

TEN YARDS OF MUSLIN

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I was out shopping for dress material at the fabric shop this morning when I happened to pass by a display of unbleached muslin. I stopped a moment and fingered the coarse, rough material. Gazing out the store window at the gray winter skies, I stayed there with that bolt of fabric a long time. I was thinking of the story my grandmother Christina once told me of the ten yards of muslin and the winter she grew into womanhood.

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"Papa!" cried ten-year-old Christina Swenson sitting proudly beside her father in the big wagon. "I have never been so happy! I am so glad you wanted me to come with you!"

The little girl and the big man were beginning the long trip from their farm home in North Dakota to the distant town of Bismarck. It was mid-November, and this would be their last chance to get supplies before the winter snows came.

Christina loved to travel over the prairies like this with the wind whipping through her long blond hair. She watched as it rippled through the brown buffalo grass and imagined it ruffling the feathers of hidden prairie chickens. She looked up and saw how the wind controlled the clouds, those high, white horse tails flung out grandly across the blue sky by some unseen circus master. Christina knew that their wagon was really a tiny ship being blown across sea of prairie, a sea that went on forever without end.

"I'm glad it's just you and me on this trip, Papa," the girl said, moving closer to the farmer on the seat beside her.

Christina did not care that her father's muttered reply was lost on the wind. She knew he loved her, even if he never said so. Often when they went to town, the whole family went. This time, however, Mama had decided to stay home with Christina's four younger brothers. When Papa had brought up the subject of this trip, Mama said she was having enough trouble these days just taking care of her children at home. But Christina could go.

Christina had been delighted. She was a born traveler at heart, a lover of Chinese palaces, rare Persian birds, and other exotic splendors she had read about in her teacher's geography book. Some day she would see them all.

She had a reason, this time, for wanting to be alone with Papa. She hoped to be able to influence him in the matter of yard goods for a Christmas dress for Mama. This was a secret hope which she had been nourishing for many days. Christina could not remember when Mama had last had a new dress. Mama worked so hard for them all and was so pretty and frail. A new dress would be just the thing to pep her up a bit.

Christina's thoughts centered for a while on Mama. What must it have been like, she wondered, to leave Sweden at the age of eighteen; to leave parents and homeland forever, to cross the Atlantic amid icebergs and storms; to reach New York alone; to travel to Marquette, Michigan; and there to meet and marry another emigrant Swede, who was planning to homestead in the brand new state of North Dakota?

Now, five children and a whole decade later, Mama certainly deserved a new dress. It must be gingham or calico. Pink would be pretty with Mama's sandy red hair. Pink, like the color of the prairie roses she loved. Auntie Hildur would help sew the dress. And maybe, Christina mused, there would even be enough material left over to make a dress for a ten-year-old girl.

She was proud of how they looked now, she and Papa, as they crossed the prairie together. She always liked to wear her church dress, and going to town demanded one's best. Papa had on his best overalls and his red woolen shirt. Since the day was not too cold, his sheepskin overcoat was unbuttoned, and the earflaps on his muskrat cap were tied across the top of the cap. As always, his dark, full beard and mustache made her think of a giant.

She admired him for a few moments, but he was lost in thought as they slowly jiggled over the rutted trail. He didn't talk too much, her papa. He kept his thoughts and feelings mostly to himself. When he did speak to her, he used his broken English, determined that she should not learn Swedish but instead the language of the new country.

If she knew what he was thinking right now, she might figure out how best to tell him about the pink gingham for Mama's Christmas

dress. Christina reached into the pocket of her own overcoat and pulled out the list of items they would buy when they reached Yegan's General Merchandise in Bismarck. Slowly she read the words Mama had ciphered: flour, sugar, salt, pepper, dried fruit, beans, ten yards of muslin, thread, kerosene, a butcher knife, a milk pail, a horse collar. . . . That night before they had left, Mama and Papa had carefully gone over the list, weighing their needs and wants against the meager contents of Papa's old leather purse. The list had been much longer until it was subjected to her parents' careful trimming. It had been a bad year on the farm, she knew, and her parents still owed on the lumber for the new barn Papa had just built. There simply was not enough money. How, she wondered, could she ever convince her father to add pink gingham to the list?

