



Mary Onezima Ralph Bradley was the quintessential hostess, graciously feeding everyone who came her way. The Southern version of *The Matchmaker*, her home was a haven for the downtrodden, some for hours, others for years. These stories, both hilarious and touching, explore her complex personality and her widespread influence for Christ.

Spillin' The Beans
Stories of a Southern Mother
Striving for Christian Perfection
by Lanita Bradley Boyd

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Spillin' the Beans



Lanita Bradley Boyd

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1 - Spilling the Beans	3
Mother's Pressured Green Beans	10
2 - Waving at Miss Velma	12
Mother's Coconut Cake.....	17
3 - Just Another Day with Mother.....	19
Mother's Free Bible Pork Barbecue	23
Cornbread Cakes/Hoecakes.....	24
4 - Miss Ralph Goes to Washington	25
Aunt Dinah's Banana Cake	29
5 - Made for Each Other	32
Newly-wed Gingerbread with Lemon Sauce.....	39
6 - Third Grade Wheeler-Dealer	41
Room Mother Toll House Cookies.....	44
7 - Woe to the Breaker of the Rules!	46
Tenderized Steak/Country Fried Steak.....	53
8 - John's Golden Curls.....	55
Cornbread.....	59
Onezima's Favorite Snack: Buttermilk and Cornbread.....	60
9 - Growing Up on Vertical Plains.....	61
10 - Dreaming of a Santa Christmas	67
Onezima's Christmas Jam Cake	73
11 - The Year of the Vacation Mother	75
Tight Budget Lemon Mousse	82

12 - Firecracker Frenzy	83
Sock-It-to-Me Cake	87
13 - The Bathtub Prayer	89
Be-Careful-With-the-Can-Lid Baked Beans	95
14 - My Mother the Speedster	96
Lawrence’s Welcome Home Salmon Supper	103
15 - California, Here She Comes!	105
Grandmama Ralph’s Fried Green Tomatoes	111
16 - Never One to Spoil.....	113
17 - Welcome to the Family!.....	122
Swiss Steak.....	127
18 - Silver Threads Among the Gold.....	129
Miss Marie’s Favorite Chess Pie	134
19 - The Sting of Death	135
Green Pineapple Salad.....	143
20 - Two Houseguests Who Didn’t Leave	144
Keith’s Favorite Pineapple Upside Down Cake	152
21 - Flirting Comes Home to Roost	153
Mother’s Lasagna	158
The Only Way to Make Good Garlic Bread	159
22 - And for Your Eightieth Birthday... ..	161
Pecan Cinnamon Rolls.....	168
23 - My Mother the Writer	169
Aunt Josie’s Fried Okra.....	173
24 - Keeping Up Appearances.....	174
Clearview Cornbread Dressing.....	178

Spillin' The Beans

25 - Still Running—This Time for Office.....	180
Pimento Cheese Spread	187
26 - The ESP of MRB	188
Blueberry Delight	191
27 - A Friend in Every Port.....	193
Blackberry Cobbler	198
28 - Thirteen Again	200
Mary's Best Fruit Punch.....	206
29 - My Mother the Shopper.....	207
Onezima's Strawberry Pie.....	213
30 - Call Mary—and Then the Undertaker	214
Funeral Country Ham and Biscuits	218
31 - Driving Miss Mary	219
Aunt Mae's Chocolate Pie.....	224
32 - Ready to Go.....	226
Aunt Ava's Yeast Rolls	230
33 - A Resolute Life.....	232
My Mama's Apple Dumplings	235
34 - Over the River and Through the Woods.....	237

Spilling the Beans

“I’ve had it!” Mother yelled. Standing right there in the middle of her kitchen, she threw the bowl of hot green beans straight into the air. It landed with a crash—broken china, steaming green beans, potatoes, and chunks of bacon skittering over the linoleum floor.

We all froze—even Mother. Then, with the wild look still in her eyes, she ran into her bedroom and slammed the door shut.

