



THE STORY QUILT

The Temple of Jesu Christo is on the outskirts of Shardly, a town of a couple hundred people in Hursoot County, Texas. I was in the office at the back of the church.

“You don’t want to give this away,” Mrs. Pilfrim said, looking up from the quilt. “It’s too pretty.”

The quilt was definitely pretty. It was a Texas star, with eight points that stretched across a yellow top to a red border. Little diamond-shaped patches from a dozen different fabrics made up the star. The colorful fabrics had been common during the Great Depression, when feed companies sold their goods in sacks that could be used later for sewing projects.

I wondered if my Great Aunt had made the quilt. I inherited a cedar chest full of the things from her. They were different sizes and patterns. There was a Peter and Paul, a bear paw, a log cabin, and several of the stars.

Mrs. Pilfrim said, “Are you sure you want to donate this, Professor Featherbed?” My name is Weatherhead but I didn’t see any point in correcting her for the third time. And I’m not a professor. I was new to the area and some of the locals assumed I was one because I have a lot of books.

“Yes, I want to donate it, Mrs. Pilfrim. I thought maybe the church could raffle it off, or sell it.”

“Could be.” She considered. “But don’t you have any children who’d want it?”

I couldn’t tell if she was honestly trying to puzzle out what to do with the quilt or just fishing for information.

“No children,” I said, “but it would be good if it

went to a child.”

I remembered the quilt I’d had when I was young. Long before the internet, before my parents even got a TV, I would entertain myself by making up stories while looking at the quilt on my bed. It was an around-the-world pattern, made by my grandmother and her sisters especially for me. They used little squares of circus and Wild West materials, and an underwater scene with fantastical sea creatures. Perfect materials to fire a boy’s imagination.

Mrs. Pilgrim said something.

“Pardon? My mind wandered.”

“I asked how you came across this quilt.”

“I inherited it.”

“Hmm.” She gave me a questioning look. “Strange thing to inherit, you being a man.”

I left her fishing and went home, back to the house I was still settling into. It’s a small place on a few acres of cactus and mesquite. I’d contracted to have it built when I retired, and I was lucky to get it finished when I did. Construction costs jumped after Covid and were continuing to rise.

I ate a sandwich and browsed the news on the internet, then I went through my notes looking for a story idea. None seemed worth pursuing. It had become nearly impossible to compete with the government when it came to manufacturing fiction. In just a little over a year the usurper Biden had delivered staggering body blows to America’s financial security, food security and border security, but according to the news coming out of Washington the country’s biggest problem was a reluctance to embrace transsexuals.

The next day I was still combing through my notes for an idea, when I got a phone call from Pastor Wells. He was the minister at the church where I donated the quilt. I’d never actually met the man, but I heard he could thump a Bible with

the best of them. He thanked me for my gift and then asked how my relationship with the Lord was going.

“About like my relationship with my ex-wife.”

“Oh,” he said, sounding disappointed. “Well, Jesus raised Lazarus, brother Weatherhead, so he may raise you back into the faith. And if that ever happens, you come on down to The Temple of Jesu Christo to testify.”

I told him I’d be there if and when, and then he got to the reason for his call.

“We gave your quilt to a girl named Caitlin Raye. She’s stuck in bed with the mononucleosis. The family doesn’t have much, but they’re god-fearing and, well, Caitlin was mighty pleased to get the quilt. She asked if you could stop by sometime so she can say thanks.”

An hour later I parked my pickup in front of the old frame house that Wells had directed me to. It was a couple of miles out of Shardly, on a dirt road that snaked between barbwire fences holding back cactus and goats.

The house was surrounded by a dozen or so tall oaks. They were shedding for the year, and dead leaves fluttered down to join others in a carpet that looked a foot thick in places. Chickens scratched here and there. Occasionally one would mistake a flutter for an insect and jump at it.

I kicked through the leaves and climbed the steps to the front porch. A middle-aged woman appeared at the rusted mesh of the screen door. She wore a stained apron over a washed-out dress, and her thin brown hair was pushed back behind her ears. She looked tired.

“Hello,” I said. “Are you Mrs. Raye?”

She nodded and asked if I was the professor.

“I’m not a professor, but I’m the man Pastor Wells talked to you about. My name is Weatherhead.”

“You’re the one that gave Caitlin the quilt?”

