

*The several short stories have different settings and outcomes. Moral messages are hidden or abandoned with surprising outcomes.*

# **Readings for a Lazy Day**

## **Collection of Short Stories to Brighten Life's Gray Times**

By Lagoon Writer's League of South Florida  
Edited by D K Elliott

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# Readings for A Lazy Day

Edited by  
D. K. Elliott  
Lagoon Writer's League  
of South Florida

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# It Was Enough

by Mary Maguire

*Somewhere in the unsettled west—a long time ago.*

Ol' Sam scooped out three fistfuls of flour from a leather pouch, threw them in his dead partner's hat, and stirred it up to make it fluffy. A five-finger pinch of baking powder and a three-finger pinch of salt went in next; he finger-stirred them together. From a tin box, he dug out an egg-sized lump of lard and sniffed it. *A little rancid, but still edible.* He blended the fixings with a little water; stopping twice to scrape the lard—along with dirt packed in over the course of previous weeks—from under his fingernails, put that in the batter and chuckled. *My secret ingredient. Nobody makes biscuits better'n me.*

After the meal, he wrapped the remainder of biscuits and roasted owl, packed his gear on Hack, his horse, and stomped out the fire. *I don't wanna do what I gotta do, but I promised Smiley.* Sadness engulfed him. Finding Smiley's family was the easy part—facing them would be hard.

\* \* \*

The house near the edge of town was right where Smiley said it would be. *Only a little more run-down than Smiley described it.* Ol' Sam didn't need to knock. The door opened a bit, and a rifle barrel appeared.

He put his hands over his head. "I'm jus' lookin' for the family of Joshua Benton—known as Smiley. Might you be them?"

"Who wants to know?" a woman's voice said.

"Sam Miller, ma'am. Smiley and me was partners for almost twenty years. I'm looking for his ma and brother, Joe Benton. Might you be his ma?"

"His mother's been dead for eleven years. Where's Smiley?"

"He's dead, too, ma'am. That's what I come here to tell ya."

The barrel lowered and the door opened.

*A white woman—a pretty white woman. I didn't know Smiley had a sister.* Ol' Sam hadn't seen a white woman in fifteen months except for a few dilapidated whores.

She opened the door wider. "You don't need to stand outside there, Mister Miller." Her voice was soft. "Do come in." She stepped aside and beckoned him in.

"Yes'm. Thank you ma'am." He removed his hat and grinned. *Her eyes are so large and striking... yet, kinda'*

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*sad, too.* He glanced at her bodice and waist, and held his breath. *As pretty as pretty gets.*

He stepped over the doorsill onto a slight depression in the dirt floor.

“Would you have a seat, please?”

He scanned the room. *There’s only one chair.* “Thank you, ma’am.”

“I have a pot of coffee in the hearth. Would you like some?”

“Yes’m.”

She wrapped her apron around her hand, lifted a large pot from the embers, poured steaming black coffee into the cup before him, and returned the pot.

His eyes followed her. “You gonna have a cup, too?”

“No, I had one a minute ago.”

He looked around; there was no other cup. Only a wooden box, one plate, a spoon and a fork sat on the table. The entire room was empty except for the table, the chair he sat in and a straw mattress with a blanket in a corner.

She opened the box, removed a biscuit and put it on the plate. “I’d offer you more, but I don’t have much left.” Then she smiled. “But I do have some jam I made last month.” She reached into the box again and placed a jar of jam, the spoon and biscuit in front of him.



*Oh, Lordy.* He spread the biscuit with jam and munched it. *She's right pretty, but she can't make biscuits worth a darn. And she must'a made the coffee a month ago, too.* "The jam's good, ma'am. Ain't—I shouldn't say ain't. Ain't ain't in the dictionary. But I can't remember what word to use in place of ain't—ain't tasted anything this good in a month of Sundays."

"Would you like more coffee, Mister Miller?" Before he could say no, she moved toward the hearth, skirting the edge of a design like a Persian carpet drawn into the earthen floor. Even a fringe had been scratched in at both ends of the design.

*Beautiful.* The border displayed a perfection of symmetry and repetition. *The center must be a story of her life—a big house with children playing in a garden. Flowers, trees and rippling pools of water everywhere. Horses running around the edge, but only one with a rider—I wonder what that means.*

"Mister Miller?"

"Yes ma'am. Just admiring your... er... rug. Is it your life there?"

She glanced at the floor design. "Dreams, Mister Miller... just dreams."

"Are you Smiley's sister, ma'am?"

"Sister-in-law. Joe and I married about fifteen years ago."

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“Is he around?”

“Sadly, no. He got himself killed a year ago.” She lowered her head, turned away from him and remained still.

“I’m sorry, Missus Benton, real sorry.”

She turned her back to him and poured more coffee in his cup—standing closer than before.

*She smells nice—clean—like soap, maybe. And something else—a woman’s odor.* Ol’ Sam responded to her closeness and her scent. He crossed one leg over the other and placed his hand to hide his crotch. *I hope she doesn’t see it. I wonder if she can smell me as well. I should’a bathed when I had the chance last month. At least, I shaved last week.*

“Marianna. Everyone calls me Marianna. You may, too.”

“That’s a right nice name, Marianna.” It pleased him to say her name. *Marianna... Marianna.* He looked up at her. “Everyone calls me Ol’ Sam.”

