

TAKING AFTER MUDEAR

A Novel

By

Tina McElroy Ansa

This is an excerpt of *Taking After Mudear*,
by Tina McElroy Ansa.

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Also by Tina McElroy Ansa:

You Know Better
(William Morrow, 2002)

The Hand I Fan With
(Anchor, 1998)

Ugly Ways
(Harcourt Brace, 1993)

Baby of the Family
(Harcourt, 1989)

CHAPTER ONE

"Didn't ya'll hear me?" Annie Ruth asked as she lumbered into her big sister's sun room in one of their mother Mudear's silk pastel vintage nightgowns with the water from her broken uterus still streaming down her legs into her copper-colored leather Easy Spirit walking shoes.

Her water had broken with a gush as she stood at the bathroom sink flossing her teeth before bed, making a big odd-shaped puddle at her feet on the Italian tile floor.

"Didn't ya'll hear me?" she again asked her sisters who sat staring, stunned silent at the sight of her. "I called for ya'll to come get me."

When neither of them still reacted, she looked down at her dripping gown, then back at them. "Sisters," she said, "it's time."

That's all Annie Ruth had said - - quite calmly, too, considering that she had just experienced the first signs of the birth of her first baby.

Moments before, the sudden burst of water had surprised her so that she could not seem to get the buttons on the intercom by the door to function

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correctly so she could call for help from her two sisters, Betty and Emily, downstairs.

After yelling for them to "come get me" the way she had since she was three years old, she had made the laborious trek down the wide formal staircase of her big sister Betty's house by herself and walked splay-legged into the solarium, leaving small wet tracks all the way on the shiny hardwood floors.

All three Lovejoy sisters stood stock still for a moment: Annie Ruth in her soaking peignoir, Betty still dressed in the jewel blue shantung silk outfit she had worn out to dinner with her young man - - her very young man - - and Emily barefoot and comfortable in what her sisters called "a playsuit," a red halter top and matching shorts.

They looked at each other, frozen for an instant in a time - - one final time - - when they would be the only Lovejoy girls on earth. They lingered there in the sunroom a moment, seemingly petrified in the amber light thrown off by the Tiffany floor lamp in the corner. Then, as if suddenly released from a paralyzing drug, Emily and Betty sprang into action. Emily slipped on her soft scarlet leather moccasins and grabbed the keys to Betty's car, a brand-new Lexus, roomier and more reliable than her old clunker, which was sitting outside in the garage needing some mechanic's attention before she could safely put it back on the road.

Betty dropped the tangle of extra-soft lime green baby yarn that she was determined to knit into a fluffy crib blanket before the child was school age onto the foot of the pink and green striped chaise lounge she was sitting on, leapt to her feet and rushed past Annie Ruth to blow out the lavender-and-lemon-scented candles

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burning downstairs in the opulent house and grab the packed overnight bag waiting at the foot of the big curved stairway in the hall.

Emily hurried outside without throwing any kind of wrap over her blood red top and clinging shorts that exposed her bare shoulders, back, thighs and the bottoms of her butt cheeks to the cool late spring night air. She jumped in the Lexus, turned the key in the ignition, gunned the motor and pulled the car up to the side of the house. Betty and Emily hadn't told Annie Ruth, but for weeks, whenever Annie Ruth was napping, they had been practicing for this time, making dry runs of their dash to the small Georgia town's Medical Center.

"Turn here," Betty had ordered.

"No, we should go this way," Emily had countered, making a huge U-turn in the middle of Forest Avenue to avoid driving past the Pleasant Hill Cemetery and their mother's grave site. They had bickered and strategized and mapped out and then re-mapped until they had finally settled on the most efficient route to the hospital.

"Would ya'll come on?" Emily yelled out of the open car window as she gripped the steering wheel like a vise and in the process nearly pierced the tan leather wheel cover with her long scarlet nails. As she sat there rocking in the driver's seat, she went over and over in her head the quickest route to the Mulberry Medical Center that she and Betty had settled on.

"If they don't bring their asses on, I'm gon' lose my mind out here," she said aloud through gritted teeth to the empty car as she continued to rock slowly to and fro in the driver's seat. "I swear I am."