“Well, I gave it to the church, and they passed it on to her.”

She eyed me for a moment, then she nodded again, pushed the door open, and I stepped inside.

I followed her through a high-ceilinged living room to the kitchen. Both rooms were tidy but needed to be painted. As she went to the stove Mrs. Raye told me to take a seat at the beat-up dining table. A spindly chair creaked beneath me when I sat.

She stirred a large pot and gestured to a door that was slightly ajar.

“Caitlin’s asleep, but she’ll wake up when she hears us talking. She was right tickled when she saw that quilt.”

I looked around at the sparseness of the kitchen. Wells had said that Mr. Raye was an ex-con who’d met the Lord inside and now walked the straight and narrow. He made pretty good money in the oil fields, but most of it went to debts, so the family didn’t have much.

Mrs. Raye offered me some Kool-Aid but I declined. She continued with her stirring. I asked what she was cooking and she said chicken soup. We talked about food for a while, then during a pause in the conversation a girl’s voice said, “Is he here, Mother?”

Mrs. Raye went to the door that was ajar and stuck her head through it. I heard a murmured exchange and then she opened the door fully.

I saw Caitlin sitting propped up in bed. She looked to be ten or eleven and had a cascade of wavy chestnut hair. The quilt was draped over the bed and reached almost to the floor. She ran a smoothing hand over it.

Mrs. Raye placed a chair next to the bed and said, “Come on in Mr. Weatherhead.” She introduced me to Caitlin, then as I sat she returned to

the stove. She was positioned so that she could keep an eye on me.

“I’m not contagious,” Caitlin smiled. Her eyes were a glittery hazel color. “Or not very contagious. The doctor said I’m over the worst of it.”

“I was sorry to hear you’re sick. I hope it hasn’t been too bad.”

“Oh, no, not really. But it seems like I’ve been in bed forever and . . .” She sighed. “I get bored. There’s not much to do except sleep and read.”

I looked around the room. It was drab and cried out for girly pink paint, ruffles at the windows and posters of boy bands. There was no TV, and no radio or sound system.

I noticed a laptop computer on the bedside table, on top of a stack of books. Caitlin followed my gaze and said the computer was only for school-work. I read the titles on the spines of the books and was pleased to see a collection of stories by Washington Irving.

“Thank you for the quilt,” Caitlin said. “Where did you get it?”

“I inherited it. My mother’s side of the family made quilts. I got one when I was about your age, or a little younger, and I really liked it. I think it’s the reason I became a writer.”

“You’re a writer?”

“Yes. I write stories and sell them to magazines.”

Her mom gave me a sidelong glance from the stove.

“How’d a quilt make you become a writer?” Caitlin asked.

“Well, I used to look at the patches of material and make up stories about them. I’d write about cowboys and clowns and sea monsters, then turn the stories into little books with scissors and a stapler. I grew out of that and went on to other things, but I always drifted back to the writing. Been doing

it steadily now for twenty years.”

Caitlin thought for a moment, then said, “Can I read one?”

“One of my stories?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I, uh, I don’t know.”

None of my writing’s obscene, but it’s adult. I didn’t know if I had a piece that would be age-appropriate. “Hold on a minute,” I said, and I took out my phone. I poked through folders until I found a story that seemed innocent enough. “Maybe this one. It’s called ‘Coventry.’” I was about to hand the phone over when I heard her mother clear her throat. She was at the bedroom door.

“Oh, uh, I keep copies of the things I’ve written on this, Mrs. Raye. Let me show you.”

I went to the kitchen table, set my phone on it and stepped aside. She leaned down and read. Her lips moved while she did. The story’s not very long and she went through it twice, using a fingertip to scroll up and down, then she straightened up and said it was okay to show it to Caitlin.

I returned to the chair by Caitlin’s bed and handed her the phone. She read without moving her lips:

“Who’s that man at the fountain, Mother? The old one.”

“That’s Mr. Abelard.”

“He won’t talk to me.”

“Oh you mustn’t try to talk to him, dear. This town used to send people to Coventry.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s in . . . Well, it’s a place, but when you say someone was sent there, it means they’re being shunned. You have to ignore them.”

“Why do people get shunned?”

“Because they broke the law, or because they’re a gossip or a liar.”

“And no one can talk to them?”

“That’s right.”

“I wouldn’t like that. I talked to Mrs. Gaines this morning, and to Marilyn Swift. I’d miss talking to them.”

“Of course you would.”

“So why was Mr. Abelard sent to Coventry?”

“Oh he wasn’t, dear. He got mad once and sent everybody else to Coventry.”

Caitlin read the story twice too, same as her mother, and then she said, “I like it. Is there really a place called Coventry?”

“Yes. It’s a city in England.”

She asked how long it took me to write the piece.

“Not long, but then I did a bunch of polishes. Somebody said, ‘Writing is rewriting,’ and they were right.”

“Well I liked it. It gave me a . . . a kind of a surprised feeling at the end, when it turned around who was really being shunned.”

“A twist ending. You should read some stories by O. Henry. A man named . . .” I was going to say that William Sydney Porter began using O. Henry as a pen name while he was serving time in prison, but I stopped myself when I remembered that her dad had a record.

“What about Mr. O’Henry?” Caitlin prompted.

“Oh, uh, he was really good with twist endings.”

She handed my phone back to me and asked when I wrote “Coventry.”

“A couple years ago. Before I moved here.”

“Do you have anything else I can read?”

“Well, not that I can think of. Lately I’ve been writing a lot of grownup stories. Social criticism. But I’ll look around.”

We talked awhile longer and then she yawned, so I left. Mrs. Raye gave me a dozen yard eggs on my way out the door.

A few days later Russia invaded Ukraine. NATO and the CIA had been using Ukraine as a staging area to prepare for an attack on Russia, but the Russians moved first. Biden responded by saying he might launch nukes. So I needed to get away from things and I went for a drive to clear my head. And I drove to the Raye house.

On the way I remembered how I used to think of my stories as quilts that covered the ugliness of the human condition. My intricate patterns were symmetry laid over malformation. But then the real world began to seep through the fantasy. Dark stains began to creep across the patterns.

I kicked through the leaves at the Raye place. The chickens were leaping for worms that hung by silk threads from the oaks.

I knocked on the front door and heard Mrs. Raye call out from behind the house. I walked around and found her hanging wash on a clothesline. Caitlin was on the back porch, stretched out on a chaise lounge. She was wrapped in the quilt. I asked Mrs. Raye if I could visit, and when she said I could I sat in a chair beside the chaise. I asked Caitlin how she was feeling.

“Good, thank you. It’s nice to be outside. And I’ve been trying to make up stories with your quilt, the way you used to.” She pointed to a patch of fabric that was green and had a pattern of black squiggles. “This piece here makes me think of the worms hanging from the trees. They hatch out in the spring, then the blackbirds come along and eat them. But last year the birds were late and there were a gazillion worms. And when I walked through the yard one time their webs stuck to my feet and made them look like those puffy mops you use to dust the floor. Anyway, I remembered that today when I was looking at this piece of material, and I thought, ‘What if I’d kept walking around the yard until the webs on my feet balled

up as big as clouds and lifted me into the sky?”

She stopped.

“Go on,” I said.

“That’s all. So is that how you used to make up stories with your quilt?”

“Yes, but I’d keep thinking and try to come up with a complete story. Like with yours, what happens once you’re up there in the sky?”

“I don’t know.”

I looked up, found a gap in the canopy of new leaves and saw a cloud. I pointed.

“See that cloud through there? Doesn’t it look like a horse?”

She squinted, then giggled.

“It does. A horse with a big nose.”

“So what if the balls of silk on your feet lifted you up there and you settled onto the horse’s back? Where would you ride it?”

“Hmm. I don’t know. Maybe to Consuela’s. I haven’t seen her since I got sick.”

“And after that? If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?”

“Well, maybe to Switzerland. To the mountains. And I’d make the horse jump from peak to peak.”

“What if you ran into the Abominable Snowman?”

“I’ve heard about him. I even looked up that word once.”

“Abominable?”

“Snowman.”

We both laughed.

We watched the horse cloud change into a peacock that Caitlin rode through the Amazonian jungle. Then it became a tortoise and carried her across the Sahara desert, where she met a prince in a castle. They got married and lived happily ever after.

While Caitlin looked dreamy-eyed at the sky

and thought about her prince, I saw that her mother had perched on the edge of the porch to listen. It was the first time I'd seen her smile.

I stopped by the house again a week or so later, but Caitlin wasn't there. Her mother said she was back in school. She returned the quilt to me and said she'd washed and dried it carefully. I told her I wanted Caitlin to keep it.