We did not know what had triggered her reactions and weren’t sure what to do except clean up her mess in silence. Daddy got a dustpan and scooped up what he could, throwing it in the trash. I scrubbed the floor, cautioning all that it could still be slippery from the grease in the beans.

I served the rest of the food, and Daddy, my brothers, Steve, and I ate in silence, none of us having much of an appetite. I remembered clearly the last time I had seen Mother enter her bedroom and slam the door in anger, over six years before. I had not been living there since, so I wondered how many times in between Daddy had dealt with her habitual escape when things didn’t go her way.

I thought back to that momentous day when I’d come home from college wearing an engagement ring. Her response had been equally extreme.

“No! I don’t believe it! I can’t believe you’d come home with that ring when you know how I feel! Nothing against Steve, you know that, Lanita.” That part sounded pretty unconvincing to me. She had made it clear she thought Steve was a country yokel and not good enough for

her only daughter. She criticized his clothes, his socks, his habits, his speech, and his general “Yankeeness.” “You are too young to get married! I can’t stand it!” Mother’s voice ended with a screech to go with her wild-eyed look.

I was still trying to voice my rebuttal when she fled to her bedroom and slammed the door. “But Steve talked to Daddy...,” I said to the closed door. No response.

Daddy went into their bedroom and returned without a word. Dinnertime came and Mother did not emerge. In awkward silence, I scrounged the refrigerator for a supper of leftovers.

My brothers and I huddled about what was going on with her. It wasn’t as though the engagement was a surprise. Steve and I had been dating for over two years and surely Daddy had told her about Steve going to his classroom to ask for my hand in marriage.

Steve had told me about the episode, laughing as he said that Daddy ended with, “It’s okay with me, but I’ll have to talk to Mary about it.” He’d never heard of a father saying he’d have to talk to the mother before giving his blessing—but then, Steve was a Yankee.

“She sure has him cowed,” Steve commented. I didn’t appreciate the implied criticism, but I had no good response—certainly not denial.

Evidently we were supposed to wait for the word and the word would have been not to get married, but Steve hadn’t realized that. In all innocence, he missed the big blowout. He hadn’t come with me for the weekend because he had preaching responsibilities 100 miles away, so I took the brunt of her anger.

Gingerly, I entered her bedroom and tried to talk to her. I reminded her of how long we’d dated, what a fine Christian man Steve was, how his fine qualities reminded me of Daddy, how Steve had talked to

Daddy. She lay in bed with the covers pulled up to her chin, giving no response.

She acted as if her life was over. In March of 1965, she was only 41 and perhaps couldn't face the idea of her only daughter getting married. She would not get up, even to go to church on Sunday.

After church, when the minister, Brother Howard, inquired about where she was, I told him frankly. He adored Steve and said he thought we were a great match. I wept at his sympathetic response.

As we were finishing lunch that day, Brother Howard showed up at the door. "I need to talk to Mary," he said.

I stood outside her door, saying, "Mother, Brother Howard is here." We paused a minute, then he marched into her bedroom, closing the door behind him.

We don't know what he said, but no doubt the Spirit led him to say what she needed to hear. He came out, closing the bedroom door again, thanked us, and left. I will forever be grateful to that strong man of God.

To our amazement, within minutes Mother came out, fully dressed and acting as though nothing had happened, warm and friendly and sweet as pie. She still wasn't interested in the wedding, but she was starting to move beyond herself.

Of course I had no doubt that I'd made the right choice and had already started making wedding plans. Having studied many bride magazines, I knew certain arrangements had to be made in advance. At the time, I had no idea that when she was 19, she had fallen in love in November, became engaged in December, and married in April on her twentieth birthday. Her mother and sisters planned the wedding because she was living in Washington, D. C., at the time. If I'd known that, I might have both had more ammunition for dismissing her

criticisms and better understood her desire for me to be on my own for a while before I married.