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Just then, Betty ran to the car carrying Annie Ruth's purple T. Anthony overnight bag, threw it in the back seat of the big silver Lexus and jumped in the front next to Emily. Then, she looked around bewildered. "Where's Annie Ruth?"

"I thought *you* were going to bring her out," Emily said, panic seeping into her already rising voice.

"I thought she was with *you*," Betty shouted wildly as she threw open the car door and leapt out.

She ran back into the glassed-in solarium at the rear of the house, passed the kitchen, raced through her formal dining room, rattling the French crystal and bone china in the cabinets with each stride she took, and came to a dead stop out in the front hall. She braked so suddenly the soles of her high-heeled sandals made a "screeeech" sound on the Georgia hardwood floors. Standing there like stone carved from the quarry outside of town, Betty tried to speak, but all she could do was open and close her mouth a few times and gasp.

Right there in front of her was Annie Ruth, as big as the colonial-style house she was standing in, squinting into the large gilded mirror in the entry hall, her feet planted wide apart for stability, the insides of her spread legs still dripping birth water onto Betty's imported Red Flower rug as she leaned in as close as her big belly would allow, trying to apply Copper Nut Brown eye shadow that she had taken from her giant black zippered M.A.C. makeup bag on the antique table in front of her.

Betty continued to gawk in silent amazement for a few seconds. Then, she found her voice.

"Lil' Sis? Girl? Have you completely lost your mind?"

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Betty didn't mean to, but she shouted it at her preening baby sister. Annie Ruth, startled by Betty's shriek, tossed the mirrored compact she was holding high above her head. It sailed through the air, fell, bounced once on the thick pile of the rug, then, landed on the hardwood floor with a loud "crack."

"Oh, Betty," Annie Ruth whined as she stared at the broken compact mirror on the floor, "look what you made me do! We don't need no seven years' bad luck tonight!"

"Leave that damn mirror and that makeup alone, Annie Ruth, and bring your pregnant ass on! We having a baby!!" Betty ordered.

"Oh, I just want to brighten up my eyes a bit," Annie protested breezily as Betty strode across the long Persian runner toward her with a determined look on her face. Betty wanted to grab her baby sister by her long curly newly thick henna-tinted hair and drag her out the front door by the scruff of her neck the way she had a couple of times when the girls were teenagers and Betty had to get them all home from a party before Poppa discovered they had slipped out of their bedroom windows. But this time, she didn't have to.

Just as Betty reached for her, Annie Ruth experienced something she had only read about in books and seen in films: her first real contraction. It hit her so hard in the pit of her stomach, it made her knees buckle as if she were a disjointed brown-skinned pregnant Barbie doll.

She let out one sharp cry of anguish and reached toward the delicate antique table for support.

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"God 'a mighty knows!" she gasped - - half-exclamation, half-prayer - - and froze for a moment with her eyes screwed shut, her mouth hanging open in an incredulous little "O." Grabbing her stomach with one hand and thrusting her other arm across the surface of the scallop-edged table, she swept all the tubes and cases and sable brushes to the floor and turned to seek her sister's help.

"Betty, come get me," she implored for the second time that night with her eyes squeezed shut in pain.

Betty was right there this time for her baby sister, and, taking her arm tenderly right above the elbow in the fireman's position, she lifted Annie Ruth to her feet and slowly led her out of the formal entrance at the front of the house, forgetting to close the big pine double doors behind them.

Outside, Emily was still sitting and rocking behind the wheel of the car with the motor running, looking for all the world like a wild wolf, gnawing on her bottom lip and bouncing her left breast rhythmically in her right hand the way she did when she was deep in thought or just plain nervous.

Emily felt so torn about the impending birth of her sister's baby that she feared she just might leap out of her own body and run in two different directions at the same time, up and down the deserted street like crazy Miss Cliona from Yamacraw.

