

Family Knots

Narcissa Foy made patchwork quilts. Even when she was a little girl turning frayed bits of feed sack into covers for her dolls, people praised her neat stitching and nice contrasts of color. After she married and moved over the mountain to live with her husband's family, her fame spread in the new community. She would spend her evenings with cloth spread on the bed, trying to get the colors to move a certain way. Finally her husband Harlan would come in the bedroom yawning dramatically. Most people favored her blue and pink Grandma's Flower Garden, but her mother-in-law, Mrs. Foy, preferred a Double Wedding Band in shades of lavender and gray.

Narcissa herself liked the crazy quilts best. Years ago it was explained to her that a crazy quilt wasn't like a lunatic, but crazed like the cracks under the glaze of old pottery, and Narcissa's crazies weren't random to her anyhow. With a planned quilt, you knew the pattern beforehand and looked for the right colors to play up the pattern, but the way she saw it, with a crazy, you were following trails of color wherever they led and then discovering the shapes that contained your discovery.

Narcissa didn't talk like that to people; she didn't even think that way. She was more of a dreamer than a thinker, at least in her early years. She loved praise and smiled when she received it as if she'd been stroked. There was something special about her smile, something in her eyes as if she was always looking partly at you and partly up at the clouds. Then there would be a shift, and just for a second, almost in passing, you would have her eyes in your eyes, all to yourself, and you felt warmed, as if she knew your secret beauty, the part of you that was like the mountains and the clouds.

She was a good girl, too: respectful, cheerful, a pleasure to look at with her young skin. She wasn't much of a hand to do field work, but the Foys had plenty of men in those days, and women too, what with Mrs. Foy's maiden sister and the girls. Narcissa always offered to get up

from her quilting to make the cornbread or slop the hogs, but her mother-in-law and the others would say Sit, sit. When she got pregnant so soon, they were all even more solicitous. They wanted her to feel at home and loved, so far from her own relations.

Some said that Mrs. Foy indulged Narcissa, let her do a young girl's chores too long. She collected the eggs, picked the raspberries, beat an occasional white cake for Sunday dessert, and after the baby came, she sat in the big cane rocker on the porch, sweetly nursing, softly singing, looking up over the hills or down into the baby's eyes.

"Mrs. Foy," she said one afternoon. "I never seen a scrap that color, have you? Wouldn't I love a piece that color."

"What color, honey?" Mrs. Foy was snapping beans and dropping them into the big tin pot where they rang substantially until the pot began to fill up.

"Sky eyes," said Narcissa. "The baby's got sky eyes."

Mrs. Foy looked up, not altogether sure what made her so uncomfortable: the rhyme, the hint that Narcissa had strange things going on in her mind. "You mean sky blue, Cissy?"

"No, something different from sky blue. It's a change color."

Mrs. Foy snorted. "Babies' eyes don't settle in for a color till they're right big. I wouldn't worry about it."

"I'm not worried, I just wish I had a piece that color. I'd make a quilt called Sky Eyes."

Mrs. Foy winked her right eye slowly. "I expect you'd have to go to silks for a color like that, and you won't find any silk in this house." But she added, "I have some nice blue lawn in the drawer I was saving. If you want to do some kind of fancy quilt, I'd let you have a little bit of that."

They weren't always comfortable with what came out of Narcissa, but it was no strain for a family to carry a dreamer in those days. Narcissa, with her quilts and singing and her games for the boys, was the sort of luxury a mountain family could afford and even show off with pride.

The back-breaking years of clearing the land and carding the wool to spin the yarn to weave the cloth were over. People worked hard but felt compensated for their work. There was a pattern to things that everyone could see, and Narcissa was the touch of red in the over all blue and tan, the berry in the bush. The juice in the berry. She made the commonplace, overall pattern even more comforting.

