

September Bread

Louise Dunford pulled the cookie sheet of September bread out of the oven, flipped it over onto another cookie sheet, and began spreading warmed butter over the crispy crust. Ida Arnold had called to say she was coming by to check on her, with the hope that Louise had a pot of coffee on and some fresh September bread.

Neither woman knew why it was called September bread only that Louise's mother had made it some mornings for breakfast instead of biscuits. More buttermilk than flour created a light, crispy slab of bread, while more flour made it rise. Ida had told Louise that she liked it either way – as long as the crust was crispy and buttery.

Before Ida's call this morning, Louise had another plan for her day off from work.

She worked full-time from Wednesday through Sunday cleaning rooms and making beds at Pleasant View Motel. That, and her husband's death, altered her former daily routine.

As Louise finished buttering the bread, she heard a knock at the kitchen door. There was no telling now how the rest of the morning would go, but she had wonderful news to share.

"Hey there woman, how you been?" Ida asked Louise as she headed straight to the dinette table and her usual chair. "Just came by to cheer you up, not that I know if you need any cheering. Oh, let's face it, everyone needs a little now and then. How you doin' honey?"

"Fine," Louise responded. "Honestly, I am doing just fine."

"You still got this old table, huh? I'd of thought by now you would've gotten a new one with the insurance money Elmo left you."

"It's holding up," Louise said. "Elmo bought it just after we married more than fifty years ago! You married about that time, too...."

"Yeah, but I ain't got much from those days, not even Arnold since he passed on," Ida sighed.

"We sure miss 'em," said Louise as she rolled her eyes upward.

They both laughed.

Louise put a plate in front of Ida. "I guess you're ready for a slice"

"You know it. I'm so hungry my stomach's gnawing at my backbone. Oh, and a cup of coffee – no cream," Ida said as she scanned the room. The dinette table was crowded with boxes of what looked like household items, while other boxes lined the wall leading to the back door.

"Home shopping network?" Ida asked, nodding her head in the direction of the boxes.

Louise grinned.

"That's grief for you. Pure and simple. They say don't made big decisions or major purchases the first year," Ida said. "Oh, I wouldn't mind if you cut an extra big slice for me."

Louise accepted her comment as a compliment.

"So, how have you been," Ida asked again, her words muffled by the bread in her mouth.

"You can tell me, really I mean. After all, it's been a while and I am sure you've been going through a lot, just like me."

"Everything is fine," Louise said through a wide smile. "Really."

"Really? You know when people say 'really' they really don't mean it. They're trying to convince themselves of something – leastways that's what my daughter tells me. Ida thought there was something awkward about Louise's smile. In response, her brow furrowed like a narrow field ready for tobacco planting. "That smile real or fake. You can be honest with me. Ain't like you to have some big grin on your face, Louise. What 'chu been up to?"

"Nothing much, but I did make one wise purchase with Elmo's money," she smiled.

"What did you buy?" Ida asked, leaning forward in her chair as if she was about to hear a secret.

Louise opened her mouth to create a wide smile.

Ida looked puzzled. "Cat got your tongue?"

"No Ida, I bought me some teeth," Louise said with newfound pride.

"Waddaya mean you got yourself some teeth? Didn't you have any before?" Ida asked.

"Not for more than twenty years," smiled Louise. "Didn't you notice how I usually covered my mouth with my hand when I talked or smiled?"

"Woman, if it crossed my mind at all I probably just thought you were shy, you know – backward." Ida leaned further across the table to get a closer look. "I never noticed or never paid it any attention. They look all right, I guess. They're kinda white, like a new porcelain sink or a toilet."

Louise straightened up in her chair and closed her mouth. She wasn't sure how she had expected Ida or anyone to react to her investment. Maybe she shouldn't bring it up in the future – just see if anyone notices.

"It looks a little strange on you– that smile," Ida said. "As for me, I don't have nary a thing to smile about these days. Diabetes, cancer, you name it. I've been taking lots of pills. They give me diah...."

