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## Quilting for Beginners

Kira Archibald

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QUILTING FOR BEGINNERS

My sister, Lemon, has told me in no uncertain terms that she will never forgive me. She stands firm on one point— mani-pedi in her bath robe on Bernadette’s wraparound porch, sweetgum shade on her exposed shoulders, those shoulders a white blaze paler than moonlight, sunk into the cushions of the porch swing with a mimosa that couldn’t get a three-year-old tipsy, moan of the swing, and rattle of the Sweet Gum’s leaves a melody she’ll recall in bed on the morning of her golden anniversary, bride’s maids, high school friends with husbands and babies who have perfected the art of anticipating acquaintances’ and loved ones’ paths of desire, who have forgotten their own paths of desire, musk of bruised petals fallen onto mahogany tables the only proof they aren’t ghosts—this is what I took from her. It is Lemon’s big day after all. But we are in a truck that’s never been accused of being clean, going to pick up her wedding dress because I ripped a mouthful of puckered lace at the small of the back where a string of buttons sit like old women in church pews, and tore a button clean off squeezing behind the armoire to hide. Out from behind the armoire, the dress crumpled at my feet like so much tissue paper on Christmas morning I saw for the first time that my hips and the space left by the curve of my abdomen were beautiful. Even now, when anger has carved my heart into a spit, I admit that I have never not burned to be ten years older, my sister’s best friend, sharing lipstick and bras, the one with steadier hands dipping a brush into a tin of eye shadow and spreading gold shimmer across the lids of Lemon’s blue eyes.

Rosemary. Mom said again, raised voice, allowing herself only the barest hint of impatience because we had company. It was time to open the gifts. I hung the dress in the armoire. I had an idea, which was delightfully nonsensical and perfectly irresistible; the idea—even if she notices, and it’s not that bad, I don’t care if I’m caught.

That was Sunday. Today Mom makes Lemon take me with her, hoping we'll have to talk. So far nothing. Kirby drives with one hand on the steering wheel, whistling techno beats; Lemon stares out the window. She has so completely abandoned good posture that she would fall onto the road if the passenger door vanished. Our shoulders and knees parry but she looks straight ahead as if I am a stranger on the subway. The more I try to not squirm the more I'm aware of the parts of me that itch and the parts of me that are hot. At our feet are piles of junk food wrappers and empty chocolate milk cartons. We hit moon crater large potholes and dust explodes around us like confetti. I cough in spasms and Lemon purses her mouth. It smells like off duty firefighters, like Chad, who put a lei around my neck during assembly. You've gotten lei'd, he said and laughed at his own joke. Chad's pickup doesn't have a broken door handle. You don't have to roll down the window and slam the door shut because Chad opens and closes doors. Chad is a gentleman. Dad says Kirby's on his way to manhood, he's just running ten years late. He did show up at 7:30 sharp. We hit every pothole and our limbs jerk like there's someone at the other end of the string yanking. Already, I have to pee.

I'm being haunted by a girl whose body, wearing knee-high volleyball socks and a pink top, washed up near White City. That's what we whisper about in the halls between periods. The details change daily. By the time Mom let me watch Channel 10 News they'd removed all traces of her body. When the cameraman zoomed in on the blackberry bushes, where a man running his chocolate lab found her floating facedown, there was nothing to see but flat, brown water sliding around bridge pylons. In the photo the family supplied she is every seventeen-year old, brown hair down

to there, half-smile concealing braces. We don't believe it was an accident. No one came out and told it straight at church or at a school assembly, our parents just stopped letting us girls go anywhere alone. That night the rain began. Torrential, it fell for ten days without pause, but in the six months since, not a drop. A man died when a tree fell on his car and lightning started a fire that devoured an elementary school in Klamath Falls. In Ashland, Lithia Creek broke its banks and we waded playfully through a foot of water in knee high rain boots we'd purchased cheap from the grange. The red and yellow rain boots, the soda cans that zoomed past us, each dazzled us as only new experiences can. On day three, with nowhere to go and water seeping between the chinks in our bedroom, Lemon and I fought, first about about a spilt bottle of nail polish, then about a scarf, until we could not wrap up one fight before starting another.

In front of us the road unfurls, red-brown, dusty-dry, even the cottonwoods look thirsty, like they want to lie down. My skirt is pushed up around my thighs and my thighs are stuck to the vinyl seat. By now Betty will have resurrected the wedding dress. I have seen her kneeling in the cemetery on Sunday mornings, dressed in a blue corduroy jacket beside a pile of weeds. That everyday act, trowel in her right hand opening the earth, muscles in her arms clumping together, knock twice against the gravestone to separate soil from roots and her habit of pausing to bow her head, contains more devotion than all the hours I've spent sitting in pews.

