



2014 First Place

Nugget *by Bonnie Hobbs*

Papa is talking a blue streak. That's what Ma says whenever Papa gets to telling his stories. Most times I like Papa's stories: some true, some made up out of his head. But just now light is poking through the cabin's side window, uncurling like a golden ribbon and I just have to cut in.

"Look, Papa. The sun is shining through that clear place on the window glass." I reach up, wishing I could somehow touch the light.

"Well, look at that, child. It is showing me up for a shirker. I promised your ma I'd scrub away the dirt from the outside of the window before the gathering tomorrow." He shivers like he's scared, then grins my favorite grin, his teeth flashing white in his dark face. "Your ma is gonna give me holy you-know-what!"

"No, Papa. I don't mean the dirt." I scoot closer to him. "It's the sunlight. See? Coming through like a ribbon? And now look." I cup both hands into a bowl on my lap. "Now it's filling my hands."

Papa stares for the time it takes to breathe in and out. "Now where'd you come by such wild thinking, little Sarah? Not from your mama, I'll be bound." He winks. "She's a woman of practical mind. And a good thing for us she is." Papa has been carving while he tells me stories. He finishes and hands over a little wooden lady.

"She's a beauty, Papa."

"Seems I just keep finding things to keep me from the load of work I have yet to do." He nods once. "That little doll there was begging to be carved from that slab of the old oak. Seems that ol' tree didn't take to being burnt up in the stove, not every piece anyway." He smiles and shakes his head. "I'd better get at the window glass." He stands up. As he passes by he tugs my hair where Ma has oiled it and plaited it to my scalp. No amount of tweaking will disturb the hair nor the blue ribbons woven in. I feel the skin of my face pulling way back from the tight braiding.

I try to make the little doll dance but something about the legs is wrong. Papa is already out the door and scrubbing at the window. I try to fix the legs myself, for Papa will likely soon be busy with feeding the cows and the hogs. Nothing I do makes the doll work right.

I give up and run into the kitchen to hold the doll up high. "She's broke, Ma. Broke already." I try not to whine. Whining isn't allowed



in this house. Papa says so, but smiles when he says it. Ma says it too, but gives the words grave meaning.

Ma turns and rubs her arm across her forehead, whuffing out a quick breath that moves a cloud of black hair from her eyes. It has slipped out from under her kerchief. "Only mid-morning," Ma says, talking to the stove, or maybe the kettle for she's not looking at me. "Already hot enough to press a body flat."

"Ma?"

"Hush, child. Need to keep stirring this jam. If it don't set, I just don't know..."

I sigh and let my shoulders droop. Ma is always working. Yesterday was wash day, with the big black kettle boiling outside in the yard, the smell of the lye soap and the slap of the wash paddle against water. I have to be watchful on wash day. Ma calls it a particular care-taking kind of time, staying clear of the kettle and the fire. Now today Ma should be ironing. I like how the heavy iron rings out when Ma drops it on the hot stove. I like the thuds it makes against Papa's shirts and our dresses before the soft-swishing sound takes over. I especially like how the clothes from off the line carry in the smell of sunshine.

"Why aren't you ironing, Ma?"

Ma gives a snort, nearly a laugh. "Lord, child. You think your mama's not working hard enough? Think I can do everything at once? Maybe I'm magic like in one of them stories your granny tells." She sighs and tucks her hair back beneath the damp kerchief. "Questions. All the time, questions. Talking all the time. Never give a body time to think. Can't you stay quiet for even a...?" She sighs, turns to me and gives me a smile. "Sorry, sugar.

No need to go snapping at you. What is it that's broke?" She leans the wooden spoon against the rim of the kettle. The bubbling berries and sugar give off a tart-sweet smell and makes me lick my lips.

I pass the doll up to Ma. She looks it over. "Just got to untangle that scrap of gingham you dressed her with. Got all tangled with the legs Papa pegged together. See? There at the knees." She smiles a dreamy kind of smile. "Made it so it could dance. Handy man with the carving, your papa. And a pretty fair dancer himself as I recall." Ma runs her fingers across the carved smile on the doll's face, then shakes herself a little like she is coming awake. "There," she says. "That should do it." She peers in the kettle. "Berries are setting up fine. I reckon I can let up. Worried over nothing, as usual." She wipes her hands on her apron and lets herself down in the rocker by the window. The light puddles in her lap, just like it did in mine, but she doesn't act like she takes notice. She picks up the basket where she keeps her thread and needles.

I watch her sort the tangled threads. "There's a rainbow in that basket, Ma," I say. "A whole rainbow."

