

The Zen of Ironing

by Sylvia B. Barber

A sudden, noonday shower sent a chocolate colored woman dashing across a narrow porch and into a barren yard. Gathering clothes pinned on the clothesline with outstretched arms, she called over her shoulder to a small, thin girl standing on the top step.

“Hurry up, Sis!” Bring that basket ‘fore all these clothes get soaked!” She continued to gather sheets and pillow cases, throwing them over her shoulder. Some of the clothes pins fell to the ground. When the girl stooped to pick them up, the woman scolded, “Forget those, girl. We’ll get them later. Don’t drag those shirts in the dirt, either. Ain’t gonna wash them again!”

Together, they managed to collect the day’s laundry and pile it into the basket.

The woman hurried to the porch, pushing the basket under the eaves and out of the rain. She climbed the steps slower than she descended them. Out of the downpour, she turned to see the girl spinning in the rain, head thrown back, arms outstretched.

“C’mon, Sis. Get up here out that rain. Your momma don’t pay me to let you get sick!”

“Aww, Manda.” the girl whined, “Let me get cooled off some. Ever since Daddy killed that cottonmouth, he won’t let me go down to the creek anymore. Look, I can get a whole mouthful of water!” She opened her mouth wide and continued to turn slowly as the raindrops drenched her clothes. Her skin glistened with raindrops.

Manda smiled as she wiped her face with the tail of the apron tied around her thick waist. She thought the girl’s skin was beautiful. Pecan colored, with heavy as silk straight black hair. At first glance, a passing stranger might think the girl was related. A second, closer look would notice the almond shaped green eyes, the light colored skin between toes and fingers, the tan line at her shoulder.

Some of those uppity white ladies at the Baptist Church whispered that the girl’s daddy was Negro, but Manda knew the truth. She had worked for Sis’s grandma down at the Diner across from the train station. When the trains used to stop in town. She had been with the family a long time. The girl had no Negro in her bloodline. Manda shook her head. Worse than colored. Her daddy and his parents were Injun. Crow, Chippewa, Cherokee, Sioux. The name of the tribe didn’t matter. She sighed. In the year of our Lord, nineteen hundred and fifty-nine, here in backwoods Georgia, ain’t no man would welcome Injuns to live in their town, let alone own a mule. And never any land. Sis’s daddy had threatened any who uttered the word by drawing his finger across his throat. Manda needed no other warning.

She waved the girl onto the porch.

“C’mon, Sis. I said get up here. Don’t make me go find my switch!”

Sis grinned. Manda used her switch only twice in her seven short years that she could remember. She skipped in circles, splashing mud, drawing closer each time, until she was at the foot of the stairs. Hands on hips, she took two at a time until she stood on the top step.

Manda moved to the clotheslines that zigzagged across one end of the porch, pinning up the items that were still wet.

“Got to get these here wet ones up ‘fore they sour, girl. Help me pick ‘em out.”

Sis shook the water from her hands, crossed to the basket, bent and pushed her hands deep into the heap of clothes. She inhaled deeply, smelling the sun drenched linens, burying her face for a moment.

“Ummm, I love that there smell!”

Manda cleared her throat. “Your momma would say ‘I love that smell!’ not ‘that there’, girl. You got to watch how you speak. Don’t want folks thinking you ignorant, like me. Your momma making sure you talk right, sending you to school and all. Reckon I should be calling you by your Christian name. Emma. That was your great granny’s name, you know.”

Sis frowned. She didn’t like the name. Emma. Emma Leigh. Sounded like an old woman.

“But I like to be called Sis, Manda.”

The woman watched the girl pick through the clothes until she found a damp towel. smelling it, Sis handed it to Manda. She pinned the towel to the line, thinking about the day Emma got her nickname.

Three years back, Emma’s mother had lost a baby after a long difficult labor, and the doc said most likely she couldn’t have more. A little more than a year ago, her momma surprised everyone and gave birth to a pale, frail little girl. No one thought the baby would live, but with Manda’s help the infant thrived.

When her momma was dressed in a fresh gown and propped up on pillows, they let Emma into the room. She crossed on tiptoe to the bed, hugged her momma’s neck, and bent over the tiny infant. Slipping her finger into the balled up fist, Emma whispered “Hey, there, baby. Don’t you worry ‘bout nothing. I’ll be watching over you. I’m your big sis.” The nickname stuck.

They worked together quickly, the girl picking through the basket, handing pieces to be pinned in place.

Once the wettest pieces were hung, Sis spoke, breaking the silence.

“Manda, can you teach me more? Please?”

“Child,” Manda started. “I don’t think your momma would appreciate it. You still a bit too little for house chores.”

Sis folded her hands together as if in prayer. “Please, oh please, Manda?”