On my next visit home, I mentioned that we were planning an August wedding, and I planned to get married on the Saturday that would have been my college graduation day. That way, we'd have a week for a honeymoon before I started my first teaching job.

"Absolutely not!" Mother said. "You are graduating from college and I want to be in the audience to see you walk across the stage. That's all there is to it! Obviously this wedding is going to happen, but it will NOT happen until you have graduated from college!" The fire in her eyes told me there was no room for argument. She had not graduated from college and was determined to see me walk across that stage to accept my diploma.

Consequently, we got married on a Tuesday evening, much to everyone's horror, but it was the only way to get in a honeymoon before I started work the following Monday. At the time, I didn't understand what was so unusual about it. Since then I've realized that weddings are expected to be on weekends.

Finally, early in June, almost three months into our engagement, Mother came in and sat down on my bed. "Well," she said brightly, "let's get started planning this wedding!" From then on, you'd have thought it was her idea.

We arranged for Mother and Daddy to meet Steve's parents, and anticipation of the event made Steve a wreck. But they quickly became such close friends that they would drive the five hours necessary to visit each other even when we weren't there.

The night before the wedding, I received another bedside visit from Mother. "So you're getting married tomorrow," she said. I'd long

ago figured out that when she started stating the obvious she was working up to something else.

She continued. "I'm just wondering if you need to talk about—you know, the bedroom part..." She trailed off.

"Nope! I think I've got that covered!" I answered, thinking not only of the books Steve and I had bought and read but also her books I'd sneaked from her closet when I was in high school. Those books had given me a new view of my parents and their relationship.

"Okay, then!" she said, rising. She kissed me good-night and was gone.

Mother could have held a grudge about our marriage for years, but she chose not to. She chose to embrace Steve and his family with open arms and open heart. It was not a joke that he was her favorite son-in-law. Sometimes my brothers noticed that she honored Steve's desires over theirs, but that was okay with them.

We were overwhelmed with the love Mother and Daddy showered on us and the lack of pressure to visit them when we lived in Kansas, North Carolina, Illinois, and Kentucky. Both of them simply welcomed us with delight whenever we could come home.

And here we were, six years later, staying with them for the summer while Steve did research for his doctoral dissertation. After a whispered consultation, Steve and I decided we could no longer stay there. The atmosphere was too stressful for us both.

I was the obvious choice to beard the lioness in her den. I went into Mother's bedroom and quietly closed the door. This time she was not in bed, but drooped, rag-dollish, in an overstuffed chair.

I sat on the floor beside her and took her hand.

"Mother," I said. "I need to talk to you. Is that okay?"

She nodded.

“I know you’re having an awful time right now. I don’t know what’s happening to you, but I know you surely don’t like breaking your favorite bean bowl and missing supper. There’s something going on here that we don’t understand, and I’m begging you to get professional help. I think you need to see a psychiatrist.”

Her head snapped up and the fire returned to her eyes. “I am NOT crazy!” she snapped. This was not the last time I would hear that proclamation.

“I’m not saying you are. I’m saying you need professional help to see what’s wrong. Do you want me to try to find a doctor for you to see?”

“Absolutely not! I can get my own doctor. I’ll talk to Sonny about it.”

Sonny was her cousin, an allergist and general practitioner that she’d recently started seeing professionally. I did not think he’d have the answer, but I figured that was a start. “Ask him to refer you to a psychiatrist,” I said. She glared at me.

“The other thing I need to talk to you about is how we are inconveniencing you and Daddy this summer. I think even though you are sweet about it, we are part of your stress. Grandmama has said we could stay with her any time, so I think we’ll do that. It’s closer to Nashville and Steve won’t have to do so much driving. We’ll go down there tonight.”

She said nothing and I rose to leave. “I love you,” I said, and kissed her cheek.

“I love you, too,” she said, but her voice was so hopeless that I truly feared for her.

We packed our things and went to my maternal grandparents' house for the rest of the summer.

