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And the Floodgates of the Heavens Were Opened

by Julie Toich

Sixty-seven years she's lived in Basswood, Iowa, and every year for the past forty-four of them Ethel Croft has knitted a blanket and given it away. One for her mother, one for her father, one for each of her five siblings. One for her husband on his deathbed. One for Susan Carole, one for Scottie Fischer. One for Brigitte Salin, who first taught her how to knit when she spent a summer in Québec back in '71. The others went to friends and lovers, neighbors and pastors and teachers. One went to the mailman. One went to a family who lost everything in a fire. The truth is, Ethel doesn't remember everyone on the list—and there was a list, lost in a 'safe place' that she hasn't rediscovered in the past decade—but she knows that none of those blankets have made it to her own bed.

Forty-four blankets and none for herself, even though the old quilt on her bed is getting thin. Forty-four blankets and none for herself, even though the windows leak cold air in

the winter that the heater can't compensate for, and the bedroom gets cold. Forty-four blankets, and she decides the forty-fifth will belong to her.

"It's about time," she tells her sheep, who is the last of the old flock she and her husband, Henry, used to care for. The sheep bleats as Ethel stares up at the summer sky. "Blue," she says, "and white and gray. Just like the sky. What do you think?" The sheep nibbles the grass in the pasture, and Ethel nods to herself.

She dyes the yarn by hand, yarn she made back when they had wool to spare. Lovely cerulean and powder blue, bleached white and gunmetal. She dries it on the clothesline, so that the wind will carry the smell of soil and grasses into the yarn.

Then she sits and knits a little bit every night for a week, starting with a large blue stripe as she hums to the oldies on the radio. Each day that week is sunny and cloudless, the skies stretching wide over the hills. Then she knits a pale blue stripe, then a white one, and the skies change ac-

cordingly, bursting with rain when she reaches the dark gray rows. On the darkest of the gunmetal days, she puts aside her knitting needles and stands in the storm as the fields fill with water and dirt turns to mud, which slides down the hillsides and pools murky and thick in depressions.

"It's like in the Bible," Patty Larson tells Ethel the next day when she goes visiting. There are four of them—Ethel, Patty, Patty's husband Brian, and Ed Somers—sitting in the Larson living room and drinking tea. "Storm like this will send the whole world to hell, you'll see. And serves us right, too."

"Good grief," Ed says, putting his mug on the table. "My grandfather used to say the same thing. Just the same. And we're still here. We're still kicking. So don't get worked up about a little rain."

Ethel nods her agreement, and Brian slurps from his cup. "Checked the rain gauge this morning. Already got four inches in there."

The gunmetal gray stripe is thick and beautiful, and Ethel pauses her knitting and looks at her friend, who has aged so much in the last decade, hair whitening and skin creasing. Her eyes are watery and dull.

Then she thinks of Henry and the bright blanket she knitted for his hospital bed, all yellows and greens like summer, the way his hands lay so limply against it like dead birds. In his last days, he told her he could see through to the other side, and he wept. “There’s nothing,” he said. “Nothing at all. It’s so, so beautiful.”

“Henry believed in many things,” Ethel says, “but never thought rainstorms were a sign of the end.”

“A good man, Henry,” Brian says, smiling. “Once, back in ’82, he picked me up down at Dale’s in that old lemon of his when I got stranded there in a freak storm and we’re riding up Old Swallow Road, just the two of us, and—don’t you know it?—the car breaks down and then we’re both out stranded in the rain.”

“The only thing is, how are any

of the crops going to grow like this?” Ed says.

Ethel starts a new row, fingers lingering over the lovely gray. Blue this time.

The storm clears, and the skies are empty of any clouds, deep blue at their highest point. The ground absorbs the standing water from the storm, draws it deep inside, and pushes out flowers and sprouts and green tendrils of life. Ethel sits by the window day after day and knits, watching the sheep graze in the pasture, watching the skies turn from dark blue to light blue to white, and pausing when it’s time to switch back to the gray yarn. Lacing the yarn through her fingers, she stares at the white sky, white as the last row she completed, and doesn’t start the next row.

“Tired already?” Ed says. He was just stopping by to help her fix the stubborn drawers in the kitchen that don’t open and close so well, but despite the drawers being fixed now, he’s still here, eating one of the apples from down cellar and watching her knit. She knows what it’s about. Ed, Patty, and Brian have been spending more time with her since Henry died.

Checking in on her. She knows how these things go.

“No,” she says, “I just don’t think we need more rain yet.”

Ed laughs. “You can say that again. The fields are going to be wet for a long while.”

Putting her blanket aside with a sigh, Ethel keeps looking out the window at the sky and the patchwork fields. The Queen Anne’s Lace is growing now, white and delicate along the roadside and in the fields left fallow. “Funny how the moment you decide it’s time to do something for yourself, you start thinking of everyone else.”

“What’s that?” Ed says.

“I think I’ll make some hats and mittens.” When Ed just gives her a baffled look, she smiles back, gets up from her seat, and walks to her yarn basket. “For donating. It’s spring now, but it’ll be summer, then fall, and...” She has no real explanation for him.

“I thought you wanted to make yourself a blanket,” Ed says.

“Well, yes,” Ethel replies. “But...” She looks at the white sky again. “I’ll save that project for a rainy day.” [IM]