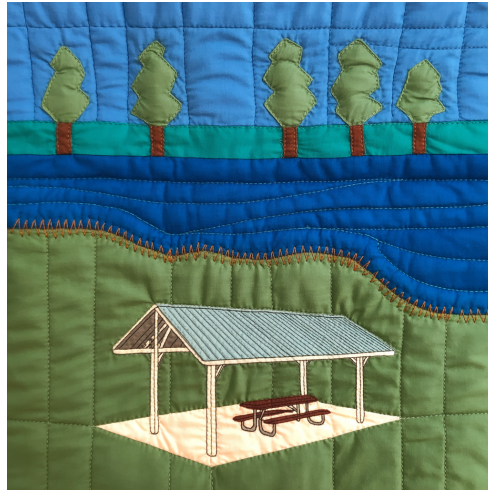


THE SECRET IN THE OLD QUILT

By

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I was still working on my hair when Mama yelled from downstairs. "Lula-Belle, get down here. We can't be late for church today, and remember I have to rush right back to grab the food for Dinner on the Grounds."

I rolled my eyes at my reflection, yanking the brush through one last tangle. "Yes, Mama. On my way."

Annalise and Aunt Minnie exited their house together with Apollo right on Annalise's heels. I skipped down the steps to hug my best friend as we started the 10-minute walk to Church Street, a block over. Mama greeted Aunt Minnie and reminded me to mind my manners and keep my dress clean, while Aunt Minnie adjusted the pink ribbon she had tied into Annalise's dark curls that morning, saying, "And do not let that cat follow you into the sanctuary, again."

"As if I could stop him from going anywhere he pleased," Annalise whispered to me, and I giggled.

The service always seemed to take too long when I was ready for the celebration, and by the time we got to the last prayer, my stomach was growling. As soon as the final Amen was said, we were the first two out the door, Apollo greeting us on the steps as we headed down to the park.

We'd perfected our Dinner on the Grounds strategy over the past year: stay alert as to where the desserts and deviled eggs were, and position ourselves strategically for the blessing.

"Miss Sue just put the eggs out," Annalise whispered as we watched closely to see who brought what. Many of the dishes were the same as always, with those who made the best of each dish always bringing that dish. Miss Sue's deviled eggs topped our favorites list, and they went fast. Miss Rose made buckets of the perfect fried chicken, while Miss Eunice's buttermilk biscuits, next to the honey from her hives, were worth fighting for. As usual, the tables under the center picnic shelter groaned under the weight of all of this, plus a multitude of casseroles and enough Jell-O salads to sink a boat.

The churches and community of Poe Lakes had combined their quarterly Dinner on the Grounds two years ago, and our local synagogue joined in to make it a full-out town affair. Even those who didn't attend any formal services, like the Hare Krishnas who lived in an ashram outside town, took part. Though they only brought and ate vegetarian options. Mama said it was to build community. Annalise's mother said it was to share prayer requests. Mrs. Henderson from the post office said it plainly: "Honey, it's so we can all get the good gossip at the same time instead of hearing five different versions by Tuesday."

Each quarter, they rotated the prayer order. Pastor Johnson from the Presbyterian church kicked us off this time. He clapped his hands. "Alright, folks, let's gather round for the blessing."

This was the part that took forever.

Everyone formed a large circle, hands clasped, heads bowed. Mrs. Simpson stood off to the side, her kitchen timer clutched in one hand like a weapon.

"We'll proceed as usual," Pastor Johnson announced. "Two minutes each, and I trust Gladys will keep us honest." He shot a look at Mrs. Simpson, who sniffed.

"I time everyone the same, Robert Johnson, and you know it. That business last quarter was your own fault for going on about the new hymnals."

A few chuckles rippled through the circle.

Pastor Johnson cleared his throat. "Heavenly Father, we thank you for this gathering and for the hands that prepared this bounty..."

I squeezed Annalise's hand. We'd positioned ourselves perfectly—right in front of the deviled eggs, close enough to drop hands and sneak one once the prayers got going.

Pastor Johnson wrapped up before the timer buzzed.

Father Mike from St. Anthony's went next, his thick Boston accent making "gathered" sound like "gathahd." He, too, kept it under the time limit.

Reverend Walters from First Baptist cleared his throat with the gravity of a man preparing to address the United Nations. "Lord, we come before you today..."

Annalise's fingers twitched against mine. Reverend Walters never met a prayer he couldn't stretch.

"...and we thank you for the fellowship of believers across denominational lines, for the breaking of bread together in Christian charity, for the opportunity to worship you in spirit and in truth..."

Mrs. Simpson's timer dinged.

