

The Patchwork Quilt

Cate looked out the window at the patchwork fields below. She almost poked her younger brother Joe in the ribs again to point out the scenery passing below them, but then she remembered his irritated scowl the last time she had drawn his attention away from the music he was listening to. She snuck a quick glance at him and decided she would be better off simply enjoying the view herself.

Cate had flown twice in her twelve years and was always amazed at the perfect rectangles and squares of the farms far below that looked like a huge patchwork quilt. Several shades of green and brown fit together as if someone had joined the seams with precise handiwork.

Thinking about how the fields looked reminded Cate of her Grandma Catherine whom she and her brother were on their way to visit. She could picture Gran's fingers working nimbly to stitch together colorful squares of material, each square a story in itself. Joe usually rolled his eyes when Grandma Catherine started telling stories as she worked, but Cate loved to sit and listen to her grandmother talk about life, family, and adventures she had experienced.

Grandma had a way of telling a story so that Cate could feel every detail - the sights, the sounds, the smells. Often Cate would lose herself in the words. It was easy to imagine herself in a coal mine working alongside her great grandfather as he chipped away at the rock deep under the surface of the earth at the age of 14, the blackness brightened just a bit by the dimly lit lamps that hung from nails. She imagined herself looking up at the Statue of Liberty from the bow of the ship that brought her ancestors from Ireland to Ellis Island. She could almost smell the salty air as it blew across the Atlantic Ocean.

She smiled at the thought, but her grin turned to a worried frown when she caught sight of her brother. With his music turned up and his eyes tightly shut, he seemed determined to keep the rest of the world at a distance. Although he had always been a bit of a loner, Cate worried about him even more lately because he had started to listen to rougher music. What's more, she had seen some of the friends he was hanging around with at school. Sometimes, she worried; she even thought he smelled faintly like cigarette smoke when she walked home with him after school. Yes, Cate decided, she would have to do a better job of looking out for him.

As the pilot gave the word that the plane was beginning its descent, Cate's thoughts turned to her grandmother, and her former smile began to reappear. "If anyone can help me, Grandma Catherine can," Cate thought. She sat up straighter and took a deep breath.

Her brother gave her a suspicious look, and Cate suddenly wondered if she had spoken the words aloud. She remembered that her mother had asked her to keep her eye on Joe but not to try to make it too obvious. She didn't want him to feel as though he were being watched.

Cate smiled at her brother and unsnapped her seat belt as the flight attendant announced that they had arrived at the gate and told them to prepare to get off the plane. "Hey, Joe," she said. "Can you reach our bags?"

Joe stretched a bit before he opened the overhead compartment where they had stowed their things. "Yeah," he muttered. "Here's yours. Take it."

Cate had to fight to keep her frustration from showing, but she was determined not to let her younger brother ruin her trip. "Thanks," she said. "I can't wait to see Grandma! I wonder if Earl will be here to help out?"

At Earl's name, Joe's attention picked up a little. It seemed as though he couldn't help smiling, remembering the funny old farm hand who worked for their grandma. The memories were enough to snap him out of his grouchy mood. He laughed a little as he caught Cate's eye. "Hey, remember last time we were here?" he asked.

Cate's eyes sparkled. "Do I ever! Remember how Earl snuck out in the middle of the day to go fishing in the creek across the field?"

Her brother finished the story for her. "And the neighbor's bull--wasn't his name Midnight?--chased him up a tree. We didn't hear Earl hollering until we went out to help Grandma with the evening chores. Man, he was mad!"

"I'm not sure what made him more angry though," Cate mused; "Getting caught trying to sneak away from work, almost getting gored by an angry bull, or missing his chance to fish on one of the nicest afternoons of the summer."

Joe's mood seemed to have shifted. He put his headphones away and then turned to his sister and said, "Let's see who can spot Grandma first. The loser has to wash dishes tonight."

"You're on!" Cate responded, hunkering down a little to try to see out of the plane windows and into the airport in front of them.

As it turned out, Grandma Catherine won the contest. She spotted them as soon as they came through the door and hustled over to wrap them in an enthusiastic hug. "Oh, it's SO good to see you!" she exclaimed. "And just look how you've grown. Joe, you are so tall for an eleven year old, and Cate, I barely recognized you with your hair so long!"

