The Blue Ribbon Quilt

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til the relaxant had taken affect, then pushed a button on the face of the box.

Wham! Wolzak's neck bulged with blood vessels, his face swelled to a bright red, and his back arched violently toward the ceiling. Three . . . four . . . five seconds. He started to shake with the induced convulsion, worse and worse, until two attendants had to hold him on the table. A wet stain appeared, then grew until it darkened the entire front of the green hospital pants. Slowly the convulsion subsided, until the little room was silent. A faint smell of singed fear hung in the room like a fine smoke.

"As you can see, there's really nothing to it," said Dr. Lightburn, looking up from his paper. "He'll be confused for a while, but by tomorrow he'll be a new man. I hope you two are learning something this morning. Well, we've got four to go."

Randy could hardly wait.

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Modern Languages, Sr.

Mrs. Sutter rocked back and forth, rubbing bare parallel lines into the faded roses of the carpet. Her eyes were fixed in a semi-trance on the dusky wallpaper, which looked as though it might suddenly disintegrate into a powder on the floor. Everything at Maple Borders Rest Home gave the impression of being aged and frail; that was probably the worst part of being cooped up there. She just wanted to go away for a while and pretend that Maple Borders and about forty years were still ahead of her. No, not that exactly. That things like Maple Borders could never happen to her or to anybody. Instead, she was here and miserable, and right now she had to suffer through another visit with her daughter.

Doris Payne visited her every Thursday evening; it was one of the good works she devoted herself to. Tonight she
had not brought Linda along. That was too bad; Mrs. Sutter enjoyed her granddaughter's visits.

"How have you been feeling, Mother?"

"Oh, all right, I guess." What a stupid question! Here she was not even able to write because of her rheumatism. If she felt fine, she would have packed her bags and flown to Miami.

"Well, that's good."

Mrs. Sutter said nothing. The aged air thickened, muting the low blur of voices outside the room. She enjoyed this long pause; it always made her daughter uncomfortable.

"How's Mrs. Briggs?"

"O.K., I guess." Her! Mrs. Briggs snored all night and ran her radio full blast all day.

The question-and-answer period dragged on for half an hour. Mrs. Sutter noted with satisfaction that her daughter was beginning to tire under the burden of conversation; before long she would give up and go home. She wished Doris could be more realistic at times. At Maple Borders, a visit from outside was supposed to be a big event, and Doris Payne was fool enough to believe that it was. What was she talking about now?

"... something to keep you busy, Mother. Why don't you sew a quilt for the county fair?"

"A quilt! Good grief, with my rheumatism?"

"Then afterwards you could give it to Linda for her hope chest.

Well, that was different. Linda was still a skinny girl with stringy hair, but in a few years she would be old enough to need quilts and pillow cases. That was funny. She wondered if Linda would get chubby like Doris after she got married. Probably not; Linda was more wiry, like she herself was.

"Maybe I will; I haven't entered anything at the fair for a long time."

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Doris Payne pulled her skirt from her sticky legs. She wished Linda would hurry up. Across the counter, a tousled boy held up a quarter. "One hot dog, Mrs. Payne." He was
wearing a felt cap with "Jimmie" stitched on the brim and a long orange ostrich plume sticking out of the crown. "Sold many today?"

"Over four hundred fifty, Jim." She swiped away several spots of grease and catsup on the oilcloth. "You haven't seen Linda, have you?"

"Not this afternoon."

"Thanks, anyway." She watched him disappear into the crowd, behind a boy carrying a huge cone of cotton candy. A farmer walked by, wiping the sweat across his forehead into a gray smear.

Aggie Finch turned to her with another hot dog. "Boy, wild horses and ten Rev. Robertses couldn't get me back here tomorrow." That was like Aggie, to complain about a little honest work for a good cause. Sure, it was hot; but with another day of sales like this, they could make the down payment on a new organ. Doris had already worked a half hour over time.

"Hi, Mom!"

"About time, young lady." Doris Payne slipped off her apron. "Be back tomorrow, girls!" she shouted. "How about looking at the displays in the Community Affairs Building before we go home?"

"Oh, Mom, you just want to see whether your preserves won."

"Well, don't you want to see how Grandma Sutter's quilt did? The poor woman has been working on it since May. She has this ridiculous idea of giving it to you for your hope chest after the fair is over, but I can probably talk her out of it."

"Nothing doing, Mom. I'll take the quilt."

Doris was proud of her daughter. After all, Grandma Sutter had been living for that prize quilt to give to Linda. Being so alone like that, little things like blue ribbons meant a lot. Linda wouldn't have to ever use the quilt—no one ever used them any more—but she could pretend to want it.

Inside the Community Affairs Building were a series of booths and exhibits. A roofing company was giving out toy umbrellas with the slogan "Let us be your umbrella on a
rainy, rainy day,” and the Young Republicans asked them to help “fill the elephant’s trunk.” Further on, the aspiring artists of Murdock County displayed paintings of Paris street scenes and reclining nudes. Doris Payne tried to avoid this section; she felt that it was a corruption to the county’s youth. Then came the foodstuffs display with rows of fancy cakes, canned vegetables, and preserves. Doris quickly affirmed her three blue and two red ribbons and then checked to see whether Aggie Finch had done better. She had not—only one red and three white ribbons. “I thought this would be a good year for strawberry preserves.” Doris felt the same satisfaction as a race track better who has outguessed the odds. “Well, let’s get on home; I’m ready to melt.”

