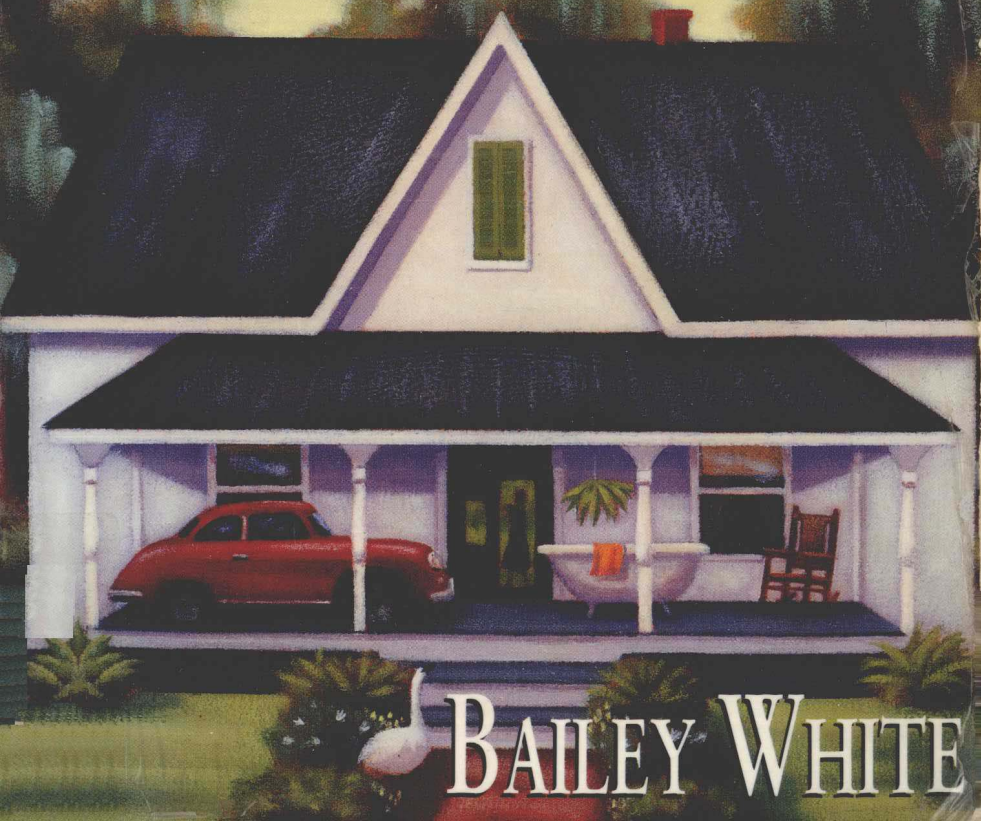


NATIONAL BESTSELLER

MAMA MAKES UP —HER MIND—

and Other Dangers of Southern Living

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universal." —*San Francisco Chronicle*



BAILEY WHITE



Mama Makes

Up Her Mind

and Other Dangers of

Southern Living

Bailey White

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Mama Makes Up Her Mind

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Contents

Mama Makes Up Her Mind 1

Rosey's 3

Spyglass 6

Turkeys 12

Midnight Cowboy 17

Porsche 19

Instant Care 22

Bicyclists 25

Birth of the Blues 28

Something Like a Husband 31

Camping 36

Dead on the Road 39

Nonrepresentational Art 41

The Bed 45

Contents

<i>Family Ghosts</i>	49
The Monkeys Not Seen	51
The Inn	54
The Devil's Hoofprints	60
Bluebirds	65
Good Housekeeping	68
Summer Afternoon	79
Joe King	83
Sleep and Prayer	89
Alligator	92
Finger	95
Scary Movies	99
Mama's Memoirs	102
Memorizing Trollope	106
Distillates	110
Madness through Mirrors	114
The Lips of a Stranger	118
<i>Zone 9</i>	125
A Scourge of Swans	127
Rattlesnake Belt	130
County Fair	133
Flying Saucer	136
Campaign Promises	139
Leave-taking	142
An Interesting Life	145
Semen and Daffodils	148
Teaching Luther to Cook	151

Contents

Buzzard	156
Homecoming	158
Gardening	160
<i>The Imagination Game</i>	167
Maritime Disasters	169
Grandparents' Day	173
Fireman for Life	177
The Dance of the Chicken Feet	182
Cultural Center	187
Mortality	192
One-Eared Intellectual	197
Christmas Party	200
Maine	204
Used Cars	208
Snake Show	214
<i>Jeanne d'Arc</i>	217
Micanopy	220
Finding Myself	227



*Mama Makes Up
Her Mind*

Rosey's



The other day Mama made up her mind she wanted some smoked mullet.

"Does this mean we have to go down to Rosey's?" I asked.

"Yep," she said.

Rosey's is a tough juke joint on the edge of the marsh in an old-fashioned part of Florida. Tourists don't go there; they've got more sense. At Rosey's you never know whether you're drunk or not because the floors wave up and down anyway. The foundations are sagging. You can eat inside if you can take the smoke, or you can eat outside and throw your fish bones down to some rough-looking pelicans who squat like vultures under the porch. Ernest Hemingway went there once, but the atmosphere was too much for him.