Can you roll down the window? I ask.

Nope. Lemon says. It's the first word she's spoken to me in days and I can't help but think it signifies a softening.

She was up before the sun doing her hair in the bathroom mirror. There's so much hairspray in there she'd burst into flames if I lit a match. We pass the Stateline and get on the freeway. I almost ask Kirby to stop so

I can pee, but he's fiddling with the radio, trying to find a station that isn't playing country music or evangelists. Kirby doesn't go in for God like the rest of us. He finds nothing and goes back to whistling. The speedometer reads 70mph. Kirby swerves around the carcass of a deer in the middle of the freeway, another bad omen, and momentarily our bodies touch the way they once did, when things were good between us.

What time is it? Lemon asks.

8:30. Kirby says.

Kirby grew up on road kill. When the Uncles smoke they say things, say road kill stew is where all his weird comes from. Say Uncle Russell bought the highway patrolman a pint now and then in return for a phone call when something big was hit. It's easier to say that than talk about the decade Uncle Russell spent unemployed and mean. Eventually he found God. And God's love melted his pride like so much dirty snow. That's how Uncle Russell tells it. Kirby says he got God and I got to eat what the neighbors'd been offering.

I don't deny trying on Lemon's dress or shoving it deep back in the armoire hoping she wouldn't notice, but I didn't intentionally rip it and I didn't do the other things she accuses me of. The comb John gave her that went missing, and the red shirt that was her favorite until it came out of the wash with a jagged cut across the breasts. Lemon's always been good. Course she might have had a second life—leaving sharpie notes on the walls of the Statesline bathroom and making out with boys in the back of cars— while I was playing with mud. If she caught me with a boy, Lemon would say that making out in the back of a car is undignified. What she doesn't know is that I saw her and John in the hayloft of Martin's barn before Mom and Dad knew who John was. Like her goodness, Lemon's pursuit of perfection is as exacting and arduous as carving miniatures. The

first time she shivered into her dress Lemon looked like she ought to be on magazine covers. Beside her I was a scrawny sixteen-year-old in a pink tulle dress the seamstress wasn't sure could be taken in at the bust.

Why are you sour? Mom asked.

Oh honey, she said when I explained myself, not everyone can be as beautiful as Lemon.

Wait here, Lemon says when we pull up, then slides out of the truck with a cherry pie in one hand and a bag of Dad's tomatoes in the other. The door opens and Betty sticks her head out. She blinks vigilantly if sleepily, like an owl nestled in the knot of a tree. In its plastic bag the dress looks cheap. Lemon hands her the pie and tomatoes.

I wish you'd come. She says. The ceremony is at ten and the reception is at the old stagecoach house.

Suddenly Betty is in Lemon's arms and she's tiny, like a child who has been wandering lost in a field of corn. But if either finds comfort it is Lemon, who allowed herself ten furious minutes before settling into a state of impersonal efficiency. Betty frees herself and closes the door with a smile as soft and worn as an old couch. The aunts say Betty didn't use to be this way; she's having a big sad on account of her daughter dying from ovarian cancer and her husband having a series of heart attacks in a hotel four months after he left. Betty taught me quilting though we never finished. I think of Betty's hands when I think about those months and also how certain she was when she dragged her fingertips over bolts of fabric trawling for the right piece, as if she understood hers to be a world in which things fell into place because she believed they would. How unlike the woman she has become. Betty said that fear is useful in moderation because when we lose our way it reminds us that we still love the people who drive us up the wall. She makes the most beautiful quilts, the kind

you hang on the wall. They aren't your grandmother's quilts, geometric pastels endlessly repeating as if suggesting that life is predictable. Betty's quilts drip sorrow.

The dead girl, Susannah, and I were born three days apart. Her story unfolded in weekly chapters as old books used to. It was all we talked about. We were addicted to her story because it was so open ended that we could insert ourselves into the drama. And by the end we knew more intimate details than we ought to, which made us uncomfortable at times. When the paper began to report on Medford's meth lab epidemic instead, we felt a strange sort of loss exacerbated by boredom. I imagined too vividly. My nightmares always began with me bicycling in a rain of leaves: red, yellow and orange. I would turn my head to admire the silken coils of the river and when I looked again a dark, featureless man would step into my path and I would have to get off my back to go around him. I was diagnosed with an unhealthy fixation by the women in my family who decided that quitting cold was the only solution. I lasted a week.