"...and we ask your blessing on this food. Amen." He added quickly..

Three more to go. Annalise and I had this down to a science. As soon as Reverend Thompson from the AME church hit his stride—"Lord, we thank you for bringing us a mighty long way"—Annalise would drop my hand, snag a deviled egg, and pass me one in a move we'd practiced until it was smoother than her brother's baseball pitch.

By the time Rabbi Goldstein from Temple Beth Shalom offered the final blessing in Hebrew and English, we'd each had two deviled eggs, and nobody was the wiser.

"Amen!" several in the circle chorused.

"Now let's eat!" Pastor Johnson declared, and we all grabbed plates and fell upon the food like ants on a dropped sandwich.

As we dropped hands and prepared to eat, Mama looked at me with a raised eyebrow, figuring I had strayed but not having any evidence of my food sneak.

The following Saturday, Mrs. Henderson caught us on the walking trail with Apollo trotting between us.

"Girls! Perfect timing. I need help sorting through Dorothy Marsh's things for the church sale, and that attic is hotter than sidewalks in July. Could you two help me bring some boxes down and go through what's in the furniture up there?"

Miss Dorothy had passed last winter, quiet and peaceful in her sleep at eighty-nine. She had no children, and her nephew in Tallahassee had signed everything over to the church.

"Yes, ma'am," we said together.

The Marsh house sat three streets over from the lake, a small concrete block home painted yellow with white shutters. Inside, it still smelled like it always had—lavender sachets and lemon furniture polish.

Mrs. Henderson pointed upstairs. "There's a wardrobe up there that's full. Would the two of you sort it and bring the items down? The men will take care of the furniture."

The attic stairs were narrow and steep. Apollo shot up ahead of us, his grey tabby tail disappearing into the dimness.

The heat hit us like a wall. The attic ran the length of the house, crowded with boxes, an old dressmaker's dummy, a few chests of drawers, and a massive oak wardrobe. Even in the dim light from the attic bulb and the sun trying to filter through the one dirty window, you could see

it was a beautifully crafted piece. Its wood grain, deepened over time, made it seem more majestic.

"The wardrobe doors opened smoothly, revealing beautifully hand-knitted sweaters and fabric in a variety of colors. We pulled these out, stacking them in a box, knowing they would bring good money for the church sale. As we worked, Apollo found something interesting—he pawed at the wardrobe's base, meowing insistently.

"What'd you find, boy?" Annalise crouched down.

A thread. Deep red, almost burgundy, caught under the wardrobe's bottom edge. I pinched it between my fingers and pulled.

Something clicked inside the wardrobe.

We both jumped back.

"What was that?" Annalise whispered.

I pulled the thread again, harder this time. Another click, and the bottom of the wardrobe shifted—just slightly, but enough to see it wasn't solid.

"It's got a false bottom," I breathed.

The base revealed a hidden drawer that dropped down slightly, allowing us to pull it open. Inside lay a folded quilt.

It was smaller than a bedspread, more like something for a lap or to fold over the back of a chair. Even in the dim attic light, the colors were bright, not faded by time or the sunlight.

We carried the quilt and two of the smaller boxes downstairs, where the light was better.

Mrs. Henderson looked up from a box of costume jewelry. "What did you find?"

"Hidden compartment in the wardrobe," I said, spreading the quilt across the old kitchen table.

We stared at the quilt.

The top third was crafted from pale blue fabric like the sky, along with pieces of brown and green cut and stitched to look like trees. A section in the middle was darker blue, which looked like water.

Under the blue section was green cloth. Brown thread wound across it in a meandering line, and three small pink stars were stitched at intervals along that line.

Near the very bottom, the background was still green, with a quilted picnic shelter in the center—a peaked roof supported by six white pillars, three on each side. Inside the shelter, tiny brown rectangles suggested picnic tables.

"That's the lake," Annalise said slowly. "The middle part—that's Lake Lenore."

I traced the brown stitching with one finger. "This stitching doesn't look right, and yet, its winding pattern looks familiar."

"It's the trail," we said in unison.

"What about those stars?" Mrs. Henderson leaned closer, her reading glasses sliding down her nose.

The stars seemed carefully placed—one towards the inn and ferry, one in the middle near the picnic shelter, and one closer to the meeting hall at the other end of town. "What if the stars signify something special?" Annalise asked. "You know, on the street maps, they sometimes designate highlighted locations."

I looked up at Mrs. Henderson, asking. "Could we please take this to see what we can find in those parts of the trail? I promise we'll bring it back before the church sale."

