

A Good Christian Woman

Stacey Slaten

"Mama, when you gonna be through?"

Dora Ayers straightened, easing the ache in her back. The midday sun was always hot in June, and perspiration trickled between her shoulder blades.

"I don't know, child," she admonished Emma, her youngest daughter. "Go find some doodle bugs and play. Run along, now."

Monday was wash day, so she had scrubbed clothes most of the morning. Someone nervously cleared his throat behind her, and she turned, startled.

"Why, Uncle George!" She closed the distance between them and hugged the older man. He felt frail, as though he would snap if enough pressure was applied. She stepped back and studied George carefully. It had been five years since her uncle's last visit to Wilton, and she had thought about him often.

"What brings you to these parts?" she questioned, eager for news about the rest of the family.

George nervously shifted his weight before answering his niece. "Dora, I got a favor to ask. I'm sick, and I need to stay with you and Buddy. I know times are hard. Y'all have enough mouths to feed, but I got no place to go."

"We'll make do," assured Dora as she ushered the weak man into the house.

"Looks like it's gonna be another dry July," Buddy observed. Dora muttered an agreement as she buzzed around the kitchen. She deftly set a plate of beans and cornbread on the table, at the same time extracting her skirts from Emma's tight grasp.

"Grace, don't scald yourself," she warned her oldest daughter. "Robert, Billy, I need more kindlin' for the stove after lunch." The boys nodded and made a quick dash for the door, shoving each other playfully.

"Dora, I need some help," Uncle George called from the back porch.

"Be right there!" Dora responded, flashing Buddy a worried look. Buddy watched his wife hurry away and sighed. The crops were horrible this year, and their food supply was low. He needed to do some hunting so they'd have meat tonight, but Dora kept talking about some revival down at the Baptist Church.

"She'll give me heck if I don't go," he grumbled, pushing away from the table.

"What, Daddy?" Grace asked, glancing at him over her shoulder. Buddy watched her struggle with a heavy pot and chuckled.

"I said we need to find you a husband tonight at that revival," he teased and helped her lift the pot.

Dora spooned the last bit of soup into George's mouth. She gently wiped his face with a damp rag, murmuring to him softly. Buddy watched his wife from the doorway.

"Dora, you've done all you can do. It's been two months. It's probably pellegramy. He needs a doctor."

Dora sighed deeply and gathered the dirty dishes. She moved toward the doorway, glancing back at the limp body in the bed.

"The Green boy over in Horatio has a car to take him, but we need money for gas," Buddy continued. Dora gazed at her husband for a moment, then nodded her head.

"I can ask Miss Aida to let us borrow enough," she finally suggested, reluctant but desperate.

"She's a good, Christian woman. Surely..." Buddy trailed off half-heartedly. They knew Miss Aida Mills well. Everyone did. She owned the local store, and every family in the county owed her money.

The next day, Dora walked three dusty miles to Mills Store, stopping occasionally to remove a pebble from her shoe. The girls ran ahead, clamoring for a gumball from the store.

"Y'all wait out here," she warned them, approaching the porch of the building. She stepped into the building,

letting her eyes adjust to the darkness, and gathered her nerve to speak.

Nodding her head politely, Dora walked toward Miss Aida Mills. Standing imperiously behind the grand, oak counter, Miss Mills was an imposing figure. Several inches taller than Dora's five feet, Aida Mills was a large woman with a long nose and lips that wore a perpetual frown.

Swallowing her pride, Dora quietly explained her situation and asked for the gas money. Miss Aida fixed her with a stare, cold and piercing, before slowly shaking her head.

"No, I can't do that. The Ayers family already owes me a grocery bill. You should have thought of that before."

Dora's shoulders slumped in defeat, and she murmured, "Yes ma'am," before walking to the door. Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the sunshine and began the long walk home.

A week passed, and Dora held Uncle George's hand as he took a final gasping breath. The news spread rapidly, and that afternoon neighbors gathered at the Ayers' home. The men worked in the backyard, constructing a coffin from the rough planks Cebrin Sawyer had brought. The children had been scattered in the pasture to pick wildflowers for the grave. The women were clustered on the front porch, sewing a lining for the coffin from a motley assortment of material scraps.

"You know how Ida Mae's mother was..."

"Well, William told me that Hoover's the cause of so many folks having to eat rabbit!"

"Ellen's father got pellegramy and..."

"This is just God's way of doing things."

Dora ignored the idle chatter that floated around the porch. She threaded her needle and noticed a car, bouncing over the wagon tracks toward the house. As Miss Aida Mills stepped from the car, Dora rose to greet her stiffly.

"I was just wondering what songs we need at the funeral, and do you want the Methodist preacher or the Baptist," Miss Mills demanded, careful not to let her white dress touch the edge of the porch. Dora used the porch's

height to look down into the larger woman's eyes.

"Let me tell you something, Miss Aida. We don't need your help, your songs, or your preachers."

Miss Aida Mills stepped back in shock, then glanced at the silent women observing the exchange. She drew herself up, indignant, and walked to her car.

George Harris was laid to rest in the Wilton Cemetery, and Dora lingered after the funeral. It had been a simple ceremony—no preacher, song, or Miss Aida.

"Coming?" Buddy called, guiding the children toward the wagon. Dora wiped her eyes and started toward her family.

"Where we going, Mama?" Emma asked, shivering. The summer had turned to fall, and the wind whipped through the children's threadbare clothing.

"Cousin Sara wrote and said she was coming to visit. We're supposed to meet her at the train station," Dora replied.

When the train pulled into the depot, a feeble woman Dora recognized from her own childhood stepped down to the platform. A steamer trunk was unloaded beside her, and Dora looked at her relative in surprise. The elderly lady shrugged her shoulders helplessly.

"Dora, I've come to stay the rest of my life with y'all. You're the only folks I got."

Buddy and Dora stood for a moment, gazing at the displaced woman. Then, Dora nodded and held out her hand.

"We'll make do."