

a little

SALTY

to cut the

Sweet

*Southern stories
of Faith,
Family, and
Fifteen Pounds
of Bacon*

SOPHIE HUDSON
author of BooMama blog



If you're not familiar with Sophie Hudson already, you're about to find out why all of us who know her want to be her best friend. Whatever your love language, Sophie can speak it. If you need to laugh, she's your girl, but don't be shocked to find yourself moved to tears minutes later. She's all the things you love most in a woman of God. Have a blast with her!

BETH MOORE

New York Times bestselling author and speaker

This is Jerry Seinfeld in a skirt and a huge heart for Jesus. This is laugh-out-loud, hold-your-side funny. This is one unstoppable book—once you start reading, there's no stopping!

ANN VOSKAMP

Author of the *New York Times* bestseller *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are*

Sophie Hudson has managed to capture all the heart and humor of growing up Southern in *A Little Salty to Cut the Sweet*. I devoured this book—I laughed out loud, I cried, I smiled, I talked back. For the first time in my life, I've found a book I wish every woman in my family could read together. There isn't a woman, no matter where she is from, who won't connect with the heart of this book. But the Southern women? They will feel it deep in their souls. That's the kind of book this is—the kind you read and feel and love and share.

ANNIE F. DOWNS

Author of *Perfectly Unique*

The very first blog I ever read was Sophie's *BooMama* blog, and I have read it every day since for the last six years. Her writing style keeps me coming back with her mix of HILARIOUS stories and the ability to make everyday things interesting. Sophie is the epitome of all that is Southern, and her writing brings that familiarity with it that makes you nod your head and say, "Uh-huh" and "Yes" if you were raised anywhere in the Southern states. *A Little Salty to Cut the Sweet* has made me laugh until I cried and has made me a little nostalgic for my family and childhood. It was everything I had hoped it would be and more!

KELLY STAMPS

Author of the kellyskornerblog.com

Well, it's official: I'm in love with this book. Sophie Hudson is hilariously appreciative of her very Southern roots, and she shares tales of all the experiences (and the lovably eccentric relatives!) that shaped her. Threads of love, family, and faith hold the stories together . . . but it's Sophie's laugh-at-life humor that sings forth from every page. She writes as if you're sitting on her front porch drinking a tall glass of sweet tea, and it's impossible not to come away from each chapter without feeling like you know her a little better. I can't remember the last time I had this much fun reading a book.

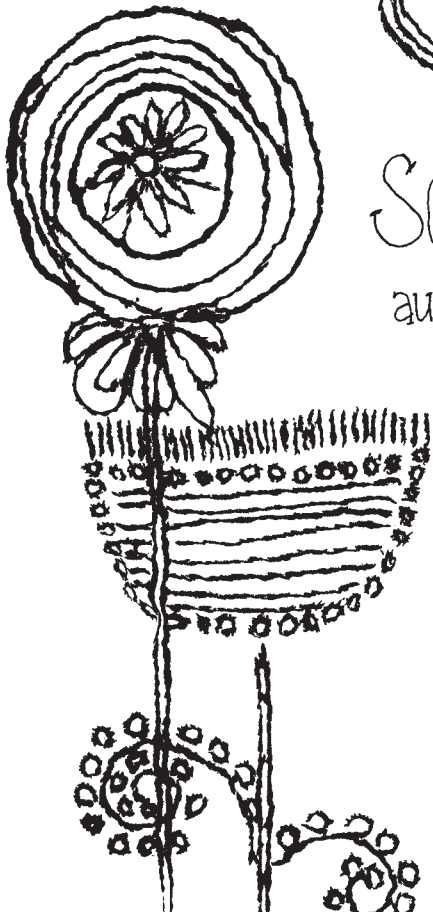
REE DRUMMOND

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Pioneer Woman Cooks*

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A LITTLE LITERARY DISCLAIMER

THESE STORIES ARE TRUE—for the most part. I mean, you're reading my perspective on these true-for-the-most-part stories, and my perspective may differ from other people's. I think it's good to remember that. Plus, every once in a while I changed details and names because, well, it seemed like the right thing to do—lest I start some sort of family feud, you understand.

I also changed the names of some towns and altered some locations. Real life happens all over the place, and since I didn't want you to need a map in order to follow along, I consolidated the action to a few towns that exist only in my imagination. From that perspective, I guess the stories are 90 percent true-*ish* as opposed to 100 percent absolutely true.

I know. I'm overexplaining. It's what I do when I'm trying to make sure I'm covering all my storytelling bases.