Every morning since moving back to Mulberry from her apartment in Atlanta and sharing her big sister Betty's house with Annie Ruth, Emily had promised herself that that would be the day she finally, definitely, completely put

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behind her the anger and resentment that came and went like the tide. Each day, as she wiped the sleep from the corners of her eyes, as she brushed her teeth, as she chose her cutest clean outfit to put on, she swore under her breath, "I won't be mad at Annie Ruth today."

Then, she would leave her sun-lit room, all positive and showered and moisturized and made up, her chin tilted up, "looking to the stars" the way her Mudear had taught all her girls to do when they had gone out of their house to face Mulberry and all the talk about their strange family. But as soon as she would meet Annie Ruth at the top of the winding staircase looking all healthy and pretty and fecund as a sprouting green field of corn, her pregnant stomach taking up way too much room in the wide hallway, Emily would feel her control begin to seep away and she would start to lose it completely. She'd be right back on the porch of her dead mother's house out in Sherwood Forest six months earlier in the chill of an autumn evening hearing the news that Annie Ruth had broken her sisterly vow, had let herself get pregnant and was going to be a mother herself. Emily would have to turn abruptly and go back into her bedroom and pump herself up all over again.

Now, more than half a year later, on the cool middle Georgia spring night, as she sat in the driver's seat of Betty's car gently gunning the motor and waiting for her sisters to emerge from the house so she could get on with what couldn't be stopped, she prayed for the strength to pump herself up just one more time for the birthing ordeal that lay ahead. And she wasn't for a minute thinking of her pregnant baby sister's ordeal.

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As Betty came out of her house supporting Annie Ruth, she could see Emily clearly in the glow of one of the floodlights that were scattered in the trees around her property. Betty couldn't stand a dark house, inside or out. She knew what it felt like to sit up after dark in a house without lights, without heat, without the hum of the refrigerator or the static from the radio, the electricity turned off. She had promised herself at age 11 that if she had anything to do with it, it would never happen again. So, lights inside and outside her home were on timers that clicked on automatically at dusk, and continued to burn until she turned them off.

Winter, spring, summer and fall, but especially in winter.

After years of dreading the approach of the fall with its foreshadowing of shorter days and early dusks, she had consulted her doctor and discovered she had more than the winter blues and a fear of the dark. Betty suffered from SAD, seasonal affective disorder. She had gladly taken her doctor's suggestion and installed a few lamps throughout her house that emitted artificial broad spectrum light. The light over the sink in her bathroom that she clicked on before she brushed and flossed her teeth; took her shower, washed and moisturized her face and applied her makeup ("Lovejoy women don't go out ' the house without no makeup," their mother had instructed them, although she herself hadn't worn so much as lipstick in decades.) had her humming to herself by the time she drove to her beauty shop over in East Mulberry in the winter pre-dawn darkness.

However, some parts of the spacious front and back yard didn't need the floodlights she had installed. In the dead of the last winter shortly after Mudear's death, Betty had hired a yardman to begin putting in a myriad of plants

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and bulbs that produced white blossoms - - tea olives, crepe myrtle, rose bushes, camellias, dogwoods, crocuses, tulips - - all around the edge of her house and down the long curving driveway that could be easily seen in the dark. Week after week, more and more of the monotonous verdant grass that for years had covered the entire huge yard front and back was being eaten up with brilliantly flowering shrubs and plants. And the oak and mulberry trees that had stood at the perimeter of the yard for decades were joined by flowering trees like peach and plum and pear that had the nerve to bear fruit.

By the first week in that spring, the grounds around the massive house were beginning to look like something on the cover of *Southern Living*. Now, three months later, when Annie Ruth's water broke, the whole property could have passed for a small town botanical garden, from tall spiky native middle Georgia grasses to colorful bedding plants to bushy budding local peach trees. And although no one quite wanted to acknowledge it, all of Betty's garden's plants and trees seemed to have a mind of their own, blooming all out of season and proportion to their size.

Winter-blooming tea olives flowered in May right next to spring-blossoming gardenias. Camellias that usually came into their own in fall were bearing big heavy cabbage-sized flowers in Betty's new yard in April.

