It was five a.m. when the sheriff came to our door to tell us that our mama was dead*.* His hat was covered with freshly fallen snow. On an ordinary winter morning, snow wouldn’t have been an oddity, but my mother died on the first Saturday of September. Saturday’s in September usually meant evening fish fries and pancakes for breakfast. But this Saturday morning brought forty-degree weather, snow, and a dead mother.

I tied Mama’s sweater around my waist (something I had always done in an effort to hide my wide hips) and opened the door. The sheriff studied his shoes as if his script for this morning call was written on them. He didn’t know how to tell us that mama was dead. He knew that I was the oldest in the home at that time, but that I was only fourteen.
“Where did they find her?” I asked

“Right by Clevettes market- not far from here at all,” he said

“*Right by*? Where?” I asked

“In the road,” he mumbled. “We don’t know if she was hit by a car or thrown from a moving vehicle, but she was found in the road by a group of teenagers walking home from a party.”

“Did you call my daddy?” I asked.

“We’re still trying to find your father” he said. “Evidently, he didn’t go to work last night.”

He stood on the porch and watched for any sign of sadness of sadness. I *was* sad. I *wanted* to cry. But suddenly I couldn’t speak, all I could think of was my mama would not be coming home.

 He left me on the porch clutching the sleeves of mama’s sweater. I untied the sweater from my waist and pressed the collar to my nose. I inhaled as deeply as I could. It smelled like mama.

It reminded of night before mama died, when she had spent hours trying on dresses and hats. She tried to persuade me to try on her purple and white polka-dot tank dress. I wore a size 16, and was extremely self-conscious about my size.

“Ladybug, don’t you know that you are beautiful?” Mama asked. She always called me “Ladybug.”

“No, Mama, I’m fat. Everyone says so.” I told her.

“And fat ain’t pretty?” She asked. “Where you been, girl? You better be proud of those hips. Those are child bearin’ hips!” she chuckled.

“Can I go out with you tonight, mama?” I asked.

“Not tonight. I got plans, Ladybug” she said. “And this is one night you can’t come with me.” She squeezed her ample hips into her orange dress, grabbed her purse walked out the front door.

A little over an hour after the sheriff left, I could hear footsteps on our back porch. The steps belonged to none other than the Elm Street Baptist Church’s Women’s Auxiliary Club, also known as “The Death Patrol”. They were a group of women who took it upon themselves to visit the families of the dead. They would always show up hours before the formal announcement of the death had even been made, and they always brought food, Bibles, and sometimes even a funeral outfit for the deceased.

The group always traveled in groups of five or six and they usually came well before they were invited. They were there when my baby cousin died suddenly, and they came when Grandma didn’t make it home from the hospital. They were always there when death arrived, a morbid welcome wagon without the formal welcome.

I wanted nothing more than for everyone to just leave us alone. Daddy would be home soon, and I foolishly thought that maybe he could make mama alive again. I could hear the ladies whispering all morning about daddy.

*“You know he spent last night with that ol’ loose girl up the street. The one from New York,”* one of them said*.* They all nodded and continued to prepare the food.

*“And you know she’s ‘spectin a baby too”* another lady whispered. *“That Sophie never could keep a man for long”.*

*Sophie was my mother’s name.*

I wanted to run into my mother’s kitchen and yell “Get out! Get out of my house! No one wants you here!” But instead I cuddled up beside my baby sister Jackie, and fell back to sleep.

We were all still sleeping when daddy finally came home later that morning. He came into our room and sat his lunch cooler on the floor. When I looked inside I saw remnants from the previous nights’ dinner my mother had packed for him: A chicken bone, biscuit crumbs and a half-filled jar of sweet tea. *Had he shared this meal with his girlfriend?* I wondered. When daddy caught me looking into the cooler, he immediately slammed it shut.

“Daddy” I said.

“Yes, baby?” he answered.

The light from the sun was shining in his face. His eyes were sullen, dark and seemed to have a depth I had never seen before. He looked sad, but more afraid than anything else. “Daddy, what happened to mama?” I asked.

He began to cry. The women in the kitchen heard his weeping and they all came running into our room. “James!” they said, “James get up and act like a man. Your girls need you. Sophie is gone now, and there’s nothing you can do about it now.” But Daddy was hurt, he *needed* to cry, and he needed to be able to grieve with his children.

“Leave him alone, please!” I said. And like a marching band they all turned at the same time and headed back to the kitchen. I could hear the front screen door slam shut behind them. They were obviously mad, but they had completed the task they had set out to do: prepare food for us.

I asked daddy again what happened to mama. Was she killed? Did she have an accident? Was he with her? He didn’t have an answer for my questions, he just kept saying “Sophie, oh God, what have I done?” Not once did I ever believe that he had something to do with her death. Once daddy made sure were all settled, he spent the rest of the day in his room.

 Over the next few days we planned mama’s funeral. We picked out her last outfit and prepared my sisters for the funeral. Since my sisters were all under the age of ten, we decided to bury mama in her prettiest nightgown and robe, so my sisters would think she was sleeping. Senter’s funeral home even made the inside of her casket look like a bed, complete with a pillow and mama’s favorite blanket. My sister Jackie placed one of her teddy bears in the casket, and I placed my Bible next to mama’s folded hands.

Mama’s funeral was much longer than necessary, with what seemed like hundreds of mourners kissing and hugging us. They all seemed to be sad that mama was dead, but these were the same people who had shunned my mother for wearing her skirts too short.