"My Lord, where did you come up with such fanciful thinking? Not from me, that's sure." Ma scowls at her work. "Don't know how I'll get this finished. Not by tomorrow with all the commotion around here."

I edge up and lean against Ma's knee.

"Can you make out them words, Sarah?" She smiles.

I squint and lean my head over to one side. As I watch, the letters come alive, in blue and green and yellow crossed stitches. "True Love," I say, feeling proud.

"Mighty fine reading for such a little lady. I learned reading early too. I guess to make up for my own mama and papa not reading til they were grown."

"Why was that, Ma?"

"The way of the world in the old days, Sarah. Folks like us weren't allowed to read, not then, not back there." She shakes her head and presses one finger against my lips before I can open my mouth. "I know you're gonna be asking why. I will not tell you just yet. The stories will be coming your way, but not now. No use thinking on hard times before you must."

I just nod and look at her work again. "What's the numbers on the picture mean, Ma?"

"The years the two old folks began their life together down there in Texas on the very day the soldiers brought the news of freedom. Fifty years past. This year they celebrate fifty years of being as one."

"Like when we celebrated my birthday?"

Ma chuckles. "Well, they do pretty near everything together, but not birthdays. It's a Jubilee, fifty year wedding Jubilee. And at the same time, fifty years since that first Juneteenth-Freedom Day.

We're going to have music and fireworks just like the celebration we had a few years back when Colonel Allensworth started up this town for folks like us. A town out here in this rich valley. But you won't remember that. You were just knee-high to a frog back then." Her sweet smile slips away a little. "Yes, child. And more'n fifty years since the first gold rushing days. Guess that's why they call this the golden state." She sighs. "That and how golden brown the hills get in summer time."

"You look sad, Ma. Was it a sad time?"

"No, child, though gold is powerful and can lead a man down roads, well, I'll just say that's another story for another time."

"So it's a Jubilee," I whisper. "Sounds

sweet, like a candy's name. Jubilee," I say again. "That sure is a pretty word. Sounds like a word with color to it, like all the pictures you make with your needle." I

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look up at the pictures stretched on wood and hanging around the room on spikes Papa has pounded into the cabin walls. Ma sometimes grumbles, saying if a body pounds in pegs they should be useful, but Papa always says it smartens up the place and that's useful too. He smiles saying it. Sometimes Ma smiles back.

"Can I give them a present too?"

"They'd be proud."

"I can't sew like you, or carve like Papa."

"Well, just anything, Sarah. Anything you do will be mighty pleasing to them."

"What kind of anything?"

Ma puts down her needle and tugs off her kerchief. She re-folds it and ties

it back over her hair after pushing in the comb Papa carved for her out of a cow bone. "Since this is their golden Jubilee, too bad we can't give them some gold." She chuckles. "But gold, like I said, is a rare and precious thing." She smiles, but in the way I always think of as her not-so-happy smile cause it twists her mouth wrong. "Go ask your papa about gold. For years he's been panning our ol' creek bed between planting and reaping. Long time ago—well—he learned quick that finding gold is not so easy. Finding it is as rare as being together and as happy as lambs cavortin' in the meadow, like gramps and granny still are." She smiles wider this time. "Happy for fifty years, bless their hearts."

I scrunch up my face, thinking it through. "But Papa never found any gold? Not ever?"

"Like I said." Ma's smile twists again. "Gold is mighty rare."

"Then how can I give them gold?" I feel tears rising. Ma doesn't allow easy crying so I blink and swallow those tears down.

"I was talking wild. Doesn't have to be gold, Sarah. They'd be pleased with anything."

There it is again. Anything. I don't want to give them just anything. I want to give something, something special and made of gold. I go outside and plunk myself down on a stump by the kitchen garden, thinking to ask Papa how he went about looking for gold.

When he comes in from the barn he sets to working hard, digging in the garden plot, and his shovel bites into a clump of yellow flowers.

I sit up quick. "Those are pretty, Papa. They're golden like..."

"Dang weeds." Papa turns his lips down at the corners, chewing on the inside of his mouth the way he does when things aren't going so good. "Too many weeds in this country. Only two kinds of yellow I ever did turn up. Ripening corn and these weeds."

I bite back the rest of my words. Those flowers couldn't be a good present if Papa hates them so.

After supper Ma gives me a cup of sugared milk and I crumble my cornbread in it and spoon it out. I sit a while in the doorway listening to the quail calling and the new calf bawling to her mama. The sun had beat down on the rocks in the field all day leaving a sort of hot smell. I don't know the right words to say how it smells, so I just keep it to myself and breathe it in.