Betty, who had sworn all her life, along with her sisters, that she would never suffer a plant to grow in any yard of hers, now had a garden that, at the end of a forgiving Georgia spring, was as fertile and fruitful as her pregnant baby sister and was actually beginning to rival her mother's legendary sumptuous

garden out in Sherwood Forest. And Betty, a neophyte in horticulture and floriculture, refused to question it or fathom how amazing it all truly was.

"I can't believe you turning into a gardener!" Annie Ruth had exclaimed as she struggled to get her expanding body out of the car in March when she had returned to her tiny middle Georgia hometown from her Southern California home to stay with Betty for the final trimesters of her pregnancy. Annie Ruth said the word "gardener" like it was some nasty morsel of rotten food in her mouth that she had sucked out of her teeth and had to spit out.

Betty had smiled as sheepishly as if someone had discovered her hidden cache of sexy Polaroids she and her 20-year-old lover Cinque had taken and stuffed under the king-sized mattress in her bedroom.

"Yeah, who'da thunk it? Like Mudear used to say, 'Keep living,' huh?" she replied playfully as she had helped Emily haul Annie Ruth's pile of luggage into the house and up the stairs to the room she had prepared for her, trying nervously to make light of a sea change in her life.

Annie Ruth, trailing into the house behind her sisters, didn't press Betty any further about the garden. She just exchanged a rare conspiratorial glance with Emily that said, "Now, what the hell is this all about?" A little later that night before Emily headed to her own bedroom down the hall to change into more comfortable clothes, Annie Ruth grabbed her and pulled her into the bathroom while Betty was downstairs making them all a pot of blueberry tea.

"Quick, Em Em, before Betty comes back. Tell me what in the world she's doing growing a garden in her own yard? Right outside of where she sleeps?"

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Annie Ruth demanded quietly, using her childhood nickname for her middle sister, as she peeped around the door to the bathroom that she had left slightly ajar to keep an eye on the curved oak staircase.

"Well," Emily began as she sat on the side of the big marble Jacuzzi tub and pretended to examine the fronds of the lacy fern Betty had cut and brought into the bathroom in a tall crystal vase with white pebbles in the bottom. But she was finding it nearly impossible not to watch Annie Ruth struggle to pull down her panties, sit on the toilet and sigh in relief as she peed. She was so fascinated by Annie Ruth's new round ripe-looking belly and her big full breasts, it was difficult for her to concentrate on a succinct explanation.

"Stop staring at me and talk, girl," Annie Ruth admonished her jokingly. "I ain't no porn site called 'Knocked Up Women on the Toilet.'"

Emily, caught in the act, chuckled at her hungry curiosity, shook her head sharply to clear it and started to explain in a rush, glad to have her baby sister around to share the strange turn of events with.

"Well, for starters, these fern leaves here are not made out of plastic," she began in a hushed voice. Then, she paused for effect and added, "They're real."

Annie Ruth's stream of urine stopped sharply and she let out a little gasp. "Uh."

"Yeah," Emily said, nodding her head knowingly.

After a moment of silence as they both stared at the fern, Annie Ruth gathered her wits and continued peeing. Emily breathed deeply and went on.

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"Annie Ruth, girl, last fall, right after you left Mulberry after Mudear's funeral, Betty started checking out gardening sites on the computer. I came into her office downstairs one day in November and caught her. She tried to log off real quick, but I saw the flowers and the plants."

"Get out!" Annie Ruth said as she slowly rolled off white toilet tissue and reached around and under her belly to wipe herself.

"Yeah. And then next thing you know, she's hired herself a gardener! Not just a lawn service to mow the grass and clip the trees and hedges like she's always had. But a real gardener with a helper and tools and a truck and an old broke-down hat and everything!"

"You lie!" Annie Ruth was astonished.

"If I'm lyin', I'm flyin', and I'm too fat to fly," Emily said, trying to make light of the few extra pounds she had gained in the past couple of years. But even as she smugly scanned her baby sister's newly rounded figure, she couldn't shake the self-conscious feeling about her own voluptuous body.

"Shh, here comes Betty," Emily whispered as she stepped out of the bathroom. "Don't say anything. I haven't said a word about it to her."

