



THE ART
of
DIPPING CANDLES

A Short Story

by

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The Art of Dipping Candles

My mother doesn't make candles any more. Her candles used to be the smoothest and straightest in North Texas. They burned bright with an even flame and never smoked. Ma ran candles in the late fall, when Pa had killed a steer and she had rendered the tallow. She'd make more candles than we needed for daily use for the whole year, just so we could have them all around the house at Christmas. Sometimes, in the summer if she could find beeswax, she made a second batch, but beeswax was hard to come by.

Ma knew just how much clay from the Red River bottoms to put in the kettle so the candles would have some color, and she knew how long to wait for the dirt to color the tallow and then settle to the bottom so that the candles wouldn't be gritty. In front of our cabin Pa had built a stone pit just sized to hold the kettle above a fire, and Ma spent hours there, dipping a wick over and over again, hanging the finished candles to dry, admiring her handiwork when she was done. Sometimes she poured the hot tallow into a mold and it would set in an hour or two on a cold December day, but there wasn't any art in that, she said. Ma liked to dip her candles by hand.

"Mama, can I dip a candle?"

"No, Elizabeth, you haven't the patience yet to make it smooth and straight. Someday . . ."

I sat and watched and waited for the day I was grown enough to dip candles. To be able to dip a candle was the mark of a woman to me. It wrapped up in one skill all the things that a woman did, and I dreamt of the day I had a husband and children of my own to care for. When I was grown, I would dip candles.

Ma was dipping candles that December day when Pa had gone for supplies and Jeb came screaming across the prairie.

"Ma! Ma! Indians! Indians!" he shouted, running so hard and desperate that I thought sure his lungs would burst. His eyes seemed near bugged out of their sockets, and his voice, just beginning to deepen, was now higher than mine. Any other time, I might have laughed at him for squeaking. "Mr. Belton says they struck the Simpsons, and they're headed this way." He collapsed on the ground, his breath having completely left him.

Jeb was fourteen and used to boast about what he'd do if the Comanche came near our house. Now his boasts had given way to sheer terror, and it was a terror that was catching. As I watched him approach, like watching a dream in slow motion, I felt my stomach lurch. Fear enveloped me--hadn't we dreaded an Indian attack ever since Pa had moved us out to the banks of the Red River in 1866? I wanted to run and scream and do whatever I could to shake off that blanket of fear.

If I expected Ma to be as frightened as I was, I was mistaken. Candle in hand, she whirled to look at Jeb. But there was no hesitation, no throwing her hands in the air, no instant of wondering what to do. Ma was in control, as though this moment was something she had been anticipating for a long time.

When she spoke, her voice was calm and controlled. "Get inside, Elizabeth, and take Jessamine with you. Go to the attic. Quickly!"

Her voice did what no amount of screaming and running would have done--it quieted my fear, and I did as I was told, grabbing two-year-old Jessamine, who whimpered at my roughness, and pulling her into the darkness of our cabin. It was a good wood cabin--Pa had sent to Fort

Worth for the wood, when Ma said she wouldn't spend more than one season in a dugout where bugs and dirt sifted out of the roof into the food.

Behind me I heard Ma say, "Jeb, bring this kettle. Careful, don't spill the hot tallow on yourself."

Jessamine and I peered curiously over the edge of the attic trap door, while Ma closed the outside door to the house and threw the great wooden bar across it, ordering Jeb to climb the attic ladder and take the kettle with him.

"Take this kettle up that ladder?" he asked incredulously, having regained his breath.

There was no arguing with Ma. In that same deadly calm voice, she said, "Take it to the attic. Be careful." Then she pulled the boards tight over each of the windows.

Jeb labored up the ladder, having to use one hand to hold the kettle level while he pulled himself up the ladder with the other. A bit of tallow splashed on his leg, causing him to cry out.

"Hush!" Ma ordered.

He barely made it to the top and set the kettle down, with a sigh of relief, when Ma clambered up the ladder behind him. Once up, she pulled the ladder behind her, while we three watched silently.

"Ma?" I asked. "Will the Indians . . . can they . . . will the door hold?"

"Probably not," she said calmly. "Now listen to me. It is very important that you do not move, do not make a sound if the Indians come near this house." She paused and looked long and hard at each of us. "Jeb, you peek out that crack there and keep watch. Elizabeth, you tend to Jessamine. Give her that sugar tit and make sure she doesn't cry. Rock her if you need to."

With those words, Ma set herself down beside the kettle, clutching it with both hands.

I rocked little Jessamine until she slept, while Jeb, less frightened now and more filled with the importance of his duty, peered through the crack in the roof boards. Ma sat by the kettle, her face expressionless, her hands still clutching. I wondered if the kettle wasn't hot next to her body.

