



2013 Honorable Mention

The Embroidered Sheets *by Virginia Dehlinger*

Clara spit on the base of her iron to make sure it was hot enough to remove wrinkles, yet not so hot it would scorch the one good shirt Vincent owned. Another iron heated on the stove, ready to trade places when the first one cooled.

Her straw-filled mattress substituted for an ironing board, a luxury even her stepmother Geneva didn't have.

Tuesday, not Saturday, was typically ironing day, but she wanted her husband of two weeks to make a good impression at a party that evening. The gathering wouldn't be a grand affair; however, twelve adults sharing food and drink in the remote stretches of the San Luis Valley amounted to a party.

Finished with Vincent's shirt, Clara began pressing her dress, the one with a bothersome ruffle around the neck and mutton chop sleeves that were impossible to iron without creasing. She chose the dress for its color, a light blue that matched her husband's eyes and brought out the specks of blue in her own.

While she ironed, party guests were arriving by twos and threes at her pa's house, a mile and a half up the road. They traveled long distances in horse-drawn wagons to celebrate her marriage, a ceremony performed by a justice of the peace while her pa was in Omaha meeting with cattle buyers. If Clara had stayed in Philadelphia, she would have enjoyed an elaborate wedding preceded by an engagement party and other social events organized by her father's friends and business acquaintances. Instead, she would be feted at a simple family supper—no champagne, no music or dancing and very few gifts.

It was pleasantly cool that October afternoon as Clara and Vincent rode their horses up to her pa's four-bedroom ranch house. In the distance ahead, a line of clouds flirted with the tips of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains while the sun warmed their shoulders from behind. There was no room in Clara's thoughts that afternoon for the social niceties she might have left in Philadelphia when she traded genteel city life for the wilds of Colorado. Her biggest worry was whether her pa was still in a black mood. Although Albert, a widower when he moved to Colorado, had remarried in haste, he



expected his daughter to have a traditional wedding.

Just back from Omaha, Albert hadn't even removed his hat before his wife Geneva told him his sixteen-year-old daughter had married his foreman. Hell's bells and a liberal portion of tarnation peppered the man's outrage as he walked outside, lit a cigar and began pacing the length of his long front porch, spouting expletives and puffing like a locomotive. Geneva followed close on his heels, savoring the steam.

Geneva was only three years older than Clara. Prior to the day she shocked everyone in the family by marrying Albert, she and Clara had been friends, best friends in this valley with no neighborhoods or schools. Related by blood as well as marriage, the two young women looked nothing alike. Everything about Clara was long and straight: legs, arms, and dark brown hair parted in the middle. Geneva's ash blond hair was curly as fiddle fern, and she had a curvy body to match.

Before Geneva moved into Albert's house, she and Clara lived nine miles apart. It took half a day on a trail as brown and rutted as a waffle to travel by wagon from one ranch to the other, so the girls welcomed their infrequent visits. They shared private thoughts on long walks, or climbed into the loft above the horse barn to spy on cowboys. They usually got an earful of language they weren't supposed to hear, and more often than not, Geneva forgot to whisper so they could be "discovered."

Hidden from view, they held whispered debates over which cowboy was handsomest, or whose mous-

tache they liked best. They both preferred moustaches that turned up at the ends over those that grew downward, calling upturned moustaches “happy” and droopy ones “sad.” Vincent, who had a sad moustache, still won most of their best-looking cowboy contests.

Albert was never a contestant. If he had been, he would have scored well enough on his looks, and his clean-shaven face would have escaped the girls’ facial hair comments.

“Go down to that shack,” Albert told Geneva after he stopped pacing the boards of his porch, “and tell Clara to get herself up here. Pronto. I’ll mind the baby until you get back.”

Geneva marched down to where Clara and Vincent were living and smacked her former friend with every word Albert uttered. Vincent was rounding up cattle for a drive to Dodge City, so Clara, who was outside chopping firewood, took the full brunt of the rant. She watched in amazement as Geneva began cursing like a man, flailing her arms about like a woman possessed, her kinky blond hair fairly standing on end. When she ran out of curse words, she announced, “And Albert wants to see you this very minute.”

Clara gave her stepmother a penetrating look. “You know it riles me when you use Pa’s given name.” She picked up her skirts and headed for the cabin. “Tell him I’m on my way.”

While changing out of her dirty dress and apron, Clara mentally sorted through Geneva’s histrionics and, by the time she mounted her horse, she was convinced her stepmother had included a few smoking oaths of her own.