"Oh, she couldn't do that," she said. "We don't accept charity."

So the quilt went back into my Great Aunt's cedar chest, but it didn't stay there long. Pastor Wells called again a few days later and said another child was asking to use it. "Or his mother is. Mrs. Arredondo. Her boy's something of a hellion and the Lord visited an accident upon him. He's laid up in bed."

He gave me the family's address and I said I could stop by the next morning.

The house wasn't out in the sticks like the Raye place; it was in Shardly. And it wasn't run-down. It was red brick, had a proper lawn around it and so on. Wells had told me over the phone that Roy Arredondo did all right selling farm and ranch equipment across several counties.

Mrs. Arredondo met me at the front door. She was a small Hispanic woman, middle-aged but good-looking, and she was dressed in a crisp tan pantsuit. She invited me in and led the way through the living room. As we passed the fireplace I slowed to scan the pictures of the family that were on the mantel.

Some dishes were laid out on the dining room table. I placed the quilt beside them and sat down to coffee.

Mrs. Arredondo was a fidgety type. She was up and down a lot, going to get spoons and sugar and whatnot. We chatted during her comings and goings, and I learned that her son, Travis, was

thirteen and had broken both legs while skateboarding.

She settled in her chair but then immediately got up again and went to the quilt. As she ran a hand over it she said, "I heard this gave Caitlin a great deal of comfort, and I thought . . ." She didn't finish but didn't need to. She wanted the best and the most up-to-date for her son, and the quilt was gaining a reputation as the thing to have for your sick child.

I declined a second cup of coffee and she took me to meet Travis. She carried the quilt and toed his bedroom door open while she said, "Knock, knock."

The room was neat but looked like it didn't want to be. What should have been teenage clutter was folded and stacked and squared away. But a touch of havoc screamed down from the walls—posters of skateboarders in flight and video game heroes blasting bad guys.

Travis was propped up against the headboard of his bed. He had an explosion of shaggy black hair and his attention was fixed on a computer in his lap. The top sheet on his bed outlined a lean body tipped with a couple of leg casts. He didn't look away from his computer but he said "Hey" when his mother introduced me. Then his hands twitched and the computer burred with gunfire and screams.

"He's playing his online game," his mom explained with a smile, and then in a louder voice said, "but he'll shut it off now."

Travis sighed and closed the computer. The room fell silent after one last scream.

"That's better," Mrs. Arredondo said. "Here's the famous quilt, Travis."

She held it forward and he looked and said, "Cool," then he yawned. She responded by unfolding the quilt with a sudden flap. It flew toward

him and he flinched. The quilt caught the air like a parachute and settled. Mrs. Arredondo walked around the bed tugging and centering. Travis pulled his computer out from beneath the quilt but didn't open it. He yawned again.

"There," his mom said when things were arranged the way she wanted. She looked at me and smiled. "I think Travis has some questions for you, Mr. Weatherhead." She moved a chair to a position beside the bed. "Have a seat, and let me know if you need anything."

She left and I sat. After an awkward pause I said, "So, what questions do you have, Travis?"

"Huh? There, that's one, right? If I just say 'huh' that's a question."

"Manners," his mother said from the distance. She'd left the door open, apparently so she could monitor our conversation.

Travis didn't really have any questions, but I did and I learned that he broke his legs when he beefed a railslide. Translation after my puzzled look: "I fell off a handrail I tried to slide down on my board." I also learned that he wanted to be a salesman when he grew up.

"Do you want to sell farm and ranch equipment, like your dad?"

He shrugged and said it didn't matter. People would buy anything. The trick was to find out how much they would pay.

He fingered his computer while we talked, so after about five minutes I said goodbye and let him get back to his game.

Then a few days later I stopped by the house again. Travis was streaming an old movie on his laptop. I sat by his bed and he angled the screen so I could see, and together we watched Wallace Beery try to outsmart Jackie Cooper on Treasure Island. I asked if he'd ever read the novel. His response was, "They wrote a book about this?"

Halfway through the battle at the stockade he muttered, "This is lame" and muted the sound.

"I checked you out online," he said, looking at me squarely for the first time since we'd met. Something in his dark eyes seemed familiar. "I found some of your stories and read a couple."

"Which ones?"