Paradise, in winter, when snow drifts creep toward heaven, encasing the first floor windows, enters our house in a 9x9 pie crust. The scent of coconut visibly hovers in the air just like in cartoons. I walked home from the bus stop and the ill omen, a black snake thick as my arm and still thawing after the long winter was stretched across the road like a jump rope. I ran through the front door red and out of breath to find the whole family there, Mom, Dad and Grandma Sheila sitting at the kitchen table, Lemon cooking.

Sit down Rosemary. Dad said.

So I did. Lemon wouldn't look at me. If I had a notebook full of everything Lemon was to blame for that summer there wouldn't be a blank sheet.

You act like you're the only person in this family adjusting to Lemon leaving. It's beyond the newspapers or the mood ring you stole. Yes, Lemon found that too. You're sour with John who is family now. Tomorrow Lemon will take you to return the ring. Dad said.

There was a lot more to it than that of course.

I hate you. I can't wait until you move to Pendleton. I hope you never come back. I hope you're miserable living in the middle of nowhere, staying home while your husband is a prison guard in a prison full of psycho killers, I said.

Lemon stood with the poise of a dancer caught in the spotlight and waiting for the music to start and I wondered if she no longer cared enough to bother fighting. She picked up the knife and continued chopping potatoes for soup, the blade flashing in the sunlight, smacking the cutting board like bb's hitting the trunk of an oak tree. The timer buzzed to say that the coconut cream pie was now perfect.

I have to pee. I say.

We are thirty minutes from the church, you can wait. Lemon says.

Lemon has hooked the clothes hanger though a hole in the ceiling so the dress lies across our laps. That way it won't crease. We drive down an avenue of pines then turn onto Mt. Ashland road. At the fork a sign warns us that today's fire danger is extreme bordering on catastrophic, like the summer of '66 when half the town, including the mill, burned down. Catastrophic is represented by red behind black bars. All summer there have been fires just out of sight. When firefighters smother one, another is born from lightning. On their days off the fireman come to the Stateline for burgers and chocolate milkshakes. They bring their manly smells and



take up all three booths, appraising Lemon with their eyes. After I was pardoned, I rode my bike to Martin's lake every afternoon and watched the water planes circling the lake, diving like a team of synchronized swimmers.

I can't. I say. I've been holding it since we left. Please, it will only take five minutes.

Five minutes. Lemon says.

I want to say thank you, but the words won't come. Something stagnated between us and now it has petrified. Kirby hauls ass on the freeway. We pass a minivan. A kid in the back seat smashes his face against the window and his shit-eating grin makes him look like a cartoon character that's been flattened by a giant roller. We pass two Hells Angels who speed up and make vulgar gestures. The woman on the back of the bike has a bluebird tattoo on her neck and shoulder.

We pull into the Stateline and I run for the bathroom, stumbling a little in the stupid, strappy sandals Lemon choose for her bridesmaids. Mine are a size too big because by the time they arrived there wasn't time to return them. Lemon follows me inside so she can knock on the door if I take too long. Kirby stays in the truck with the engine on. Someone has to watch the dress because the doors don't lock. The bathroom smells like pee and vomit with a sickly sweet undertone of peaches. Now that I'm close to a toilet I think I'm going to explode. I fumble with my pantyhose and tear them.

Hurry up. Lemon says.

I take my time, read the bathroom graffiti, and fantasize that one day some girl sitting where I'm sitting, will see a heart dug into the wood with Chad and my initials inside, and feel jealous.

There's no soap or paper towels so I wipe my hands on my dress.

Lilac is their color. The whole wedding is dainty, like having tea with the Queen.

Come on. Lemon says.

The clock above the soda machine says 9:30. At the register a whippet-thin boy-man fingers a rabbit foot, rubbing it between his thumb and pointer finger. His nails are dirty and his clothes are wrinkled but clean like he's been sleeping in his car. He asks for a pack of Marlboros and a fifth of Jack Daniels. Mr. Junckel scans his ID for ages before turning around and opening the liquor cabinet. That's when he pulls out the gun. Lemon grabs my arm. I feel her trembling. She puts her finger to her lips and pulls me backward toward a shelf of candy and trail mix. I smell thyme and lavender mixed with the Chanel 5° she normally rubs on her wrists. For years I thought the way she applied perfume, spritzing her left wrist, rubbing them together, then rubbing her wrist along her collarbone, was the height of sophistication. It was elegant and intimate, more intimate than the way she undid the buttons of her dress at night, but not as intimate as when she took down her hair, pulling one bobby pin out at a time and placing them between her lips, and her hair, piece by piece, coming to rest on her shoulders.

