

***Author's note:** I did not have the privilege of meeting Miss Ophelia Troup Dent during her lifetime, which makes me sad. So I had to get to know her through the memories she left behind and the lives she touched. And by getting to know her home, of course. This story is my tribute to her and my way of saying "goodbye."*

This story is 90% fiction. "Miss Phee" did live in the old plantation house, she died, and Rudolph found her. Beyond that, everything here is a figment of my imagination designed to offer a glimpse of this marvelous lady's life to those, like me, who never got to meet her.

Hofwyl–Broadfield Plantation, on GA Hwy 17 between Darien and Brunswick, is a precious jewel and a breathtaking opportunity to spend an afternoon soaking up a time and place when life was very, very different than we know it. It is also a chance to be close to Miss Phee and her beloved friend Rudolph Capers, two unique individuals who are deeply missed in their community. Just being in their presence in the old house leaves the visitor knowing he or she has experienced something special.

His Last Magnolia

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Through the open window, Ophelia's marsh was the color Georgia coastal marshes are in the early morning – green, with a splash of rosy tint from the rising sun. Ophelia had always thought that if Georgia summer heat had a color, this was it. The cicadas were cranking up now as well; the humming that rose to a near-deafening roar came in waves. If heat could have a color it could have a sound, too; and this was what Georgia summer heat sounded like. Ophelia let the cicadas' waves wash over her as she sipped her coffee by the window in the old

plantation house she had lived in all her life. The fragrance of magnolias filled the parlor.

Hot, rosy-green and humming, and smelling of magnolia... that was an Altamaha River morning. Ophelia had seen over eighty years of Altamaha River mornings and they never failed to thrill her.

Miriam didn't have much patience with Ophelia's affinity for assigning smells and sounds to inanimate things; she called them Ophelia's 'fancies.' Miriam used to scold Ophelia for "daydreaming." She fussed that if Ophelia would devote as much attention to her work as she did to her fancies, the family dairy business the two sisters owned would be a lot more profitable. She

didn't mean it, though. She loved Ophelia as she was. Miriam just had to be the "older" sister sometimes.

As it was, Ophelia had always been more interested in the neighbors than the dairy business, and she was always getting into something when she delivered milk. If there was furniture to be moved for cleaning, a baby to be held while its mama hung the wash, or a horse to be started under saddle, Ophelia was in the middle of it. More often than not, Ophelia would swing the big station wagon into the farm driveway in the evenings hoping Miriam was busy and would not notice she had gotten distracted and forgotten to bring home the empty milk bottles - again.

Of course, Miriam always noticed. And by the time Ophelia was five minutes into explaining what had distracted her, Miriam was packing food for a sick neighbor, or fetching a tool to lend, or planning some time to go help some other family with their chores. It was just Miriam's way. Miriam was as willing to help out their neighbors and friends as Ophelia was. Miriam just was better organized than Ophelia. It was one of the things Ophelia loved about her sister.

Funny, she had been thinking a lot about Miriam lately. She had jolted awake last night; certain she had heard Miriam call her name. Of course it was impossible. Miriam had been gone for so many years. But still - when Ophelia had been enjoying her weekly shopping trip in Brunswick yesterday she had picked up a linen napkin and turned to ask Miriam what she thought of it. She was still puzzling over that one. So odd - to turn to speak to her long-dead sister as though she were right there....

Ophelia's faithful dog, Buddy, sighed as he napped on the rug beside her. She reached down and stroked his ears. She had always loved dogs - she and her parents and grandparents before her. She couldn't remember life without a dog. They were in her life even before she was born, eighty-six years ago. Her first dog she could remember was a huge Golden Retriever named Max, who let her climb all over him and ride him like a horse.

Miriam loved dogs too but not like Ophelia did. She got impatient when they were in the house and fussed when they tracked in sand. And she really hated it when they came in with damp fur and rubbed against her and begged to be petted... "I hate when they do that!" she complained. "You never know what they found to roll in down by the marsh!"

Miriam wouldn't have liked Buddy much today, that's for sure. Ophelia had taken to allowing him to sit next to her in the big red velvet chair, the one she sat in this morning. She smiled and shook her head thinking of how Miriam would pitch a fit to see that. Miriam tolerated dogs in the house only because their grandfather believed the family dogs had as much right to be in the house as anyone, but she hated it when Ophelia let the dogs on the furniture. Miriam protected the beautiful old antique pieces that had belonged to their ancestors; Ophelia figured that if her beloved grandfather had let the dogs on the furniture, so would she. She did draw the line at letting wet dogs on the couch and chairs, though. She kept old towels for the dogs to lie on til she

could brush them and clean them up. Truth be told, she hated sitting on sand in the chairs too.

