

ONE GOOD
MAMA BONE
a novel

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part 1

MOTHERS

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One night, deep into it, when sounds are prone to carry, a baby boy lies crying on Sarah Creamer's kitchen table. He is minutes old, still wet with his mother's blood, and hungry for his mother's milk.

But she does not hear his cries. She is no longer there.

Only Sarah. Only Sarah remains. Her body bent over his, her hands rummaging the wooden planks for a towel still white enough to wrap him in. Blood is everywhere, puddled up as if there had been a hard rain. The smell of it saturates the eighty-one-degree air, pushes aside the dry tang of bleach, and fills the heat with the moistness of a long-shuttered earth, now free.

The baby's cries penetrate Sarah's bosom and bounce around its emptiness. Her hands are shaking.

A lone light bulb hangs suspended over the table, a pull string running from the base of the bulb. It hangs as still as death. The light casts Sarah larger than she knows herself to be, beginning on the far wall above her husband, Harold, who lies drunk and passed out in front of the open doorway to the porch. Sarah spreads high and wide.

Harold's pocket knife lies atop one of the towels, the blade still open and awash in a red slickness. Sarah yanks the towel towards her, flipping the knife onto the table, still warm from Mattie's body. "*Cut him loose of me!*" Mattie's words to Sarah, who delivered the child. "*Get you a knife and cut him loose of me now.*" The towel in Sarah's hands, she twists. The red and white spirals of a peppermint stick. "*What was in my head? I can't keep him. Billy Udean will kill me and this baby, too.*" Mattie's voice almost too hoarse for utterance, her legs working to free herself from the table. She drops to the linoleum and heads for the door, crawls over Harold and leaves on him a trail of bright red. "*It ain't the child's fault he was born,*" her last words from the porch, before the darkness drew her.

It ain't mine, either, Sarah thinks now, and wraps the baby in the towel, brings him in close and steps over Harold and into the sweltering night in Anderson, South Carolina, where the moon is on its way to bed, and crickets, a whole chorus of them, sprinkle the farmland in waves.

"Mattie! Sister Mattie!" she calls out, her bare feet scurrying across the dirt yard to the vegetable garden they share, the rows running from Sarah's house to Mattie's. She takes the one between the green beans. They would make in another week or two.

She rushes up the few steps to the front porch and onto the green concrete slab, throws open the screened door, and turns the knob. It's locked. "Sister, open the door!"

Mattie never locks her door. No one does.

Sarah shakes the knob. "I'm bringing him back to you. This is your baby, not mine. Don't you put this on me!"

The door does not open.

Sarah places her ear against the wooden surface and strains to hear Mattie's footsteps inside, hear the creaks her barely one hundred pounds would make. But the baby's cries do not allow for that.

Sarah kicks at the door and beats it with her fist, beats it hard. "I mean it, Mattie. I ain't no mama. You his mama. Bet he's got your dimples. Now come get him. Come get him now!"

Sarah's words come fast like the bullets Billy Udean said he wanted to go fire on the people he called "slant eyes," his arms pretending to hold one of the guns he kept stashed in every room of his house and pointing it like he could see them already. He never broke any of Mattie's bones, but he'd beaten her black and blue. The newspaper the day before splashed a headline that spanned the top of the front page, "War Hero to Return Home," and carried words that said Billy Udean Parnell would be on the train to Anderson the next day around noon. That's in a few hours. "Me and Harold won't let Billy Udean do nothing to you or this baby," she calls through and hopes to the high heavens that is true.

A sheen of sweat coats Sarah's skin, makes it glisten, and keeps fresh the red of Mattie's blood that lines Sarah's hands and wrists and arms. Against the wooden surface in front of her, Sarah lays her forehead, wide like the rest of her, except her eyes, which look almost pinched together, as if huddling. Strands of dark hair, almost black and long loose from her bun, lay stuck to her forehead and neck and sides of her face.

The baby's cries ring in Sarah's ears.

"I mean it, Sister! Come get your baby! I'm going to count to ten, and if you don't open the door, I'm putting him down, *I am*." Her voice has become shrill.

Sarah begins to count. She counts loud.

But Mattie does not come.

“Alright, then,” Sarah says and steps back, the screened door slapping shut. She lays the baby in front of it. “He’s at your door now, *your* baby is. You the mama, now you come get him. I don’t want him. He ain’t mine, and I wouldn’t make no good mama.” The back of her throat feels like knives cutting it. “I ain’t playing, Mattie. I ain’t!” She stomps her foot. The jowls in her face shake.

The door stays closed.

She takes another step back and holds up her hands in surrender. “Bye, Sister, I mean it. I’m leaving. Now come get him!”

She starts down the steps.

From inside the house, a gunshot blasts.

The sound finds Sarah and lifts her arms like wings.

“Mattie!” she screams and runs back to the door and rams it with her full self. “You playing, right, Sister? Ain’t you playing? Tell me you playing!” She grabs the knob and shakes it, then beats it with her fists. “Tell me!”