It’s so like her, she thought. Geneva has been trying to put a wedge between me and Pa ever since she married him. She urged her horse into a gallop. *Let her swear all she wants—I’m the one married to Vincent.*

The newlywed arrived at her pa’s house wearing the red plaid shirtwaist he gave her for her sixteenth birthday. Her dark brown braids were wound into the respectable coronet of a married woman as she gracefully slid from her sidesaddle.

Albert pulled a cigar out of his vest pocket for the second time that day and, using a pearl-handled pocket knife, cut the tip off one end before lighting it. When he was sure the cigar was lit, he pointed it at Clara.

“Why did you get married without my permission, Daughter? And why in the name of Heaven—to a cowboy?” His forehead was a raft of wrinkles. “This is madness! You are too young to get married.”

Standing in front of her pa, who was a little over six feet tall, Clara looked up at his face, not down at his boots. She knew better than to ask what he had against cowboys when he depended on them for a living; however, she couldn’t resist bringing up something from his past.

She folded her arms across her chest. “What about Geneva? Geneva was exactly my age when the two of you made that trip to Santa Fe.” *And if you hadn’t chosen to marry your first cousin, she mentally added, you could have married in Colorado and saved yourself the trip.*

Albert’s face reddened. His black eyebrows were nearly conjoined as he gave his daughter a searching look of appraisal. “I should have left you in Philadelphia with your Aunt Tillie,” he grumbled. He waited a few seconds for an apology or an argument, and hearing neither, said, “Then go back to your blessed cow-

boy, and your pig-headed insolence be damned.”

Albert’s dark countenance sullied his face for three days, slowly diminishing as he immersed himself in the details of his cattle business. By week’s end, Clara even convinced him to take a look at how she and Vincent had fixed up the old homesteader’s cabin that sat in a corner of his three thousand acres.

As he walked around the pimple of land looking for something to criticize, Albert was surprised to see glass in the shack’s lone window, new daubing between the logs, and the split rail fence repaired. Even so, when Clara invited him to come in, only his shadow ventured inside.

“You can keep your bedroom furniture,” he said after a cursory look, “since you already hauled it down here, but you won’t last a year in this place.” On the way to his black gelding, he turned to her and said, “I thought you were smarter than this, Daughter.

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You wanted to be on your own, so here you are, living like a pauper. With Vincent gone for weeks at a time, you will most assuredly be on your own. And if you don't like your new life, don't expect to move back in with me and Geneva."

That will never happen, Clara vowed as she watched her pa mount his horse with the ease of a younger man. *She may have been my friend once, but I will move back to Philadelphia before I live in the same house with her again.*

In Clara's world, adults did not speak openly about personal issues, and children were supposed to keep their thoughts and opinions to themselves. Teetering between childhood and womanhood, Clara used silence as a weapon when Geneva moved in with her and her pa. Geneva, previously the more talkative one, eventually returned the rebuff, and to get back at Clara, announced she was now in charge of Albert's household.

"If I need your help, I'll ask," she told her onetime friend who had overnight become her stepdaughter.

With Geneva handling the chores she used to do, Clara was left with no school, church, friends or books she hadn't read at least twice to fill her days. To get out of the house, she asked Vincent if he would teach her how to ride a horse. Young women were scarce as fresh vegetables in that part of the country, so even though Clara was the boss's daughter and he'd never taught a female to ride before, Vincent took on the task.

Pleased with her progress and determination, Albert gave his daughter a pack horse named Bridget, a gentle bay with a black mane and tail. Every day Clara rode Bridget across the unfenced portions of the San Luis Valley, her dark brown braids bouncing against her back as she punctuated her silent anger with every thud of the horse's hooves. The farther she rode, the more she appreciated the rugged beauty of the open range, where Mother Nature painted breathtaking landscapes, then painted over them as the seasons changed. In the spell of a freedom she'd never known, she opened her arms to the assault on her senses that waited in ambush behind every tree and boulder.

After supper most evenings, she rode Bridget across the grassy dunes at a faster pace than might be expected from a pack horse and a girl riding sidesaddle. Vincent accompanied her when his responsibilities allowed. Each time he rode up to the ranch house with Bridget in tow, Geneva found some reason she needed Clara's help. The two young women would glare at one another like duellists before Clara left with Vincent anyway.

WITHIN MINUTES OF ALBERT'S VISIT TO THE HOMESTEADER'S cabin, he regretted his harsh words, and thus his decision to host a party. Geneva, who expected her husband's wrath to last substantially longer than a week, was surprised when he told her to make preparations.

"We didn't have a party," she complained.

Albert hardened his jaw. "Instead of going along as their witness, you should have stopped this marriage, a marriage you must have known I wouldn't approve. I leave for Kansas in less than a week, so don't tarry with the arrangements."