She paused, and Annalise jumped in. "What if it points to something important? I'd like to see if we can find what these stars might be."

Mrs. Henderson nodded slowly. "Okay, but you girls be careful with it and make sure I have it back by next Friday before the church sale."

That afternoon, we spread the quilt across Annalise's bed to examine it further. "Look at this she said." Here on the bottom of the map, I'm sure that's the center picnic shelter, and the center star seems to be back on the trail right behind that shelter. Annalise detailed our ideas and places we wanted to look in one of her favorite notebooks.

It took some bargaining with Mama and Aunt Minnie to let us skip out on Sunday dinner after church, but they agreed, so we gathered the quilt into a cloth tote and headed down to the park with a picnic of cheese sandwiches, thermoses of sweet tea, and our shovels we took to the beach, just in case we needed to dig for buried treasure.

As we ate and focused all attention on the notes we had compiled the day before, Apollo successfully snagged a piece of cheese from Annalise's sandwich and took off to enjoy his conquest.

"Let's start by walking straight from here down to the trail and get a look at it from that direction," I said.

The trail wound along the lake's edge, with some sections straighter than others.

There didn't appear to be anything on the trail that ran the length of the picnic shelter. No trees or benches. Nothing seemed to mark an area where you might need to dig. The girls searched the entire area but saw nothing. "Let's see if we can find anything that might represent the other two stars," Annalise said.

They walked towards the end of town, anchored by the inn and the ferry. They had carefully folded the small quilt to make sure it didn't drag on the ground and found that if they folded it just right, they could follow what appeared to be this part of the trail.

"Let's look at this old oak tree," I said. "Do you think it could mean something? It seems to be the first thing that stands out in this direction from the shelter." We walked slowly around the tree, careful not to trip over Apollo, who wound between us.

"Maybe someone buried something at the bottom of the tree? It would be an easy way to find where you dug. But why would you dig?" Annalise asked.

"Remember, we learned in class that people used to hide treasures during the Depression. Do you think that's it?" I asked.

We took our small shovels and dug around a bit at the bottom of the tree, but didn't find anything.

"Hey, you girls, stop digging up the park," we heard a voice yell. We turned to see Mr. Summers pointing at us accusingly. "This park is for everyone to enjoy. Go over to the lakefront and dig in the sand if you feel the need to dig stuff up."

"But, Mr. Summers, we may be following a treasure map," we pleaded. "I don't care," he said.. "You solve that without digging in my park. Takes me time and effort to keep this place looking nice for everyone." He stomped off towards the inn.

Annalise shrugged. We weren't finding anything anyway, so we stopped digging and took another few slow turns around the tree.

"Wait. Look here. There is a heart carved into the tree with the initials JS + TC. But those aren't Miss Dorothy's initials. Maybe this wasn't her quilt." Annalise said. We checked around the tree for other carvings, but couldn't find any.

Another large oak appeared to be the location of the third star. There were no initials on this tree, but on the bark above two roots that created a small hollow area under the tree, what might have been a heart was carved. We couldn't make it out. I looked around carefully for Mr. Summers, and then we risked poking into the dirt with our shovels a few times.

"Let's do this fast," I said. "Our Mamas will have our hides if they find out we disobeyed an adult."

I stood to double-check that we were in the clear when Annalise's small shovel hit something that stopped it. Quickly, she dug around it and pulled out a small glass milk bottle. It was covered in dirt, but seemed intact. A lid had been pushed back on the bottle, but there was nothing inside.

"It looks like it's been here a long time. I'm surprised it never washed away in one of the storms," I said. "Maybe it was secured by the roots."

"Let's go back and recheck the wardrobe. Maybe we missed something," Annalise said.

Mrs. Henderson was separating clothes into piles for men, women, boys, and girls. "We found two clues," I said. "Can we go up and look at that wardrobe again before the moving crews come this week?"

"Sure," she said. "I've got to run down to the church. Go ahead on up there. I should be back in a bit, and we'll see what you've found. Look to make sure you didn't miss anything else to bring down last weekend. You both were so excited about the quilt that you might have missed something."

"Yes, Ma'am," we said in unison, heading up the stairs as Apollo sped by, beating us to the top.

We had just started examining the wardrobe when a voice called out. "I saw you two down in the park. What are you up to? And does Mama know about it?" We turned to find Annalise's younger brother Tommy standing in the doorway, hands on his hips. "I'm gonna tell if you don't let me help."

Annalise exhaled in exasperation. "Tommy, go away. Mama knows what we're doing, and we don't need your help. Why don't you go play with Andrew?"

Tommy stomped his foot and pouted. "He had to go to his aunt's house. Mama said to find you."

