



The Quilt



by Dorothy Nixon



After 50 years, it still is my best gift ever. A work of art, really. A doll's quilt, about 12 inches by 18 inches and it was stitched together by an "old" lady who lived in the same trailer park I did. By Little Wabush Lake in Labrador, back in 1959.

Our trailer park had only five long green (im)mobile homes, all state of the art, with suitably space-age looking front loading washer/dryers (I think) and many stowaway or convertible beds designed with clever Scandinavian style economy.

I lived there with my father and mother and twin brother (and in summer my older brother, Mark, who was attending private (public) school in England.) We were the only kids living in the park.

We had a dog, Spotty, a coon hound (well, at the time she was described as half dalmation, half beagle, but a short surf on the Net reveals this family myth to be incorrect) who was executed by the RCMP. Like all hounds, Spotty liked to roam but one day we were told to keep her tied up. Soon after, she bit a boy, who was popping a blow gun in her ears. I recall the phone call my mother took, in mid afternoon. I can't recall her exact words to the officer, but they were suitably ominous. Spotty had to be put down.

Anyway, there weren't any girls my age to play with in our minuscule mining community (girls of any age, really) so I spent my days pushing my toy baby carriage around, alone; it was plain brown and beige, an uninspiring toy and my 'baby' was one of those hard plastic models, shaped like the real thing, and about as big, with long lashes over soulless windex-blue glass eyes, and with jointed limbs and neck but no private parts, (naturally) and a hole from the mouth to between the legs, so you could bottle feed it and also catch its pee in a diaper.

And sometimes, swathed in deep woods OFF, I'd manoever my carriage a few dozen yards over the gravel to talk to this lady, who sat in a garden chair outside her 'front door' about just what it's hard to imagine, as I was four and she was infinitely old. The woman was always working on this doll's quilt (it was a clearly a magical work in miniature that required deft fingerwork and the wisdom of the ages of make) and then one day, with a quick snap of the last thread between her teeth, she just handed it over to me. I sensed this was a spur of the moment decision. She didn't say much, if anything at all, as she pushed the little blanket away into my hand. Then she got up from her chair turned and entered her trailer.

But despite this lack of ceremony upon the giving of it, no gift was ever more appreciated. The quilt was simply beautiful for one, designed in a classic diamond pattern in powdered pinks and blues, and violets and yellows (if I recall.)Of a very manageable size for a little girl of four. Soft on the hands, too. And living out there in the wilderness, with the spindly over grown fir trees, dark green, almost black, mangled, mangy and often toppled over at awkward angles, there wasn't much for me to look at.

There was no TV and not much reading material, if I recall, no Dr. Seuss, that's for sure. No picture books with awesome kaleidoscopic artwork and cute animal characters. No home library, no gaily decorated playschool. I was living a 2 year field trip to the wilds of Quebec, and this was an essentially greyscale expedition, if you don 't count the rainbow trout my father caught before breakfast which my mother fried in butter and which I alone ate, if there was but one fish caught that day. Or, for that matter, the colourful flies and lures, with names like Blue Caddis and Daredevil, which was red and white like a barber pole, used to catch them.

I didn't know it at the time, but I was starved for beauty, as that particular stark Group of Seven aesthetic was lost on me. (My mother said A Y Jackson actually passed through and saw my brother, and was captivated by his big brown eyes and long lashes and told my mother that had he the time, he would paint him. (The great artist was unimpressed by the tom-boy twin sister.)

I wonder how I managed to develop intellectually, what I now know about early childhood development. Well, I talked to old people. Like that lady. Like the kind oil man who took my brother and me on his rounds sometimes (our own personal Bob Homme) in his truck with the dangerous heavy doors. "Watch our for your fingers, " he'd say. And sure enough, my brother, caught his thumb in the door. The nail turned black and eventually fell off.

And the high strung, unhappy red-headed Australian woman in one of the other trailers, who was married to a swarthily handsome, congenial man, a half MA OW RI, who had a ukele and let me strum a tune on it: My Dog Has Fleas.

"This place brings out the best and the worse in people," I think I recall my father saying to my mother, eating his supper of ridiculously cheap t-bone steak and reconstituted potato flakes at the melamine counter in

the kitchenette, after a day at work bean-counting for the Iron Ore Company of Canada or EYE OWE SEE as my parents called it. I assumed this couple were a living embodiment of that natural principle.

I spent my fifth and sixth year in that place, a feral creature among many feral creatures, black bears and snowy owls and timber wolves, but, paradoxically, one with little nature sense, certainly no sense of direction, and once like Hansel and Gretel, my brother and I almost got lost in the woods. I panicked and sat down on the rubbery yellow muskeg of the forest floor and cried for my dad. My twin, much more resourceful than me, looked skyward and spied a thin yellow wire and we followed it back to the trailer perhaps 20 yards away. And let's not mention the time we almost set the trailer on fire grilling slices of white bread on the gas stove, without (as per usual) parental supervision.

Anyway, I kept the quilt for years, and for some time to come it swaddled my dolls in the brown toy baby perambulator that I would push around, when the black flies weren't too thick and furious, during those short Labrador summers before the Cuban Missile Crisis, or the Beatles.

And it is only today, May 26th, 2010, as I sit in my suburban living room, that could be an Edwardian parlour (it's so stuffed with antiques and bric a brac) except for the 50 inch HD TV in the corner and that 10 year old couch from Sears with the faded southwest indian flavored floral pattern, and comfy cushions mauled by animals and media-garburating teenagers, having just, after much effort and experimentation, 'developed' a couple of pictures (black and white, of course) of Wabush on the scanner, (by leaving the scanner top open to the natural light and pinning the negative under a plastic CD cover and scanning at a cumbersome to download 1200 dpi) that I summoned my inner child and put 2 and 2 together. I recall my mother telling my father, back in 1959, that someone, a neighbour, had lost her daughter, who was hit by a car far away in Montreal. The girl was attending convent school. (I recall the queasy feeling the news gave me. I imagined a French girl, a little older than I was, in prim private school uniform crossing the busy city street outside an old and very austere building. I imagined it a gloomy winter day. I imagined death, The end? No more? like our good-natured friend Spotty had suffered, for my mother, a lapsed Catholic, didn't sugar coat anything about the dog's sad, senseless end.) But she was not a dog. She was a little girl, not unlike myself.

Now there were only 5 trailers in that camp, ours and the MA OW RI's and three others.....Who was this local woman?

I wonder, now, fifty years on, (inspired by photos resurrected from negatives found in old boxes at my mother's death, last year) was this 'old' lady the mother of this girl and that she had been quilting it for her daughter, but then, suddenly, had no daughter to give it to.

That might explain the odd and sudden mode of presentation. The woman's inability to say anything -or even look at me - as she pushed the lovely quilt into my little hand, made all the more precious for the time it had taken to piece it together and the care (and, could it be, I wonder half a century later) the love and monstrous grief and bitter guilt) that may have gone into the stitching of it.

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