

## LEARNING TO QUILT

by

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I sit here in the outhouse, fifty yards up the hill behind the house, staring at the Sears catalogue draped over a rusting hanger, wondering how I'll ever get that worn kitchen linoleum to shine without wax.

Grandma says she "don't care iff'n it don't gleam" as long as I "git the blamed dirt up."

Smells buzz around my head along with the flies. I wipe myself with a page of fluffy bath towels and amble back down to the house.

Grandma and Grandpa are out in the field digging potatoes to sell to the store. I don't like bending down in the dirt with the sun burning my back, so I've been allowed the luxury of scrubbing the floor instead.

It's not big. The whole room is maybe eight by ten feet and the woodstove and refrigerator cover a lot of that space. And Grandma sweeps it out everyday. But it's been months since it was truly scrubbed, and I know what awaits me: fine layers of ash and grime attracted and held by the even finer layers of bacon and sausage grease sent down every morning, noon and night when Grandma cooks the meat, potato and bread meals we all know and love.

I count the sixteen fat flies that sit on the window sill avoiding the fly paper strips that hang from every ceiling in the house. Grandma would swat them dead if she saw them here. I shoo them outside with the handle of my mop.

I lift the heavy floral skirt my Grandma made for the sink. It hides the bucket which is the only drain in the house. It also hides the lye soap and stiff gray rags that will become the head of my mop. I empty the bucket out the door and watch the water run down the hard-packed earth, trying to find some grass to feed. There is none, and anyway it's August. The grasses have been dried up for six weeks.

The rainbarrel is empty, so I walk down the road a quarter of a mile to the spring and fill my bucket with creek water. I'd get my hide tanned if I used spring water to wash the floor.

On the way back the bucket bangs my shins, and precious drops slosh out the sides. I walk slower and the weight tries to tug my shoulder joints from their sockets. I'm so focused on not spilling the water I don't see the copperhead waiting for me at the gate until after I've set the bucket down, lifted the barbed wire, and straddled the snake.

Bent over, with the barbed wire at my back, and my face about eighteen inches from the snake's own face, I can see entirely too clearly its flitting tongue as it smells whether or not it should coil and strike. I'm frozen in position. If I dare to move either one of my feet, I fear I'll step on the snake and it will no longer be confused as to whether or not to bite me. If it strikes me, it will at least get me in the thigh, maybe in the crotch and I don't trust that my cotton panties are going to be much protection.

My hands seem glued to my knees, and I can feel both the sun and the wire barbs burning into my back where my sundress has dipped for fashion and comfort. My ears seem to burn with the sound of someone screaming, and I finally realize it is me when my throat begins to

burn more than my ears.

The snake looks at me and keeps flicking its tongue. Still, it has not coiled. I know this is a good sign, but I'm praying for all I am worth that it will decide to continue on its journey to wherever it was going before I came along and straddled it.

Screaming, praying, burning. I remain frozen in position, only my lungs and vocal cords at work.

Suddenly, Grandma is yanking me to her side of the gate so hard I am flung several feet away from her. I watch with horror and not a little bit of awe as she wields the wood chopping ax and parts the snake's head from its body. The body writhes, but the tongue stops.

Grandma tosses the ax to the ground, grabs me up and inspects me for bite marks, then beats my butt for "gittin' into sich a pickle!" I cry from fear, anger, and hurt feelings. I couldn't help it, I tell myself.

Grandma flings the two parts of the snake over to the side of the yard, picks up the ax in one hand, the bucket in the other, and motions me to the house with a flick of her head. I follow her up the hill to the house, and then spring ahead to open the screen door for her, hoping to get back into her good graces.

I needn't have worried. Grandma sets the bucket and ax down, takes my hand and leads me to the rocker. She wraps me in a summer quilt, for even though it's about as hot as I ever remember it, I am shivering. And then she rocks me in silence until I feel warm again.

Before bedtime, she decides it is time I learn how to piece quilts so I'll have something safe to do while she and Grandpa are out in the fields. And the next day, I make my first patchwork square. That night, Grandma embroiders a big old copperhead right in the middle of it.

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