There's a chance, I guess, that you'll find yourself wondering why I don't chronicle some big family falling-out, why we never seem to argue or disagree or fuss, so let me assure you that we most definitely do all of the above. You know that old Keith Whitley song called "I'm No Stranger to the Rain"? Well, we're



A LITTLE SALTY TO CUT THE SWEET

no strangers to the drama. I will say, however, that my grandparents set a high standard in terms of how they expected us to treat each other, so even when we're aggravated, we're much more apt to talk about it than to storm out of a room. On top of that, this book is not meant to be *An Airing of the Grievances*; it's meant to be a celebration of family.

Consider yourself warned that I may have been prone to some exaggeration and embellishment every once in a while, but that probably goes without saying, since I'm Southern and all.

Don't roll your eyes, people. *It's in my blood.*



INTRODUCTION

Because I'm Crazy about My People

ONE OF THE GREAT BLESSINGS of my life is that I grew up in a family of storytellers. Some of my earliest memories involve sitting in Mamaw and Papaw Davis's den while my mama, my aunt, and their cousins took turns telling tales. The stories always featured real people and real-life events—like, for instance, Uncle Herman and Aunt Elsie, or one of the Keenans who lived down the road, or their cousin Tom Alex (pronounced “Ellec,” a peculiar Mississippi pronunciation that puzzles me to this day)—and they were always hilarious.

What the stories were *not* was mean spirited. And there was never any profanity. In fact, the liveliest the language ever got was when my sweet Papaw would react to something by saying, “Well, I’ll be John Brown.” I had no idea who John Brown was, of course, but that’s sort of beside the point. Because as I sat and listened to my mama imitate her uncle Owen and heard my aunt howl with laughter over something that had happened at the Moss Rose General Store, I learned very quickly that a good story doesn’t require “all that foul language,” as Mama might say. And with the exception of an unfortunate season in my early twenties



when I regularly experimented with all the curse words in all their various forms, I've remembered the lesson.

Way back in ye olden days of 2005, I was the mama of a two-year-old and, according to my husband, a person who might benefit from a creative outlet that didn't involve Elmo, *VeggieTales*, or *Blue's Clues*. I'd been reading blogs for a couple of years, and one night while I sat in the rocking chair in our guest room and watched our little guy play in the tub, I decided I was going to start one of those blog things and maybe try to get back in the swing of writing.

I had been a habitual journal keeper from my early teens until my late twenties, but after I got married, I abandoned the writing in favor of some fairly obsessive housekeeping and decorating. After all, it's tough to commit to keeping a journal when you're repainting your bedroom for the fifth time in a year and scouring T.J. Maxx and Marshalls for the latest shower curtain shipment. As a wise philosopher once said, "Discounted linens wait for no woman."

But that night in the guest room, I realized that I was ready to write again. I *needed* to write again. And I figured that if two or three people wanted to hop on the wide-world Interweb and read what I wrote, that would be delightful. I thought my daddy, my sister, and my brother might be interested—maybe even a few friends from college. I knew from the get-go that my mama wouldn't touch the blog with a ten-foot pole since she often reminds us that she doesn't even know how to turn on the e-mail, but I was okay with that.

For about six years I kept up my regular routine of blogging in between piling up clean clothes on the guest room bed, finding new and inventive ways to incorporate bacon into our meals, and watching more than my fair share of Bravo after our little boy was asleep.

I know that last thing probably sounds super shallow.

That's because it is.

But sometimes, after a long, hard day, I need to hear Ramona on *The Real Housewives of New York City* say that she'd wear a certain item of clothing "in a heartflash."

It comforts me.

Then one day in April 2011, I was folding clothes from the aforementioned guest room pile when an expression that Papaw Davis used all the time came to mind: *I think I need a little salty to cut the sweet*. He'd say it as he pushed back from the table after devouring a helping of Mamaw Davis's homemade blueberry cobbler, and it was always a signal that he might need one more piece of fried chicken to balance out his sugar intake. I don't know about y'all, but that tendency to temper an overly jellied biscuit with one last piece of thick-sliced bacon or to alleviate the effects of too much homemade banana pudding with a sliver of beef tenderloin is at least one family member's story at every holiday gathering. And as I stacked folded towel on top of folded towel that afternoon, I thought about how that expression applies to more than just food.

For the first time in my life, there was a book I wanted to write. And it blows my mind just a little bit that you're about to read it.

Mamaw and Papaw Davis didn't live to see me graduate from high school; honestly, I have no idea if either of them knew how much I liked to write. But make no mistake: their example and their legacy are precisely why I treasure our family stories and why I feel privileged to share them. They couldn't have known how deeply I was soaking in the words and the expressions and the testimonies and the laughter that surrounded me when I would perch on the edge of a breakfast room chair and listen





to the grown-ups hold court. But I was taking it all in—and I've never forgotten.

So that's all a very long-winded way of saying that, for me, this book is my twenty-first-century version of Mamaw and Papaw Davis's kitchen. I haven't really figured out a way to serve you some of Mamaw's sweet tea and apple tarts while you read, much less her homemade chocolate pie, which could make even the staunchest Episcopalian lift up holy hands and offer the Lord spontaneous songs of praise and thanksgiving.