"I know what you mean," Louise interjected. "Why I had so many prescriptions for a while that I should have invested in a pharmacy. But I'm feeling better now...."

Ida extended her coffee cup toward Louise.

"Maybe so, but you don't know how many pills a day I have to take for fibromyalgia, lupus, and that cancer I had. No, you can't begin to imagine..." trailed Ida.

"How could you know? You're a hard woman to catch up with these days," Ida said after she washed another bite of bread down with a sip of coffee. "Shew-wee. That's good. You don't mind if I cut another piece, do you?"

"Help yourself," said Louise as she poured a little stream of cream into her coffee cup.

"As I was saying, I gotta bone to pick with you – 'bout you not being home anymore. Why, two weeks ago when I had that little bit of cancer taken out of my gut, I asked the doctor to put it in a jar with a preservative of some kind so I could show people what cancer looks like. I wanted to show you but you weren't home, and you don't have an answering machine to know I've called with something to tell you. Fortunately, that preservative has kept the cancer intact. Wanna see it? I got the jar with me." Ida reached down into her oversized purse on the floor.

Louise grimaced.

"Here it is," beamed Ida as she placed the jar on the table in front of Louise. "Have you ever seen anything as ugly as this here cancer?"

Louise thought for a moment. She had seen plenty of things that seemed ugly to her in the rooms at Pleasant View Motel where she worked. Her Pentecostal upbringing did not prepare her for worldly things, let alone things obscene.

"Hey, you listening?" asked Ida, as she waved a hand in front of Louise.

"I was just thinking about something ugly," replied Louise.

"Uglier than this here cancer?" Ida held up the jar.

Louise remembered her first sight of a girlie magazine. Actually, she had found two magazines one morning in Room 303. One magazine had been under a pillow, opened to the middle where a single photo spread across two pages. The girl was pretty but the photo was

shameful. The other magazine was in the bathroom, on the floor, folded over. Yep, an ugly sight on that page, she sighed.

"Well, Louise, have you?" Ida asked, tapping the table.

Before she could respond, Louise remembered the first, white, deflated balloon in between sheets on a bed in Room 112. Similar flat, wet, balloons fell out of the fold of a top sheet as she threw it off the bed.

Staring at the messy bed, she recalled the day when Elmo had taken her to the county fair. It was there that a fellow used balloons to make critters or dogs or cats or crowns. But who, she had wondered, would be doing that in bed in a motel? She told another maid what she found. After the maid roared with laughter and told her the purpose of the "balloons", Louise nearly choked. After work that day, she went to Piggly Wiggly to purchase a pair of rubber gloves.

Before working at the motel, the ugliest thing Louise thought she had ever seen was a furrow web spider, which had made its home outside her kitchen window. Every night from spring to fall, before she turned off the kitchen light, she examined the creature. Yes, it was so ugly that she could hardly resist looking at it and the exotic markings on its belly. However, visual experiences at the motel have since taught her to resist the inclination to stare or examine too closely.

"Well, Louise...I'm waiting," Ida sighed. "Why if I wasn't Holiness, I'd tell you this cancer looks damn ugly, 'scuse my French. And this ain't the worst kind. Lordy, no. They tell me there's all sorts of cancers out there and if you get one it's likely you can get another. I don't want no other ugly thing like this in my body. Why, my body's ugly enough at this age. Besides, where they cut me to get to this cancer is all the ugly I can handle. Wanna see...?"

Before Louise could utter a word, Ida jumped up and hiked her cotton housedress above her belly. Louise, trapped in her chair with no means of polite escape, couldn't help but stare at the naked frame in front of her. The stitches were the least of all the uglies.

"Uh, more coffee?" Louise asked Ida, attempting to scoot by her to the counter.

"Uh, sure," Ida replied as she put her dress back in place. You okay? I'm just trying to make you feel better. Least you don't have a zipper like mine. That's what they call 'em, you know – stitching like that. They call 'em zippers."

Louise decided to keep her mouth zipped and sip coffee instead. There would be no stopping Ida until she was done or the September bread and coffee were gone.