"Ma"

She put her finger to her lips and looked sternly at me, so I hushed. Ma wasn't much on discipline—Pa always saw to that, while Ma generally surrounded us with her love. It scared me more, now, to have her so grim and unrelenting, when all I wanted was for her to put her arms around me and tell me it would all be all right. She never did do that, the whole long day.

I wanted to ask Jeb how he knew Indians were coming, and ask Ma if she thought Pa would be home soon, and . . . I just wanted someone, anyone, to talk to me. But we were quiet.

It seemed to me we sat that way forever. My legs began to cramp, and I shifted position ever so slightly, causing Jessamine to wake and cry a little and Ma to give me another stern look. We probably hadn't been there half an hour before Jeb, speaking so low we could barely hear him, whispered, "Here they come. Three of them. On horseback."

Ma nodded and then whispered her first words in a long time: "Our lives depend on how quiet you can be."

I could not see them, but I heard . . . their horses raced up to the house, then the hoofbeats stopped suddenly, and there was loud talking which I could not understand. The voices didn't sound angry . . . more curious than anything, I guess. They stayed outside the cabin so long I was near desperate to ask Jeb what they were doing, but he kept his eyes riveted on the scene he saw through the crack, and Ma sat stone-faced, clutching the kettle.

Then there was a knocking on the door, so loud it startled me and made Jessamine give a whimper. Ma turned the upper half of her body quickly, so that she stared at us, and I clamped a firm hand over Jessamine's mouth while I found the sugar tit and gave it to her again. She sucked happily and quietly.

I looked at Jeb, only to see that he was holding his nose, a desperate look in his eyes. Jeb was about to sneeze! I shook my head at him, as though to say, "You can't!" and he shoulders convulsed, but no sound came. Then I had to put my hand over my own mouth to stifle a fear-begotten giggle. Ma looked grim.

The banging on the door kept on, and the next thing I heard was the splintering of wood. Then there was loud, masculine laughter and shouting, still in that tongue that none of us knew. Then came the footsteps . . . not loud, for they didn't wear leather shoes like Pa, but still a tramping sound, accompanied by much talk. They were wandering about our cabin, knocking over the table, throwing crockery on the floor, laughing all the while.

I thought about my doll, the one I kept on my bed, and wished I'd brought her to the attic with me.

I looked at Ma. Her knuckles were white, clutching the kettle tightly, tipping it ever so little towards the trap door opening, though she'd put the board door over it.

Then it came to me--Ma intended to pour that boiling tallow on the Indians if they discovered us. It had been her plan all along, a plan she probably formulated lying sleepless at night, worrying about the times that Pa was gone and she was responsible for her family. Candles were her pride, and candles would save her family.

Ma didn't have to pour the hot tallow on the Indians. Having done all the damage they

could and taken all the food they could find--corn dodgers from our breakfast, flour, coffee, salt and sugar--they departed. As I listened to their horses hoofbeats fade into the distance, I thought it was a good thing they hadn't come tomorrow, when Pa was just back with enough supplies to help us celebrate Christmas, and I was grateful they hadn't found the steer carcass that Pa had hung in the lean-to shed.

Jeb watched intently long after the sound of the hoofbeats was gone, but at last he said, "They're gone," and then he added matter-of-factly, "we'd best go clean up the mess."

I started to cry, the relief from tension somehow bringing my fear to the surface. I just sat there, clutching Jessamine and letting big tears run down my cheeks, while I sobbed quietly, my shoulders heaving. I knew Ma would come take me in her arms any minute.

Instead, her voice was harsh when she said, "Quiet! They'll be back!"

"Ma!" Jeb complained, "They ain't comin' back. They're gone."

I cried on, and Jessamine began to whimper, and all Ma did was clutch that kettle and command us to be quiet. Short of shoving her out of the way, there was nothing we could do--and we children didn't dare do that. We knew something was wrong, terribly wrong, but she was our mother.

So we sat the whole long day, until dusk began to take away the light filtering through the cracks in the roof. Jessamine was hungry and fretful in spite of my best efforts to quiet her, and she needed to be changed desperately, which made me hate having to hold her. I myself began to need a trip to the bushes so badly that I squirmed from time to time. Jeb drummed his fingers on the board floor and wriggled in impatience, though I thought he too might have longed to run for the bushes. But Ma never moved, never loosened her hold on that kettle.

"Here comes Pa," Jeb said softly.

Within minutes we heard the clop of the mules, the creak of the old wooden wagon, and then Pa's terrified call, "Margaret! Jeb! