

The Idea of Perfection

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People usually thought museums wanted the heirlooms, the cameo brooch, the engraved silver tea-pot, the lace christening robes that had come out from England with the great-great-great-grandparents.

It was a safe bet that Karakarook was full of lace christening robes and silver tea-pots. They always survived because they were never used, just brought out now and then to be admired.

The trouble was, the same things that had survived in Karakarook had survived everywhere else as well. No one was going to turn off the freeway to look at somebody else's great-grandmother's silver teapot.

What would put Karakarook on the map were the things that were so ordinary that no one had thought of keeping any of them. Ordinary dresses and baby's jumpers and men's work-shirts, and all the improvised things made for their houses by people who never had enough money to buy one from the shops.

Those things did not survive, because no one thought they were worth keeping. They were just used until they fell to pieces, or were thrown away as soon as you could afford something better. There was a kind of shame at keeping an old pair of children's overalls made from cut-down man's pants, or an apron made out of a sugar-bag. It was like admitting you picked your nose or farted. *That old thing!* they always exclaimed when Harley asked for them. *That rubbish!*

Things only survived by accident. Harley had found the *Ploughshares Quilt*, now in a humidity-controlled environment at the Museum, in a fruit box full of *terrible old things from Grandma* that had been about to go to the tip, in the back of a garage in Tenterfield. The now-famous *Beamer Collection* of work-clothes had been wedged into a hole in the side of a shed to keep the rats out.

Those were the things that would bring the city tourists. They would exclaim at the improvisation, the ingenuity, the thrift, and would go back to Sydney feeling they had been in touch with the real *spirit of the bush*.

Everyone had something on the table in front of them, but Harley did not think anyone would have brought their *old rubbish*. The old woman – probably *Beryl Trimm* of the shaky copperplate –

had her hand on whatever was in her plastic bag, as if someone might run in and snatch it away from her. The Asian man had a shoe box in front of him, bulging with something that needed two heavy-duty elastic bands to hold it closed. Across the table from him, an over-dressed blonde woman kept looping her hair behind an ear and rearranging the handles of a cloth bag.

Harley had learnt from experience that the idea of the *old rubbish* was best led up to gradually.

Let's see what you've brought, she suggested, and like a good hostess Coralie glanced around, then volunteered.

My mother made this, she said. For her glory box.

She unfolded a large and elaborate white tablecloth with a lot of drawn-thread embroidery along the sides and some very ornate Mountmellick Work in the central medallion.

There were the napkins too, but they got lost.

Mmm, Harley said. Lovely workmanship.

It could break your heart if you thought about it too much, the amount of Coralie's mother's life that had gone into this tablecloth. She picked up the complicated scalloped edge, where the corner turned like a military operation.

Beautiful, she said, and meant it, even though it was no good to any museum.

Gives me a headache just looking at it, to be honest, Coralie said. But my word Mum was proud of it.

She folded it up, holding the middle under her chin like a bedsheet.

Go on, Merle, you're next, she said to the woman next to her.

Merle was wearing a blue tee-shirt with a knotted scarf printed around the neck in red, and the woman next to her was wearing the same thing, only the colours the other way around. Next to each other the way they were, they were like a practical joke. They looked as though they had gone to the same hairdresser, too, and had their hair tidied away into the same perms.

Each one wanted the other to go first. *Go on, Merle. You first, Helen.*

They looked to Harley like best friends, the way they were laughing at each other, and it was only natural that best friends would have the same taste in clothes. *I like your top, Helen,* Harley could imagine Merle saying. *And my word that's a nice one you've got there, Merle,* Helen would answer.

The one with the red top and the blue scarf-pattern had a pair of white lace gloves her great-aunt had made. *Not for wearing,* she explained. *You just carried them in your hand. To church and that.* A woman across the table whose eyebrows were the same sandy red as her cheeks was interested in how you did it with the tatting shuttle, but she found it hard to visualize and the explanation became complicated, and everyone threw themselves at length into the business of whether you went *front to back* with the shuttle, or *back to front*.

Harley sat the head of the table she kept a smile on her face and breathed very steadily. *In. Out. In. Out.* She was not the least bit *wound*.

Helen, or was it Merle, with the blue top and the red scarf-pattern, had brought along the lace christening robe that had been handed down in her family for five generations. Someone wanted to know whether she had ever had to wash it, and there was long story about a baby who had brought up his breakfast on it. *Not stewed plums, luckily*, she said, and they all laughed, but then they were interested when she told them that the best thing was horse-shampoo because it was exactly the right pH. Someone else got out her address book to write down the name of the horse-shampoo, which had a complicated spelling.

While they were still sorting out whether it was two *ls* or two *ms*, the woman with the hair that had to be looped back all the time opened up her red corduroy bag. It had cloth handles, and a strip of velcro to keep it closed at the top, and a label in one corner, like a stamp, with her name and address on it.

Harley could guess what was inside.

The sound of the velcro unripping made everyone stop listening to the way you spelt the name of the horse-shampoo. When the woman lifted out a quilt folded in tissue and spread it out, they all went *Ooooh!*

It was an antique crazy quilt, made out of hundreds of little pieces of velvet and satin, each one a different shape and outlined in thick yellow embroidery. There was a scalloped black satin border and a black satin backing.

Every museum in the world had dozens just like it.

The woman leaned over the table towards Harley, who could see the way she outlined her lips with a fine line of bright lipstick. She had painted the exact shape she wanted, even if it was not quite the shape of her lips.

The lips cut out the syllables one by one and put them together.

