

Heirlooms

A Mini-Story from the Mothers & Daughters Collection
by K. A. Young

Like the crack of a rifle, the heavy-bottomed glass struck the Formica® tabletop. Mercifully, it shattered only Mattie's thoughts. She jumped like a skittish colt at the sound and the immediate sensation of cold wetness in her lap. She grabbed a fistful of napkins from the metal box at the end of the table. Her black skirt drank the water like a hard-ridden horse, leaving little for the napkins.

"It's all right, girl," Mattie reassured the young waitress whose eyes were spilling tears down a face redder than her apron. Mattie hated wearing her suit anyway. She'd planned to change into her jeans before catching the bus—might as well do it now. She ordered without looking at the menu, grabbed her denim satchel, and trotted to the ladies' room.

Sauntering back to her booth, she observed the young waitress scurrying to the kitchen. The senior waitress met the girl just inside the swinging doors. Something about the way the woman hovered over the girl made Mattie think they were mother and daughter. She remembered her own mother, hovering over her like that. She sighed. So long ago—more than 40 years.

Mattie slid into the mustard-colored booth—dry now—and let her eyes follow the dancing dust particles across the diner, through a corridor of light, beyond the plate glass window into the windswept street of the Oklahoma town. Her mind's eye wandered farther still. It galloped across the prairie, across the years, to a small frame house in the middle of a treeless plain of dust and dirt that stretched as far as the horizon in every direction. There, inside that house, Mattie saw herself: a skinny, homely, 15-year-old girl, fumbling with a thimble, surrounded by scraps of cloth, destined by her mother to become an heirloom.

Mattie's mother leaned over her with sharp eyes and skilful hands, her fingers steadying the needle and Mattie's future. "See there. It's easy," her mother would say. "Now, you do it."

Family tradition demanded that Mattie contribute a quilt to her hope chest, a hope lacking any companion within her bosom. Stabbing her fingertip again, yelping, she dropped the needle. "I'm sorry, Mama!" she said, her voice quivering, eyes too fogged with fatigue, frustration, and failure to try finding it.

"Oh, Mattie!" Her mother got down on her hands and knees to search the rough wood floor for the silver needle, an heirloom, the only item of her own mother's meager possessions she had inherited, being the 5th daughter. Face to the floor, she failed to see Mattie slink out the door like a shadow.

Mattie ran away, joined a rodeo, leaving the quilt unfinished, the hope chest abandoned. Her mother never found the needle.

The girl deposited Mattie's club sandwich with a rattle of the china plate and a nervous smile, followed by a hasty retreat to the kitchen. Mattie turned her eyes, still red from the morning's funeral, away from the past to observe a different drama—different, but same. The experienced waitress emerged through the swinging doors. She glided across the brown and white linoleum squares, balancing five plates on her long thin arms and grasping a glass coffee pot in her long strong fingers while smiling at her customers. The girl followed, grappling with a basket of bread and bottles of ketchup and steak sauce in her short, stubby hands, her lips stretched as tight as a rubber band. Mattie wondered where the girl would rather be. She took a bite of her sandwich.

"See there. It's easy," a voice as bright as the sunshine bouncing off the plate glass sang somewhere behind her. "Now, you do it."

As Mattie got up to leave, she tucked a larger-than-usual tip under the edge of her plate and considered herself blessed that she'd never had a daughter. The girl would have probably wanted to learn to sew, and Mattie knew she'd have tried to teach her to ride horses instead. The girl would've eloped, moved away, never looked back, never returned ... until it was too late to make amends.