



CRAZY QUILT

STORY BY Marianne Fons. QUILT OWNED BY Liz Porter.

*M*y husband thought the situation was caused by poor ventilation. What I mean is, Harold deduced from the available facts that our odd experiences were the result of insufficient oxygen. That's how Harold is—practical, deductive. I can just see his mind at work. First he said to himself, “During the night my wife and I both had extremely odd and uncanny dreams. Undoubtedly, some condition is affecting the atmosphere in the room where we are sleeping, lessening the amount of oxygen available to our

brains. Thus, the dreams.” Then he would conclude, “A window must be opened.” It was, you might say, an open and shut case. Just the thing for Harold, my future lawyer. His mind is like a computer: the facts are fed in, sorted and analyzed, and a rational, objective solution is produced.

Now, I'm not like Harold. I get all wrapped up in one detail at a time, forgetting the others until their turns come. I was sitting up in bed, still groggy from my dream. Spread on our bed was the big patchwork quilt, and

as I looked at all its colors and patterns and shapes, I knew the quilt itself caused the dreams.

Sunday, the day before, we had gone to a flea market and made one purchase. I saw the quilt at a distance, hanging on a line. It was not a set pattern, symmetrical design, but a crazy quilt, a wild conglomeration of irregular scraps. A whole world seemed to be alive on it. “A Christmas present to ourselves,” I thought. I convinced Harold of its quality, its warmth, and its value as a collector's item. We carried it home.

The next morning, as I said, I was sitting up in bed, fingering a tiny scrap of brownish velvet. I took a deep breath and said, “No, Harold, there's plenty of oxygen. It's the quilt.”

“Oh, Martha!” Harold replied. He was standing before the window, and the morning light put half his face in shadow, but I could read his exasperation. “My dear, I love you,” he said, “but the ideas you have utterly astound me.”

My theory was simple. The fabrics had actually absorbed the lives of those who had worn them. While we were covered by the quilt, the history of those personalities seeped into us. Harold wouldn't buy my view. “Don't let me forget to open that window tonight,” was all he said.

I dropped Harold off at the university where he is a law student and drove on downtown to my job at the bookstore. I was supposed to be rearranging a stock of art books for the pre-Christmas sale. The manager wanted all the coffee-table editions prominently displayed. But I had a

hard time keeping my mind on my work. Last night's dream kept creeping to the surface.

I had dreamed of a night deep in the winter, out in some open country place where the snow was three feet deep on the ground. The sky was clear, and the moon was full. I was trying to run through the snow, but I kept falling and getting back up. My body was heavy, and I was wearing a long, thick nightgown, and was barefoot. Every time I fell, my hair would tangle around my face; as I got up, I would push it back. Even in the dream, it seemed strange not to be cold. A farmhouse was up ahead of me and I was stumbling toward it.

At the bookstore that day, I sat on my little three-legged stool amid the rows of books on Leonardo Da Vinci and Van Gogh and tried to remember the rest of my dream. There had been more, but it was lost, slipped back to wherever dreams go.

That night, Harold remembered to open the window a crack. We both sat up awhile reading. Harold was engrossed in the *Civil Procedures*, and I was nearing the end of *Don Quixote*. I came to the part where Quixote and Sancho are stampeded by a huge herd of pigs, and I just collapsed with laughter. I made him put down his tome; I read him a few paragraphs and got him laughing too. We laughed, and the bed shook. Harold was snoring softly before I dropped off to sleep, and the last thing I remember was stroking the top of the crazy quilt, finding a little patch of silk and wondering whose party dress it had belonged to.

The next morning the alarm rang; Harold thrust his arm out from under the covers and shut it off. He groaned and flopped back against the pillows.

"Nightmare," he said, "perfect nightmare. Shoveling snow...incredible speed...dozen men."

"A dozen men, Harold?" I asked, "shoveling snow off the road so horses could pull a wagon through?"

"Yes, yes!" He was confounded. "Exactly, Martha, but how could you know?" He was wide awake, staring at me nearsightedly in the pale light of the morning.

"I was wrapped in the blankets in the back of the wagon. Everyone was saying I was mad."

"But that woman was old; she must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. She was raving and carrying on. Martha, this is ridiculous. We can't dream the same dream!"

But we had. We had dreamed the same thing. As an old woman, I had seen the farmhouse through the trees and gone to the window. I knocked on the frost, and a lamp was lighted. People peered at me from within and tried to make me come inside, called me Cordelia, then chased and caught me and wrapped me in blankets. They tied my bare feet in rags. I struggled as they put me in the wagon, but I felt calm inside and could hear everything they said. The horses pulled the wagon forward as the men shoveled the way clear.

It took a third night under the quilt before Harold was convinced. The day

had worn the edges off the weird, snowy night, and, by evening, Harold was sure the window only needed a few inches more. I myself was profoundly interested in the night ahead. I wanted to know where the old woman was going in the wagon.