The children smiled up at their grandma, knowing that it would be a while before they would get a word in. She was always so excited to see them that she talked as though she might never get the chance again for at least the first few hours each time they

visited. The trip from the airport to the farm passed quickly, as they bumped along in their grandma's old truck listening to her catch them up on everything that had happened since the last time they had been to the farm.

Finally, Grandma Catherine appeared to run out of steam. She drove for a few moments in silence, then turned to Joe, who was sitting right beside her. "OK, I've said enough for a few days now," she laughed. "Let's hear about you. Your mom told me that you had kind of a hard time in school this year. Tell me about it."

Cate felt the tension build up inside her. She worried that Joe's good mood would disappear instantly. He hated it when people probed into his personal life, and he seemed to prefer to avoid talking about his feelings. Cate bit her lip and held tight to the arm rest on the door, as she turned her face to look out the truck window.

The light was fading outside, and she saw her own reflection in the glass. She suddenly realized that she could also see Grandma Catherine and Joe, and they wouldn't even know she was looking at them. She tried to pretend she wasn't listening, hoping the silence would help make it easier for Joe to talk.

Her fears were realized, though, when she saw Joe's smile disappear. "I'm fine," he said, and then pulled his headphones out of his bag and put them on his head, effectively tuning out the two of them.

Cate swallowed and looked at her grandmother's worried expression and her brother's guarded one in the reflection on the truck window. She sighed and felt a little of the joy that had been bubbling inside her die out.

After dinner, once the dishes were done, Grandma Catherine and Cate settled into their favorite spot on the porch while Joe went into the room where he would be staying to listen to his music.

It seemed to Cate that the sky couldn't possibly hold any more stars than she saw that night. Cate had so many questions filling her mind: questions about life, about her brother, and about what she might do to help him if he were in trouble. Finally, as if a dam had broken, the questions came pouring out.

Grandma listened as Cate shared her fears and concerns, her hopes and dreams. Occasionally, Grandma would ask a question or interject a comment, but mostly she just listened. Finally, Grandma spoke up. "Remember the patchwork quilts I am always making?" she asked.

"Yes, of course," Cate replied.

"Well, I want you to think for a moment about life and how it resembles one of those quilts. See, all the events in our lives are just one small piece of a much bigger picture. When you look at just one small piece, it's often hard to see that it really is part of

something much larger. Each one brings meaning to our lives and shapes us into the people we become."

As her grandma spoke, she touched the different colored pieces of fabric on the quilt lying on her lap. Cate knew that each one stirred a memory. Grandma turned so that she could look Cate directly in the face. "Each of us has to make our own quilt. Each has to choose how those pieces fit together. That's the part that Joe is having a hard time understanding. He seems to be looking to others to make his quilt for him, to make the decisions in his life so he wouldn't have to."

Cate thought about how her brother seemed so willing to go along with what his friends wanted to do. She thought about how much he had been changing in the last few years and how unhappy he appeared to be.

"Grandma," she whispered, "do you think you could talk to Joe while we're here?"

Her grandmother smiled with the wisdom of years. "Dear Cate," she said, patting the quilt with gentle hands. "Who do you think I made this quilt for?"

1. Why did the fields the plane flew over remind Cate of a patchwork quilt?

- A. The different shades of green and brown could easily be seen.
- B. The fields were so big compared to the houses they didn't seem real.
- C. They looked like perfect rectangles and squares sewn together.

2. What had Cate's mother asked her to do?

- A. Keep an eye on Joe and let him know that he was being closely watched.
- B. Keep an eye on Joe and make sure that he was told how to behave.
- C. Keep an eye on Joe but not let him know that he was being watched.

3. What did Cate think would happen if she tried to get her brother Joe to stop listening to music and look out the window of the plane?

- A. He would tell her that she shouldn't interrupt his listening but then would be glad that he looked.
- B. He would get upset with her for taking his attention away from the music he was listening to.
- C. He would make Cate change seats with him so he could get a better look out the window at the fields.

4. How did Cate feel about her grandma?

- A. Her grandma was someone she could tell all her troubles to, and her grandma would be able to give her wise advice.
- B. Her grandma knew a lot about life but liked to talk more about her life on the farm than listen to Cate's problems.
- C. She thought her grandma didn't really understand the problems that children like Joe had to face every day.

