

Preface

“**H**ome” for me has always been the house of my grandmother. Her name was Marietta.

Marietta’s house is home because my mother, my sister and I lived there for so many years — while my father went off to Alaska and other places looking for gold, and finding none. Marietta always had a place for us. And lots of other relatives too.

One of the last times I went home to visit with Marietta, it was a spring day and it was raining. The blooms of the wisteria vine on the arbor over the front gate bobbed crazily in the rain.

Passing through the gate, I saw that the front and side porches of the house were rotting. Fading gray deck paint hadn’t saved them from the harsh Louisiana climate.

Inside, I saw that the whole house seemed in disrepair. The floors in spots were weak and sagging. And the roof leaked.

Marietta’s house, which had survived a Mississippi River levee break, floods and several hurricanes over more than a century, seemed tired, as if before long it would be only a memory.

I didn’t want that to happen. I wanted this house to endure, the way it always had, as a place that would be there when there was no other place to go.

On that rainy day visit, we ate lunch in the kitchen. There was my mother Gladys, whom everyone called Doll, my sister Brenda, our cousin Sandra, Marietta and me.

We ate from china dishes made in Germany a long time ago. The dishes didn’t look right sitting on the modern, vinyl-topped dinette table.

Marietta once had an old wooden dining table, but my sister had taken it. Marietta’s children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews, were always taking things from her house. Old things they had laughed about when they were children because the objects were so out-of-date. But as the years passed,

people started to call those things antiques and collectibles. Everybody wanted them.

After I was grown, every time I went home to visit Marietta something else was missing: a pair of fanciful wooden rockers varnished so many times that they were black, splendid vases of carnival glass that used to rest on the mantel in the “front room” (that’s what we called the parlor), an ornate bronze and porcelain oil lamp that had been the wedding lamp of Marietta and her husband, my grandfather, Oniel Loupe.

It made me sad when I noticed things missing. Because it meant that “home” had fewer objects that were familiar to me.

“Relics,” Marietta called them.

When I was a young boy, I found an old portrait between two pieces of cardboard covered with dust on top of Marietta’s high armoire.

“Grandma, what’s this?” I asked.

“That,” she said, “is a relic. That is a picture of Balmio Dugas, your grandfather’s grandfather. He was a sugar planter.”

“And you know how he died?” she went on. “I’ll tell you. He was bitten by a mad dog. And Balmio went mad. There were no shots for rabies back then. His own sons had to smother him between two mattresses.”

Most people do not like to think of death — their own or that of someone they love. But Marietta was always rather matter-of-fact about death. She experienced its sorrows many times — her mother, her father, her husband, all of her sisters and brothers, two sons...

She helped many people die — held them, prayed with them, comforted them to accept the inevitable.

But then there was Murphy, her second son. Marietta wasn’t able to help him. His death was one of those that come as a sudden, terrible shock. A picture of Murphy — a little boy with blond hair wearing a white suit — has held pride of place above the mantel in the front room ever since the day of his accident.

Murphy, at the age of seven, became the first person to drown in the Bayou Plaquemine Lock, only a stone’s throw from Marietta’s back yard.

I remember the afternoon she told me the story. I was home from college for summer vacation. I was sitting in a rocker on the back porch.