But I didn't find out. Instead, I found myself in the arms of a man with a silken beard. I snuggled up to Harold and he became a ruddy face, eyes crinkling at the corners, a scimitar of a smile in the moonlight, and warm lips that whispered, "Sarah, oh Sarah, how I love thee." Such a strange, ruddy young man, so real, his broad shoulders and unbuttoned woolly union suit.

Morning came with light filtering through the sheer curtains of our



apartment window. I lay still, with my arms wrapped around my husband, and watched him sleeping. His nostrils moved a little with each breath, and his lips were parted. I studied the details of his face, each curve of bone and flesh. Harold, I thought to myself, are you the man of my dreams?

When he opened his eyes, he seemed not to know me. And then he did, and I knew it had happened again.

Harold found it difficult to accept what had occurred. He kept thinking there had to be a logical explanation, but of course there just wasn't one.

"It's not possible," he said. "It's unnatural. It's supernatural! Nothing like this has ever happened to me before, Martha. I must be going nuts."

I was worried about him. For a person like me, an incident without a normal explanation presents no problems. In fact, I rather like the idea—the mysteries of life and all that. But for Harold, it meant a complete breakdown of world order. A raw element had invaded his otherwise well-disciplined mind and threatened him in a truly frightening way. His usually cool brown eyes looked strained behind his glasses. I knew he was tired. I called in sick at work and Harold stayed home from the university. Classes were out for the holidays and he was just studying anyway. He sat in the rocking chair, wrapped in his terry-cloth bathrobe, and stared at the floor. His sandy hair

was tousled and cowlicked back. He reminded me of a little boy home from school with a cold.

"Want some hot cocoa?" I asked him. I poured some milk into a saucepan and turned on the flame. He kept watching the floor and then burst out laughing.

"Preposterous," he guffawed, "preposterous! I'm letting myself get worked up over nothing. I'm just going to forget about the whole thing. Do me a favor, Love, fold that thing up, wrap it in tissue, and put it in the very back of the closet, and let's forget all about it."

"Good idea," I said, humoring him, "forget all about it. Brilliant conclusion to a painful case." Harold moved to the table with his cocoa and

began spreading out papers and books. He would spend the day at his work after all and wipe out all this foolishness. I smiled at Harold, being so himself.

In the bedroom, I tossed the pillows on the floor and began to smooth out the sheets. I pulled the quilt off the bed and gathered up its four corners; as I was folding it, my eye caught an interesting scrap I hadn't noticed before. It was a lovely crescent, like a piece of night, embroidered with stars, around its edges a fancy stitch of white. All the pieces of the quilt were fancy-stitched around the edges, as though each had its own little fence or frame. There were embroidered and painted flowers, animals, and birds everywhere, and I sank to the floor, studying scrap after scrap.

The shapes were like people, I thought, like human hearts. As my fingers moved from patch to patch, memories slid by me, of farmhouse rooms, attic cobwebs, beds of childbirth, hay wagon rides, mattresses on the floor, card table tents. I had to do some rearranging in the closet to find space for the folded quilt. I pulled out a sack of old clothes for the Salvation Army box.

That evening, the light was switched off with a sigh from both of us. I guess it was relief on Harold's part, and on mine too, but I had regrets. I was leaving dozens of dream persons inhospitably cramped in the closet.

We both slept soundly, deeply, right through the alarm, and had to rush like mad to make it to campus and work on time. We didn't have a moment to talk about dreams.



Besides, there was nothing to discuss. All I could remember was the ordinary succession of familiar faces in unfamiliar settings, the usual odd combinations of everyday elements, late arrivals at work and buses going backwards. I don't know if Harold dreamed at all.

The bookstore was a madhouse that day, people buying armloads of books for Christmas presents—cookbooks, travel books, children's books, best sellers, everyone wanting boxes and gift wrapping. It was almost six by the time we got the money counted and locked up the store. The car lights and freeway lights gave me a cozy, Christmasy feeling. I thought about getting a tree, but I knew Harold would say it was entirely too early. He insists that if you get one too soon it's dry as a bone by Christmas, no matter what you do.

He wasn't on his accustomed bench when I got to the university, so I assumed he had caught a bus when I was late. The apartment was dark, but I could hear him snoring the moment I let myself in. I switched on a couple of lights and then looked in the bedroom. I couldn't believe what I saw. There was Harold, sprawled face down on the bed, wrapped in the crazy quilt.

I shook his shoulder gently. "Harold, wake up," I said, "are you all right?" He mumbled and groaned, and at first I couldn't make out what he was saying.

"Horse...beautiful horse...ran like the wind...won the race."

Gradually, I got the whole story out of him. He hadn't been able to



concentrate on his studies, couldn't work in the library, and at noon walked out to the street and caught a bus.

"I rode through the city," he said, "just feeling restless. The minute I got home, I went straight to the closet and unwrapped it." His eyes sparkled as he patted the quilt. He had a marvelous dream about a race track and thoroughbred horses, a beautiful bay he had ridden to first place across the finish line.