“Old?”

“Old enough, I guess. I had a son named after me. We called him Young Sam. But he’s gone, now, too.” His brow puckered, and he lowered his head. “The measles took him when he was seven. But my name stuck.”

“You have a wife, then?”

“Don’t know. After Young Sam died, I jus’ had to be alone and went off wanderin’ for ‘bout a year. When I had enough, I went home to settle down for good—maybe start another family. But the cabin was burnt to the ground and nobody knew her whereabouts.” He shook his head. “Haven’t seen or heard ‘bout her in many a year.”

“I’m so sorry, Mister Miller.” Marianna returned the pot to the hearth and leaned against the fireplace brick. “Have you just been drifting ever since?”

“Yep, me and Smiley. Drovin’ mostly. With no family left, I didn’t know what else to do, but be a drover.”

“How did Smiley die?”

Ol’ Sam frowned. “I shot him. Didn’t mean to, but I sure as hell did. Beg your pardon for swearin’.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Well... I don’t know what we ever did to attract the attention of four of the meanest men you ever saw. But, they definitely had somethin’ against us. One night, they was drunk and we wasn’t, and when they started shootin’, we killed two of ‘em easy like. Smiley was a good shot. Did you know that?”

Marianna shook her head.

“After that, the other two stayed on our tail all the way from the Ozarks to Nebraska. Thought we finally got rid of ‘em, when—didn’t they show up in a little town near Omaha. They was easy to spot ‘cause they both wore

yellow shirts, like they was a club uniform or somethin'. Everyone called 'em The Yellow Shirts.

"Well... when we saw those two, we got out'a town fast and didn't even build a fire that night, so's they wouldn't find us. But the next night, I woke up to the noise of someone sneakin' up on us and got a shot off real fast." Ol' Sam shook his head, and drew in a quick breath. His voice quivered. "Ceptin' it was Smiley."

Ol' Sam cleared his throat. "Before he died, Smiley asked me to take Splotch—that's his horse—and gear to his family. So's I came lookin' for 'em. Guess you're all that's left of family, now.

"I guess I am."

"How come a fine looking lady like yourself ain't got hitched again?"

"There's not much good to pick from around here. They're either too young, already spoken for, or not worth a wooden nickel. Joe was a good one, and I still miss him."

Ol' Sam paused and nodded in understanding. "Well... I'll be leavin' Splotch with you, now. All of Smiley's gear is on him." He headed toward the door.

"Please wait, Sam. I don't know how to thank you. Maybe, if you could do a favor for me, I could ask you for dinner."

He smiled. "Yes'm. Anything."

She glanced around the room. “As you can see, I’ve sold or traded everything to keep going, but if you could sell some of Smiley’s gear down at the livery stable, and pick up a few things at the grocer’s I could fix you a nice dinner.”

He grinned. “I surely can.”

“I’ll make a list.”

Ol’ Sam left Marianna’s with a joy he couldn’t recall ever having, untied both horses and then remembered. *Shucks. I forgot the list.* He knocked on the door once—but the door, not having the latch dropped in place—swung open easily.

Marianna knelt on the floor with a sharpened twig in her hand, sketching on her rug design. She looked up. Her face not only showed surprise, but a bit of embarrassment. “Oh. I thought you had gone.”

“I forgot the....” He studied the new figure in her dream area. It was him. *No doubt about it. That’s my rumped hat and big boots—curled toes and all.*

They studied each other’s faces. But neither spoke.

The long silence made him uneasy. He tried to fill the void. “Ah...” *Well, speak up, ya ol’ coot. What’s the matter with ya? The cat gotcha tongue?*

She stood, tilted her head and gave him a questioning look. “Does the cat have your tongue, Sam?”

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He laughed. “I was thinking the same thing. My tongue, not yours.” He grabbed the list in one quick swipe and ran out the door.

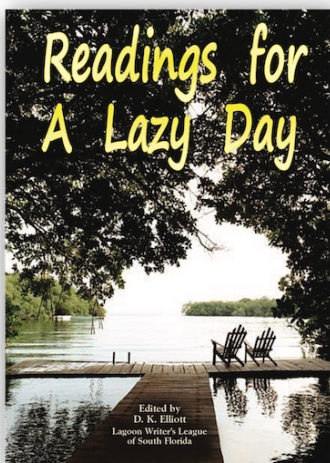
*I think she likes me. Me!* He skipped a few steps and leapt onto his saddle with an agility he didn’t know he had anymore. “Yee haw.” *I feel happy enough for it to last me the rest of my life.*

The livery stable was at the other end of town. All the way there, he pictured Marianna’s face and soft cultured voice, the way she glided and the genteel movements of her slender hands. *I gotta find a barber and a bath house. Maybe get me a new shirt and pants, too.*

Distracted, he never saw the two men in yellow shirts. It was too late by the time he heard the shot. Ol’ Sam flew from his horse as though a rope had jerked him off.

An intense weight burned in his chest, and he couldn’t move his head. Thumping hooves came close, paused but a moment, and a louder thumping passed on. He opened his eyes—Splotch and Hack were gone. *Why’s it getting so dark out? It’s too early to get dark.* And the light faded completely. *Marianna....*

AMEN



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