Clara hadn't seen her pa since his one visit to the cabin so, after she and Vincent joined the party, she was relieved to see him enjoying himself at the celebration of a marriage he didn't favor. Surrounded by his sisters and cousins, he was in the middle of a cow story when he spied his foreman enter the room.

"You can tell this better than I can," he said to Vincent, raising his glass to a son-in-law shiny as a cleaned-up cowboy ready to whoop it up in a railhead town.

After a roast beef supper, Geneva served cake—one layer, a little brown around the edges, sprinkled with loaf sugar. Clara's aunts presented her with wedding gifts drawn from the trunks they brought with them when they moved west—an emerald green silk shawl from her Aunt Lou and a set of rosebud-embroidered sheets from Aunt Ada.

Vincent stared at the sheets for some time before touching them with his wire-nicked fingers. He wondered how the silky fabric would feel when he was buck naked, and the thought was almost as sensual as the intimacy he and Clara had been sharing between ordinary sheets. Clara was delighted with the sheets as well, and when her eyes met Vincent's, her face reflected the same glow of pleasure she saw in his.

Geneva inspected the delicate pink rosebuds embroidered on the sheets and pillow slips. "In my opinion," she

said, "sheets like these don't belong in a shack with a dirt floor."

Clara forced a smile as she reached for Vincent's hand. "But we haven't been sleeping on the floor, have we, Dear Husband." Out of a corner of her eye she saw Geneva's lips disappear into a thin line.

The young couple slept on their fancy sheets for three nights before Vincent left for Dodge City with Albert, a dozen cowhands, a camp cook, horse wrangler and fifteen hundred steers. The brutal winter of 1886-87 nearly wiped out the cattle business in many parts of the West. Nestled between two mountain ranges in the southern-most part of Colorado, Albert's herd was spared and, since markets in the East were paying a premium for beef, he decided to make a fall drive to Kansas.

"As long as I'm doin' what I'm doin', I'll be gone a lot," Vincent said to Clara before he left. "There's no drives in winter, so when I get back from Dodge I'll be home more." He stuffed a handful of the biscuits she baked that morning into one of his saddlebags. "Home." He paused to look into her serious, hazel eyes. "I like the sound of that."

A smile passed from Clara's eyes to her lips. "I'll miss you, Dearest. Stay safe, and don't you spend a single minute worrying about me."

After Vincent kissed her goodbye, Clara decided to tidy up the cabin he had so lovingly called "home," a log box so small the entire place would fit inside the drawing rooms of the houses she and Geneva grew up in. Cleaned once a week, those homes had foundations and wood floors, plastered ceilings and paneled walls that kept the outside where it belonged. Abandoned for over a decade, the homesteader's cabin was wall-to-wall spider webs and rodent droppings before Clara attacked them with her broom. Every day she saw signs the previous tenants were still around.

During the two weeks Clara and Vincent had been married, they chopped enough wood to last until spring. Vincent filled the rain barrel with water from nearby La Jara Creek and built a wire hutch for two setting hens. The chickens would lay a few eggs, but there was no cow or goat for milk.

After sweeping the cowhides that substituted for rugs, Clara cleaned the window, pleased the homesteader who built the place had the good sense to cut the opening on the side with a view of the mountains. She stepped outside to check under the hens for eggs and dropped the one brown egg she found into her apron pocket.



Not especially hungry, she decided to save the egg for breakfast. Instead, she smeared bacon grease on a couple of leftover biscuits and made that her midday meal. A pot of beans simmering on the stove would be supper.

While she ate the biscuits and finished the morning coffee, she read both sides of a page of the *Alamosa Journal* that had been wrapped around a slab of bacon. Grease-stained and three months old, the newspaper occupied her mind for several minutes before she laid it aside and looked for something to do besides chop firewood.

Geneva handed her fourteen-month-old son to his father.

"He could be walking before I return," Albert said after kissing Christopher on the cheek. Having lost two sons from his first marriage to diphtheria and a third, along with his wife, during childbirth, Albert spent as much time as he could with this one.

"You need to know the child's whereabouts at all times, Geneva. Don't get lost in your fancy work." He returned Christopher to his mother's arms.

"What plans have you and Clara made to look after one another? I wish you weren't so God-awful afraid of horses."

Geneva shrugged. "I'll walk down there or she can ride up here."

"While the weather holds, you'd best be walking. Our son could benefit from the fresh air. You, as well."