While I fried hamburgers, Harold made a salad, or tried to. He was so excited about the horse race that he kept forgetting completely what he was doing. He recalled every detail of the course, the pastel colors of his silks and the angle of the riding crop, with its small tassel at the tip.

"It was so thrilling, Martha, so real. I feel as though I were really there."

We ate in silence, Harold lost in reverie, my own mind dazed and unbelieving. Only a day or so ago, Harold said he thought he was going

nuts, and I hadn't taken him seriously. As I sat across from him at the table and watched the strange light in his eyes, I thought he might be right. When he got up yawning and said he thought he'd turn in early, I knew something was definitely wrong. When he stayed home from the university again the next day, I knew something had to be done.

I thought bitterly of all Harold's plans for this vacation, how he was going to "utilize the time to the utmost," as he put it, studying next semester's material and catching up on all the little things that needed to be done, writing letters and doing bookkeeping. What a joke that turned out to be! Instead, he was spending all his time snoring under that blasted quilt. If it hadn't been Christmas vacation, Harold's future as a lawyer would be going down the drain.

I bought a little Christmas tree on my way home that evening. He watched as I set it up. I had hoped the lights and decorations and my small collection of packages might snap him back into the real world, but he just stared at the little glass candles, the liquid bubbles reflected in his eyes, and said nothing.

I began that night to cut little pieces out of the quilt with my fingernail scissors. I knelt by the bed while Harold slept softly and, with the utmost care, I snipped the embroidery thread, loosened each patch, removed it, and placed it in an envelope. It was midnight by the time I had removed just six pieces. I leaned my head down on the bed and tried to think, but soon I was sleeping and dreaming too, my face against

the quilt. This time I saw rows and rows of growing vegetable. I was standing among them in a cotton dress, holding a hoe. Above me was an azure sky with friendly white clouds. A little tow-headed child held my hem and cried.

The next morning, I awoke stiff and disoriented. No alarm had been set, but I had time to change clothes and get to work. I drove down the street, thinking about my still-sleeping husband, the patchwork quilt, and myself.

Buying the quilt had been my idea. I was the one who knew right away that the quilt was responsible for the crazy dreams. I'm the one who is supposed to love mystery and magic. I've always said Harold was too studious, too conscientious, too dull, and that he should open up a little and accept some strangeness in the world. I felt ashamed for what I had done to the quilt. It was an awful day all the way around. I was tired and preoccupied. I'm sure my customers figured I was a typically inept Christmas extra. As closing time came, I knew I would be up late again that night, putting the patches back.

But when I got home, Harold was in the rocking chair waiting for me, the inevitable crazy quilt draped across his knees. His robe was rumpled, his unopened books were on the table, and dirty dishes were everywhere. He has a sad, sleepy expression on his face, and he just looked at me while I put my purse down and got my coat off. Then he folded back a corner of the quilt to show the place I had scalped. How he must have studied that wild field of colors to have noticed my hand-sized crime!

"How could you, Martha?" he asked. "How could you do this?"

I got out my sewing box and the scraps I had cut off. I brought a lamp and chair over beside Harold and went to work, doing my best to re sew the pieces just as they had been, not really knowing how. I stitched around one and then another of the scraps, saying nothing. Harold watched me as I labored and, after an hour or so, I sensed a change in him, though he was



silent too. It was as if he began thinking for himself again, as though he were no longer dreaming.

I saw I was coming out short of cloth. I had folded back too much fabric, I guess. I had not been able to make the fancy embroidery stitches to join the pieces. Harold got up and brought over the sack of our clothes set aside for the Salvation Army box. He pulled out an old shirt of his and blouse of mine. Together, we cut and trimmed extra patches to complete the mending of the crazy quilt.

“Let’s give it away, he said. “Let’s give it to someone for Christmas.” My mind ran dully through the members of our families.

“I mean,” he said, “let’s just go walking and find someone out in the world to give it to.”

I was slow putting on my coat while he practically jumped into his jeans and sweater. We gathered up the quilt and went outside. The air was cold as we walked down the sidewalk. Windows in all the old brick apartment houses were cheerily lighted up, squares and rectangles and occasional ovals of warmth, some with Advent candles on the sills or holly wreaths hanging from the sashes, all shining out in the fabric of night.

We came to the nearest busy street and turned by the corner grocery. Half of the little parking lot was filled with Christmas trees; the scent of evergreen reached us before we ever saw them. There was an arch way

between the first two rows, and a sign overhead that read “Odd Fellows Lodge No. 81.” Through the archway I could see the alley where a small trailer was parked for an office, and just to the side of it a bonfire was crackling on the pavement, consuming scraps of evergreen and pine needles.

A little old man was dozing in the doorway of the trailer, asleep with his head against the jam. His jacket was buttoned up to the neck, his short arms were folded on his chest, and his

booted legs were crossed on the steps in front of him.

He did not awaken as we tucked the quilt around him. His features seemed to change slightly as the warmth of it enveloped him, and a smile played at the corner of his mouth. I think he began to dream at once.