"Seems like you have changed since Elmo died. More quiet like. Not that you've ever been much for talking or getting out and seeing folks. No, that's not you either. You're what they call a homebody. It's just you seem out of it, a bit far off. You poor thing. All secluded up here," Ida said.

"Now, on the other hand, you ain't gone and gotten yourself all citified since you started working in town, have you? You know I can't stand that type – townies we used to call them. Folks who thought they were better than us because they had fancier stuff. We had stuff, too. It was just different stuff. *Right?*"

"Right," Louise said. "It's just these days my legs last long enough for me to get my work done at the motel and get home. I'm crippled by six o'clock."

"Woman, you don't know what crippled is. Why just the other day I was walking over to Shirley's house after Crum's wake to see if I could be of any help. Whew, you should have seen the amount of food on the tables and all the people crammed wall-to-wall in that small house. Well, all of a sudden, I turned my ankle at the front door. A few of Shirley's guests helped me to

the couch in the living room where they propped my right leg on a pillow. Guests leaned over me, asking how they could help. I tried not to make a big do about it, so I said just little something to drink might be nice. Oh, and since I was feeling a bit dizzy, I said something to eat would be good-- just a little nibble, nothing much. You know what I mean. After all, I hadn't had breakfast that day either. Since my Arnold passed on last year, I'm not much for cooking. I don't suppose you are either," Ida said.

Louise smiled. "By the time I..."

"As I was saying," Ida continued like a trotter wearing blinders, "one of Shirley's guests asked me if I wanted some of Barbara June's potato salad. You know no one makes potato salad like Barbara June. Don't get me wrong. Your potato salad is just fine. Yep, just fine. But I think the difference has to do with her recipe for the sweet pickles she puts in it. She dices them real small."

Louise sipped her coffee.

"Oh, and then someone asked if I thought I could eat some of Ruth Ann's chicken and rice casserole. There's no thinking to an invitation like that! You and I both know ain't another soul in the holler, not you or me or anyone else, who can make that casserole like Ruth Ann. No ma'am. And, she guards her recipe more closely than my sister does a possible winning pull-tab at bingo."

"Another slice of bread?" offered Louise.

"Don't mind if I do if it cheers you up for me to do so," said Ida as she spread a pat of soft butter on a slice. "I mean, I don't want to hog the whole thing or anything like that."

"No, I made it for you Ida," Louise said.

"Well, back to my story. I gladly ate what was given to me that day," Ida continued. I tried not to draw attention to me. After all, the center of attention was to be Crum. From the couch, I could see folks going into the parlor for the viewing. Thank goodness Shirley kept the pocket doors to the dining room closed. I didn't get to see much else, let alone go see Crum in my condition. Before long, my ankle had swelled and turned purple like a big *I-talian* eggplant. You get the picture?"

Louise nodded her head.

"Well, as I was saying, my ankle swelled twice its size to the point that I couldn't walk on it. I was crippled. For all I knew, for all any of us knew, it was broken. Unfortunately, that meant some of Shirley's guests had to carry me home. They were followed by a few other kind folks who walked across the road to my house with plates of food to help me get by for the next few days. After all, there was no tellin' then how long I'd be laid up. Someone offered to take me to Dr. Branson's. You know, he doctors down at the lead mines where Arnold and Elmo worked. I said a heating pad and a six -pack, I mean a cold pack, might bring down the swelling. I'd try that first, I told them. I tried calling you, but, again, you weren't home and you don't have no answering machine so a person could leave a message and let you know how they've been hurting. Let me tell you now, you don't know what crippled is until you had an experience like that one."

"Guess not," Louise sighed, ready to change the subject. "Work keeps me busy. I forgot, after being home for forty years, what it was like to work full time."

"What happened to Elmo's insurance money? Didn't he leave you enough?" asked Ida as she wiped her fingers with a napkin. She reached for the near empty cup of coffee and decided to

push it away. She knew one more sip would make the September bread in her belly swell for sure.

Ida surveyed the kitchen, which was filled with home shopping network purchases.

"You still buying a bunch of stuff off that TV shopping show?" she asked.

