



Honorable Mention - 2020

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Quilt: circa 1930's quilt – creator unknown

Sunshine & Shadows

The bloodstain spread through the quilt, like a cloud gathering before a storm. Pa wrapped the quilt tightly around his wife. “She’ll get cold,” he said.

“But Pa, she’s dead. She cain’t feel nothing no more.”

“Shush, child. You don’t know how much of her spirit is hangin’ on. Tell her a story while I get things fixed up.”

“What kind of story?”

“Don’t matter. One of the ones she taught you. She’d like that.”

Eleanor couldn’t look at Ma as she sat next to her and recited the story of *Mother Holle*.

Took Pa the better part of an hour to get the horses calmed and the wagon righted. He cursed and swore he’d kill that moose if he ever saw it again. Damn moose charged the horses, spooking them, causing the wagon to tip. Berry, broke loose and accidentally trampled Ma after she got thrown to the ground. If they didn’t need the horses so bad, Pa would’ve shot him right there.

When he was ready, he tucked Ma into the hay in the back of the wagon.

“You sit up here.”

Eleanor didn't want to sit in her mother's place but no one said no to Pa. When they got home, Pa told Eleanor to send her brothers and sisters to the neighbor's house. They were only too happy to go, since Sunday was chore day. The youngest, May, looked at her sister. "Something bad happened."

"Go on." Pa and I have a few things to finish."

Her sister didn't move.

"I said, go on, now."

May scampered out the door. Once they were off, Pa lifted his wife out of the wagon and carried her tenderly to the house. He lay Wilma's body on the braided rug near the fireplace.

"Get your mother's church dress."

When Eleanor returned with the brown homespun wool dress, her father set it on a chair, then handed her the quilt her mother had wrapped around her shoulders earlier that day for the drive to the saddlery.

"Take that to the river. Rinse it out good then scrub it if you need to."

"Yes, sir." She knew Pa would've buried her Ma in the quilt, she loved it so, but they didn't have money to buy another one. Winter was going to be long and cold.

Eleanor held the quilt to her heart as she carried it to the river. Her mother's scent was woven into the fabric; flour and lard, pine from firewood and her one luxury, rose scented soap. At the river, she spread out the quilt so Eleanor could see every square. Ma used Pa's old red flannel shirt for the center of half the squares. She said the center was the heart and Pa was her heart. The other half came from the lavender dress she wore the

first time he came calling. Her Ma once explained the pattern, “On every square there is dark and light, sunshine and shadows. Just like life.”

Eleanor fingered the brown strip with blue flowers. That was her Aunt Dotty’s dress. “After your Pa proposed, my sisters brought over their scraps of old clothes. We stitched this quilt so I would always have them with me. Someday I will give you the quilt so I will always be with you.”

Eleanor knelt at the bank of the river, submerging the blanket, watching the blood float away, carried to places unknown. Her hands numbed from the cold. She wished she could lie in the water, let her heart go numb, too. She could barely bend her fingers to wring out the blanket.

As she trudged back to the house, she heard the sounds of a shovel hitting dirt up where her baby brother was buried. She let Pa go about his business. Knew he needed to take care of the hurt in his own way.

Filling the washtub with water, she warmed it over the fire, then put the quilt in, lathering it with soap and ammonia. She worked the quilt with her hands until there was nothing left of the stain. She rinsed the blanket then took it outside to hang on the line. As she fastened the quilt with clothespins a cloud passed over the sun causing her to shiver. They wouldn’t have the warmth of their mother tonight. Eleanor waited in the shadows for the cloud to pass and the sun to return.