She listens.

There is nothing.

Blood rushes to her head. The hotness of it, then the coolness like a thousand peppermints jammed inside.

“Mattieeeeeee!” Sarah calls out, holding onto her best friend’s name as long as she can.

She is a child’s toy top spinning. She spreads her feet to steady herself and slaps her flat hands against the screen. “Oh God, no, no, no, tell me no, Mattie. Tell me noooooo!”

The louder Sarah is, the louder the baby at her feet becomes.

But their sounds are just for each other. No neighbors live close enough to hear. Field after field of young cotton surrounds them. The farmhouse across the way has long been abandoned.

Sarah slides down the door, her body folding on top of itself as if she was a knife being put away. Her hands clasp the back of her knees, and she begins to rock. She falls over and draws herself up into a tight curl.

The baby lies just out from her, his cries now wails.

They shake her down to her twenty-six-year-old bones.

Drops of sweat roll down her face. They want to get away from her. She doesn’t blame them. “I ain’t enough, baby boy, I ain’t. I don’t know how to be no mama. I wouldn’t make no good one. No good one. No good one. No good one.”

The towel reveals only his face, the rest wrapped around him like the picture of Baby Jesus she saw in her mother’s Bible when Sarah was a girl.

She can see his little mouth working. He is hungry. He needs to be fed.

“Why? Mattie, why? Sister, why?” Sarah’s voice is now a whisper. “No good one, no good one, no good one. No, sir. No good one.”

He is squirming like he wants to free himself. But he has nothing to free himself for.

Except her. Except Clementine Florence Augusta Sarah Bolt Creamer.

She looks at the screened door behind him. It is closed. She lets her eyes climb the large metal design in its center, a bird, painted white. Billy Udean would always laugh and say it was a pelican that lived along the coast, where he pronounced he would live one day, buy a house on the beach and wait for such a bird to fly by so he could shoot it.

It’s a stork, Sarah thinks now, and it’s brought a baby. A baby boy.

She can feel light at her back. The sun now is waking. On the baby’s face, she sees the light’s timid beginnings. The world behind them is becoming midnight blue, the color of God’s handoff from night to day, that switchover that appears to occur in a single act, in a single second and setting what was, never to be again.

“No sir,” she tells him. “It ain’t your fault.”

Then she makes herself go still. Just like that, go still.

She rises from the floor and gathers him in her arms. His hair has dried some. It carries a tint of red like Harold’s. Around his tiny and heaving back, she folds her hands. They are strong hands. They can cook, and they can clean. Harold called her “handy” once. He was right.

The baby, theirs now.

Sarah bows her head. She can’t say who she is praying to. Her mother’s Jesus does not know her. But she has to believe that someone, something hears.

NOVEMBER 8, 1950

The mother cow left the herd under a ceiling of darkness, as dots of white, even twinkling white, sprinkled above her and around her in patterns of order and beauty. She headed across the pasture. The light from the full moon lit her way, but she did not need it to see. She knew where she was going. She had made the trip a dozen times before over this familiar land. The other cows did not follow, although it was customary for them to do so when one decided to move. But this early morning, for this mother, none of the others moved.

She crossed the earthen dam that held back the pond's muddy waters and made her way to the creek, where the flow over the years had carved deep and jagged into the red clay soil. She arrived at a spot on its bank near an old cedar tree and dropped to her knees, folding herself onto the earth. At first, she kept her head high, but as daylight dawned, she lowered it, surrendering herself in full.

The mother had come to deliver one of her own.

Neither the farmer nor his workingman had noticed her udder, how it had begun to sack up. Nor had they noticed the top of her tail rising and her lower back softening, her ligaments and tissues becoming supple, so that her babies, twins, lying on their backs and surrounded in fluid warm, could follow their natural course and move from their high place near her tail head past her pin bones to their new place, deep in her womb, where they rotated to their bellies for the rest of their journey.

Like the times before, there would be no mother or sister or friend to instruct her as to what to do. She would know, and it would come from a place deep inside where maternal love lives and maternal love grows, a place that is regardless there, never wavering there, nonnegotiable there.

It lay in her bones.

In the growing light, her uterine muscles began to contract. At first, her squeezes stayed small, but as they became harder, her legs stiffened and lifted. They trembled.

All of this could be seen from above. Life, seen as ripples, moving along the mother's skin.

A single buzzard circled above her. A dark, ragged patch against the beginning blue. The mother cow drew in a breath and released it from her nose and mouth, her breath warmer than what it greeted. It formed a mist that hovered near her face.

From her vulva, a right hoof, the tip of it, appeared. It was midnight black and sheathed in a cloudy membrane. The hoof slipped back in as if timid. She squeezed again. This time, the baby's left hoof joined the right, and together, as if holding hands, they slid under the roof of the mother's lifted tail, along with the tip of its nose. Soon, the rest of the baby's front legs and head came forward in a sack of milky white, transparent and sticky and laced with tiny veins of blood. Already, the baby's nostrils made little sucking noises, popping the white, while its eye lids tried to blink, letting in the first light. From that warmth, steam rose.

The mother cow pulled in her front legs, curled them to her chest and rocked her upper body until she was able to get on her knees. On other days, such would not take much effort, but her advanced age of sixteen years, and having just delivered a calf, made rising taxing. When she could, she lifted into the air her back side and then pushed up on her front legs. She turned towards her calf, wet and bloody and sealed, and leaned down and smelled, beginning at its back legs, then up its body to its face, where her tongue stretched. She began licking in long, slow strokes, lifting its head northward, where a second buzzard, and then a third, now joined the first.

Down its body, she moved her tongue, her young's blood flowing with her. The calf was a male, a bull, and the same color as she, the red brown of their breed, Hereford. But it would be their faces that would summon all attention. They were mottled, carrying a pattern of red brown and white, his, a small version of hers.

The smell of smoke curling from nearby chimneys and woodstoves floated through the air, now filled with light and a fourth buzzard.

The young bull calf curled his front legs, digging into the land. He wanted to stand. He managed to do so, but he could not stay. His legs wobbled. He toppled over.

A fifth buzzard now circled.

The mother stood over him, her mouth nudging him, until he could rise again and stay. This time, he moved his mouth to her underbelly,

nubbing along until he came upon a teat, swollen and patient. He wrapped his lips around it.

She bent to the earth and took inside her blades of grass, soon to go dormant.

A second set of hooves emerged from her, dangled like rocks tied to ropes. In a rush of liquid, the rest of the calf's body fell to the ground, landing on its back. The mother jerked her head that way. She had never delivered a second. She turned her body towards it and leaned down and smelled the newborn's face. She began to lick. Her firstborn followed along and continued to drink from her.

A dozen buzzards now rode the thermals above the mother and her babies.

Her tail lifted and exposed a bluish pink bubble, full of fluid and blood and all that had nurtured her young, the bubble's buttons having now disengaged from the mother's womb, the bubble now expanding and extending downward and falling to the ground. She turned again, lowered her head to it and opened her mouth and took it back inside.

The first buzzard landed beside the newborn. The first peck was made at its eyes. The baby jerked its head. The mother cow released a long bellow and charged towards the bird, pulling herself from her firstborn's mouth. The bird hopped back.

By now, the rest of the buzzards had landed. They stood in jagged layers behind the first. The mother ran at them. They hissed and lifted into the air, scattering back a few feet. She ran at them again, her right front leg giving way. She leaned hard to her left and steadied herself and then returned to her new baby, lowering her head and smelling, beginning at its nose. From her mouth, she brought her tongue and drew it up its face. Its head quivered.

Three of the birds hopped towards the mother and her young, the firstborn now on the ground. The remaining birds stood with their wings spread.

The mother ran towards them. They hurled low hisses, flapping their wings and lifting. All except one. It now was near her firstborn, at his rear, pecking.

She ran at the bird. It hopped away.

A patch of tall grasses and young cedars grew near the fence line some fifty feet away. She hard-nudged him with her nose, prodding him until he was able to stand, and then she moved in a slow run towards the patch, her calf following. When they were deep inside the cover, she bore down with her mouth on top of his back, until he laid his body on the ground, even his head, which she pressed to the earth.

She ran back to her second born. The buzzards now surrounded it.
The mother charged them.

They scattered.

Most of her newborn's eyes were gone. Splashes of blood and tiny specks of white lined the two hollow holes, both the size of a case quarter. Its eye lashes were still intact.

The mother moved her tongue down her young's body, moved it in long stretches. The calf was a female, a heifer.

A bevy of buzzards fought over what remained of her bubble, their pecks rapid and loud. Two, though, hopped in towards her newborn. On their beaks, traces of red and white were sprinkled about.

The mother began to circle her baby, her sounds guttural. Her udder, full with milk, swung beneath her. On the rounded ends of her teats, milk seeped. She rammed one bird with her nose. It grunted and hopped back. She moved faster now. Almost running. Charging the second one to her left. Then to her right. Only for a third buzzard and then a fourth to join in. The mother's breathing was hurried. Her mouth dry, bone dry.

Her back left knee hit the dirt. She fell to the ground and rolled. She rocked her body hard but could not get up on her knees. She pawed at the ground, digging grooves, deep ones.

She extended her neck and released a cry, her voice hoarse now. Streaks of sweat in jagged white lines crisscrossed her body. Her second-born lay five feet away. But the mother cow could not see her for the curtain of buzzards.

In time, and it would be just before the sun hit its highest point that day, the mother cow managed to return to her feet and to her firstborn, still in the patch on the ground, his head still against the earth, and his whole being, his whole being still alive and set to carry the prayers of all who would cross his path.