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Sarah Groneck

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Threads and Tulle

*Sarah Gronbeck*¹

“You’re throwing that red tulle away?”

I stare at a perfectly symmetrical piece of tulle draped over a mess of yolk-stained eggshells in Heather’s overflowing trashcan. The tulle is a deep crimson, gauzy material and would be flawless except for an X-shaped cut at its center. I scamper to the trashcan and carefully lift the material from the eggshells’ jagged teeth. How could someone want to throw this fabric away?

“You know, tossing tulle like this would be a sin in my family,” I comment, feeling the sand-like friction of the tulle between my fingers.

Heather chuckles and, poking her head from behind her bunk-bed, replies, “It’s probably one of my roommates’. I bet you could keep it if you want.”

I grin as I fold the material into a puffy square and tuck it into my jacket pocket. Wandering into the closet-sized space that Heather and her five roommates have deemed the living room, I flop down onto a weathered calico couch and wonder what Heather thinks of my sudden urge to “dumpster-dive.” After all, I should know better than to stick my hands in a bag of rotting trash for a piece of fabric. Yet, in spite of any social faux-pas I may have committed, I know that my great-grandmother would be proud.

I prop my legs on the couch’s arm and rest my gaze on the whitewashed ceiling. Great-Grandma Harrell could turn an oak branch into a royal scepter, work yesterday’s copy of *Manhattan Times* into the lining of a patchwork quilt, and create a lacy party dress out of colorful flour sacks. Once, she took a used Clorox bottle and transformed it into a Granny doll, complete with a knitted dress, a painted bobbing head, and wire-rimmed

glasses. She wrote catchy sonnets onto the back of *Publisher’s Weekly* newsletters, cut them out with crinkle-cut scissors, and tucked them inside of cookie jars as wedding presents for newlyweds.

I know that Great-Grandma Harrell could probably turn the red material into a doll’s dress or a fancy handkerchief with a basic stitch. No matter what materials she lacked, she could always conjure up something remarkable.

Heather walks into the room with a copy of *Fried Green Tomatoes* in tow. She throws her Columbia parka onto a dirt-brown sofa and gives me a half-grin. “You having fun with that red cloth?” she teases.

I smile. “Yeah,” I say, “I think I’m going to make it into something.”

Moving from the sofa to the television, Heather bends down and opens the DVD case. “Well, you’re welcome to use anything we have here. We’re not artists or anything, but we have some glue and stuff if you want.”

“Thanks,” I mumble. I pull the gauze out of my pocket and unfold it. What should I do with this? I push my fist through the fraying X at the center, my mind drifting from Great-Grandma Harrell to her daughter, my Grandma Hoerman. She would most likely use the tulle as a dress for a hand puppet; she was quite the jokester.

Grandma Hoerman always talks about how growing up on Great-Grandma Harrell’s farm taught her to find humor in clumsy calves and beauty in sprouting cornfields, a skill she kept into adulthood. When conversations began to lag at the Harrell family reunion in Kansas, Grandma Hoerman stood up in front of nearly one-hundred people, strung imaginary thread through an imaginary needle, and pretended to sew “in one ear and out the other.” Puckering her red lips and

squinting her powder blue eyes, Grandma gave looks of earwax-removing ambition, which made my aunts, uncles, cousins, and me laugh until we fell to the ground. Once, when Grandma, Mom, and I were at a steak restaurant where white paper was substituted for tablecloths, Grandma asked the waiter for a pack of crayons and scribbled a red-and-blue portrait of my face. She even remembered to tear out the drawing to give to me after we paid our bill. Mom, who has critiqued many pieces of art since she is an art teacher, thought that the drawing was an accurate likeness of me.

I curl my body into a ball and clasp my legs as the moving TV screen runs through a series of lack-luster previews. Tilting my head up to look at Heather, I murmur, “Hey Heath, do you have a pair of scissors?”

Heather points to the wire movie rack on the opposite wall. “There’s a pair over there,” she says.

Moving to my feet, I feel across the wire rungs of the rack until I touch the metal handle of the scissors. I return to the couch and begin to snip away the edges of the gauze, still uncertain with what I am crafting. I watch as the strips of the fabric shimmer in the fluorescent light and sink to the floor. Mom would love the deep color; if she were here, she would save the tulle as a backdrop for her students’ paintings.

I cut a rectangle around the edge of the tulle, thinking of Mom’s early days as an art teacher at a down-and-out high school. The school board started her off with one hundred dollars and an uneasy promise that she might have her own

room in a few years. I remember going with Mom to Saturday morning garage sales, dusty craft stores, ultramodern art boutiques, and closeout extravaganzas to scrape up supplies like watercolor paints and Sharpie markers as cheaply as possible. We collected cigar boxes, half-empty wine bottles, rusty candelabras, so that Mom could set up “still lives” for her students to draw. She also dug through trash bins to recover grimy paintbrushes; with a little molding clay and some paint, Mom could turn a used paintbrush into a paintbrush person, using the handle as a body and covering the metal base to make a clay face.

By the time I graduated from high school, Mom had her own art room with eight oak drafting tables purchased second-hand from a local high school and a ceiling-high bookshelf brimming with bright construction paper. The room had chipped tile flooring and plain white paint, but Mom could put up posters like Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* and easily transform it into an art studio.

I toss two newly-cut pieces of tulle onto the floor and ignore the laughter ringing from the television. Great-Grandma Harrell died thirteen years ago. In the end, we inherited Great-Grandma’s half-finished patchwork quilt, and Grandma Hoerman took her mother’s sewing kit. The quilt is buried in our dusty basement now, while the sewing kit rests snugly between Monopoly and a box of cracked china in Grandma Hoerman’s closet. Mom still makes her paintbrush people, and Grandma Hoerman still strings thread between her ears every once in a while. And here am I, obsessively trying to figure out what to do with a piece of tulle that I pulled from the trash.

¹Sarah Groneck, a sophomore at Dordt College, wrote this essay for Dr. Jim Schaap’s Advanced Expository Writing class.