As soon as Geneva heard Albert's spurs clink down the front steps, a smile fluttered across her face. *No man to cook for, clean for. No dirty trousers to wash. More time to crochet. Maybe I'll knit something for myself or the baby.*

Christopher was crawling and curious as a kitten, so Geneva built an en-

closure out of Albert's books to keep him contained while she engaged in her favorite pastime. She rarely finished any of her needlework projects while her husband was away, preferring instead to move from knitting, to crocheting, to tatting or even mending. It was her way of making sure she always had something to enjoy when the next day rolled around.

With Albert gone she didn't have to set the table, so she stood in the kitchen when eating her meals. She cooked whatever was easiest, usually scrambled eggs or cornmeal mush, both of which she shared with Christopher as she weaned him off mother's milk.

Her son's favorite toy was a wooden spoon he liked to bang on the floor or anything else he could reach. He almost never cried unless the banging got on Geneva's nerves and she took the spoon away. Listening for baby sounds, or any sound at all as the days dragged on, her sense of hearing intensified. One night, while Christopher slept and she knitted by lamplight, a half-burned log fell off the grate and clunked against the wall of the fireplace. Startled, she cried out, "Who's there?" There being no answer, she left her chair to lay her ear against the cold front door. Hearing nothing more, she triple checked the latch and slept that night with her eyes open.

WHILE VINCENT WAS UNROLLING his bedroll for the twentieth time since leaving for Dodge, Clara watched an array of clouds turn from cream to apricot to peach as the sun's parting blush warmed the horizon. Since the view through the cabin's window was distorted, she filled her neglected senses outside, where the picture was perfect and she could breathe the scent of pine rather than the stale, at

times smoky air inside the cabin.

The sun's descent marked the end of another long day. With no one except her horse Bridget to talk to, Clara filled her days with work, most of it repetitious and not enough to absorb every hour. After tending to Bridget's needs, feeding the chickens, sweeping, hauling water and filling the wood bin next to the stove, she sometimes wrote in her diary. Schooled in the virtues of patience and tolerance, there were many days she couldn't think of anything to write about that didn't sound like grumbling. When that happened, she might spend an hour looking for blackberries, even though they were past their prime, or watch ground squirrels gather seeds and then protect them from other ground squirrels. She reread the page from the *Alamosa Journal* until she almost had it memorized.

As the sun disappeared, clouds that were glorious a few seconds earlier began turning murky. The wind picked up, sending a pine cone from a nearby tree ricocheting from limb to limb before it landed on a bed of needles. Clara tightened the shawl around her shoulders, listening for a moment to the hiss of frost-killed grass being rustled by the wind.

She hurried into the cabin to light the kerosene lantern. A moth hurled itself against the lamp glass, striking it several times before disappearing into the brown shadows. Clara carried the lantern over to the table she sat next to countless times a day. Besides eating her meals at the small table, she washed dishes and clothes there, rolled out biscuit dough, cleaned beeswax off her irons, brushed her teeth, ground coffee beans or wrote in her diary. Sometimes she just sat at the table and stared out the window, looking for snow clouds and wondering whether her pa and Vincent had crossed into Kansas.

She groomed Bridget almost every day, yet her sidesaddle hung on a peg next to the door. The first few days Vincent was gone, she spent her idle hours riding the same grassy dunes the two of them used to race across before they were married. The valley, with its drifting sun devils and cruelly indifferent sky, felt desolate now that the cattle were gone. Most of the vegetation had turned brown, and the white-cheeked sandhill cranes she and Bridget used to scare up had flown to Texas for the winter.

The lamp wick sputtered. Clara got up from the table to stir the fire and add enough wood to last through the night. She slid the door latch into place and leaned a loaded shotgun against the doorframe. Cabin secured, she changed into her night dress, unlaced her shoes and climbed into bed with her stockings on.

She went to bed every night when the sun went down, shortening days too long to bear. Lying in the dark under a pile of quilts and blankets, she heard a family of coyotes yipping in the distance. She tucked the bedding under her chin, hoping for sleep, listening instead to the intermittent drips of a passing rain shower as it rolled off the roof into the rain barrel. Stiff with cold she reached for Vincent's pillow and pressed her face into the embroidered slip.

“Oh, Pa,” she wept, “I’m so sorry I disappointed you.”

The day after it rained, Geneva peered through the milky morning fog looking for the silhouette of a horse and rider. It might be Clara, driven out of her shack by the cold, or it might be a messenger delivering the telegram her husband promised he would send when he got to Dodge. A telegram would not only bring news of his safe arrival, it would be delivered by a person considerably older than fifteen months.

“Surely the messenger will stay long enough for a cup of coffee and a meal,” she said to her son.