But times changed. The girls married and left home and Narcissa had more work and more babies. Mrs. Foy and Aunt got older. Narcissa's skin lost some of its resilience and the color it had when she first came over the mountain with Harlan. The toughening of her skin, the subtle thinning of her lips, made her look more capable of work, whatever she felt inside. She always did whatever was asked, but being who she was, when she was, she kept on making her quilts. When Mrs. Foy complained about the time, Narcissa turned out to have inside her the jaw of a bull terrier, and she hung on to what mattered to her, kept gnawing away. It didn't make her sweeter to bite in so grimly, but it made quilts.

Maybe it would have been better if Narcissa had been born a few years later. Maybe it wasn't really quilts she wanted to make. Maybe she would have been in another time a painter, or a performance artist, or a field scientist who studied wild pygmy chimpanzees, or the discoverer of the jumping genes that cause the variations in colored maize. Or perhaps she would have accomplished more with her quilts if she'd borne fewer children. Her fourth labor was fierce: the baby was breech and nearly strangled by the cord, but they saved it, and it immediately grew large and voracious, a night screamer and nipple chomper that could nurse for an hour at a time. Narcissa's breasts became caked and inflamed, and she cried and whimpered along with the baby, who seemed to thrive on blood as on milk.

The family hadn't time to sit and hold her hand. They knew it was difficult, but so was harvest season, and if the truth be told Mrs. Foy and Aunt and even Harlan thought secretly that they wouldn't mind a little fever and infection themselves if it meant they could sit on the porch in the overheated beauty of the late afternoons, with the mountains rising directly behind,

unutterably green with buzzing and enormous thunderheads in the west and blue. When she had a moment's respite, Narcissa looked up and groaned at the beauty. When the baby rested from its gobbling and gumming, she fell into a feverish nap and dreamed of quadrants of green and lavender, some milky, some bloody, and a ground the color of baby flesh. She dreamed of a quilt the color of her struggle to nourish this baby and the color of the peace she couldn't get hold of. The colors began to trickle and form paths across her semi-consciousness like veins, twisting, weaving, plaiding, bursting open like fireworks or zinnia petals unfurled.

The fever of her inflamed breasts broke with the firework zinnia and the storm. It's not a crazy quilt at all, she thought, watching the sheets of gray rain slash at the hillside, watching the old women hurry in the wash. I'll have to make up some fool name for it, I'll call it the Exploding Zinnia or Shriek of the Wild Cat. It don't matter, just so they'll know it's a pattern and then I can do whatever I want with it.

The quilt should have been a new beginning, a break-through. She was all ready to start on it, but the one thing happened that nobody expected--and Narcissa saw that this was a pattern too, the dependable inevitability of the unexpected. Aunt Foy, the maiden, the spinster, the scrawny fifty year old with a stoop and exaggerated neck tendons, revealed that she had a secret beau and was going to marry him and go live in town. It made Narcissa's peculiarities pale. She asked Narcissa for a red, white, and blue Lone Star quilt, and Narcissa made the most beautiful one ever, the one that her oldest daughter Lou eventually inherited when Aunt died.

And then Mrs. Foy went to bed with dropsy, her legs swollen and propped on pillows. Narcissa took a step back, saw: Aunt Foy gone; Mrs. Foy in bed; Lou supposed to be free to do her homework because she was so smart; and the men waiting for their dinner. A headache struck the back of her eyes like a blow. This is an old story--the sudden, the unexpected, the demands of living. Narcissa the one now to start the fire in the morning and set the biscuits to rise. Narcissa to boil the great kettle on Monday morning for the wash, to make pistons of her arms over the washboard. Narcissa to run to the big bedroom and help Mrs. Foy with the

chamber pot. Her headache ended, but it was followed by the toothache, and she lost four teeth and whatever was left of the sweetness that used to make people forgive her oddities. She never went bitter about the mouth, but she sealed off something in herself the way Brother's left thigh sealed off a piece of shrapnel in France. Brother was alive and walking thank the good Lord with just a slight limp, but there was a piece of metal in him all the same, and on certain days, he could feel its weight. Thus Narcissa, her quilt.