"Well, tell her you couldn't find us. We're busy with something important."

"You always say that. You think you're so smart." He turned, slamming the attic door behind him. We heard footsteps race down the stairs and the front door slam.

Returning to the wardrobe, we searched, but couldn't find more compartments. The only other things we saw in the drawer were a few sachets that had long ago lost their fragrance. "I don't see anything else," I said, and sat down, frustrated. "There has to be more to this quilt. Maybe we should try the library to see if the initials we found on the tree mean anything to Miss Emma."

We headed out with Apollo right with us.

“Oh no,” Annalise said. “The door is stuck.”

She pulled, and I pulled, but the door wouldn't open. “It must have warped over the years,” I said. “How are we going to get out of here?”

I went to the window to see who I could call to on the street, but it seemed jammed shut, too. “I can't get this thing to open,” I said in frustration, “and it's too dirty to see if anyone is on the street below.”

“Look,” Annalise said. “There is a transom window over the door. Maybe we can pull something over and crawl through it, or at least hear Mrs. Henderson when she comes back.”

They dragged a dresser across to the door and crawled on top.

Annalise opened the window, saying, “I'm going to pull myself up and see if I can hear anything downstairs.” She pulled herself up and moved just her upper body through the window. Before she could report back on what she saw, Apollo jumped to the dresser, then to the back of her shirt, and flew through the window.

I screamed out, afraid he would be hurt, as Annalise scolded him loudly. “Apollo, you can't keep escaping through windows. One day your lives will run out,” but the cat was already down the stairs.

She pushed herself back through the window to the dresser. “We definitely can't get through there without falling down the stairs.”

I think I was still holding my breath. “Do you think Apollo is okay?” She nodded. “Most likely. It isn't the first time he has pulled this trick. He can be very creative and persistent when he wants to get outside, especially if he sees a lizard or squirrel to chase.”

The girls stayed on top of the dresser to better hear if someone came in and returned to their notes.

“I keep coming back to that drawer,” Annalise said. “We're stuck here for now. Let's take another look.”

We pressed the wood around the drawer's bottom and sides, hoping another compartment would open, but nothing. The sachets didn't seem to hold anything but lavender.

“What about the drawer liner?” Annalise asked. “That's really pretty paper. Maybe it means something.”

I gently felt the paper. Time, and the quilt had pressed it to the wood. “There might be something right here in the center,” I said. It took a few minutes to peel the paper away from the edges.

“Careful,” she cautioned. “We don't want to ruin anything.”

Finally, one corner gave way, and it peeled off easily. Directly in the center of the drawer, there was a letter.

My dearest Judith,

By the time you read this, I'll be on a ship headed for France. I wanted to tell you face-to-face, but your father was watching, and I couldn't risk it. I've hidden this where only you would think to look—at our spot, where I first told you I loved you.

I'll never forget sneaking away to the picnic shelter and asking you to marry me. I know for now, you have to hide the ring. I'm going to make you, your father, and the town proud so I can come back and you can wear that ring and be my bride.

Please wait for me. I'll be home before you know it.

All my love, Thomas - October 3, 1917

We heard a scream from downstairs followed by, "Apollo, what are you doing here, and where are the girls?"

We were on our feet immediately, yelling through the transom. "Help, we are stuck in the attic."

Mrs. Henderson came running up the stairs. "What happened?"

"Just get us out of here and we'll tell you," I said.

We latched the window and moved the dresser. We could hear her trying to get through the door, but it didn't budge.

A muffled, "Hold on. I'll be right back with help," came through the door.

A few minutes later, a deep male voice came through the door. "Move away from the door, girls. I'm coming through."

We heard the weight of someone hit the door hard once, and then as it happened again, the door flew open, and Mr. Jacob flew into the room, propelled by his momentum, landing on the floor with an oof. Apollo ran in behind him, rushing to twirl around Annalise's legs. She reached down to scratch his head. "You bad boy. I love you, but you've got to be more careful." He just continued to wind around, purring loudly as though he had rescued us and was accepting his status as a hero.

Mr. Jacob sat up, rubbing his elbow, and smiled. "Well, that was something. Are you girls okay?"

We both nodded. He got to his feet.

"Mrs. Henderson. Look what we found," I said. "We think we've discovered a love story." She read the letter:

"I know this man and this story. His name is Thomas Calhoun. He and Judith Snyder fell in love in 1916. He tried to court her, but her father forbade it. Judith took care of me a few times when my parents needed to go out of town for the night. They were much older than I was, and obviously very in love. He tried to court her publicly, but her father wanted nothing to do with it. He planned to send her off to school and then find what he considered a proper husband.

