

Embroidery, Ray Bradbury

Embroidery

The dark porch air in the late afternoon was full of needle flashes, like a movement of gathered silver insects in the light.

The three women's mouths twitched over their work. Their bodies lay back and then imperceptibly forward, so that the rocking chairs tilted and murmured. Each woman looked to her own hands, as if quite suddenly she had found her heart beating there.

'What time is it?'

'Ten minutes to five.'

'Got to get up in a minute and shell those peas for dinner.' 'But—' said one of them.

'Oh yes, I forgot. How foolish of me...' The first woman paused, put down her embroidery and needle, and looked through the open porch door, through the warm interior of the quiet house, to the silent kitchen. There upon the table, seeming more like symbols of domesticity than anything she had ever seen in her life, lay the mound of fresh-washed peas in their neat, resilient jackets, waiting for her fingers to bring them into the world.

'Go hull them if it'll make you feel good,' said the second woman. 'No,' said the first. 'I won't. I just won't.'

The third woman sighed. She embroidered a rose, a leaf, a daisy on a green field. The embroidery needle rose and vanished.

The second woman was working on the finest, most delicate piece of embroidery of them all, deftly poking, finding, and returning the quick

needle upon innumerable journeys. Her quick black glance was on each motion. A flower, a man, a road, a sun, a house; the scene grew under her hand, a miniature beauty, perfect in every threaded detail.

‘It seems at times like this that it’s always your hands you turn to,’ she said, and the others nodded enough to make the rockers rock again.

‘I believe,’ said the first lady, ‘that our souls are in our hands. For we do everything to the world with our hands. Sometimes I think we don’t use our hands half enough; it’s certain we don’t use our heads.’

They all peered more intently at what their hands were doing. ‘Yes,’ said the third lady, ‘when you look back on a whole lifetime, it seems you don’t remember faces so much as hands and what they did.’

They recounted to themselves the lids they had lifted, the doors they had opened and shut, the flowers they had picked, the dinners they had made, all with slow or quick fingers, as was their manner or custom. Looking back, you saw a flurry of hands, like a magician’s dream, doors popping wide, taps turned, brooms wielded, children spanked. The flutter of pink hands was the only sound; the rest was a dream without voices.

‘No supper to fix tonight or tomorrow night or the next night after that,’ said the third lady.

‘No windows to open or shut.’

‘No coal to shovel in the basement furnace next winter.’

‘No papers to clip cooking articles out of.’

And suddenly they were crying. The tears rolled softly down their faces and fell into the material upon which their fingers twitched.

‘This won’t help things,’ said the first lady at last, putting the back of her thumb to each under-eyelid. She looked at her thumb and it was wet.

‘Now look what I’ve done!’ cried the second lady, exasperated. The others stopped and peered over. The second lady held out her embroidery. There was the scene, perfect except that while the embroidered yellow sun shone down upon the embroidered green field, and the embroidered brown road curved toward an embroidered pink house, the man standing on the road had something wrong with his face.

‘I’ll just have to rip out the whole pattern, practically, to fix it right,’ said the second lady.

‘What a shame.’ They all stared intently at the beautiful scene with the flaw in it.

The second lady began to pick away at the thread with her little deft scissors flashing. The pattern came out thread by thread. She pulled and yanked, almost viciously. The man’s face was gone. She continued to seize at the threads.

‘What are you doing?’ asked the other woman.

They leaned and saw what she had done.

The man was gone from the road. She had taken him out entirely.

They said nothing but returned to their own tasks.

‘What time is it?’ asked someone.

‘Five minutes to five.’

‘Is it supposed to happen at five o’clock?’

‘Yes.’

‘And they’re not sure what it’ll do to anything, really, when it happens?’

‘No, not sure.’

‘Why didn’t we stop them before it got this far and this big?’

‘It’s twice as big as ever before. No, ten times, maybe a thousand.’ ‘This isn’t like the first one or the dozen later ones. This is different. Nobody knows what it might do when it comes.’

They waited on the porch in the smell of roses and cut grass. ‘What time is it now?’ ‘One minute to five.’

The needles flashed silver fire. They swam like a tiny school of metal fish in the darkening summer air.

Far away a mosquito sound. Then something like a tremor of drums. The three women cocked their heads, listening.

‘We won’t hear anything, will we?’

‘They say not.’

‘Perhaps we’re foolish. Perhaps we’ll go right on, after five o’clock, shelling peas, opening doors, stirring soups, washing dishes, making lunches, peeling oranges...’

‘My, how we’ll laugh to think we were frightened by an old experiment!’ They smiled a moment at each other.

‘It’s five o’clock.’

At these words, hushed, they all busied themselves. Their fingers darted. Their faces were turned down to the motions they made. They made frantic patterns. They made lilacs and grass and trees and houses and rivers in the embroidered cloth. They said nothing, but you could hear their breath in the silent porch air.

Thirty seconds passed.

The second woman sighed finally and began to relax.

‘I think I just will go shell those peas for supper,’ she said. ‘I—’

But she hadn't time even to lift her head. Somewhere, at the side of her vision, she saw the world brighten and catch fire. She kept her head down, for she knew what it was. She didn't look up, nor did the others, and in the last instant their fingers were flying; they didn't glance about to see what was happening to the country, the town, this house, or even this porch. They were only staring down at the design in their flickering hands.

The second woman watched an embroidered flower go. She tried to embroider it back in, but it went, and then the road vanished, and the blades of grass. She watched a fire, in slow motion almost, catch upon the embroidered house and unshingle it, and pull each threaded leaf from the small green tree in the hoop, and she saw the sun itself pulled apart in the design.

Then the fire caught upon the moving point of the needle while still it flashed; she watched the fire come along her fingers and arms and body, untwisting the yarn of her being so painstakingly that she could see it in all its devilish beauty, yanking out the pattern from the material at hand.

What it was doing to the other women or the furniture or the elm tree in the yard, she never knew. For now, yes now! it was plucking at the white embroidery of her flesh, the pink thread of her cheeks, and at last it found her heart, a soft red rose sewn with fire, and it burned the fresh, embroidered petals away, one by delicate one...

The end