One day she saw a spider weaving its web in a corner of her quilting frame: it was a beautiful web of exquisite, complex design, and she ripped it apart and rubbed it into the grain of the wall boards.

"You told us spiders eat flies," said Lou, who was supposed to be studying. "You told us spiders is good."

"It was in my frame," said Narcissa. "I was jealous of that spider's web."

That night she prayed for forgiveness for killing the spider. She prayed for strength, and received just enough to stay awake and start piecing the exploding zinnia. What God gave her to see was that if she was going to make that quilt for love or money or glory-be, she had better make it now, because there was no slack time coming. She had the extra bit of energy, though, every night now, and sometimes in the day.

Once she was working on the quilt and didn't get to the tomatoes until they were so heavy they drooped to the ground and rotted. Mrs. Foy couldn't get over it and counted up the number of lost quarts. "It's that quilt, Narcissa," she said. "You're using such little small pieces. It'll take too long to finish."

Narcissa's bull terrier clamped. "Mrs. Foy, I'm real sorry, but I have to say, it's only tomatoes. I don't think a peck of tomatoes is all that's standing between this family and starvation."

She had never talked back to Mrs. Foy before, and Mrs. Foy didn't know how to take it, had an uncomfortable feeling that it was a bad sign, a changing of the guard.

"It's the waste, Narcissa," she said. "You know very well it's the waste that bothers me. Just

the same as with that quilt. I swear that quilt is going to take forever, Narcissa. All of them say it just has too many pieces."

Narcissa breathed in around her clamped jaw. "Mrs. Foy, I'm not making that quilt for all of them. I'm making this quilt--I'm making this quilt--" and she wasn't going to say it was for herself, although it was, because it was also for the family and the neighbors. "I'm making this one for God," she said.

Mrs. Foy snorted and shook her head and said to herself, That Narcissa. That's just like Narcissa. Make a quilt for God. What's she going to do, hang it at church? And then decided she had really better get out of bed and take charge of the canning if they were going to have anything to eat for winter.

When the quilt was finished, Narcissa decided it wasn't a flower after all. It didn't satisfy her with its dark complexities. Where was that fleshy life color she had wanted? The shapes were crude, the color changes too quick and uneven. People called it unusual, and no one seemed to want it. Narcissa called it Family Knots and folded it away in the cedar chest and started in on some bright cheerful ones that refreshed her spirit. She continued to make up her own patterns, though, including a nice one called Big Zinnia with new cloth Harlan bought her as a present.

The cheerful quilts ushered in a good period. Mrs. Foy was better, the other boys came back alive from overseas, and Narcissa got pregnant again. This time it didn't seem like such a burden, though, because they'd sold off the coal and timber rights and used the money for a new washing machine. They stopped baking bread, too, and bought white bread at the store, and sometimes pies in boxes. Lou did more around the house, albeit with a book stuck in her apron. And right before the baby was born, Narcissa sold Big Zinnia to some city people for an astounding sum of money.

Some other city people came another time to look at Narcissa's quilts and asked why she didn't do more of the old traditional patterns. "Such beautiful work," they said. "So colorful, but what about Dutch Girl and Barn Door? Don't you ever do a Bear's Paw or Virginia Reel or

Country Squares?"

And before Narcissa could answer, Lou jumped in. "Why," she said, "Don't you reckonize that pattern? All my Mama's patterns go back to the American Revolution. That one there is called the General George Washington Dancing quilt."

Actually it was called Canning Beans Is Hard Work, and she should have shamed Lou for telling people stories, but the city people said Oh, they hadn't seen it right off, of course it was, and offered her too much money. She took it and mentally changed the quilt's name to save Lou from lying. It could just as easy be called General George Washington Dancing, she thought.

Mrs. Foy was in bed again. "I'm getting too old, Narcissa," she said. "You must start taking over, planning the things."

Well, Narcissa had been planning everything for five years now. "I will, Mrs. Foy," she said, "but you know it won't be the way you do things."