The next day Mother went to see Sonny. I wondered how forthright she would be with him. At that point in our lives, I'd never accompanied her on a doctor visit, but even then I knew her propensity for wanting people to think only the best of her. This would be especially true of anyone connected with her family—all the people from Long Hollow Pike who called her by her middle name, Onezima.

Whatever she said, Sonny read between the lines enough that he suggested a day-long test for hypoglycemia. After fasting for twelve hours, she was in his office all day, with blood tests and stats being taken periodically. At the end of the day, he met with her to share the results.

“Onezima, you are hypoglycemic,” he said. He went on to explain how her blood sugar would drop and spike depending on what she had eaten or not eaten. Always watching her weight, she admitted that before that last episode she hadn't eaten anything for several hours. He assured her that if she'd eat protein-rich foods every two hours she would not have the erratic emotional outbursts she'd been experiencing.

From that moment on, cheese and peanut butter became her allies. She kept both in her office and at home and usually had Lance's peanut butter sandwiches in her glove compartment, often munching on them as she drove. She was still temperamental—that was basic to her gene pool—but at least she was no longer throwing food with her outbursts.

She called me at Grandmama's, telling me the results of the tests and asking if we wanted to come back to her house. Steve was still reeling from her explosion and I knew he was sure peanut butter would

not fix the situation, so I declined. We stayed the rest of the summer with Grandmama and Granddaddy and visited Mother and Daddy several times in an effort to maintain a good relationship.

Steve and I never forgot that landmark episode in our lives, and we were startled years later to learn that neither of my brothers remembered it. I credit their forgetting it to the fact that it was commonplace for them.

Mother's Pressured Green Beans

(Best if not thrown in the air)

If you aren't in the habit of saving your bacon grease, start with your next cooked bacon so you'll have it on hand if you really want to impress your guests with the tastiness of your green beans. If you're just cooking for your family and want to stay healthy but inauthentic, substitute olive oil.

5 cans Blue Lake cut green beans, drained
2 heaping soup spoons bacon grease
1 teaspoon crushed red pepper
¼ teaspoon black pepper
8 new potatoes, scrubbed

Put ½ inch of water in a pressure cooker and add all ingredients, stirring the first four before putting the potatoes on top. Pressure cook for 5 minutes after pressure vent starts to jiggle. Cook and return to stove. Simmer for 30 minutes or more.

Spillin' The Beans

(They'll taste most like the ones Mother and I cooked together if approximately every four minutes one person turns the burner up to medium-high and another person turns it down to low.)

2

Waving at Miss Velma

Mother and Daddy, recently married, settled in to their life in the Clearview community of Middle Tennessee where he had grown up. She had been raised on the Bible in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and already had a strong faith. At first she was offended that Daddy interpreted the scriptures more strictly than she did, but they studied the Bible together and soon she was immersed in a nearby creek. She came to believe, as members of the Church of Christ were fond of saying, that they were “not the only Christians, but Christians only.”

Her parents resented the implication, to their way of thinking, that they were wrong. They would berate the “Campbellites” at every opportunity, since one of the leaders of the movement to “restore the church of the Bible” was Alexander Campbell. (When our son was born in Campbell County, Kentucky, my grandfather was quick to say he was a “true Campbellite.”)

By fall, Mother acquired a teaching job at the country school, which was much larger than your typical “one-room schoolhouse.” One room housed grades 1-4, the other grades 5-8, and the children sat at tables in the large kitchen to eat their lunches brought from home. Mother, with her high school diploma and six months of business school, taught the older children. They called her “Miss Mary,” and the name stuck long after she was no longer teaching. Years later, at my Portland, Tennessee, elementary school, my teachers were Miss Clara, Miss Sue, Miss Floy, Miss Valley, and others, even though most

were married. I think we accepted the idea of Ms. long before Gloria Steinem touted it.