“All right. But you best not wake up that baby.”

Sis, already through the screen door, stopped, kicked her left leg back to stop the door from slamming. She eased it closed with her foot, and when she reappeared, she was dragging a wooden ironing board that was longer than she was tall. The girl wrestled with it, managing to open it and place it under the lone bare light bulb of the porch.

Manda reached in her apron pocket, opened a palm-sized tin, and placed two fingers worth of chewing tobacco in her cheek. The first sweet bite of tobacco made her clench her teeth. Her jaw worked against the urge to spit. She stood near the edge of the porch and watched Sis bring out the iron and a Coca-Cola bottle filled with cloudy liquid.

Setting the items in place, Sis brought a rusty milk crate and turned it upside down to use as a step. The basket of clothes scraped the floor as she pulled it near. The girl climbed on the step, the ironing board between her and the woman.

Manda reached up to plug in the iron at the base of the light. She pulled the string, the light came on. It would take only a minute or two for the iron to get hot, not like the irons she learned with. Back then, when she was nine years old, heavy irons had to be set onto the wood stove to be heated. She looked at the two parallel scars on her left wrist. Both caused by brushing too close to the stove when picking up those irons.

Sis grinned like it was Christmas morning. Her eyes sparkled. Why this child liked to iron so much, Manda didn’t understand, but she couldn’t deny the girl this small pleasure.

The woman reached down and handed the girl a pillow case. Sis took it, and smoothed it flat on the board with her small hands. She lifted the iron, turned it towards her, and spit on it. The beads of spit sizzled and danced on the hot surface.

“First, start at the back end, not the open end.” Manda said. “One corner, to the other. Same, all the way to the hem. Let the weight of the iron do the work, else your shoulders be aching ‘fore you know it. Don’t let the iron stay too long, you scorch it, my fanny be the one in trouble.”

The woman watched the girl guide the heavy iron as instructed. She nodded her approval and continued to talk in an even tone.

"That's it. Now put the iron on the resting plate. Be careful you don't touch it with your arm. Fold the case down the middle, then three times over. Smooth with both hands."

Sis did as she was told. Holding the folded linen like an offering, she stepped down from the milk crate and placed it in an empty basket that waited nearby. Back in place, she repeated the lesson, half whispering Manda's instructions, and ironed a few more pillow cases.

"I'll do the sheets." Manda said. "They too big for you. How bout we try your daddy's work shirt?" The legs of a ladder back chair scraped as she pulled it to rest against the porch post.

Sis squealed. "Really, Manda, for real? Oh, I promise I'll be real careful. I won't scorch it."

"Shush! Wake up that baby, there be no more ironing."

"Pay attention." Manda picked up a blue work shirt and laid the collar flat on the ironing board. The girl closed one hand around the other and laid them against her chest as she nodded. Her face, lit by the light bulb, was dotted with raindrops.

"Now, once you got the collar laid flat, you sprinkle it with the starch water." Manda picked up the Coke bottle and sprinkled a little of the liquid along the length of the collar.

The rain let up, and the day's heat crept under the tin roof of the porch. Sweat beaded along her top lip and at her hairline. The damp cloth made a hissing sound when she placed the iron on it.

"You got to be real careful about the corners of the collar, or you get a wrinkle right at the tip. See here?" She pointed with an arthritic finger, then smoothed the fabric with her hand.

"Next, pull the shoulders onto the end, like this. Iron from neck to shoulder. See?" Manda looked up to see if the girl was watching.

Sis stared intently and nodded as Manda slid the iron across fabric.

"Then you press the front placket from bottom to top, like so." As she spoke, the iron answered, hissing against the dampened cloth again.

She pressed the body of the shirt in silence, and began to hum the tune to 'Wayfarin' Stranger'. Sis picked up the tune, and sang a thin soprano to Manda's alto.

The woman paused. "Now, when you get to the buttons, check each one to make sure they not loose. If so, then we need to tighten them back up, or re-stitch them on."

"Look here, these sleeves be tricky, they ain't the same on either side. You got to lay them flat and iron the back of them first, then the front. Understand?"

The girl nodded, moving her head quickly. She watched the woman finish the cuffs, and hang the shirt on a wire hanger. Sis picked up a shirt from the basket. Manda nodded.

“Now, mind what I said.” She stepped back, and watched the girl.

Sis repeated the instructions somberly. Manda smiled and sat down. The chair’s wicker seat creaked against her weight.

“That’s it. You got it.” She leaned her head back, closed her eyes. She began to hum the sad song again. The girl’s whispers faded, and she joined in with the words. The rain, which had almost stopped, came harder now, sounding like pebbles against the tin roof. Underneath the peppered sound, the woman and child sang the hymn softly through three more shirts until the baby’s cries brought them back to the porch.

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