Christina's thoughts were abruptly interrupted. Ahead near the trail was a partially consumed carcass of an antelope. It was obviously a fairly fresh kill. A coyote, she wondered? Her father had seen it too. She was on the verge of asking him about it, when she saw how intently he was staring at the bloody remains. Christina shuddered and kept her silence.

Yegan's General Merchandise was already bustling with activity early the next morning when Christina and her father walked in. Other farmers had also decided to take advantage of this spell of mild weather to stock up for the winter, and the storekeeper was busy climbing up and down his ladder fetching items for them off his high shelves. A group of farm wives were clustered around the potbellied stove in the center of the store laughing at the tale one of them was telling. Christina watched them a while, feeling the warmth of their happiness.

While Papa talked with a friend, Christina gazed down the aisles at the rows and rows of provisions. She saw paper bags containing roasted coffee beans bearing proud names like Arbuckle and Lionhead. Her eyes rolled over a vast fleet of large cloth sacks filled with Oxident Flour, all bearing the familiar "XXXX" trademark. She saw five-gallon containers of honey, and that reminded her to ask Papa to be sure to get one. Honey would be good for Mama's cough. Her nose soon located the large boxes rounded high with bright red apples. Near the apples she found boxes filled with dried raisins, apricots, and prunes.

Catching the sharp scent of new leather, Christina ran eagerly over to the display of new shoes. She and Papa would choose two pairs before they left: one pair for her and one pair for Andrew, the oldest boy. The other children would each inherit a new pair of hand-me-downs.

After a while Christina left the shoes and wandered up and down the hardware section of the store. Here she found the milk skimming pans and the new bucket Mama wanted.

At last she came to the yard goods. Crossing her fingers, she let her eyes explore up and down the bolts of brightly colored calicoes and gingham. To her delight, the pink gingham she wanted was really there. And prairie rose pink it was! Surely when Papa saw it, he could not possibly refuse.

Christina ran back to her father, who was still talking with his neighbor. "Papa!" she cried. "I have just found the most beautiful pink gingham! Please, Papa, could we buy some of it so that Mama could have a new dress to wear to the Christmas morning Uylata service at church?"

Papa looked at Christina a long moment before answering. She tried to read his expression, to figure out what his answer would be, but the look in his eyes was a strange one, one she had never seen before. As usual, she could not guess his thoughts. At last he said slowly and with finality, "Christina. You forget. Ve vas hailed out in summer. Ve have not money for pink gingham dresses."

She knew she could not argue with him. To do so, especially in front of the other farmers, could only bring down his wrath. It was bad enough, she realized, that she had embarrassed him. He had had to remind her publicly of their poverty. Hot splinters of shame and anger stung in her cheeks. It just wasn't fair!

For the next hour Christina sat and moped amid the cracker barrels.

When it was their turn, Christina watched with only passing interest as Papa read from the list and the storekeeper filled their order. Flour, salt, sugar, the honey for Mama . . . it was all laid out, item by item, on the storekeeper's large counter. Then Papa came to the word "muslin" on the list.

"Vat kind of plain cloth you have?" he asked. The storekeeper brought his bolt of muslin. Christina thought of the garments her mother would sew for the children.

"Ya. Some of dat," he said. Then, after glancing quickly at Christina, he added, "You have anyting darker?"

"*Pink*, Papa!" Christina whispered excitedly, her hopes suddenly

rising again.

The storekeeper answered, "No, not in plain cloth. But I have some gingham and calicoes . . ."

"No." Papa cut him off abruptly. "I'll just take twenty yards of muslin."

"Mama said *ten* yards," Christina whispered nervously.

"Twenty yards, please."

Christina smiled up at her father. He did not return her smile, but she understood. He was embarrassed that they could not afford gingham, but he still wanted Mama to have the new dress. Muslin wasn't so pretty as gingham, to be sure, but still, it could be embroidered. . . . And the extra ten yards, she concluded, was certainly enough for a new dress for herself as well.

When they arrived back home, Christina watched with pride and curiosity as Papa stopped first at the old barn. There he hung up the new horse collar in the harness room. Then he took the twenty yards of muslin and cut the fabric into two ten-yard lengths. Christina watched as he took one length, the material for Mama's surprise dress, and folded it gently, smoothing it down just so. Then he laid it in an old wooden box in the harness room.

"It's a secret, isn't it, Papa?" Christina asked happily. "I won't tell!"