"What?" Annie Ruth asked as she scurried out as best she could behind her sister without washing/as she dried her hands. "You just gonna' act like that garden's not out there growing around us like Mudear come back from the grave?"

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They both ran softly and jumped onto the high 1880s four-poster bed in Annie Ruth's new room just as Betty reached the landing, carefully carrying a silver tray with a full silver tea service on it.

"Yes!" Emily whispered firmly and put her index finger to her lips as Betty came in.

The Lovejoy women, even in their 30s and 40s, were like most sisters. Each of them knew that when she was absent the other two were talking about her because when one of the others was out of the room, that's what she did.

As she entered the bedroom with the tea service, Betty called out laughingly as they each had since they were teenagers, "Stop talking 'bout me, here I come!"

But with Annie Ruth's water broke and her baby on the way, Betty knew that this was no time for collusion and division. This night, the Lovejoy girls needed to pull together!

"Oh, God!" Betty muttered to herself as she saw the look of confusion cross Emily's face when they came out of the front door instead of the back. If she can't handle a change in exit routes, Betty thought, how are we gonna ever get through this baby's birth?

"You alright, Em Em?" Betty asked as she helped ease Annie Ruth into the back seat where she immediately stretched out with her head resting on her overnight bag, holding her stomach and her back and moaning in pain.

Emily didn't say anything. She just nodded a couple of times, quickly, sharply, but she was thinking, I wonder how many times Annie Ruth been stretched

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out in the back seat of some car. Yet, when her baby sister let out another primal scream, like something out of the Old Testament, Emily bit her lip in true sympathy, and she felt like shit for her petty judgment.

Betty had no idea what Emily was thinking, but just seeing the look on her face made Betty want to suggest that perhaps she herself should be behind the wheel of her Lexus instead of Emily. However, Betty immediately thought better of saying anything. If she didn't know anything else on earth, Betty knew her sisters, and she feared Emily might just see the suggestion as a criticism and go off on her.

All I need now is to have another Lovejoy in crisis mode, Betty thought as she sucked her teeth at the memory of Annie Ruth, with her big old pregnant self, trying to put on makeup to "brighten her eyes a bit."

But as soon as Emily turned the car around and pulled out of the driveway into the deserted street, Betty saw a veil of calm descend upon her like a mantle of benediction.

For once, Betty was grateful that her tiny hometown seemed to shut down after midnight. There wasn't another single car on the street. With one eye trained on Annie Ruth in the back seat, Betty watched Emily focus all her attention on the empty road ahead as she headed cautiously but speedily for Mulberry Medical Center just as they had practiced.

Betty leaned over the seat and took Annie Ruth's hand.

"How ya'll doing back there, Lil' Sis?" she asked trying to keep the weighty atmosphere in the car light. But the look on her baby sister's face, so changed, so

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different from any Betty had ever seen there stole any levity she had to offer the situation and made her gasp.

If it hadn't been at night and if they all had not been totally engrossed in the eminent birth of their first baby, one of the girls probably would have noticed how spring had arrived all over Middle Georgia not just in Betty's yard.

The peach trees that the city had planted throughout various neighborhoods expressly for the upcoming Peach Blossom Festival were all in their glory. Even rosebushes growing in the yards of deserted houses along the route of the new highway that cut through town were blooming.

But inside Betty's car, it was beginning to feel as still and grave as winter.

Emily, who hadn't said a word since they had pulled out of Betty's driveway, suddenly spoke up.

"When I was pregnant that time with Ron's baby before I got rid of it," Emily began, "I got mad and told him it might not even be his, when I knew it was. He didn't really believe me, but it hurt him just the same."

Betty, grateful for once for her middle sister's knack for inappropriate comments, quickly joined in the siblings' ritual game as they made their way on to the hospital.

"Once, when I met Cinque at his mother's house for the afternoon - - the only time I ever went to his parents' house, I swear - - and we were alone there, we fucked on his mother's new leather sofa."

For a moment, both sisters were silent, waiting for their baby sister to outdo them as she always did. But Annie Ruth just let out another wordless primitive

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scream in reply, and Betty felt Emily press down on the accelerator and barrel through a yellow traffic light so suddenly the momentum threw them all back against their seats.