Just before the service ended the doors of the church opened and a small, childlike woman entered. She wore all white, and never once looked up at any of the faces she passed. I watched as everyone in the church pointed and whispered. She sat right behind me and my sisters. I looked back and tried to catch her eye, but she pulled her hat down over her eyes. Was she the woman the church group was whispering about?

Daddy immediately began to make arrangements for someone to take care of my sisters. Jackie and Kaya would go to NY with our Aunt Trudy. Castille, Mary and Samantha would go to Tampa with my cousin Sandra. Since I was the oldest, I would stay here in Blue to help Daddy. But I didn’t want my sisters to leave! We had always been together, and I was sure that someone would end up hurting them if I wasn’t around to take care of them. I cried the whole weekend before they were scheduled to leave. I begged daddy to please let them stay. But his mind was made up.

“I have no way of taking care of all of ya’ll” he said. “I’m only letting you stay because you are the oldest. I don’t have to worry about you as much as the little ones. Maybe once I figure this all out, your sisters can come back. But until then, they have to be with someone who can take care of them.”

About a week after my sisters left, my daddy began to disappear at night. At first it was for an hour or two, but pretty soon he would be out for the whole night. One night I summoned up enough courage to follow him, and where he ended up was no surprise to me. He was sitting on the porch of the lady from the funeral who sat behind us with her hat pulled down. They sat on her porch swing and drank from glass bottles as they talked. Daddy smiled a full white-toothed smile, and he looked really happy. The next morning I decided to confront him.

“Daddy, where do you go at night?”

He didn’t answer me, but I persisted.

“Daddy, I see you coming in late. Where do you go?”

“Baby girl, I can’t sit here and die in this house. I’m young. I have to have a good time sometime!”

I said “Not if you’re having a good time with that woman,”- and there it was. I had finally said what I had wanted to say since Mama died.

 “That woman? Is this what you’re all upset about? Let me show you something” he said, as he reached down into his pocket. He retrieved a small gold box from his pocket. Inside the box was a ring with a red stone.

“*This* is what I was hiding from your mama. That lady, the one who always wears white, well her name is Maya. She’s what they call a healer, and she said she could make your mama all better. I had to keep bringing her pieces of your Mama’s clothing and mine. She was gonna work a healing on her and make the cancer go away. All I had to do was give this ring to your mama and she would have been healed.”

“Mama had cancer?” I asked.

“She had it since she had the last baby. The doctors said they couldn’t do anything else. Maya was my last chance,” he said.

“But those women, they said you were *with* Maya. They said you were her boyfriend! They said…”

“Hush about that now. I never loved anyone but your mama. She was my life”.

“So what happened the night that she died?” I asked.

“Your mama knew that I was spending my nights somewhere else, and she was determined to find me. I saw her in her orange head wrap peeking through the bushes in Maya’s yard. She saw Maya holding my hand. I yelled ‘Sophie!”, but she took off running. I chased her, but your mama was FAST The next thing I knew, someone came down Maya’s street saying Sophie had just been hit by a car. It was my fault. If I had been straight with her she wouldn’t have had to sneak and follow me around. She wouldn’t have run out into the street and been hit by a car. She would be alive.” His eyes were red and swollen from crying. He wanted to make me understand that he was a good man, that he loved mama and he was only trying to save the life of the woman he loved.

We stood there in silence when I finally asked him again if he’d like to have some breakfast.

“That’ll be good, baby” he answered, and went into the living room with his newspaper.

“Daddy, do you think the girls could come back home?” I asked cautiously.

“I can’t… *we* can’t take care of them. You have school, I have to work. We won’t have anyone to watch over them.”

“I can watch them, Daddy. I can take them down to the daycare, get them all signed up. They need you, daddy”.

As he ate, he thought about what I said. After a few minutes passed, he looked at me and said “Call your Aunties. Tell them we’re coming to get the girls.”

I couldn’t wait to take the trip to get my sisters. It would take us well over a week to make all the necessary stops, but within eight days we were back home and finally back together as a family.

As soon as we entered the house the girls ran back to mama’s bedroom and yelled “Mama! Mama!”

“Mama’s gone. Ya’ll know she’s gone.”

Jackie’s eyes were watery. “Gone *forever*?” She asked.

“Yes. She’s gone.

They all began to cry as hard as they did at her funeral. I wanted to tell them to stop, but I knew they needed to cry. I made lunch for everyone and went into mama’s room to look at our family photo album. I found a picture of mama wearing her orange dress, the same dress she wore on the night she died. She was proud, standing with her hands on her wide hips, head thrown back, laughing. For the first time I saw myself in Mama. I inherited her large legs, hips and arms. I had the same golden skin and long thick hair. I was beautiful. I went to Mama’s closet and tried on her purple polka dotted dress which was too big, but I looked good in it. Mama always wanted me to try on that purple dress, but I was always too afraid of how I would look. I looked at my reflection in her full length mirror and smiled. I decided to go out on the front porch and sit for awhile.

 As my neighbors passed our house they all did a double-take. They couldn’t believe how much I resembled Mama.

Suddenly I felt beautiful, alive, and ready to conquer the world. I had my daddy and my sisters, and in some ways a piece of mama’s spirit was inside me. Just then, Jackie came outside and asked if we could go for ice cream. Without thinking, I stood up and started to tie Mama’s sweater around my waist. But instead, I put the sweater on, and walked with my sisters up street with a newfound confidence, my big hips and legs swaying to the rhythm of the wind.