My husband's great-grandmother made it.

The lips were very careful to articulate the *t* on *great* and the *d* on *grand*.

According to family stories it's well over a hundred years old.

A woman with a lot of dark-brown moles on her face shook her head and made a clicking noise with her tongue. Coralie said *My word!* in a bright way.

It's always been properly looked after, the woman with the blonde hair went on.

I keep it in naphthalene.

There was a short silence around the table.

In what, did you say? Coralie asked.

Harley had always admired people who did not mind being the one to ask the silly question. She had always minded, and never asked.

Mothballs, the woman said, and pushed her hair behind her ear again.

In moth-balls.

You could hear how it was really two separate words.

People were leaning forward over the table now and hands were beginning to reach out towards the quilt.

A tiny crease of anxiety began to take shape between the woman's nicely drawn eyebrows. She pulled the quilt gently away from them.

Oh, I think we'd better not touch it, don't you?

The hands kept following the quilt as she drew it back, and her pretty little face tightened.

Not too much.

Getting the *t* on the end of *not* separate from the *t* on the beginning of *too* seemed to be making the crease deeper, but she had got the quilt folded up again now, and back in its bag.

A very large woman brought a piece of patchwork the size of a handkerchief out of a brown paper bag. With a little shock of surprise Harley realised it was the woman who had told her to go *up along Jupiter Street* that morning. It was not really surprising, of course, Karakarook was only small, but a city person had to remind herself how small a world this was, how everything overlapped with everything else.

My Nanna did the miniatures, the woman said.

The patchwork was like an opal, brilliant colours shining densely together.

She liked the little tiny ones.

She spoke very calmly and sweetly, not hurrying, looked down and smoothed the dress over the front.

Because she was big, probably. Like me.

There was a silence in which the fans revolved gently against the ceiling.

The woman whose face was peppered with moles broke the silence.

Big is beautiful, pet! she called.

While everyone was laughing, she seized her chance.

When I was a girl out West, she started, Well, when the governesses came, the first thing they'd do would be they'd knit a jumper for the jackeroo.

Everyone smiled, got themselves comfortable in their chairs. There was a sense of people settling in for a *yarn*.

Well, she said, looking around, pleased, I've knitted that many bloody jumpers!

Harley moved her sheets of paper over each other with slightly more of a snap and rustle than a necessary. She looked at the names on the list. *Glad Flower*, this one might be, or *Marjorie Pump*.

The woman glanced over the rustle of the papers.

Well, she said quickly, I'm sick of the old chenille, and I've decided I'm going to die in my own bed at home, so I said to Don, I'd better make a bloody fabulous quilts so's I'll make a nice corpse.

The laughter went on a long time. Harley laughed too, politely, with the surface of her face. But it was too easy to see the woman with the moles as a corpse, stretched out waxy in her coffin, folds of maroon satin around her face, the moles standing out dark on her dead skin.

She wondered if everyone else could too, and whether that was why they were laughing so long.

But the woman with the moles was pleased with herself. She looked around the table, folded her arms over her bosom, smiled. You could see that as far as she was concerned it was only a figure of speech. She did not really believe she would ever be a corpse.

But the mention of quilts had started them all of reciting the names of their favourite patterns.

The woman who had written down the name of the horse-shampoo had brightened.

Drunkard's Path! She called out, and blushed.

Bear's Paw! Coralie shouted. *Bow Ties!*

Oh, *Blazing Star*, the fat woman said. You should see Lorraine's *Blazing Star!*

The woman with the crazy quilt waited for a pause and pushed her hair back again.

I've always found that *Flying Geese* makes a very effective border, she said.

Harley had heard it called *refained*, the way she spoke.

But I've found that puckering tends to be a problem.

Everyone was silent for a moment, but then the woman with moles brayed out,

Oh, I still go for the old *Log Cabin*. With the red in the middle for the fire in the hearth.

The woman with vowels did not try to compete with any more information about her puckering borders.

Or remember *Courthouse Steps*? one of the printed-scarf women said. Just like *Log Cabin* except the darks and lights are opposite.

All over the room, people were nodding and smiling to show they knew about *Courthouse Steps* too.

But what about the really old things? Harley interrupted.

She had not meant it to be so abrupt.

The old shabby things?

It might have come out louder than she had meant.

Patched and mended, you know, she said more softly.

All around the room, glad smiles were fading.

The old bush quilts, for instance, she tried. Put together out of old clothes, things like that.

There was no response from the faces in front of her.

She glanced down at her notes. *Australian vernacular*, it said. She tried it.

The Australian vernacular!

It had sounded good, back in the Museum in Sydney, discussing it with the *Curator* in brackets *Textiles*. Here under the fluorescent lights of the Karakarook Mechanics' Institute hall, *Australian vernacular* did not sound nearly as good.

She heard her voice go stringy, trying to explain.

You know, made out of flour-bags sometimes? Just to keep warm? Some people call them waggas.

No one seemed to have heard of waggas.

The silence was like a substance that you had to push back with your bare hands. She went on desperately flinging words at it.

Rough as anything. Rags inside, for warmth.

From their blank faces you would think they had never heard of rags, either.

All the old horrors! she cried.

Her voice was over-bright, trying to be jokey.

The old horrors we hide out the back!

She heard her voice, too sprightly, and felt her face stretch, smiling too hard. The solemn moon faces were all turned towards her blankly. Even Coralie's encouraging smile had gone stiff.

Harley wondered if she was the only person in the world with *horrors out the back*.