

Jessica Lewis Stevens

*Stitching into Place*

I read their names again and again: Emily, Jessie, Vera, Mabel, Lulu, Elfriede, Magdalena. My grandmothers and great grandmothers, great great great grandmothers, omas, nanas, and grans. Their names and the places they lived listed in beautiful script on old census lists and ship records, scanned into digital form for me to discover and pour over and wonder. I left my computer to sit outside in the waning autumn sunshine, bringing a new project with me, a jacket I was making for my younger son. All the pattern pieces were cut in indigo-dyed linen, silk for the lining, and wool from old sweaters, and I set to quilt them together for a winter coat. I threaded my needle and held the sandwiched pieces together, and began to make small, even stitches across the fabric. A little unfamiliar, dainty almost, and precise, the stitches were mine but they felt new. I watched the lines of narrow stitches run along the fabric and began to hear my grandmothers' names in my mind again. I was overcome with a feeling of familiarity, belonging, and love. Tears welled in my eyes and I felt awash with gratitude, taken with a deeply felt sense of home. I knew that my grandmothers were with me. Women who undoubtedly knew how to sew and to quilt, who would have needed these skills to make dresses and aprons and coats and blankets for their families. I didn't need to see the objects they had made-- no such family heirlooms existed, I could be contented by the connection I had felt, unconcerned with the line between myth and truth. The validity of my experience coming not from proving, but in trusting that intuitive knowing was enough. I knew, and I sat, stitching long rows of small stitches, reaching back to connect myself to their memory and their work by the thread of the work of my own hand, stitching myself into place.

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I made my first quilt when my oldest son was a baby. In the tiny library I worked each day with him by my side, shelving books and wandering the stacks while he pulled the lowest ones onto the floor in big piles for me to tidy up later. I was drawn to the non-fiction room with the shelves of biography and gardening books, history and craft. I leafed through all the old quilt books, marveling at the patterns and colors, the way these women cut diamonds and triangles and transformed them into flowers, stars, elaborate patterns of light and shadow. I immersed myself in the names of quilt blocks: Goose on the Pond, Farmer's Daughter, Bear Paw, Hills of Vermont, Rising Sun. I was drawn to the simplicity, resourcefulness, and resilience of Amish quilts, and the folk history of this quintessentially women's work. I began to cut and sew, a composition of yellow cotton and undyed muslin in a sea of half-square triangles, mingled together like goldenrod and thoroughweed in late August by the river. That first quilt took a long time to make. I made every mistake, working slowly but with a sense of purpose I hadn't known before, I felt connected to the heritage of women's work I had admired in the quilt books, and bigger than that I felt like I had found a way to make the love I had for my child into a physical object; a way to wrap him up in my love and effort, a comfort to me as much as I hoped it would be for him.

I had become a mother without a mother of my own, exhausted, adrift, exhilarated, in love. Motherhood opened my heart to a love I had never known, and in that opening had remembered to me a crack left long untended, one left by my own mother. My child's heart had

ached for her love, her attention, her affection. It didn't come - her love given to men with violent tempers and big plans they'd never deliver on, her attention paid to friends at the bar each night, her affection caught somewhere between the two. I learned to live without my mother out of necessity, and I mothered myself and my brother and sister as best I could in her absence. I carried the weight of that truth until it became too heavy, cast it aside, and proclaimed myself motherless. I had lost her to those men, those places, to the traumas she had inherited and those she'd endured, to her addictions, to prison, until finally I lost her on purpose. Her existence became a liminal one, there but not here, a figure caught in the tapestry of memories nearly too difficult to recall.

It became important to me to create distance from her, to prove to myself that I would be a different sort of mother. I wrapped myself in that distance like a child under a quilt in a thunderstorm, and I clung to my sense of self-reliance. Teaching myself to quilt another act of autonomy, I had made with my hands some version of proof that I would be different from my own mother. That my children would be nurtured and tended and comforted, that my love would be tangible, bountiful, accessible. In this autonomy I found pride and safety and sometimes peace, but I was left with a restlessness, a yearning for a sense of belonging, an unyielding urge to be perfect in my own mothering that left me tired.

Making that first quilt gave me roots as a new mother; it gave me a sense of purpose but also a path to self-forgiveness. I could look at the imperfections in piecing, the unevenness of my hand-quilted lines of stitching, the loosely mitered corners and remember that the quilt was whole and full of love, just as I was, imperfections and all.

That same restlessness, the urge to find a place where I belonged, brought me to my search for my grandmothers. I longed to reach back in my lineage to find kinship, to learn the names and places where I came from, to know I was more than the sum of my mother's parts. What I found in that search was more of my story. Those names and places wove a new fabric for me to find myself in, to weave on and carry forward. I had come to know I wasn't relying on just myself, but on that deeply woven cloth of my ancestry, of all the women who had come before. I could piece their stories, my own, my mother's, into a patchwork of belonging.

I could no longer say that I taught myself to quilt, that no one had shown me how to do it save the old oversized quilting books in the back of the library nonfiction room, that I didn't have that kind of mother. Instead I had come to know something; that I had remembered, that my grandmothers had taught me, that my mother had left a crack that I had found a way to mend with the work of my heart and hands. I could feel with each quilt I bound together from scraps of fabric to a complete object, a wholeness in myself, and soon I could see closer to the wholeness of my mother. I could see a path to healing, stitch by stitch, to passing down comfort and beauty and warmth to my children instead of hardship and bitterness. I could feel forgiveness filling the crack so long untended. I didn't sit next to my grandmothers and learn the way they preferred to piece or how they composed colorways from old sheets and dresses and sacks or how they liked to fit a binding. Rather I felt their guidance in a quiet but steadfast way, a way that emanated from inside and felt more and more present the more I gave it my attention. Each time I sat to quilt I felt a kinship that kept me company, each stitch placed a part of a foremother quilting bee happening in my heart and my imagination. I was witness to their work by doing it myself. I became connected to myself in their lineage, pieced together like patchwork, mended

in places, cut from cloth that had lived many lives before. I embraced the myth of my experience and in that embrace I was enveloped in a sense of place, of heritage, of forgiveness, of home. With each quilt I dyed and sewed and bound, I could feel myself rest.

Even as an heirloom made to be passed down to my children's children and beyond them too, a quilt has an enduring and inherent perishability. The cotton, linen, and wool could be just as easily mended time and again to be made stronger as it could be tossed by way of the compost at the end of its usefulness to become a part of the fabric of the land again. Just as names are forgotten as generations pass and old papers bearing towns and dates and unions wear and become lost to time, a quilt cannot last forever. But perhaps the marks it makes on a person, the love it embodies, the wholeness imbued, can be carried on in those intuitive, unseen ways. A quilt holds within it thresholds; pathways to our heritage as women, connections to the work and love of our long-passed grandmothers, doors opening to healing and wholeness. A quilt is made to receive a new baby, to mark a marriage union, to shroud a loved one in death. They have the power to mark our lives, to tell our stories, to be held and to be shared, to heal the hands that make them, to stitch us into place.