I watch the sun sinking now and how the sky turns golden over the trees past the creek. The gold changes to red, then pink, then slips away into darkness, leaving only stars. They surely do shine bright, but silver bright, diamond bright, not gold. The gold had come but gone away too soon. I wish I had a way of catching just a little of that golden sky but it's only foolish thinking, like a baby would think and I would be told so if I spoke of it out loud.

I go inside and take out the paint box Granny gave me last Christmas. She and Gramps had to send off for it all the way from San Francisco. I mix yellow with red and a little brown until I have the

color I like, near about the color of my own face. I paint my new doll's face and make it shiny. I am so happy for a minute, seeing it. A golden doll. But the paint dries and goes an ugly, spotty brown. That's when Ma finds me.

"Oh, Sarah! Sarah, child, you have made such a mess." She strips off my dress and stockings and leads me out back to the pump.

"But it was pretty for a while. It was for Granny and Gramps," I say. I stand straight and brave under Ma's scrubbing, though the rag is a little rough and the well water cold.

Ma sighs, sounding awful tired. "Make a pretty picture with them paints."

I have done that before, lots of times. I've likely made them a thousand pictures. It's not special, but I don't say any of that, for Ma is looking put out with the mess I've made of my dress and the new doll.

After prayers and a kiss from Papa, Ma tucks me under the quilt. "Go to sleep, child. Folks will be coming tomorrow from miles around. I hope and pray everything will go just right. We got us two times the jubilee as other folks. Our old folks' fiftieth as well as Juneteenth."

"But, Ma...?"

"Hush. Time to quiet down." Mama kisses me and pulls closed the curtain that cuts my corner off from the rest of the room. I toss on my bed, staring at all the word pictures Ma has made with her needle and threads. One reads "Sweet Dreams." Another is all letters and numbers. I whisper them, proud I can read. Can read even before I am to start school. That will come in the fall. The new teacher has already come. All the way from Los Angeles, though I don't know where that is, not really.

One thought keeps me from sleeping. What could I find to give Granny and Gramps on this special jubilee day that was golden? Not flowers, not sunlight, not the setting sun.

A finger of light from a lamp Papa carries past my curtain falls straight across one of Mama's biggest word pictures. I sound out the words just before the light fades. That's it. I know what I can give them. I turn on my side to drift into a dream of bright and shining gold.

The sun is up and shining just as buggies and wagons start pulling up to the house. Kin and friends, even new folks, strangers with blue eyes and pale faces who talk different than folks I know. They have settled outside our town. Ma calls them 'M-grints' and says we should be neighborly. Me and those children stand and stare and toe the dirt, not knowing what to say.

Folks come with bread and cakes and pies, beans and greens and venison stew meat and fried chicken. I sniff at all the good smells coming from the pots. I dart in and out among neighbors and kin, smiling and laughing, but holding myself in, keeping silent.

On one of my passes by the tables in the yard, Papa takes hold of me. He leans down and squints into my face, then hollers over at Ma. "Something's wrong with Sarah! Haven't heard one word out of her all morning."

"Finally giving us some peace?" Ma comes over, smiling at first, then looking serious. She kneels by me and feels my face with the backs of her fingers. "Are you sick, sugar?"

I shake my head and smile even wider, nearly bursting with what I know. I turn as Gramps' buggy draws up. He helps Granny down and I fly into her arms and grin up at her.

"No howdy for your granny, little girl?"

I hug her, then hug Gramps tight around his legs.

But Gramps sits down on a pine bench Papa has made from a fallen tree. He pulls me up on his lap and twists his face into a worried scowl. The deep lines cut into his cheeks and forehead and makes him look like the bark of the oak tree behind the house. "Are you taking sick with something, little girl?"

I shake my head and feel my smile slipping off.

"Well, are you mad at old Gramps?"

I shake my head harder, trying to look happy.

"Then speak up, child. You got me worrying."

He sounds so sad that tears come spilling from my eyes, though I try to smile through them. I stare up at all the people gathering near. All are looking worried.

Ma bends near and takes my shoulders, giving me her no-nonsense glare. "Now you say something. This is not like you. Sulking does you no credit. You keeping something from us? It can't be so

bad that a gal like you goes silent. Now just spit it out. You will feel better for the telling."

"It's all ruined!" The words burst out of my mouth before I can clamp it shut.

Mama stands and steps back like my sudden words have slapped her. "What is ruined? What are you going on about, child? You broke something?" Ma looks so confused I am sorry.