Mother and Daddy often shopped at a general store less than a mile from their house. John Armstrong, the owner, was a short, stocky man who always wore a soiled butcher's apron even though he did not cut up meat. The store carried everything from pickles in a barrel to flour in 10-pound cloth bags that the local women saved to make dresses. Penny candy was at a child's eye level and the soft drinks were in a large metal cooler whose icy water chilled the hands that reached in for a RC Cola or orange Nehi. The opener for the cold bottles was on the side of the cooler. The floors were frequently oiled to keep down the dust from the gravel road just a few feet from the door.

One afternoon, as Daddy and Mother went in for a routine purchase of some staple items, the scene was familiar—scrawny, red-haired Velma White, the married daughter of the storeowner, sitting with her mother Zelda to pick up store gossip. This day, however, Velma rose from her seat, shook her fists in the air, and yelled, "Who do you think you are, makin' my little Bobby Joe stand in the corner today? Some teacher you are. Pickin' on my poor little boy."

Mother had had a hard day with her four grades of students and at that moment had no memory of what had precipitated the punishment. She stood there as Velma's verbal attack progressed to obscenities that sent mothers with young ones scurrying from the store.

When Mother and Daddy got home--both having taken the abuse in silence--she said, "Lawrence, I'm never going to that store again."

"You don't really mean that," he responded.

He knew her well. By morning she had resolved to turn the situation around.

"I think I need some cheese," she decided that afternoon on the way home from school.

She returned to the store, where Velma's father, John, sold her the cheese. Mother, only 20 years old and new to the neighborhood, decided to address the situation directly. She said, "Mr. John, I didn't care for what happened here yesterday." He simply ducked his head and held out her change.

Mother thought that was the end of it. But the next day when she got home from school, Daddy came in, shaking his head.

"Here's our cream," he said. "It wasn't picked up."

In their rural 1943 community, Velma's husband Alfred drove the local dairy truck, picked up farmers' cream, and took it to the dairy every morning. This time he left theirs at the side of the road to sour.

After that, they had to take it to the dairy themselves, and soon they quit selling cream, for the trip to the dairy every day was more trouble than it was worth. Instead they simply gave cream to neighbors.

Beginning that day, Mother started a determined campaign constructed to overcome her enemy with kindness. Every time she saw Velma or Alfred she would smile and greet them. If she were in the car, she would give a big wave. She wrote frequent, positive notes about Bobby Joe. She showered him with love and concern, for of course she continued to be his teacher.

Toward the end of the school year, Alfred flagged down Mother at the edge of his driveway, catching her in mid-wave. *Oh, no*, she thought. *What now?*

"Miss Mary," he said, the words tumbling out as though if he paused he might lose courage. "Miss Mary, down at the dairy we have this new kind of oleomargarine. It's colored yellow, and it's in sticks."

He shoved a package at her. "I thought you might like to try some." And he was gone in a cloud of dust.

Two weeks later, he again signaled for her to stop. This time he held a cardboard cylinder. Thrusting it at her, he said, "These here are canned biscuits. Ever hear of that? No, I didn't figger you did. Thought you might like to try 'em."

Mother had made a point to which Miss Velma's husband, at least, had responded. But she did not stop there.

As the years passed, Mother and Daddy parented, taught, farmed, and worked in their local church. We children knew nothing of the original conflict between Mother and Miss Velma. All we knew was that Mother always reminded us, "Wave at Miss Velma, children," every time we passed her house, whether or not we could see her. Mother suspected that Miss Velma peered out from behind the curtains of the neat white cottage and would be pleased that we waved at her.

Year after year when the church put together fruit baskets at Christmas, Mother volunteered to take a basket to Miss Velma and Mr. Alfred, as we called them. Each year when the route for the carol singers was being planned, Mother would quietly add their names, even though they were neither elderly nor shut-in.

I never understood what I perceived as my mother's fondness for this bitter, tight-lipped woman. Sometimes, as the oldest child, I'd be the one sent to Miss Velma's door with the message, "Here's some coconut cake Mother thought you'd enjoy," or "Mother thought maybe you could use these extra tomatoes since we have a good crop this year." But most of the time it was Mother herself who went to the dreaded door, smiling all the way up the front walk.

