

Preface

My entire life has been lived hand in hand with memories. First as a child, hearing the stories of folks long since gone, told amid laughter in rooms where there were so many assembled it was standing room only. Often, the more tender memories were shared at my mother's elbow in the kitchen, when she gave me a glimpse into her life when she had been my age. As I grew, the stories began to include me from time to time, my life becoming its own thread in the tapestry of family and friends. One of the great joys in my life now involves watching how my children, Brady and Katy, add their own threads to this ever-growing work of life.

Life is not always easy. Sometimes the hardships seem almost insurmountable. Stories of times in which my ancestors didn't know how they would make it through have, over time, been woven in with similar experiences from my parents and eventually people in my own generation.

I am reminded of my grandmama, Lucille, who always had a smile when a smile was needed most. Being that she was a Southern woman, many of my memories of her are in the kitchen. She had lived a hard life by anyone's standards, but she managed to come to a point where food was plentiful—and her cooking followed suit.

My grandmama never lacked appreciation for any dish that was set upon the table, and that genuine gratitude came from living in a place where food was scarce. She didn't dwell on that, though, as she placed bowls of vegetables and tender cuts of meat on a table that welcomed all. The final dish always brought a particular twinkle to her eye and made her usual smile all the more bright: dessert.

"We've got to have a little something sweet to finish it off," she'd say. To someone who didn't know her life, they would think she was talking about the meal, and she was in a way. But when you sat back and listened to stories she told, the tales of hardship always ended on a good note, because no matter what trial the family had faced, they had grown closer, stronger, and more aware of the magnitude of blessings they possessed.

Grandmama taught me that life is going to present challenges, storms to weather, and great losses. We are going to fall down and it may take some time to stand up again. But amid all of this, the blessings rise up around us in friends, experiences, and moments of warmth and tenderness that our hearts capture and hold dear as if they were precious photographs, enclosed in a gilded frame.

And at the end of the day and at the end of a life, what we remember most is that special touch, the memories and laughter, the warmth and the love: the sweetness.