But the welcome mat is out, the crazy is on full display, and there's always room for one more around our table.

I hope you'll feel right at home.



CHAPTER ONE

Not to Mention That Her Apple Tarts Would Change Your Whole Life

SO, I HAVE A THEORY.

It's not a theory about science or religion or politics. Oh, heavens, no. That would be a complete departure from the very fiber of my personality.

But I do have a theory about memory. More specifically, I have a theory about how we remember people.

Are you ready?

Prepare to be underwhelmed, my friends.

My theory is that we typically have one dominant “fallback” memory that becomes our go-to mental image when we think about somebody.

Now that I've typed that out, by the way, I'm thinking that maybe it's not so much a *theory* as a loose, unverifiable observation.

But let's just run with it. Because whenever I think about Papaw Sims, for example, I picture him leaning over his deep



freeze and asking if I'd rather have chocolate, vanilla, or strawberry ice cream. Whenever I think about Uncle Joe, I picture him dozing in his recliner with a stack of paperwork on his lap—and a ten-key adding machine within arm's reach. And whenever I think about Mamaw Davis, my maternal grandmother, I picture her looking over her shoulder and grinning while she's standing at the stove. Maybe even scooping a little Crisco out of the can.

The mental picture of Mamaw standing at the stove is one of the most enduring images of my childhood, mainly because she stood at that stove so faithfully. She cooked three hot meals a day, seven days a week. There was never anything made from a box, either—no powdery macaroni and cheese or Hamburger Helper. Oh, no, ma'am. There was hot cornbread, beef stroganoff over rice, pot roast with carrots and potatoes, fried chicken, creamed potatoes, fresh peas, fried squash, fried okra (I have to pause for a moment whenever I mention Mamaw's fried okra and give it the reverence and honor that it is due), egg custard pie, pound cake—I could go on and on.

We didn't have all that food at one time, mind you, or else we'd have alternated trips to Mamaw's table with trips to the cardiac care unit, but there was always something delicious and homemade on that stove. Mamaw didn't think she was doing anything special—she was just taking care of her family the best way she knew how—but I think her children and grandchildren can all testify to the fact that those meals she cooked ministered to us like a good Sunday sermon. And she didn't have to say a single word.

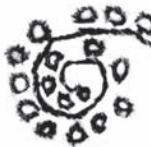
For at least one week a summer—sometimes more—my mama and my daddy, along with my aunt Choxie, who is Mama's sister, and Chox's husband, my uncle Joe, would ship my cousin Paige and me off to Mamaw and Papaw Davis's pretty

white farmhouse in Moss Rose, Mississippi—about thirty minutes from my hometown of Myrtlewood. Since Paige would have been born in the early 1900s if she'd had any say in the matter, she thrived on Mamaw and Papaw's farm. She was perfectly content to pick blackberries, walk through the chicken coops, amble about in the pastures, and count cows. I, on the other hand, was a total scaredy-cat, wary of tall grass that made me itch and bumblebees that refused to be swatted away.

I had issues when I was indoors, too. When Paige and I would go to bed at night, exhausted from our day's adventures, I'd usually make it ten or fifteen minutes before I'd sprint down the hall and crawl into bed with Mamaw and Papaw. Every floorboard creak sounded to me like imminent danger, so I settled into sleep much more easily underneath the cool hum of the AC window unit in my grandparents' room. No way could the boogeyman get me in there. Not on Papaw's watch. He was broad shouldered, barrel chested, and utterly devoted to his family—a security blanket in human form.

Papaw had some health problems when I was ten, and not too long afterward he and Mamaw decided to downsize and find a smaller house with a lot less land. Somebody later told my mama that Papaw was thinking ahead—he was worried something would happen to him and Mamaw would be stuck with the responsibilities of the farm. On top of that, he didn't want her to be living in a relatively remote area all by herself. So they sold the farmhouse (and the farm) and moved to a blond brick house that was just catty-corner from Moss Rose's Methodist church.

Papaw added a den to the back of the new-to-them house so there would be a nice big gathering place for the family, and when we had our first Sunday lunch there a month or so after they moved in, Mamaw stood at her new stove and carried out





the ministry of the homemade chicken pie just like she'd always done. Paige and I missed the backyard of the old house and the pipe swing with the eight-foot chain that hung from the branches of an old oak tree, but there was a barn to explore and plenty of room to roam. That was all we needed.