She had meant to pay the older woman a compliment, but tears popped out in Mrs. Foy's eyes: "That's hard, Narcissa Foy," she said. "That's a hard thing for a woman to hear. The day will come will Lou will spit in your face too." But then Mrs. Foy seemed to come to herself. "Now Narcissa," she said. "I never meant anything. You know we all love you like a daughter. We always did. We spoiled you a little in the beginning, but you worked out just fine." And she patted Narcissa's hand while looking out the window.

Once, during Mrs. Foy's final illness, Narcissa took out the strange dark quilt she called Family Knots and looked at it as if some answers were there. She nailed it to a pine strip and hung it up. Harlan said, "What's that thing doing on the wall?" And then got so busy sniffing around the kitchen for his dinner he forgot to wait for an answer. Or maybe didn't need an answer, just wanted Narcissa to know he noticed.

Mrs. Foy noticed too, tossed on her pillow and moaned. "You're still trying to convince me you don't have sense to run a house, but I know better, Narcissa, I know better."

Narcissa sat down and followed the complicated flow of Family Knots under bridges and over

rapids. She recalled that as she was working on it, she had named the prominent navy blue stream Mother and a series of large green and brown loops Father. A deep maroon was Sweetheart Love, and Little Girl and Baby Boy burst out here and there in bright splashes.

Then she went through her chest and found a very old crazy that she had made when she was young, all in sky blue and yellow, and she nailed that one to a pine strip and hung it up too. She was looking for something she had lost or put away. Every few days she would sit down and study those quilts, but when Mrs. Foy died, out of respect, she took them off the wall and laid her out in her favorite, the old lavender Wedding Band. The day after the funeral, she started on the best quilt of her life.

It was a variation on Family Knots, somewhat simplified in pattern but using sixty different brown and tans and 30 blues and 30 violets and purples. Unlike the first Family Knots, it had no background proper; everything was equally in foreground, or background, depending on how you squinted. She called it--feeling fancy and because she knew it was a success--Braided Candelabra, even though it was really another Family Knots. She took a great satisfaction in that quilt, and laid it on her and Harlan's bed and never would consider an offer for it.

After that, her quilts were fewer but just what she meant to them to be, and they took a place in her life as if each of them were a child of hers, or at least a niece or nephew.

Mrs. Foy's boys married and left, and Narcissa and Harlan's boys grew big and healthy. Lou became either a school teacher or a flapper, it was hard to tell from the way she dressed when she came for a visit. She was taking art courses in the evenings, she said, with her red mouth going a mile a minute. Why didn't Narcissa realize she was the artist, Lou said. These weren't quilts, these were easel paintings in cloth. Narcissa had all on her own invented Dynamism and the Fauves, said Lou.

"What's Fauves?" said Harlan. "Sounds like some kind of purple fox to me," and they all had a laugh. Narcissa was flattered, and she trusted that in the end Lou would separate out the wheat from the chaff. It was too much, though, when Lou told her to drop everything and come back

the city and study at the Art School. "Now Lou," said Narcissa. "Now Lou," as if Lou had told an off color story.

"It will smother your talent, never leaving here," said Lou. "It will just smother you."

Narcissa wondered if she had been smothered, and allowed that it was possible that something had been, but something else had been made strong. She remembered the baby who chewed her nipples but couldn't remember which one it was, and she remembered poring over the quilt pieces by kerosene lantern till they burnt into her eyes, and she remembered a time when she used to be in her own world and it surprised her when dinner appeared on the table. She remembered, too, that a time had come when they began to touch her, Harlan first, then his brothers and sisters and her own babies and finally even the old people. And I began to hear them and speak back, Narcissa thought, as if she were telling her own story. And after that, for Narcissa, quilts weren't everything anymore, or rather, everything wasn't separate from the quilts. It was the quilts, Narcissa thought, and the family. The pattern of people, and I was in the pattern.