But she laughed again when she thought of Miriam and that black retriever puppy she'd had. She and Miriam had come home from college to find their grandfather hopping from one foot to the other; impatient to show them the new litter from his old sweet bitch Millie. Miriam had taken one look at Millie's litter and immediately begged for the one black puppy in the bunch. Grandfather had given it to her, of course, and that dog had followed Miriam around everywhere. Miriam never trained her for anything, just loved her up, and Ophelia knew Miriam had let that dog sleep in the bed with her at night. She never asked Miriam about it; she knew Miriam couldn't lie and she wouldn't put her sister on the spot. But she knew.

What was that dog's name? Ophelia couldn't remember and it frustrated her. Odd that a dog that had been gone fifty years could be so clear in her mind yet she could not remember its name.

Ophelia took a breath and took another bite of omelet. It was getting cold. She had to eat it though; Rudolph didn't like it when she didn't finish her breakfast. He said she needed her strength at her age. She supposed it was true, but today her breakfast had no taste. She determined to finish it anyway; Rudolph always took great pains to serve her a lovely meal on china and with linens that had belonged to her great-great grandmother. Rudolph cherished these beautiful heirlooms as much as she did. She knew Rudolph had prepared smaller portions today, since she hadn't been eating well lately. She didn't want to disappoint him.

Rudolph. How many years had Rudolph been Ophelia's best friend; how many years had he been Miriam's? She couldn't remember. And he wasn't really their friend...not in the traditional sense of the word. But to call him a servant would have been more of an insult to Ophelia than to Rudolph. She trusted Rudolph as she would her father. He was just - there - and always had been. She could hear him now, clinking dishes and moving around in the small dining area at the back porch. She knew he was setting out her lunch service and here it was barely even eight o'clock. He had always done that - prepared ahead of time so he could devote himself to the farm doings, running errands or taking Ophelia to visit someone or to shop a little.

Rudolph had taken care of the sisters for so many years that Ophelia simply could not remember a time without him. For all she knew, he had come with the house. This was, of course, impossible since the house had been in her family for generations before her. But when she tried to picture her life before Rudolph, she couldn't. The old plantation was as much Rudolph's as anybody's in her family; they both knew he would have a home and a job at the plantation for the rest of his life.

If the truth were known, Rudolph probably couldn't picture his own life before Ophelia and Miriam, either. Papa had hired Rudolph when Miriam and Ophelia were still very young women - Papa knew they would need someone to help take care of them and help manage the plantation



when he was gone. Rudolph took the job with a full understanding of exactly what was expected of him. But somewhere along the way, he had grown to love these two women as though they were his own. He never said so, but they knew.

Papa never doubted his two daughters' abilities to take care of themselves. He and his own father had taught the girls to manage the animals, mend fence, milk the cows and pull a calf as well as any man. But no matter what the

family's financial status was at any given moment, the two women were Southern ladies and had a distinctive ancestry they must never abandon. In good times the old plantation had been a grand place, bustling with servants and maids and hosting some of the grandest parties on the coast. Other times, it had been just a big farm with a lovely house shaded by huge old magnolia trees. This was its status now, but that did not alter who Ophelia and Miriam were. Once a Southern lady, always a Southern lady. Money and grandeur (or lack thereof) had nothing to do with it.

Off the porch at the back of the house, Rudolph saw Miss Ophelia's old bay hunter Eve galloping across the pasture. The mare was seeing something in the front yard – he could tell by the way she pricked her ears and snorted in the direction of the front of the house. Some critter may have crawled out of the marsh – gators were bad to do that. He'd check in a minute; he was getting things ready to make Miss Ophelia's lunch right now. He had a lot to do today.

He spied a fat red tomato on the vine by the kitchen door and it made him smile. It would be a real treat for Miss Ophelia. "You'll look mighty pretty on this nice china plate, Mr. Tomato," he thought. He'd pick that big old tomato just before he went to fetch Miss Ophelia for her lunch today; she'd love that tomato all warmed from the sun with a little salt, sliced up with some field peas and cornbread. Yes, she would. Down the hall, Rudolph heard her singing to her dog Buddy. He knew when he went to collect the breakfast things that dog would be curled up next to her in the velvet chair. They would both be dozing in the sunlight slanting through the window; a soft unseen blanket of magnolia fragrance gently covering them.

He'd give her a few more minutes before he went for her tray; he had some things to do. He needed to get Joe to come across the road and tend the remaining few cows from the dairy; of course Miss Ophelia couldn't milk them or run the dairy anymore but she insisted that the last of the old cows be given a life of ease on the farm in exchange for their service to her and her sister. The plantation's herd of milk cows had been the finest herd on the Georgia coast, and Rudolph was as proud of those cows and that dairy as Miss Ophelia and Miss Miriam had been.

