

Selma Prayin'

Saturday, October 18, 1941

The woman, dressed in faded but fashionable and well-fitted blue two-piece dress, trudged up the incline in the gravel roadway, watching her balance. Some of the gravel was still slick from the overnight rain. She felt back to make sure her graying but the late-sun-red hair was still braided on top of her head.

She didn't worry about traffic on this unnamed road that had about 10 passersby a day, not counting the four residents taking every-now-and-then shopping trips, very rarely leaving for work.

She carried a long-faded white canvas sack. Looked heavy. At first, most would assume she must be carrying a captured water moccasin, given to her by a neighbor to sell to a local snake-handlin' preacher. They were always running out of snakes.

But watch a little longer and see all sides of the canvass bag moving frequently. Had to be carrying more than one of something.

She turned into a dirt driveway, past the mailbox that said, "Bailey and Peggy Durham," not that anyone didn't know.

The house was an aged, blue clapboard, wider than most herabouts. It had an actual split-level second upstairs room. The front door stood open except for the bug stopper screen.

A shirtless man, standing just inside, watched her approach until she reached the one step up to the roomy front porch, then opened the screen door.

"Mornin' Miss Selma. What'cha got there?"

This elicited a child's calls from within, "Selma's here!"

Met by a grown woman's slightly angry order, "Yes. Selma's here. Now, behave yourself!"

Crossing over the one step entrance, Selma strode straight to the eight-foot wide playpen, with heavily padded floors, populated by one standing toddler boy, and another about the same age, lying still. He would have looked asleep except for his labored breathing, opening his eyes with each struggle for breath.

The prone toddler's strained breathing imitated a grown man trying to blow up a balloon, already stretched to its limits.

Selma took one look, eased the canvas bag into the playpen, loosed the top strings and gently emptied the contents onto the pen floor. Seven tiny, beagle puppies spilled out, emitting frequenting tiny mews and walking-crawling in all directions.

Peggy, the sick child's mom, said, "Selma, you know Buddy's sick real bad. Doctor says he's dying, too far gone to be helped. Said anything, even dust mites, 'specially animal hair, would make it even worse."

Buddy struggled and sat up on the playpen floor with a gurgling giggle, trying to get as many beagles as possible in a hug. Some escaped, two turned instead to Buddy and licked his face vigorously, looking for something to suck on.

"My little boy is dyin', Mizz Selma," Peggy said in a soft, resigned tone.

Selma replied, "He's happy, now."

"EttaMae!" Selma barked. "We got any salz?"

Bare seconds later, a black woman, a least six foot tall and bony, face decorated with a big, bright smile filled with white teeth, appeared immediately from the side of the kitchen doorway.

"Yes, Mizz Selma, and I've got a big pot of water bolin' on the stove."

"Wonderful," Selma said in a suddenly softer, friendlier voice. "Put two cups of salt in it and put it between Buddy and the window. I thought you were outside, workin' the garden."

No apology, just a much softer, friendly tone.

"Peggy, you got a big fan? I'm gonna sit on the floor the other side of the water, make sure the steam gets to our little Buddy," Selma said.

"Bailey," Peggy said instead. "You're his Daddy. You goin' for this salt stuff?"

Bailey didn't think long.

"Doctor said he can't keep Buddy from dyin.' Might as well let Selma do her things."

Meanwhile, Selma took the giant fan Peggy gave her. She positioned herself on the floor, between the open window and the pot of steaming water. She directed the salt steam across the boiling pot and into Buddy's pen.

Everyone—except Selma—watched like a sports crowd waiting to see if their team got a winning goal. Selma stayed on the floor, making sure—as she said, "Making sure the steam cloud scores a direct hit."

Buddy's parents watched and listened, silent as a breath hold. Sometimes they couldn't tell if a sound came from the puppy's mews or something else. As a few scary minutes passed, they thought they could detect Buddy's breathing quieten.

"Hun, get your sister a chair," Peggy said. "Doin' any good or not, she doesn't need to sit on the floor."

When—as if on cue—Buddy held a squirming puppy in the crook of his left arm and grabbed one of the vertical, wood slats holding up the playpen railing. He pulled himself up to a sit, puppy in lap. They no longer could here him breathing, even though his chest was heaving, heavily, as if catching up on a deficit.