"I, uh, I don't remember the names. But I couldn't make it all the way through. Some of the words were too big."

That surprised me. I try to rein in my vocabulary when I write. We write to communicate, so why say things in a way that people won't understand? I was about to ask which words he'd had trouble with, when he said he had an idea for a movie.

"Really? A movie about what?"

"A thing I call a screamsaver. You know, like how a screensaver comes on your computer when it sits too long? Well, the program the dude in my movie designs will be like that, only it'll scream at you to get your attention. And there's a ghost or something in the code that infects computers. It makes them, like, murderous or something. What do you think?"

"Well, it's a starting point. But where would the story go after you've established the premise?"

He stared at me, blinking.

"I mean, do you know what would happen in the story? Or how it would end?"

I was hoping he'd stretch his imagination, like Caitlin had when talking about the clouds, but his imagination didn't extend beyond his computer screen. His story ideas were a mishmash of internet memes and video game violence. But he thought he was spouting gold, and after a while he went cautious.

"You won't tell anyone about this, will you? They might rip off my idea."

“Don’t worry, Travis. I’d say your idea’s still-born.”

“Good. I think it should be a movie. You could do that, couldn’t you? You’re a writer, and people write movies.”

“Screenwriters do.”

“Well, I give you permission. And you can have, like, ten percent of the money we make. It should be a lot, don’t you think?”

I saw the familiar something in his eyes again and suddenly knew what it was. It was the same look I’d seen in one of the pictures of his father on the living room mantle. He was receiving a salesman of the year award. Unfortunately Travis was having a year of beefed railslides and broken legs.

“Sorry,” I said. “I don’t have time to work on a screenplay.”

“Okay then, twenty percent.”

The quilt came back to me after he got his casts off, and I continued to circulate it, then eventually it left my control. I’ve lost track of it but I hear that it’s still being used to comfort the sick and injured. When a family is done with it they pass it on.

The quilt gave me ideas for a couple of stories. I call one of them “Gift a Wish.” I didn’t think its Travis-like character needed a full brain transplant, but I added a few neurons:

“How’d you get in here, kid?”

“Gift a Wish sent me.”

“Gift a what?”

“The Gift a Wish Foundation. They fulfill the dying wishes of terminally ill children.”

“Oh, yeah, the charity thing. They said you want to pitch a screenplay idea. Fine. I’ll listen. You have five minutes.”

“Well, the play’s about a teenaged boy who takes advantage of a company that helps young

people fulfill their dying wishes.”

“Like Gift a Wish?”

“Yeah. And the boy manipulates those groups to get freebies. One gave him tickets to Disneyland, and he sold them online. Another gave him a free funeral, but he sold that too.”

“So he’s not really dying?”

“No. He hacks into hospital computers to create fake records, to make it look like he’s sick.”

“Okay, so that introduces your main character and the premise of your story. What happens next?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether the main character is allowed to write a screenplay.”

“So he wants to be a screenwriter too, same as you?”

“Well, he claims he does, but that’s just so he can get an interview with the head of a movie studio. Once he’s in he threatens to go to the press with a story about how mean the studio has been to him.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Extortion.”

“Is this by any chance based on a real-life incident?”

“Yes.”

“I get it. So what happens at the end?”

“The studio pays.”

“Doesn’t work. The bad guy has to be punished at the end, and in this piece the kid’s the bad guy.”

“But he gets punished. He doesn’t get the ten million dollars he wants.”

“Ten million? That’s pretty steep. But they don’t give it to him?”

“No. He only gets a million.”

“Ha! Some punishment. Your time’s up, kid. Thanks for the laugh.”

“Fine. Watch for your name in the news.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s what the main character says in the screenplay. He lawyers up when the studio head turns him down. The court case drags on for years and the studio loses tens of millions because of public outrage. By the end everybody’s rooting for the kid, even though he’s the bad guy.”

“Yeah, that could work. But there’s no way the studio head would pay a million dollars. He might pay a hundred.”

“A hundred thousand?”

“A hundred bucks.”

“Half a million.”

“A hundred and fifty, with a guarantee of no sequels.”

“But sequels are where the real money is.”

“Fine. But you’d have to take them to the other studios.”

“Well . . . I guess that’s okay. Damn you drive a hard bargain.”

“I have to. Us good guys need to win. Don’t forget that when you’re dealing with the other studios. Stick it to them.”