Christopher, braced on her hip, kicked off one of his booties. After a final glance down the road, Geneva picked up the tiny sock and closed the door. Son in arms, she stood in front of the fireplace, soaking up its warmth. The massive fireplace was a masterpiece of rock work including a built-in alcove for wood storage that made tending the fire easier for Geneva. She hated removing ashes, though. No matter how slowly she scooped them into a bucket or how carefully she carried the bucket outside, the ashes floated about like goose feathers.

She began wondering how her ex-friend was faring. *Clara must be undergoing frightful privations. She hasn't been married as long as I have, so she probably misses Vincent something fierce.*

GENEVA STOPPED USING THE clothesline in back of the house when the weather turned cold. Instead she dried her wash, mostly Christopher’s gowns and didies, on a wooden rack in front of the fireplace. Although the spacious log house was warm enough, it was beginning to feel cave-

like to her. She longed for the sound of Albert’s boots on the plank floor and his thunderous voice giving orders or sharing jokes with his cowboys. When she shouted at Christopher one day for crawling out of his enclosure, she was surprised at how her voice bounced off the walls.

When Christopher napped, so did Geneva.

CLARA'S DAYS CAME AND WENT WITHOUT encountering anything warm-blooded except Bridget and the chickens. Every time she checked under the chickens for eggs, she found only one and always in the same nest. She decided the second hen needed to produce something soon or it would make a fine chicken dinner for Vincent when he returned.

On her twenty-ninth day of solitude, Clara wrote in her diary: “I know I vowed on day one I wouldn’t complain. Nevertheless, this morning I realized my days have become much like the eggs I gather—brown and boring, same as the day before.”

To escape the four walls of the cabin, she made numerous trips outside the split rail fence to look into the depths of an empty road. Every day she thought about riding up to the ranch house. *Christopher could be saying a few words by now. I might also exchange pleasantries with Geneva. Any conversation is better than none.*

Every day she decided against making the trip.

As the cold deepened and laundry froze stiff on the clothesline, Clara began ironing her wedding sheets. It made her feel closer to Vincent and warmed her to the core, so warm at times that drops of perspiration appeared on her upper lip. With the smell of hot cotton rising up to her nose, she wondered whether Geneva was ironing that day.

The cabin’s tiny wood stove had to be fed incessantly, yet ice was beginning to form inside the windowpane. One night, when two pair of stockings weren’t warm enough, Clara heated one of her irons, wrapped it in rags and placed it under the blankets at the foot of her bed. She slept better that night than she had in weeks.

The next morning, she was shocked to discover the iron had burned through the rags and scorched the bottom sheet. She leaned against the side of the bed, wavering between screaming and sobbing, as she stared at a dark brown blemish the size of her hand.

She wrote about the misfortune that afternoon. “Day 45—I must finally acknowledge my fearfulness. Last night I ruined one of my wedding sheets by using an iron as a bed warmer. What if my bed had caught fire? What if I fell ill or Geneva fell ill and there was no one to care for my little brother? I must go see her. No one is perfect, leastwise myself.”

A SKIFF OF SNOW GLISTENED ON THE FENCE POSTS as Clara rode up to her pa’s house. The hooded wool cape she wore was no match for the cold breath of winter, and the sun’s rays bouncing off

the snow made her eyes water. Shading her eyes with the flat of her hand, she saw a curl of smoke rising above the ranch house. She shivered with expectation at the thought of warming herself in front of a blazing fire.

Approaching the house she used to live in, she felt a tightness in her chest she blamed on the cold air. She rapped on the back door and, when no one answered, led Bridget around to the front and knocked again, louder this time. She heard the door latch click as the door opened just enough to see one of Geneva's eyes peering through the crack. The eye opened wide, and the door wider, when Geneva saw who was standing on the porch.

"I almost forgot what you looked like," she said, embracing pink-

cheeked Clara as if the two young women were friends again and neither one married. "You're cold. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Tea sounds good for a change. I would have baked something to bring with me, but my chickens froze, so I have no eggs."

"Don't be a ninny. I do miss the pies you used to bake, though. I've thought about coming to your place, and would have if Christopher wasn't so heavy. I'm sorry about your chickens. Would you like a few eggs? Yesterday I slipped and fell." She lifted her forearm and pulled back the sleeve of her dress. "See the bruise? What if I had fainted? Nobody would have been here to rescue me."

Geneva ushered Clara into the kitchen. "I finally got word from ... your pa. He and Vincent should be here in a day or two—hungry and dirty, no doubt. I've been worried about you, Clara, truly I have. Can you stay for a while? I'm dying for conversation, and I've so much to say."

A faint smile crossed Clara's lips as she removed her cape and gloves. "Wait until you hear what happened to my beautiful embroidered sheets."



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