Every summer our rural church would have a "gospel meeting" and Mother would always invite Miss Velma and Mr. Alfred to no avail.

Finally, when I was a teenager, Mother came bouncing in from one of her many trips to Miss Velma's. "Miss Velma and Mr. Alfred are coming to church tonight!" she announced, eyes brimming with tears.

"Great!" we all responded, secretly fearing they would let Mother down.

Not only did they come that night, but also the next night and the next. Emboldened, Mother said, "Miss Velma, what if Lawrence and I come over and study the Bible with you and Mr. Alfred?"

Miss Velma contemplated her answer, then nodded, answering in her country accent. "I think that's a good idee."

The studies touched their hearts and they were baptized into Christ, remaining faithful Christians for the rest of their lives. From then on, Mother showered Miss Velma with love as another sister in Christ.

After I married and lived out of state, I rarely saw Miss Velma, though sheer habit brought a wave at the times I occasionally passed her house. Sometimes Mother would mention that Miss Velma had given her a quilt top, or some preserves, or a purchased gift.

One day when I was visiting Mother, Miss Velma, stooped and trembly, stopped by for a visit, driven there by middle-aged Bobby Joe. "You know, Lanita, your mama is the finest woman that ever lived," she said. "I never had a friend like her--ever. I never had a sister, either, but if I'd uh had one, I'd uh wanted her to be just like Mary. You're a lucky young woman to have a mother like her."

I smiled, thinking my usual *if you only knew her like we do*, but I didn't think much of her comments at the moment. After she left, Mother decided to tell me the history of their friendship. "I do love her now," Mother said, "but there were many years when I didn't. I kept thinking that I was a Christian and the only way she would ever change was to experience how a Christian is different from other

people. I didn't want Satan to win on this one." She smiled. "And it has paid off over and again.

"Kind of like Miss Alice Moore. You know she couldn't stand me because she felt like Morgan had to share the song-leading with Lawrence when we moved here. But I kept being friendly, and the turning point was her coconut cake. Once I raved about it and asked her for the recipe, she became my friend. There are all kinds of ways to turn enemies into friends."

Now as I encounter difficult people in a variety of situations, my natural tendency is to turn away and deal with them as little as possible. But I remember the example of my mother and remind myself not to give up on the unlovable but instead to "wave at Miss Velma."

Mother's Coconut Cake

(It can melt the heart of your fiercest enemy!)

Mix Duncan Hines or Betty Crocker* white cake mix, following directions on box, *PLUS* add 1 additional tablespoon oil and beat 3 times as long as directions say. Cook 5 min. less or until toothpick comes out clean.

Punch holes in the end of a coconut and drain the water. Strain. Break coconut, peel, and grate.

Frosting: In the top of a double boiler over simmering water, combine:

2 egg whites³/₄ cup sugar a pinch of salt¹/₄ cup cold water
2 tablespoons white Karo syrup¹/₂ teaspoon cream of tartar

Beat with a hand electric mixer at high speed for about 5 to 7 minutes, until the frosting stands in definite peaks. Remove from the water and continue beating for several minutes until the frosting has cooled, no longer feels hot to your finger, and stands in soft, smooth, billowy peaks. Beat in 2 teaspoons vanilla. Sprinkle coconut water on each layer before frosting. Sprinkle grated coconut on each layer, top, and sides of frosted cake.

* “Only use Pillsbury if you have no other choice. It never does as well.” Quote from MORB

My note: If there’s a relative you’d like to punish in the guise of asking her to help, just have her hold the mixer over the steaming double boiler all that time—not a job for the faint of heart!



Mary Onezima Ralph Bradley was the quintessential hostess, graciously feeding everyone who came her way. The Southern version of *The Matchmaker*, her home was a haven for the downtrodden, some for hours, others for years. These stories, both hilarious and touching, explore her complex personality and her widespread influence for Christ.

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