“What about Grandma’s quilt?”

“Oh, yes, I almost forgot. But, then, not one more thing!” The two walked around the aisle to a long wall hung with handstitched quilts. One of them had small patches of the same yellow as Linda’s slacks; its card read “L. M. Sutter, Star bridal ring pattern.” There was no ribbon on the quilt.

“That’s too bad, Honey. Your grandmother will just be heart-broken after all her work.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Mom, she usually takes thing pretty well.”

“Linda, I’m afraid that you overestimate Grandma Sutter. You didn’t notice this, but the last time I visited her—you stayed home to study, I remember—I could really tell that her mind is getting weaker and weaker. She didn’t seem to notice me, and she never said a word unless I asked her a direct question.”

“She’s never like that. . . .”

“It’s just that you don’t notice, Dear; she just has these lapses every so often. But they will get worse as she gets older, and you will just have to accept it and try to love her the same as before.”

Linda did not answer.

“Come on now, Linda, let’s not worry about Grandma. We’ve got supper to get on at home.”

They scuffed through the fairgrounds’ dust toward the
parking lot, avoiding the raucous calls of "Ev-rebody wins!" and "Two throws for a di-yum, six for a quarter!" Doris thought she heard someone call her, but she pretended not to hear. She just wanted to get home and lie in front of the air conditioner.

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Linda turned the car on to Fourth Street. Almost unconsciously she slipped her hand over the silky ribbon lying on the folded quilt. It seemed too deceitful—a shabby trick that reduced a grown woman to a silly child, giving Grandma her mother's ribbon as if she had won it. Linda's fingers deliberately crimped the tip of the longer strip. She wanted to tear up the whole thing and toss it out the window; instead she pulled into the driveway of the Maple Borders Rest Home. For a few minutes Linda sat in the car fiddling with the knobs on the dash board, trying to think of a way out. She couldn't "forget" the ribbon—there would be the same problem to face the next time. Nor could she just hide the thing in the glove compartment—Mom would find out right away. And what if she were wrong and Grandma really would be disappointed to lose? Then how could she justify herself to Mom? Linda made one small concession to her conscience; she buried the ribbon in the folds of the quilt.

She paused a second on the porch for a deep breath of fresh air. Now—even more than before—she felt the weight of Maple Borders' heavy air. The door knob turned freely in its socket. Hadn't they fixed that yet? It opened into a hallway carpeted in a faded floral pattern. Age and decay seeped through the place like a black dye. The dusky armchairs and feeble staircase gave the impression of being covered by years of dust, although they had all been recently scrubbed, and the lampshades only further dimmed the feeble light in the entrance. Upstairs, Linda could hear Mrs. Briggs talking to someone about her Tom. "Dear Tom, he never forgets a birthday or a holiday, not like some people's folks who live right here in town and never even come to visit." Linda heard another voice beside her. "Tom's an awful boor. He just stuck Lilly here so he wouldn't have to see her. One visit and three cards a year is
all she ever gets from him, and the old fool spends every day
drooling over his graduation picture."

"Grandma! You sneaked up on me!"

Mrs. Sutter chuckled to herself. "Just call me Leather-
stocking, Honey. Let's get out to my natural element."

In the back yard were two old maple trees puffing out
their branches with the last full burst of summer leaves.
They shaded what Maple Borders shamelessly called a rec-
reation area, consisting of a rusted white table and several
unmatched aluminum lawn chairs. Linda plopped down
the quilt on the table.

"Well, Grandma. . . ." She worked up what she hoped
was a sincere smile. Now what could she say? She noticed
that her grandmother had seen the blue ribbon and was
looking at it curiously.

"Grandma. . . ."

"Linda, you don't have to lie to me. I can read the news-
papers as well as you, and I know whose ribbon this is."

"But. . . ."

"And don't say the paper made a mistake. I know how
your mother is. She thinks all I need to make me happy is
a piece of ribbon, and she thinks that if I can't have it, I'll be
inconsolable. And now she'll think that you botched up the
job and broke my heart." Linda noticed a spark fly from
Mrs. Sutter's eye. "Well, Linda, don't even tell her about
it; we'll just pretend that I'm a dense old ninny who lives
for blue ribbons." Then she laughed. "Hey, maybe I can
use it to out-brag Mrs. Briggs for a couple of days." She
waved the ribbon gaily in the air.

Linda relaxed comfortably. "Say, now that this is out
of the way, I wonder if you'll teach me how to knit."

"Oh, knitting's for old grannies."

"Well, Leatherstocking, old girl, I beg to differ with
you. It's the latest thing. Knit your steady a sweater—if it's
done before you break up, consider yourself engaged."

"Think I'm spry enough for these youthful pursuits?"

The blue ribbon quilt slipped unnoticed off the table.