

The Quilt of Faded Colors

Contributed by Mary Ann Bracewell

The year was 1950. As I skipped home from school, the blistery cold winds didn't bother me. I was eager to get home to tell Mama of the progress I was making in school. The teacher had chosen me to read from our "Dick and Jane" reader. I knew Mama would be proud. She had little education herself, and wanted her child to do well.

As I entered the house, the aroma of homemade biscuits filled the air. I thought I was in Heaven, or surely the nearest thing to it. I can still see Mama sitting at the large wooden quilting frame that hung from the ceiling, working on her favorite design, Rose of Sharon.

The church ladies often held Quilting Bees. Sitting around the wooden frame they talked quietly, and sometimes laughed as they stitched together.

Children had no place in this group. It was bonding time for the women.

Today, however, Mama was alone. I was happy about that, for I wanted her all to myself to share my good news. As she quilted she hummed a Stephen Foster tune, "Beautiful Dreamer". Many times I had seen her dance on her toes, hands above her head, twirling gracefully. She was, indeed, a beautiful dreamer.

After a quick hug, I was off to the kitchen for a plate of biscuits and white gravy. Fresh milk, homemade butter, jellies, and garden vegetables were always available in abundance in our home. My favorite was fresh churned butter. One morning Mama placed a bowl of fresh butter on the kitchen table. Being a mischievous toddler, I waited until she left the kitchen, then I climbed on top of the table, and dug in the butter with my hands. After emptying the bowl I quickly left the room before Mama returned.

Daddy was sitting at the table later when Mama, aghast, looked at him and exclaimed, "Emmett, did you eat all of that butter?" "Yep" he said..That was my Daddy, always there to rescue his baby girl. Then in I walked, covered from head to toe in fresh butter. "Mama", I exclaimed, "That was the best butter you ever made." Daddy asked, "Puddin', were you able to get any in your mouth"? Mama was laughing too hard to be angry with me.

Now, my plate of biscuits, and white gravy in hand, I took a seat next to Mama at the quilting frame. Her eyes sparkled when I told her about my reading.

One day I arrived home from school to find her working on one of many star patterns. But this day was different. Mama wasn't singing, or humming, or smiling. Tears rolled down her cheeks. I gently hugged her and said, "Mama, you're getting your pretty quilt all wet". No conversation was needed. I knew why she was sad, and I knew that soon a smile would replace the tears.

She was thinking of her baby daughter, who died of a viral illness many years earlier, in the 1920's.

Mama always hoped the Lord would call her home before she faced the pain of burying another child. Her wish was granted. The grief of a Mother is unparalleled; somehow, even at my tender age, I understood.

My mother, Rebekah, was an elegant lady who exuded charm and grace. She could have become a great pianist, or a polished writer, but those dreams were never fulfilled. As a farmer's wife with thirteen children, there was little time, or money, to pursue such ambitions. She often worked in the fields. She enjoyed singing, and talking to her flowers. "Good morning, morning glory" she would say, and "Pretty little buttercups". I was certain the buttercups were responding to her as they swayed with the breeze. Many years later I find myself repeating her words in my own garden. It's an idiosyncrasy of hers that I'm proud to share.

Mama continued quilting throughout her life, more because she needed to keep her children warm on winter nights, than for the joy of it. At the age of seventy eight with her eyesight failing and her hands unsteady, she made her last quilt. The colors she once matched so beautifully were now misplaced, and her once perfect stitches were now uneven. When Mama died in 1980, at age 79, a part of me died with her. As I grow older I am told our looks, and mannerisms are similar, a compliment I hold dear. She left to me her joy of living life to the fullest, her love of song and dance, prose and poetry, the belief in a higher power, and a heart for being forever young. Along with these, she left me her final quilt, her "Quilt of Faded Colors. And to me, the mismatched colors, and uneven stitches grow lovelier with time.

At nighttime, when my bed is turned down, I am reminded again of Mama sewing, her hands moving slowly, and rhythmically as she hummed softly and worked on another piece of art. To her it was nothing special, just another blanket to keep her babies warm. To me her last imperfect quilt is a masterpiece of love. I cherish the many happy memories that are woven into the threads of her "Quilt of Faded Colors"...