5. What did Joe usually do when he wanted to avoid talking to Cate and his grandmother?

- A. He would pretend like he wasn't hearing anything they said.
- B. He would put on headphones and listen to loud music.
- C. He would turn his head away and not answer any questions.

6. When Cate and Joe were still on the plane, what was the strongest evidence that Joe's grumpy mood had changed?

- A. He laughed a lot when Cate told funny stories about the last time they visited Grandma.
- B. He told Cate he would help her get her luggage out of the overhead compartment.
- C. He put his headphones away and wanted to play a game of who could spot Grandma first.

7. How was Cate feeling on the ride to the farm house?

- A. Worried that Joe would get into one of his bad moods.
- B. Happy that her grandma was there to talk to Joe.
- C. Sorry that her grandma wanted to help Joe but couldn't.

8. What had Cate recently seen about Joe that worried her?

- A. He was listening to rougher music and was hanging around with friends that she thought could be a problem.
- B. He was keeping to himself more and more, and he didn't seem to have any friends at school.
- C. He was starting to talk about joining a gang so that he would have friends that felt the same way he did.

9. What was this story mostly about?

- A. A young boy who was always in a grumpy mood.
- B. A girl who cared about her younger brother.
- C. Two children who went to visit their grandmother.

10. What was Cate like?

- A. She was nice but thought she knew how others should act and told them so.
- B. She liked hearing things about others, but she mostly just cared about herself.
- C. She enjoyed life, liked to talk about her feelings, and loved her brother.

11. What did Cate like most when her grandma was making a patchwork quilt?

- A. Watching her fingers work quickly to stitch the squares together.
- B. Listening to the stories she would tell as she worked on the quilt.
- C. Looking at the colorful squares and rectangles that were being sewn together.

12. What happened right after Cate said she wondered if Earl, the farm hand, would still be at the farm?

- A. Joe told a funny story about how Earl had been chased up a tree by a bull.
- B. Cate decided that she wasn't going to let Joe ruin her time with her grandmother.
- C. Joe remembered a funny story about Earl and snapped out of his grouchy mood.

13. What was probably the reason that Joe rolled his eyes when his Grandmother started to tell stories about her life?

- A. He thought his grandmother talked too much and told too many stories.
- B. He didn't know how to deal with sharing personal things with others.
- C. He loved his grandmother but thought the stories about her life were boring.

14. What happened when Grandma asked Joe about his school year?

- A. Joe started to have a conversation with Grandma, which made Cate happy.
- B. He said his year was fine and then put on his headphones to shut her out.
- C. Joe didn't answer her and turned his head away to look out the window.

15. How did Grandma probably know that Joe was having a problem year?

- A. She heard it from Joe's mother.
- B. She could tell by how Joe acted.
- C. Cate was worried about him.

16. What was Joe like?

- A. He admitted that he had a problem, but he didn't want help from anyone.
- B. He was only interested in listening to music and thought people were stupid.
- C. He wouldn't share his feelings with anyone or let anyone get close to him.

17. What did Cate and Joe expect their grandma to do right after she picked them up at the airport?

- A. Ask them lots of questions about how their lives were going and how things were at home.
- B. Give them big hugs and then let them talk to her about whatever they felt like talking about.
- C. Talk for a long time about everything that happened at the farm since their last visit.

18. Which statement below best tells what Grandma thought Joe's problem was?

- A. Joe didn't understand that the decisions he makes each day have to be good ones if he wants to have a good and happy life.
- B. Joe was getting confused because he didn't stop to think about the decisions he was making and just did what he wanted to do.
- C. Joe was not thinking about making good decision, he just went along with whatever his group of friends decided to do.

19. What was Grandma Catherine like?

- A. She was old and only cared about quilts.
- B. She was loving, kind, and wise.
- C. She was kind but not very smart.

20. How did the story end?

- A. Cate knew that her grandma understood her problem with Joe and was going to help.
- B. Cate figured out that Joe had a problem with the type of friends that he chose for himself.
- C. Cate and her grandma had a long talk, and her grandma explained how life is like a patchwork quilt.