I've heard that in moments of crisis there is a rush of adrenaline and the body acts without thought. It's not at all like that. My legs have buckled like the just born foal I saw fall again and again in the straw while his mother nudged him with her velvet nose. I have never seen anything so relentless since. I hear my heart, but not the jukebox music, and I'm certain he can hear my heart too. Lemon drags me toward the shelf. Her nails dig into my arm, and I cling to this singular point of pain as if it is the only proof I still exist. I believe Lemon can save me just as ten years ago I believed Ariel the Disney Princess would come to my birthday. As we edge

around the shelf my feet slip inside my shoes, my shoulder knocks into the shelf and I watch as a bag of Oreos hits the floor. The package rips and an Oreo rolls across the linoleum until it is intercepted by a red stool. The man's head swivels our way, but he keeps the gun trained on Mr. Junckel.

Sit where I can see you. He says, pointing at the floor with the rabbit foot.

Susannah died on a Wednesday, and the following week Lemon returned from a peach picking trip in the Applegate with a ring on her finger. John's ok, sweet and serious, and blond like Lemon, but it's only been four months. Mom and Dad grew up together. Sometimes I wonder if I'll still love my family when I graduate and go off to university and I've got sixteen years worth of memories. All the best ones involve Lemon. Does John know that Lemon wants to live in a cottage in Normandy with chickens and donkeys instead of a dirty town in Oregon where she'll always have in the back of her mind that there could be a manhunt?

Lemon squeezes my hand and stares at the floor. I know I should too, but I've got this idea that this is the man who killed Susannah and that if I remember the right detail it will lead the police to him and she'll stop haunting me. I don't want to move or let go of Lemon's hand, but I want to wipe the sweat from my palms. I feel it trickling down my wrists.

Cigarettes. The man says. Vodka. He points with his gun at each item.

Put it in a bag. He says. Make it a double.

With his left hand he scoops up packets of gum and candy, dropping most of them. His pants are baggy. I see spots of blood where he cut himself shaving and patches of hair he missed. He reminds me of

Derek Milhauser, the first boy in our class to grow facial hair, only red-haired and scarecrow skinny. Derek would obliterate him on the football field. He checks his watch every thirty seconds and I decide he's not good for Susannah's murder. His eyes are big and brown like a hound dogs'. Just a scared kid neck deep in trouble, doing this for a big brother who has already got a couple violations. Crime runs in families, according to John.

I squeeze Lemon's hand, wishing I could rewind the last six months and remember this ending. It feels like I am living someone else's story. Not in the sense of inhabiting another's body, but because everything I think is a cliché. God is a natural starting point. I will do better I promise, though I'm vague about whom and what better encompasses. Lemon, yes. God, unlikely. To be clear, when I say better I mean perfect, I mean a mini Lemon even though Grandma Sheila firmly believes I will grow into a discerning appreciation of the 'grey area.' I have flashbacks, weird memories, like the time we lay on the couch sprawled on top of each other watching a documentary on European rivers, which I've never considered significant, significant being top one-hundred.

The man keeps tugging on his baseball cap with his right hand, his gun hand. He is ordinary; another reckless, white boy made stupid by a beautiful place where nothing happens that isn't pathetic (a meth lab exploding one wall of a sagging house) or sicker than the things his friends joke about (Susannah).

This is neither prophecy nor curse. Lemon will walk down the aisle and become the woman she has been becoming since birth. They won't catch the boy this time. I decide he is just a boy who drew the short straw. Three friends are waiting in an 83' Camaro spray-painted red. Kirby saw them. At the reception John will stand before me, extend his hand, and we will dance to the twang and pluck of a banjo solo, like old people

who are no longer obliged to act conventionally. I will write Lemon letters frequently at first and then not at all. Every summer I will visit. I will look forward to these visits, but after a week under her roof I will quickly grow restless and sharp tongued, the urgency of a love inflated by distance fading into the patchwork of exasperation, loyalty, and sweetness we established long ago. Lemon strokes my hair. Her engagement ring catches, pinches, and I bury my face in her shoulder, understanding finally, as I imagine she has always understood, that there will always be something outside of us bringing us together even as the things inside us threaten to tear us apart.