Soon toddler two, Buddy's cousin Mike—right hand sliding along the top rail—inched toward Buddy and the pups. Buddy also found the top rail and tried to pull himself up while holding a puppy in one hand.

Bailey jumped toward the pen, but Mike wanted one of the puppies himself and arrived first, just as Buddy lost his grip on the rail. Buddy fell backward into Mike's chest just as Bailey reached. He held both toddlers up, then gradually eased Buddy and puppy back onto the pen floor. Mikey was holding on without help.

Dr. Conley knocked on the screen door frame. He tilted his head sideways, as if trying to hear something that strangley wasn't there. Dr. Conley called on patients at home, even on Sundays. Some days it was self-appointed.

"I'm goin' where the Lord leads me, Reverend," Dr. Conley had told his Methodist preacher one Sunday, when he felt he was being berated for poor attendance. Rev. Moley remembered the Doctor's generous tithe and let it go.

"I don't hear anyone weepin'," the doctor said, with a tentative smile. "How's the patient," he asked Bailey at the door.

"I guess you better see for yourself."

Baby Mike sat peacefully with a puppy squirming in his lap. Mike grinned at a wooden box, one side cut down to a few inches from the bottom so Mike could see the rest of the puppies wiggling and lickin' at the drippin' tops of two upside down glass bottles.

Buddy had tired and laid down in a curling position, now sucking on a thumb in his mouth. He breathed silently, but his little chest seemed to expand more than normal.

"Smells like goats milk you feedin' the puppies," Dr. Conley told Peggy. "Is it working? Who recommended that?"

"Selma said they wouldn't take cow milk. But they might like goat. Looks like she was right."

"Selma," the doctor repeated. "Seems like she turns up everywhere with that witch medicine."

"Yeah," Peggy replied. "But you know what I've notices as your nurse *and* receptionist?"

"I know what it is..."

"I've never seen Selma come to the office," Peggy interjected with just a little laugh curling at the corner of her mouth.

The doctor didn't wait on what he knew Peggy was about to say as he leaned over the playpen railing. He had his sthescopes out, listened first at several spots around Buddy's back. He tried to listen to Buddy's chest, making the sleeper move around, blindly trying to push the scope away.

The doctor gave up.

"I've heard enough to know his breathing is improving. Far from normal, but sounds like its goin' in the right direction."

He half-way held up his hand to get both parents' attention.

"Keep him as quiet as you can. Call me if he starts goin' backwards. I would try to keep puppy-playin' at least at a minimum," Dr. Conley said, nodding a resigned "No," same time with a smile of surrender.

"I'd say keep Selma away from him, too. But I know its wastin' my breath."

Peggy and Bailey favored the doctor with attempts at sweet but silent smiles.

No one spoke for awhile. The only noise was from out side, where the two boys yelled warnings to each other about their arrows returning to earth after being shot straight up through the trees.

"Teaches 'em good eyesight and fast reflexes," Bailey had explained to Mike's dad Dan earlier. Dan didn't like it until he watched for awhile and saw that the boys always shot straight up throught the big Elm's limbs. The arrows were aways deflected off one or more limbs on the way down. That slowed the arrows and made most of them land sideways.

"Hope we all see each other in church with smiles soon," Peggy said.

Sunday, June 27, 1955

Each of the swings held one man on each side of the screened, open front door at Peggy and Bailey's house. Each lay, shut-eyed on their sides, heads propped up on pillows, facing the front yard where two boys alternately played baseball, shot arrows straight up into the air, and mostly listened to the St Louis Cardinals baseball game on the radio, tuned loud as possible.

Of the boys games, the favorite appeared to be imitating the Cardinals announcers at the top of their lungs, then trying to execute the play, accurate an imitation as they believed possible.