I don't like to go to Rosey's. I'm always afraid some of those people shooting pool in the back will think I'm the one who chose that goofy song that's playing on the jukebox, put down their pool cues, and beat me up. But Mama doesn't notice. She just likes the smoked mullet.

We sat inside. I was afraid Mama might lose her balance on the porch, tip off the edge, and get eaten up by the pelicans. I crept up to the counter to order. I kept my head down and tried not to swing my arms. "One order of smoked mullet, and one unsweet iced tea, please," I said. Rosey flung the mullet onto a plate, then lifted the scum off the top of the tea with one finger and flicked it on the floor. "Don't get much orders for iced tea," she said.

Mama ate her mullet and I drank my tea. Pretty soon I had to go to the bathroom. There was a sign that said Restrooms over two doors. One of the doors said Men, and the other one said Men. I didn't like to ask. "I'll ask," said Mama. And she headed up to the counter.

When Mama starts to move across a room, people pay attention. You can never be sure she's not going to grab you by the top of the head to steady herself. And she's pretty free with that walking stick, too. The room grew quiet. I don't know whether it was the faltering gait or the look in her eye or the mismatched safety pins holding her glasses together or the Band-Aid with the "Sesame Street" characters

on it on her arm, but by the time she got to the counter, everybody was watching.

“Where’s the bathroom?” she said. “The women’s bathroom.” She paused. “My daughter,” she pointed with her walking stick, “my daughter wants to know.”

Spyglass



My father craved an adventurous life, and when I was just a little girl, he went off with an anthropological team from the Field Museum of Natural History to study and record the physical characteristics of four fierce groups of people in southwestern Asia. My father had no training as an anthropometrist, and his job on the expedition, as close as we could figure it, was to grab the subjects and hold them still while the scientists applied the spreading calipers and the anthropometer, and took hair and blood samples “where possible.”

The leader of the expedition, a famous physical anthropologist, was a kind gentleman, and he took pity on my mother, who was to be left at home for a year and a half with a farm to run and three unruly

children, and he gave her, as a parting gift, his telescope. It was a beautiful instrument, all gleaming brass and leather and ebony, with a wonderfully silent sliding action and a muffled *thunk* as it achieved its full-open position. On the day they left, Professor Meade laid it in my mother's hands. "My great-grandfather had it at Trafalgar," he told her. "Now I want you to have it." Then he said good-bye and swept away, leaving us in a swirl of English pipe tobacco, old leather, and oiled canvas, my father staggering along behind him, dragging the cases of clattering instruments.

The year and a half went by, and my mother studied every distant object she could find, from celestial bodies in the night sky to the pond a mile away from our house, which through the lenses of Professor Meade's telescope looked like a bright, magical place where frogs leapt silently and deer drinking at the water's edge had no fear of people.

My father came back, sunburned and irritable. He had presents for us: for my brother, a Persian dagger with a jeweled handle; for my mother, a lamp made out of the bladders of two camels; and for my sister and me, exquisite rag dolls that had little hands with separated fingers like real hands, and ferocious embroidered faces with furious dark eyes and sullen red satin-stitched lips.

My brother developed amazing skills with the dagger and terrorized the neighborhood with feats of knife throwing, and my mother, on a creative

whim, turned the camel-bladder lamp upside down and hung it by an electrical cord over the dining-room table. She wouldn't let us play with the dolls. She suspected lice and packed them away in moth-balls. My father himself had a serious infestation of crabs—some virulent southwestern Asian strain impervious to the pediculicides of the New World.

Soon my father went off on another adventure, but this time he never came back. The camel-bladder chandelier could not seem to adjust to the climate of south Georgia: in the summer it would droop and swag and stretch in the damp heat until it almost touched the tabletop, and in the winter it would shrink and suck itself into a tight snarl up near the ceiling.

The years went by. My mother got old and crippled. And as her mobility decreased, she grew more and more dependent on Professor Meade's telescope. "Bring me my spyglass!" she would call. Someone would fetch it, she would put her elbows on the windowsill, lean the shaft of the telescope against the frame, and gaze.

Then one day we got a telephone call from a granddaughter of Professor Meade's. She wanted to see us "on a matter of some importance," she said. She flew down from Chicago. Professor Meade was on his deathbed. He was dying peacefully. There was only one thing he wanted: his grandfather's telescope.

My brother was incensed. He had recently taken the telescope apart into its thousand pieces to clean the lenses and change the felts. It had taken him two weeks. "What does a dying man need with a telescope?" he fumed.

My sister and I asked, "Now what will Mama look at things through?"

But it didn't bother Mama one bit. "His great-grandfather had it at Trafalgar," she said. "Of course he shall have it back." And she carefully slid the telescope into its Morocco leather case, snapped the snaps, and gave it to Professor Meade's granddaughter.

And Mama didn't seem to miss it. As a premium in the thirty-dollar pledge category for the local public radio station she got a pair of tiny plastic binoculars. Looking through those binoculars was the equivalent of taking three steps closer to your subject. "But it's hard for me to take three steps," she pointed out, the binoculars clamped to her eyes. She used to be able to sweep the telescope into position, with the near distance, middle distance, and remote distance swirling and colliding in brilliant, sharp disarray, and then focus on an osprey catching a fish a mile away, a silent explosion of bright water. Now, with the binoculars, she could see the purple finches on the bird feeder at the kitchen window a bit clearer, and recognize friends and family members when they came to call