"I didn't break nothing, Ma, honest. It's the present. It's all spoiled." I lean back against Gramps' chest.

He kisses the top of my head and murmurs some soft, grumbly words. "What present is that, little girl?" he says.

"What's Golden. For the fifty years jubilee."

"Golden?"

"I read it on Ma's wall picture. It spells it out clear. 'Silence is Golden.' But I talked. Now it's spoiled." I swipe at my eyes with the inside of my wrist and sniff up tears.

Granny sits down next to us and pulls me over onto her wide, soft lap. She turns me and takes my face between her hands. Her hands are cool and boney and a little rough, just like always. She looks way down deep into my eyes like only she can do.

"You are a clever child. Always thinking." She taps me on the nose just once. "Seems searching for gold keeps bringing a strain onto this family." She glances up at Ma and Papa and gives them a little smile and head shake. "When your Gramps and me come out here in '85 we brought our gold with us."

"Really?" I blink, confused.

"Yes, ma'am. Brought a golden

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dream in a shining time of freedom. We didn't need to go digging it up from the good earth. We had freedom and a home and golden crops of corn all our own to do with whatever we chose." She looks up at Papa with a smile. "Your papa's family came later. He grew up in a city hearing tales of the old miners, men called hydraulickers who tore up the land and washed out the gold dust and nuggets. Guess it took hold in his mind." She looks over at Ma. "Now my own girl, your ma, was born here. She heard stories too, but didn't give a hoot about that gold. Maybe it's the difference 'tween boys and girls, or country and city. Don't know." Granny shrugs. "Your papa always thought he could smell gold waiting for him down below the earth."

Ma blinks hard. "Yes, he was always saying gold is there for the taking. Going off to look for it. But that gold just laughed at him. Out here, we grew up knowing all the gold there was had already been found."

I sit up on Granny's lap, worried, for Ma looks like she was gonna cry and Papa looks like a boy caught swiping bites of pie. In trouble for sure.

Papa clears his throat. "I quit roaming. I come home, though, didn't I?" Papa is nearly whispering, his eyes shut tight. "I come home and stayed home, for here's where I found my own little nugget." He opens his eyes and looks at me. "The shiniest little gold nugget I ever did see." He smiles at me and reaches one hand out to Ma. She doesn't take it right off. She keeps looking into someplace far away, like she's remembering a sad time.

"When we first come here," Granny says. "All we had was quail calling, the howl of the coyotes and the answering yips of their pups. We had the wind sighing through the tall grass."

"Them frogs behind us in that pond," Gramps says. "We had them. You recall 'em?"

Granny nods. "The sounds of the early days. No children as yet, no other neighbors. Quiet-like. You see, we had come away from a whole army of folks—laughing or fussing children, big-chested men chanting at their work and singing women going about theirs. Singing sad songs, singing happy ones too sometimes. We missed that part of how we lived all together, so we sent word to folks left behind. Soon more families come out here and we had more of what we wanted. Had us a growing settlement. Then along come Colonel Allensworth, rest his soul, and now we have us a town."

"So don't you be hiding your voice from us," Gramps says. "It's the sound we crave, and like your papa said, you are the gold he found, little nugget."

Papa steps closer to Ma. "That is surely the truth."

Granny gives me a hug. "Sarah, when you talk and laugh and sing, your voice rings out like little bells of gold. Even more precious. Gramps and I would surely miss the sound."

"But if those words don't mean what they say, why'd Ma work so hard on the picture?"

Gramps scratches his head, frowning, pondering the question.

Then I think harder about it, putting aside my sorrow for failing. I think, then I smile. "Now I know what it means. I didn't think hard enough." I sit up straight on Granny's lap. "It means sometimes it's good to speak up, like when something is wrong, like when Granny and Gramps weren't allowed to learn to read. But sometimes—sometimes it's best to stay quiet and listen." I look around, feeling bashful with everyone staring at me. "Like now," I whisper, snuggling back into Granny's soft bosom.

Granny and Gramps both lean in and hug, keeping me in the middle like the ham in a sandwich. "Yes, child," they say. "Like now." They say it in one voice, together like always. I close my eyes and sigh, then peek out. I see Papa and Ma holding hands and looking at each other like I had never seen them do before. They are looking at nobody else and the sun shines from behind them.

I close my eyes and lift my face to feel the sunshine. Everything in my world seems just fine. I am the nugget that brought Papa home to stay. My voice is the sound that makes them all happy. The present for the fifty year jubilee? Me, my own self. And just now I believe my whole world is golden.

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