The following winter Mama and Chox hosted a tea at Mamaw and Papaw's house to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Mama and Choxie's brother, Bill, who lived three hours away, was there too, and in my opinion Bill's presence always elevated a family gathering a couple of notches. He drove a sports car, reminded me of Burt Reynolds, and delivered one-liners better than anybody else I knew. If that weren't enough, Mama and Chox let Paige and me serve the punch, and we were certain such a grown-up responsibility meant we'd hit the big time. Papaw wore his nicest suit, and Mamaw wore a pretty dress that she'd made for the occasion, along with a corsage that Sister had bought for her at a florist's shop in Myrtlewood. They made an adorable couple.

Papaw's personality came alive in a big group of folks, so he was in his element that afternoon. Mamaw, on the other hand, was much more introverted and soft spoken. Every once in a while Papaw would put his hand on her back and whisper, "You doing okay, Lucy?"

She'd grin and say, "I'm fine, John."

But even at eleven years old I knew it was hard for her to be the center of attention. Her sweet, servant spirit shone just fine without the aid of any limelight, and part of me wondered if she wasn't going to sneak out of her own anniversary party so she could get in the kitchen and make everybody some chicken and dumplings. She hung in there with the socializing, though, and she stood by Papaw's side until the front door closed and Mama

and Chox practically raced to see who could be the first one to take off her high-heeled shoes.

What none of us knew at the time, though, was how much Mamaw was struggling with her health. Then again, not even *she* knew how sick she was. Having been plagued by a general feeling of weakness as well as liver problems during the past several years, she initially thought that she was dealing with more of the same. Over the next few months, however, she and Papaw traveled to Myrtlewood almost weekly for doctor's visits, and early that fall—about eight months after their fiftieth anniversary—Papaw told the family that the doctor had confirmed their worst fear: cancer. Other than helping Mamaw manage her pain and keeping her as comfortable as possible, there wasn't much the doctors could do.

Mamaw was admitted to the hospital in Myrtlewood right before Thanksgiving, and for the next two weeks Mama, Chox, and Papaw rarely left her side. Mama would pick up Paige and me from school—we were fourteen and twelve at that point—and we'd do our homework in the waiting room down the hall from Mamaw's room while we drank Cokes and ate Dolly Madison fruit pies from the vending machine. Mama or Chox would take us downstairs to the hospital cafeteria for supper, and we'd eventually go home whenever they felt Mamaw was settled for the night. It broke their hearts to see her in pain, and they took their role as her advocates very seriously. It wasn't quite like Shirley MacLaine at the nurses' station in *Terms of Endearment*—Mama and Chox were far too polite to make a scene—but in their own Southern ways, they didn't mess around.

By mid-December the weather had turned windy and cold, and Mamaw showed no signs of getting better. One Tuesday night Papaw needed to drive back to Moss Rose to get a change





of clothes and a few other things, and since Mama and Chox didn't want him to stay at the house by himself, they suggested that he take Paige and me with him. We had school the next day, but they were far more worried about Papaw than about our missing an hour of social studies. So off we went.

The ride to Moss Rose in Papaw's Oldsmobile 88 was a quiet one, and by the time we arrived at Mamaw and Papaw's house, we were all pretty worn out. It was the first time I'd walked through their back door without immediately seeing Mamaw standing at the stove, and while we didn't stop and take time to vocalize our feelings or anything like that, I think it's safe to say that we all felt her absence.

Paige and I brushed our teeth in silence that night, standing in the guest bath that always smelled like a combination of rubbing alcohol and Mercurochrome. We walked down the hall to tell Papaw good-night and found him lying on top of the bed-spread, staring at the ceiling with his arms crossed over his chest. Paige and I sat down beside him, not really knowing what to say. Papaw spoke up first and uttered six words that have stayed with me for more than thirty years.

"She was mighty sweet, wasn't she?"

It struck me as strange that he used the past tense, but Paige and I certainly didn't correct him. We tried our best to comfort him as his shoulders began to shake and the tears started to fall. And while I don't have any idea what time it was when Paige and I finally fell asleep, I do know that Papaw's quiet sobs were the last sound either of us heard.

Early the next morning, around five o'clock, there was a knock on the door. Mama, Daddy, Chox, and Joe had come to tell us what Papaw's heart had told him the night before.

Up to that point in my life—and I was every bit of twelve

years old—I'd been all about ballet lessons, my snazzy new Merlin game, *American Top 40*, and Nancy Drew mysteries. So for me, Mamaw's death was my first glimpse into what family life looks like in the midst of sadness and grief and heartache. I couldn't have put words to it at the time, I don't think, but somehow I could sense that there was beauty in all that brokenness, that there were little patches of light that permeated the darkness. Yes, there was sorrow and pain—but there was also love and comfort and laughter and joy. There was a confidence that something bigger was at work, an assurance of “an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Corinthians 4:17, NIV).

So while Mamaw's death certainly isn't my happiest memory, I can honestly say that it will forever be one that I treasure. Because that memory, by God's grace, continues to teach me.

And even now, more than three decades later, I hold that memory in my heart real tight.

And I watch.

And I listen.