Joe Garagiola: *Bubba Churc's got some heat on the ball. I don't think Blasingame scares much.*

Jack Buck: *If Don can get some wood on it without poppin' up, he'll probly have some cleats on a bag somewhere, first at least.*

Garagiola: *Swung on! Stike one!*

Buck: *He don' usually get nothin' but air on his bat.*

Garagiola: *High, towering fly...! Pop up! Barely made It past the infield. Ernie Banks there to haul it in.*

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Mike ran to get the boys' ball and climb the little mound that was piled up on the side of the yard in front where Buddy's Dad Bailey dozed in a still swing.

"Here comes the heat!' Mke yelled at Buddy, waiting at the home plate embedded in the yard on the side where Mike's Dad Dan lay on his swing, head up, watching.

"Dam'it Buddy! You wadn't supposed to bunt," Mike yelled at the same time chasing the ball. He turned, trying to rife-shoot the ball at the corner of the porch, their first base. It arrived long after Buddy.

"Baseball is full of surprises!" Buddy yelled back.

Mike stopped, amazed at Buddy's foghorn of a voice, not quite a bass yet, but like three base saxaphones blowing simulataneously, midrange. No surprise to anyone at Bailey's house that day, though it still got their attention. People had been commenting, for months, on Buddy's voice, coming out of supposedly permantley scarred lungs.

Mike threw down his glove and strode fast toward Buddy, a sure sign a fight was coming.

Both Daddies looked up, attention caught by the sudden silence. Neither intervened. Turned out, they didn't need to.

Selma was just then walking up the driveway. She carried big, white boxes, one secured on top of a second, all held together with loops of butcher's ties, so heavy she kept swithcing carrying hands, and listing from side to side with the weight.

Both boys saw her coming and lit out, trying to get to her first.

"I'll carry 'em for you Selma," Buddy yelled despite barely catching his breath. "They look awfully heavy!"

"Of course they're heavy. One's got my devil's food chocolate cake, the other my pineapple upside down," Selma answered back sharply, no greeting smiles. "I let you carry 'em, nothin' be left. It'd all down your heavin' little throats and all over your faces."

Selma was walking slower now, trying to look stern.

"I want some civilized people to get a bite before turnin' the heathens loose."

After the cakes had disappeared, Selma asked, "I noticed you're packin' a couple bagst. Y'all goin' somewher?"

"Buddy keeps getting' better, me an' Bailey goin' to Memphis for next weekend," Peggy said. "Haven't been alone together since Buddy come along."

"Bailey, you scraped enough together for all this?"

"I can handle it. Might have a sleep a night on the truck bed."

"Who goin' to handle those youngun's for two days?" Selma asked. "Mike and Eve workin'—one or the other or both—every day of the week. Actual jobs!"

"Well, we was kind'a thinkin'," Peggy started with a strained smile.

"Uh oh. I see where this is goin'."

No one spoke for awhile. The only noise was from out side, where the two boys yelled warnings to each other about their arrows returning to earth after being shot straight up through the trees.

### ***Monday, May 30, 1960***

Mike had thumbed a ride to town after his freshman year, on tuition-only scholarship at Skybright Methodist College. He awoke that morning to an empty apartment, his Dad \_\_\_\_\_ having left earlier for courthouse square where day laborers usually waited for a pickup truck that would take them to the limestone quarry, half-way to Enoch.

His Mom \_\_\_\_\_ caught her car pool much earlier for Jone's Hill where she taught kindergarden through sixth grade.

Mike strolled, kind of freewheelin', around an almost deserted courthouse square. Third turn onto the post office side and he saw a lanky young man, wearing a basebal cap pushed down to his eyebrows, sitting in front on a bench. Just then, the bench sitter launched a dark, brown spit stream across the sidewalk and well into the roadway.

Although It had been more than ten years, Mike knew the spitter was Benton Stagley, generally called Bent. Mike remembered the day after Christmas break show-and-tell when he was walking home with the new, toy sixgun and holster over one shoulder.

Someone crashed into him on the same side, grabbed the toy, and kept running. Mike made pursuit and soon was behind the boy he knew as Brent, grabbing the robber' belt loop and started dragging him down. The thief turned without stopping and threw the toy--hard and straight--into Mike's face.

Next thing Mike saw, between rapid blinks, was the clouds. At the same time, he felt something cool and wet on his forehead.

