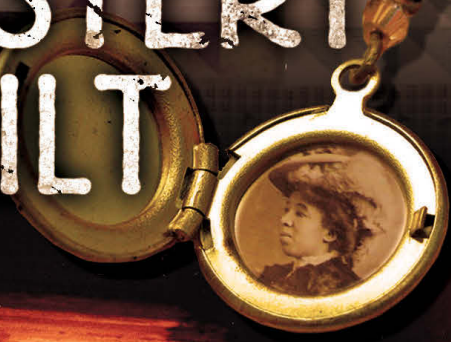


the MYSTERY
QUILT



QREADS

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A doll-size pink dress plopped onto the page of Rachel's book. Rachel gazed up at her mother in bewilderment.

Mrs. Butler smiled widely. "Look! You wore that little dress when you were a baby, just six months old," she said. "Your grandmother made it for you—you know, to wear for special occasions."

Mrs. Butler picked up the tiny dress again and gazed at it fondly. "You looked adorable in it."

Rachel raised one eyebrow. "Just how many 'special occasions' can there be for a six-month-old?" she asked.

Mrs. Butler ignored the sarcasm. "The

thing is, the dress is stained. I can't pass it on to any other baby. But I thought we could find a square of good material in it." Rachel raised her other eyebrow in question. "It's for the quilt," Mrs. Butler explained. "Remember? This Saturday is your birthday. Surely you remember, Rachel—the tradition!"

Rachel sighed when she heard the excitement in her mother's voice. She hadn't forgotten. On Saturday, she would turn 20. By tradition, that was the day she would add a square to the family's special birthday quilt.

Rachel closed her book. "Mom—" she began, but her mother interrupted.

"I do not want to hear the word 'no,'" Mrs. Butler said firmly. "You *know* how much the quilt tradition means to this family. Now please think about the square you want to add."

She handed Rachel a large box. "These are some of your other things I've saved over the years. If you'd rather use one of them—that's fine. But you have to pick out something."

Mrs. Butler marched out of the room. Rachel slid down in her chair with a groan. “Why now?” she thought.

The book she’d been holding fell off her lap. Rachel picked it up, gazing in misery at the title. The book was about America a century ago. It was so boring it almost put her to sleep. She had been struggling to read it because she hoped it would inspire her. She needed a term-paper topic for her least favorite class.

Rachel was a business major at the local community college. She’d worked hard to earn several scholarships. She also held down a job while she went to school. If she could get through this semester, she’d be able to transfer to the state university. But that depended on how well she did in American history—the one subject she hated.

Rachel was a go-getter. She didn’t believe in looking backward. “I have to keep moving ahead, thinking of the future,” she often told herself. “What does history have to do with that?”

She put the book down and lifted the lid of the box. Inside, wrapped in tissue, she found a pair of yellow corduroy overalls. When she held them up, she saw a faint grass stain on one knee and a small patch on the other.

She grinned, remembering. “I was running from my cousin on the grass when I fell. How old was I?” She struggled to recall. “Three? Four?”

The next garment was a blue plaid blouse she’d worn when she was seven. “It was my favorite,” she thought. “I wanted to wear it every day. Mom had to fight me to get it in the wash.”

There were a couple of other shirts and dresses, but Rachel didn’t bother with them. The plaid blouse was her choice for the quilt square.

Then she remembered that she’d planned to spend Saturday at the library working on that term paper. “And I *still* don’t have a subject!” she exclaimed out loud. With a deep sigh, she gazed at the small pile of clothes in her lap, worrying about her schedule.

Mom would expect her to spend Saturday with Grandma. It wouldn't take long to stitch Rachel's cloth square onto the quilt. But Grandma would want them to stay for a visit. She missed seeing family.

"Saturday is shot," Rachel thought unhappily. "That means I can't really get going on the paper until next week."

She leaned back, staring at the ceiling, but not seeing it. "American history!" she muttered. "Revolutionary War. Civil War—" Rachel made a face.

"Also known as the War Between the States," she mused. "That was when my people were all slaves!"

Rachel's ancestors had been kidnapped from their homes in Africa and brought in chains to America. Rachel shuddered. "I will *not* write about the Civil War," she thought angrily. "The subject is just too upsetting. Besides, it's long past. Let's look ahead."

In the 1900s, two world wars had been fought! "A lot of wars," Rachel thought in disgust. Then there was the Great

Depression. Prohibition. The Roaring Twenties and the Wild Sixties. She sighed. None of those eras inspired her.

Rachel picked up the plaid blouse and studied it. She had an idea. What about a topic like “fashions through the ages”? That might work.

It made her think of the squares in the family quilt. Squares dating back to—Rachel frowned. She’d never paid much attention when her mother and grandmother talked about the family history. Maybe it was time to take a closer look at the birthday quilt.

After dinner, Rachel and her mother brought the quilt downstairs. Rachel could smell the strong odor of mothballs as her mother lifted the quilt from layers of tissue paper. She and her mother spread it out on the dining room table.

Rachel gave a low whistle. She recognized some of the newer squares. There was her mother’s square, a red and white stripe. Grandma’s square was a faded navy blue silk. Aunts and cousins had also contributed, as

well as some great-great-. . . Suddenly Rachel paused. It had never occurred to her before just how *old* the quilt must be!

At the center were the oldest squares. The fabric was so old and thin, Rachel was almost afraid to touch it. But she couldn't resist letting her fingertips lightly caress the cloth.

"She touched this cloth," Rachel said. "Imagine that! The woman who started this quilt, whoever she was!" She looked questioningly at her mother. "Mom? Do you know anything about her?"

Mrs. Butler shrugged. "Only that she was an ancestor named Sarah. I'm sure your grandma can tell you more."

Rachel was surprised to realize that she was looking forward to Saturday. Now she was really curious!



“Why twenty?” she asked her mother as they drove to the nursing home on Saturday. “Why do we sew in a new square

when we turn twenty? What's so important about that birthday?"

Mrs. Butler sighed. "I don't know," she said. "I never really thought about it. I'm sure my mother told me, but—" She shrugged.

Rachel laughed. "I'm going to remember this conversation the next time you get on my case about not paying attention in history class."

When they got to the nursing home, Grandma Hutcherson was waiting for them. She gave Rachel a big hug and thrust a gift-wrapped package into her hand. "This is for my sweet birthday girl," she said with a warm smile.

Rachel tore off the paper. It was a new yellow sweater her grandmother had knitted. Rachel held it up. "Grandma, you always give me what I want most," she said with a laugh. "No birthday would be complete without a beautiful new sweater."

"It's become a tradition, hasn't it?" Mrs. Butler added.

A tradition! Rachel pulled up a chair close

to her grandmother's rocker. "What can you tell me about the birthday quilt?" she asked. "Mom says that it's really old, and that one of our ancestors sewed it, but—" She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "Where did it come from? Why is it so important? What—"

Mrs. Hutcherson laughed and held up her hands as if to protect herself. "Slow down, child. I'm glad to see you're interested in that quilt. As for who made it, that was Sarah, my great-, great-, great—" Her eyes crinkled up at the corners as her smile widened. "My many-times-great-grandmother."

"What do you know about her?" Rachel asked.

Mrs. Hutcherson thought for a moment. "Sarah was born into slavery," the old woman said softly.

Rachel felt herself tense. She was sure she wasn't going to like this story very much. But as her grandmother talked, Rachel found herself drawn into Sarah's story.

Grandma Hutcherson knew only what she'd been told by her own grandmother.