Rudolph could have hired people to milk the cows and keep the dairy going; he had always brought in help from the little town across the road to do the heavier daily work of the farm. But he knew Miss Ophelia would never have stood for that – she would want to be in the middle of it all. That girl never seemed to be happy unless she was getting dirty. Miss Miriam – she had been different. She'd work with the cows, but she preferred doing the books inside in the cool house with a cup of tea by her side. Miss Miriam's favorite time of day had been when Miss Ophelia and her two big dogs were out delivering milk and she could do her accounts in peace. Rudolph knew those two couldn't stand to be apart though; Miss Miriam would start watching the clock if Miss Ophelia wasn't back by four.

Eve made another pass around the pasture, bucking and squealing this time. What on earth had that old mare so whipped up today? Rudolph walked down the wide hallway and looked out the screened porch door – and saw nothing. Yet he could hear Eve's hooves and her squealing and whinnying from the front porch. He glanced at Miss Ophelia as he passed back by the parlor door on his way to the back again; she was looking out the window into the front yard too but she did not appear to notice Eve's agitation. Rudolph thought to himself that the old lady might not have heard the mare galloping and calling; her hearing seemed to be going.



Little dust particles floated through the parlor air like tiny bits of glitter as the sunshine touched them. The magnolia blossoms Rudolph loved and put throughout the house filled it with fragrance – he had a special way of placing them near and in windows so the breezes from the marsh would send their scent all through the house. No one had ever known how to do it like Rudolph did, and Ophelia couldn't either. She would set the big blossoms through the house and try to duplicate the way Rudolph did it but she could never fill up the house with the white, pure-snowy fragrance of magnolia like he could. It

was one of the things she had missed most when she was away traveling and at college. She knew Rudolph did it for her; it was an unspoken pleasure they shared. She always marvelled that Rudolph's blooms kept their fragrance so long; he told her once that if magnolias were properly cared for that they'd last a long long time and stay as beautiful as ever. Rudolph's blooms never wilted; they would age a little but remained lovely as ever til the end.

Ophelia wondered where Rudolph was. He usually came back to check on her shortly after serving her breakfast. On the rug beside her, Buddy stirred, then sat up abruptly, his crooked ears alert. He whined, once, and put his paw on the arm of the red velvet chair, his coffee-colored eyes

searching hers. Ophelia scooched over and patted the chair cushion, inviting Buddy to jump up. He didn't, which was unusual for him. He came round her chair to the window, and stood up, paws on the sill, to look across the yard. Ophelia leaned forward to see what had Buddy's attention.

Ophelia heard her before she saw her – a child, a little girl about six years old, running across the yard, followed by a beautiful Golden Retriever. The child was singing a song that was familiar to Ophelia, but she couldn't make out the words over the sudden buzzing in her ears. She watched as the child threw herself down in the grass and the large golden dog pounced, licking the child's face and making her roll back and forth in delight, tipping her head back and holding on to the dog and laughing the tinkly silver-bells laugh of a child who hadn't a care in the world.

Ophelia watched in delight, wondering at the identity of this happy child. Eager to join this unknown yet familiar little girl in her yard and find out whom she was, Ophelia started to get up from the red velvet chair but she couldn't seem to make her legs work. Buddy whined again, and she reached for him... but it wasn't Buddy. It was a handsome gleaming Golden Retriever, who rested his paws on her knees and licked her face.

She laughed in joy at the sensation, and wrapped her arms around the big warm dog, eager for more kisses. But Papa was calling her and she knew what that meant... time to help bring the cows up for milking. She got up out of the grass and brushed the dirt and twigs off her dress so she wouldn't have to listen to Miriam scold her again. She tugged a handful of clover to feed to her pony as she walked by his pasture on the way to the barn.

Inside the house, footsteps fell in the large, open hallway. Rudolph, whistling, walked into the parlor. He figured Miss Ophelia had had plenty of time to finish her breakfast, and wanted to get the dishes up and see whether she wanted him to see to getting the yards mowed, or getting the oil changed in her car today. He had wanted to have it changed yesterday but she had insisted she wanted to go shopping in Brunswick – when she got back she had said something about how she should have bought those napkins Miriam liked. He had meant to ask her why she said that but had gotten sidetracked when a snake had crawled onto the porch. He chuckled to himself, thinking about how Miss Ophelia was about to pick up that old blacksnake and carry it back out to the marsh herself, just like she would have done when she was a girl. Some things never change, the old man thought.

He saw Buddy nestled in close to Miss Ophelia in the red velvet chair, and wondered what she would do when that dog died. She loved that dog like a child. Buddy looked up at Rudolph, whined, and laid his head back down in Ophelia's lap.

"Miss Ophelia, what you see out there in the yard?" Rudolph asked, noticing Ophelia staring across the yard toward the marsh. Buddy whined again, but Ophelia didn't answer. "Miss Ophelia?" Rudolph asked again. He moved the breakfast things aside and knelt beside the red velvet chair. He searched Ophelia's face and then took her tiny hand in his big black one and brought it to his

lips, as two giant crystal tears slid down his old, suddenly lined, dark cheeks and the fragrance of magnolias softly swirled around them.