even more. Chuck and Dena, though, saw them every day. Their wise counsel, willingness to help, and friendship enabled Momma and Uncle Ed to remain independent as long as possible. Without them, their final years together would have been impossible. What an incredible gift and blessing they were—to both Momma and to Uncle Ed.

In the final part of her life, Momma was blessed with the most special gift of Debbie and Ardle. Even before Uncle Ed's death they did something which transformed the house and made it for Momma, finally, her home. They renovated the kitchen. As the sign in it read, it was "Jan's kitchen." For Momma, this was huge. It was no longer her parent's home, or Ed and Lee's home. It now felt like her home. She was so proud of that kitchen. What an incredible thing!

When Uncle Ed died, something in Momma died. She was in quite poor health and simply unable to survive independently. She was really not even able to take care of Sallie. Debbie and Ardle literally put their lives on hold to have Momma come live with them. None of us could have known that we would lose Ardle so quickly or so unexpectedly. This was a huge sacrifice for them. They gave up what might have been the happiest and most enjoyable years of their lives together because they believed it was the right thing to do. Quite honestly, I think that Momma only lived these last few years because of them. She had given up years ago.

The Carolina Senior Care Center was a huge blessing for Momma. When Debbie first asked Momma to go there, she was virtually bed-ridden, and she flat out refused. Thankfully, when she finally did agree to go, she loved it. In July, I went with her, and she was so excited to introduce me to her friends and to the amazing people who cared for her every day. She loved riding the van and was excited to have me see how easy it was for them to lift her

wheelchair up and in. You know me, I have photos to prove it. But, they reawakened an interest in life for her. I can not imagine how many bags of clothes and of goodies that she brought home over the years. She was constantly exchanging things with them and it brought her such happiness.

Momma also had a very close relationship with Aunt Jewel—after all she was her sister, twice! In those years when we lived in Winston-Salem they were often together and enjoyed the time they lived so close. After Momma moved to Thomasville, though, they became even closer. Aunt Jewel was so faithful to call Momma. Each evening after she returned from the Senior Care center, the first thing that happened was that they talked and caught up on the day. Aunt Jewel's number was one of the only ones that Momma remembered close to the end. Aunt Jewel and Uncle Bryant did many things with Momma and Debbie—and those meals and times together were truly rays of hope at a very difficult time. What a blessing and gift Uncle Bryant and Aunt Jewel were to Momma.

It was not easy to care for Momma in her final years.. I know that I could never have cared for her in the amazing way that Debbie and Ardle did. As her health worsened and the dementia began, she became confused, demanding and irritable. She was in constant pain. Especially this last year, I was so worried—not only for Momma, but for Debbie. Let me say this, Debbie is a hero to me. She is truly a woman of God. If ever there was anyone who honored that commandment to love and to honor her parents, It is she. Like that woman we heard about in the reading from Proverbs today—Debbie is a woman of valor. What an incredible gift and blessing she was to Momma.

Just before her death, I had a fascinating conversation with Aunt Vert. She told me that she knew she would soon die and that she was ready. She said that she had a full life and was ready to go. She had taken care of all her remaining responsibilities and obligations and felt sure that she would die in peace. She then said something that I will never forget: “I have come to a point in my life in which I realize that more people whom I love and are important

to me now are dead than are alive.” She went on to share her conviction that she believed them to be in heaven. She concluded by saying that she awaited a reunion with them with joy. I believe that this is true of Momma as well.

My last memory of Momma is from the night before I left to return to New York this past summer. After she went to bed, for some time I heard the music coming from her room. In her final years, the Gaither Homecoming videos constantly played. And that night I suspect that she listened to that lovely and hopeful hymn,

“On the resurrection morning
When all the dead in Christ shall rise
I'll have a new body
Praise the Lord, I'll have a new life
Sown in weakness, raised in power
Ready to live in Paradise
I'll have a new body
Praise the Lord, I'll have a new life.”

May you rest in peace Momma and rise in God's glory with a new body and a new joyful life in God's eternal kingdom. And may you join your restored voice with all your loved ones in that heavenly choir.