With a little luck—for it was a tiny town—Bent had attempted his grab-and-go on the sidewalk within the watchful gaze of Selma. Quick to Mike's side, she dabbed at the eggshaped bump growing on Mike's forehead.

Mike now weighed almost as much as Selma, but she wrapped Mike's arms around her neck, lifted him to a stand and pointed him toward her front porch. She allowed him to help them climb the two stairs, then walked the two of them through the screen door. She soon had Mike lying on a couch and had a metal bowl full of warm water. White flakes were visibly dissolving in the water.

Selma called Mike's Dad \_\_\_\_\_:

"Mike's had a little accident. Sidewalk fronta my house. He'll be alright by morning and I'll send him home."

"What happened?"

"Just a little head injury, you know, the concrete sidewalk in front."

"Awright. Call if he gets dizzy or somthin."

"Awright."

Selma had left Brent out of the story for fear it might get repeated to Mike's Uncle \_\_\_\_\_, whose hot temper was well known. \_\_\_\_\_ was likely to reach in his gun drawer and gone looking for Brent's Dad \_\_\_\_\_.

"Nothin' good could come from that," she said softly to herself.

"What?" Mike sounded like he was trying not to throw up.

Through the years, Mike and Brent had maintained a watchful but peaceful coexistence. Now, Mike joined Brent on the postoffice bench, exchanging almost solemn "Howdys."

"Enjoyin' that chaw," Mike asked with a cautious smile.

"Here, have a taste."

Mike thought a second about a polite "No," but that wouldn't do.

"Make a man oughgta ya'," Brent smirked.

Mike took as small a bite as he thought was manly, and almost immediately coughed just short of a heave. He quickly started spitting, not across the sidewalk, but barely to edge.

"What they teachin' y'all at that collich, anyway?" A question with pretended seriousness. "That's a prayin' school, ain't it. You ain't right with the Lord, yet?"

Mike knew---between hacking coughs---that Brent had his hands over his face in a mock attempt to hide his laughter.

Mike stood as soon as he got most of the burn out of his throat.

"Thank's for lettin' me try a taste, Brent, but I think I've had enough for the first time. Hope to see you around."

Mike had turned away before Brent---with tobacco-stained teeth---grinned: "Me too."

Wanting peace and friendly conversation, Mike knew a reliable choice: Selma's house less than a quarter mile away and where he would politely arrive just after lunch.

Selma greeted Mike with a crushing hug, for her a maximum display of affection. They leaned back, smiling, still in each others' hugs.

"My God, I have to lean back now to see you, you've gotten so tall. And, you're late for lunch, you but lug."

"It's okay. I just really wanted to see you, talk, hear about how you're doin', what happened in the days before I happened and since I've been away at school."

"Well! That requires parking in the swing and a big pot of sweet tea."

Selma always had a pitcher of sweet tea in the 'fridge for whenever it was needed. They settled on the front porch swing, sipping tea in silence until they silently adjusted to each other's gentle swing speed.

"Now! You better tell me what you want to talk about before I start talking about everything else," Selma said with her standard big grin.

"I want to know how you got to be called, 'Selma'. I know that's not your real first name."

"You want to know all my secrets, bad boy!" Selma laughed leaning back in the swing, head back, sounding more like a big man on cow-caller. Then a stinging slap on Mike's nearest knee, wouldn't have fooled anyone that she really was angry.

"Okay, that's a fun one," she smiled. "Goes back to when you and Buddy was still in swaddlers. Every little one wants attention when awake, you wasn't any different, and you wanted MY ATTENTION! We kept trying to get you to call me "Grandma," but you heard everybody else call me, "Shelley," my real, awful first name.

"So y'all got confused, I guess, trying to say one, then the other, and one time—I don't 'member which one of you it was—ran the two together, and it came out, "Sel,"—you'all couldn't say your 'M's' yet I guess—so it came out "Sel" plus "ma," SELMA!"

"So I thought about it and told everybody, 'I like "Sel" plus "Ma" and lot better than that old 'Shelley,' so let's leave it at what they invented! Ya'll call me 'Selma' if you know what's good for ya!" Selma giggled at the memory.

"So ever'body behaved an' I' been 'Selma' ever since."