When the three women pulled up to the emergency entrance of the Mulberry Medical Center, both Emily and Betty jumped out and ran inside to the admittance desk, leaving Annie Ruth alone in the back seat writhing in pain.

When they returned in seconds dragging two attendants and a gurney, she just looked at them and implored, "Will ya'll please stop leaving my black ass?!"

"Sorry, Lil' Sis," Betty apologized as she reached into the back seat to help her out. "We'll never leave you again. We swear."

"Good," Annie Ruth replied with a grunt and continued, unaware that she was finishing up the Lovejoy sisters' ritual game they had begun in the car. "'Cause all I got is you two. You know, I don't know *who* this baby's daddy is."

From there, things moved so swiftly, they barely had time to get Annie Ruth inside the hospital and up to her room. Her labor contractions started coming so close together that by the time they had her feet up in the stirrups at the end of her birthing bed, she was still wearing her Mudear's peach-colored nightgown.

So it looked as if the newest Lovejoy girl - - like a princess in the local Peach Blossom Festival coronation - - was about to come into the world down a corridor draped in curtains of gauzy fruit-colored silk. It was a grand entrance that suited her dead grandmother, Esther "Mudear" Lovejoy, just fine.

CHAPTER TWO

I don't know why these young girls make such a big deal about having a baby.

I might be dead as a doornail, but I still remember that having a child wasn't no big thing.

Nowadays, they got to have Lazarus classes.

They got to go to these expensive especialty stores that just sell maternity clothes that look like only a streetwalker would wear. Stretch jersey dresses all low-cut and tight across their big old stomachs and big old butts so everybody can see they pregnant.

They got to take certain vitamins. Heaven forbid they don't take they follick acid and iron and such.

They got to do these exercises and wear these special clothes when they doin' 'em.

They got to lay on these special mats while they stretchin' and strainin'.

And they got to have this certain kind of music playing.

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Then, after all a' that, they end up screaming and caterwauling like something in the barn yard when the real work begins.

Me, I ain't never had no bad time having no baby. All three of my girls popped out just like that. One. Two. Three. And I didn't have all that fancy stuff they got - - clothes and exercise and music and kowtowing - - before, during or after neither.

But then again, I ain't never had no problems with my body.

When I was a girl, I didn't never even have no bad menstrual pains. Never did have a day of cramps. When my middle girl Emily got her period, you woulda' thought she was the first woman to bleed. She'd have to stay home from school and lay in bed and hold a hot water bag to her stomach and to her lower back for a couple of days. Of course, couldn't do nothing around the house for those days. Emily always was a fanatical fool. But back then I think she was just being lazy.

Lazy like them girls now - - and women, too - - who have the nerve to not just have cramps during their periods, but also claim they having cramps and bloating and irritability before their times of the month. Even got a name for it. Pre-menstrual symptoms. Hell, if they come up with some post-menstrual symptoms, they'll have the whole month covered and won't have to do nothing but sit around and complain all the time!

Uh! Triflin' women.

Look at Annie Ruth there in that fancy hospital delivery room with everything made to be all comfortable and gentle. The walls painted a special soothing color. Soft music playing on a channel on the television. Hell, my own old

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bedroom out in Sherwood Forest wasn't that special, and I had made me a pretty sweet nest out there in that little cracker box house Ernest called himself being proud of.

You should'a seen the hospital ward I was in back when I had my girls! Shoot! I only had what they gave you in the colored section of the county hospital and that was old used stuff from the white section. I wanted to go to that St. Luke's Hospital, the one for coloreds, run by coloreds. Good place. Probably the best hospital in all of Mulberry County, colored or white. But, of course, back then, Ernest couldn't afford no private hospital for me on his little kaolin mine salary.

Good God, Daughter! Stop all that attention-getting fuss and just birth that baby!

I don't know where my girls get all that hysterical melodramatic stuff from.

Wait a minute! Is that my good peach gown that girl got on? Uhhh. You mean to tell me she found one of my only real silk bed gowns to go and birth a baby in?

That heifer!