It was a bit of a scandal, with rumors that they might have been seeing each other in secret, but her father never caught them.

We got word that he had left to join the war, and shortly after, the Spanish Flu epidemic hit us. We lost so many people during that time.

Judith was such a kind, caring woman, so young, but that flu didn't care.

After the war, he returned and learned of Judith's fate. I guess he wasn't corresponding with anyone locally when he was overseas. He was devastated. He was an only child, and his

parents also passed while he was gone. I am sure he was alerted to that. She paused, her eyes taking on a distant look.

I thought maybe he would leave town, but he moved back into his parents' house, and he is still there. Housekeepers come in and take care of everything, and he doesn't come into town.

His home is slightly out of town with a beautiful garden and a grove. I've heard he still loves the garden, having camellias planted because they were Judith's favorite.

I wonder what happened to the ring? I asked.

Annalise stopped. Pulling out the quilt, she said. "Did you notice that some of the different areas of the quilt have different fill levels? I thought it was decorative, but what if she sewed it into one of these areas for safekeeping until he returned?"

We spread the quilt out on one of the dressers and began to feel every area of it.

"In the letter, it said he had given her the ring at the picnic shelter. Maybe that's why we didn't find anything there. It was the memory and the ring she must have kept," I said.

They were feeling along each area when Annalise suggested. "Since the picnic shelter is where he asked her to marry him, maybe we should look closer there."

We felt around the area, but all we could feel was that it was one of the most padded areas in the quilt.

I started scanning across the front image that she had created of the shelter with cloth shapes.

"Look," I said. "One table has stitches that look slightly off, like they did for the trail. What if it's a hidden pocket?"

Annalise pinched that area between her fingers. "I think there may be something in there."

Mrs. Henderson pulled out a pair of scissors with very fine ends for cutting thread. She smiled. "I like to do my embroidery whenever I can."

Gently, Annalise clipped just the area of the seam that appeared wrong. Reaching in with her pinky gently, she smiled triumphantly. "It feels like a ring."

She pulled with her pinky and out fell a silver filigree ring. There was no stone, but the workmanship was beautiful.

We all gasped. "This must be the engagement ring," Annalise said.

After calls to Mama and Aunt Minnie, it was agreed that the quilt should be returned to Mr. Calhoun.

Annalise and I folded the quilt neatly, slipping the ring back into its pocket, and placed the letter in the bag with the quilt.

Mana drove up with Aunt Minnie, and we piled into her station wagon.

Annalise and I sat in the very back, charged with making sure the casseroles we were taking didn't spill on the short drive out of town.

As we knocked on the door, a man who appeared to be in his late 70s greeted us. He looked healthy, but had a haunted sadness about him.

"Please come in, ladies he said, opening the door. I apologize; my housekeeper has left for the day. Let's take a seat at the table and see what you have for me."

As we settled at the table, the ladies took over the kitchen, putting casseroles into the refrigerator, each covered in aluminum foil with instructions for heating taped to the top. "Have you eaten supper?" Mama asked.

“Yes, my housekeeper takes care of that before she leaves. I like to eat earlier nowadays and settle in for the night not long after she leaves.”

“Well, let’s at least share a cookie,” Mama said. “I made them today.”

Once everyone had cookies and tea. Aunt Minnie said, “Only one cookie, girls. We don’t want you to ruin your supper.”

All eyes turned to me and Annalise, and we shared our story, presenting him with the things we had found.

He stared at them for several seconds. Tears welled in his eyes. His hands shook slightly as he reached out to touch the quilt and the letter.

“Your ring is in a pocket there in that picnic table,” I pointed it out to him.

“I never knew about the quilt,” he said. “These are the memories we had. They were in the letter, but this is so beautiful. I wonder how her family never found it. Certainly, they would have destroyed it.”

“There was a false bottom in her wardrobe,” we explained.

He just shook his head.

“I can’t thank you enough for this. You’ve brought my memories back in such a happy way. I miss her every day, but this gives me something to enjoy and takes away some of the loss I’ve felt for 58 years.”

We all said our goodbyes, with the ladies promising to check on him again, and we asked him if he would be willing to share more stories about his experiences. He agreed.

As we headed home, Mama said. “You girls did a good job with that amateur sleuthing, and I think you should just leave it here. Who knows what kind of trouble you could get into trying to solve mysteries? Some people don’t want everything known.”

Mrs. Henderson didn’t say a word about our being trapped in the attic. Maybe we had found an adult confidante. We looked at each other and smiled, knowing that if a chance arose, we’d jump in to investigate again.