"Shelley!" Mike said, with a smile. Selma kept a straight face. Mike promised, "Okay, I'm wiping that outa' my memory cells."

"Give me a hard one."

Mike kept a straight face, looking long and hard and at the sidewalk where—so many years ago—Brent had hijacked his Christmas six-shooter, then threw it back in his face. He took a slow, hard breath, holding onto something in his mind.

"Go ahead, ask me," Selma said. "I invited it and I can take it."

Mike stared at the porch floor through his knees. He said it softly, a little hoarse: "Why did you and Grandpaw get divorced?"

"That ain't so hard," Selma almost whispered, softly slapping his nearest knee and letting her hand tarry just a bit.

"I been tellin' that tale to myself for years. I'm easy with it now."

She looked at the sky a bit, took some, slow, easy breaths. Then cleared her throat.

"I'd just turned sixteen when we married, so I was dumb as dirt, of course." Selma cleared her throat again. "Both his mother and dad, and my mom—my father was dead by then—they were all dirt farmers, lived off the land, what livin' they had.

"I was a burden to Mom by then, they tried to marry off their daughters in those days, at that age. But I was in blind love with Hank, too, I mean I thought he was almost *divine*! Best lookin' man I had ever seen, clean, spoke to Mom and me real nice—and BIG, strong! I thought he could'a lifted wagons if he wanted to.

"And ambitious! He had traveled around a bit, looking for work and stuff, and he had seen how some folks lived better than us. He said he loved me as hard as I loved him, but we shouldn't of married 'till he could make a decent livin'"

Selma stopped to take a few deep breaths, looking steady and high into the top leaves of the big Elm tree.

Hank watched her and rubbed a right knuckle across his right eye, just in case. "I'm sorry, Selma, maybe I shouldn'ta brought it up."

"It's all right...grandson Hank...I don't forget that I'm keepin' no secrets from the chillun," she laughed softly.

"Well, so your grand dad learned there was somethin' he could do...right down his alley, cause he had no fear...he want log ridin."

"What in the...?"

"When it gets near Spring and all the logs been feeled over the Winter, Grady---that's who owned Grady's Mill over on Sawmill Creek, of course—all the logs he had milled, he had 'em rolled into the creek until early Spring. Then he hired a crew to pole 'em down to the river. That's where the real work started and men started dyin'."

"Why in the world...," Mike started, but Selma was on a roll.

"They lash 'em all together—using cables wrapped to an anchor bolt," Selma stopped for breath. "I know all this 'cause your Granddady told me how they do it."

"Okay. I think I got the picture in my mind," Mike said. "It already sounds life-threatening even before I hear the rest."

"Once they got them all moved to where the creek flows into the Big Ox, they lash 'em all together into a raft...that raft could be nearly a quarter mile long, man stationed about every hundred feet or so. I think there's a front man—guess he would be some kinda' veteran—survivor, I'd say—put up front. With a paddle! Steerin' from the front! Have a hard time seein' that. Course, I never did in real life."

"I can't either. Sounds hard and probab'ly got in a lot of trouble, if he let 'em pile up," Hank said, almost to himself, staring hard at the dark green Bermuda grass stretching far out to the now legendary sidewalk intersection where he'd suffered the big knot on his forehead.

"They stationed a man about every 190 yards on the bank side with a long pole. Supposed to push the raft away from any mud flats and anythin' slow 'em down or—Lord forbid—stop the thing and let it pile up on 'em" Selma was well into the scene in her mind. She was panting a little, wide-eyed herself. And, a'course the back man was the last one who was supposed to stop either side from gettin' snagged on the bottom or big ol' trees hanging over the river."

"Then there was a "back man," stationed on the last raft with a big long pole, watching the side men and yellin' if wasn't concentratin' Hank was a newcomer, so they put him right in front of the back man...which is where his trouble started---not that he wasn't up for it!"

Selma stopped for awhile to throw back several swallows of sweet tea.

"You're getting tired, Selma," Hank butted in. "I don't want you to keel over from telling me stories about the family. I can hear it all later."

"No, I'm into it now. I want a finish."

Hank took a few deep breaths himself, as if he were slowin' his grandma down by example.