Papa looked again at Christina with that same strange look she had not been able to identify back at Yegan's store.

"Ya," he said quietly. "It's a secret. Ve go in da house now. Say hello to Mama."

It was almost Christmas, and Christina was worried. Things were somehow different this Yuletide. It bothered her, and she tried to figure out just why everything should seem so, well, unusual.

One difference was that Mama, who always loved any excuse to get together with the neighbors, had not gone along when the farm ladies all gathered at Hedstrom's to make the annual Christmas cheese. "You go," Mama had said. "You are old enough to learn how to do it yourself." So Christina had taken the morning milk from Bossy and had gone alone to the Hedstroms. There the women had all poured their milk into a huge wash boiler. Mrs. Hedstrom was the best cheese maker in the township. She knew all about proper temperatures and cooking times and how to press the resulting mass into cheese.

"You watch," she had told Christina. "I promised your ma I would show you how." Christina had watched and had learned.

Another thing that annoyed Christina was her mother's recent demands on her time. Mama was making her do many things she had never had to do before. She had never liked milking the cow, so Mama had always done it. Now Mama made Christina do the milking. Christina also had to help wash the clothes, cook the meals, feed the chickens, and (most disgusting of all) mind the boys.

"Mama," Christina had rebelled one morning. "You're making a slave out of me! I hate it!"

Mama had turned away a moment before answering. Then she had leveled her pale blue eyes at Christina and had said evenly, "You're almost eleven years old now. It's time you took on more responsibility."

Most worrisome of all, however, was Papa. He had refused to give Christina the dress material so that she and Auntie Hildur could get started on making Mama's Christmas surprise. Finally, when Christmas was only a week away, Christina confronted Papa in the barn.

"If you don't let me have it," she wailed, "we'll never get it done for Christmas."

Papa stopped pitching hay. "Christina," he said. "I have decided. It should not be a Christmas dress. Ve vill save it for spring."

So Christina went to the Yulata service in the same dress she had worn to town the month before. Mama did not go with the rest of the family. She had sweated a lot the night before, and her cough was worse.

Christina stood at the kitchen window and gazed out at the endless landscape of swirling snow. For days the winds had howled out of the northwest and she had long since grown deaf to their mournful wails. Nor did she any longer hear the sounds of her mother's coughing, which were now equally constant with the ceaseless wind.

A frozen, late January sun, flanked by two eerie sun dogs, hung suspended in the southern sky. From where she stood, Christina could see the new barn, which Papa had finished building last fall. Papa was out there now, inspecting his work. As she watched, lost in her own thoughts, she only very slowly became aware of what Papa was doing. He was starting to take the barn down! She squinted to see better through the frost crystals on the pane. He removed several boards and hauled them off to the old barn. When he came in, she demanded to know what he had been doing.

"I didn't get dat part right," he mumbled. "I can make it better."

But he didn't. The hole in the barn remained.

It was Valentine's Day, and Christina was numb. Every time she

looked at the cot near the kitchen stove, she shuddered and turned away. For days Mama had lain on that cot, coughing up blood. Christina was exhausted from trying to take care of her mother, mind her little brothers, and cook the meals. Papa, these past days, had been more silent than ever and had begun spending long hours alone in the barn.

Christina, standing again by the window, knew it was almost over. Mama no longer answered when she spoke to her. Her eyelids half covered the glassy blue eyes without blinking. The last time Christina had given her a spoonful of water, the liquid had rattled there a long time in her mother's throat. Now the breaths came in irregular gasps. Finally they stopped altogether.

Christina walked slowly to the front room where the boys were busy playing. She did not tell them. Instead, she returned to the kitchen, pulled on her overshoes and coat, and headed out toward the old barn. There she found Papa. He was using a mixture of kerosene and soot to blacken the coffin that he had made from the barn boards.

"Mama's gone." She said it simply.

Papa nodded. He got up and walked to the harness room. Reaching into the wooden box, he removed the length of muslin.

Suddenly Christina understood. "You knew all along!" she accused him. "Away back then when we *bought* the muslin, you knew it would never be a dress for Mama!"

The great, hulking man slowly nodded. He walked to the barn door and gazed out toward the distant horizon. Outside the eternal prairie winds were still howling their endless, mindless lament. "I always knew," he said. "I always knew it would be her shroud."

A time to be born; a time to die. . . .