Louise sighed. "No. I've gotten over that habit. Wasted too much money on things I didn't need. I don't know what got into me. I guess I was adjusting to Elmo being gone."

"You mean you were adjusting to having a few peas in your pocket that you never had before," Ida retorted. "Arnold never let me have a dime either. Only way I ever had any money was to skimp on some groceries every two weeks to set a little aside for a rainy day. Can't say as I miss those days of sneaking around and hiding money or the things I bought. Still, sometimes when I have bought something since he's been gone, I find myself trying to hide it. Guess I'll get over that someday."

"Well, the few insurance peas I had are long gone and Social Security isn't quite enough to give me anything extra. At least I managed to get my teeth before the money was all gone," Louise smiled. "Working at the motel helps, but it is back-breaking for sure...."

"Back-breaking!" interrupted Ida. "Shew-wee, you don't know what back-breaking is until you sit for eight hours a day in one place at the sewing factory. That's what I did before I married Arnold. It may be fifty years ago, but I can feel that ache crawl up my spine just thinking about it. Imagine, sittin' on a hard, wood chair with a cushion that's gone flat and a weak back to it. You didn't dare lean back in hope of any relief. No ma'am. And, when you was sewing a sleeve or whatever, you was leaning over in an unnatural way with shoulders rounded and bent forward. Body wasn't meant to be in that position all day. That's why I believe I am hunched

over today after sewing in the shirt factory for several months before I married Arnold. How long you been down at that motel now?"

"More coffee?" Louise asked, noticing the pot was almost empty.

Ida paused. "Guess so, if you don't mind to also warm up that last slice of September bread. So, how long have you been down at that motel? Kinda sleazy from what I hear. Can't imagine why you are still there. Isn't it nasty work, cleaning up after travelers who don't care what you think of them or their habits because they're gonna be long gone?"

"I want the extra money and I don't mind the work as much as I thought I would. Nothin' a pair of rubber gloves can't handle. You get used to it – for the most part," Louise said as she thought of beer bottles, girlie magazines, and deflated, white "balloons" crossed her mind.

"Been there since Elmo died, nearly a year," she continued as she put the last slice of bread into a heated copper skillet where butter had begun to melt.

"Ohhh, thank you so much for the hot butter," Louise sighed. "I don't use my stove anymore. Why do you use that copper skillet instead of nuking the bread in the microwave?"

"Makes it taste crispy instead of tough," Louise replied, "Besides, this was my first purchase on the home shopping network and I really like it," she beamed. "Really."

"There you go with that smile again," Ida said.

"Well, I've got good things to smile about," Louise said as she placed the grilled bread onto the plate in front of Ida.

"Well, since you've quit spending money that way, waddaya plan to do with it - anything?" Ida asked as leaned down to inhale the aroma of the bread.

"I plan to put some aside to buy a bus ticket to go to California to visit my first great-granddaughter when she arrives in the fall," Louise said. "There's still much more to put away for that to happen."

Taken aback that she had not heard about the baby sooner, Ida wiggled in the chair. "First I heard of this," she said. "But then it has been several months since we've talked. Well, I guess life moves on. No grandchildren or great-grandchildren in my future. No, doesn't look like it for me. But good for you. Yeah, that's what I say, good for you," Ida said quietly.

"Thank you, Ida," Louise smiled as she picked up the dishes and put them in the sink.

"Well, I see we are out of bread and coffee. I am out of time, too. I only came to cheer you up. Oh, Ida continued, and you never answered my question. What one thing bugs you most about workin' at that old motel? There's gotta be something even rubber gloves can't take care of," she chuckled.

"Well, since you ask, if I had enough money to own a motel of my own, I'd run a motel for bald-headed men only. For now, I'll just smile all the way to bank with my new teeth and my paycheck," Louise grinned.

Ida picked up her purse from the floor and headed to the back door. "Come see us, hear?" she said as she left.

Louise closed the door, walked toward the living room, and plopped down into the recliner. With the remote in hand, she turned on the television. Now her day was going as planned.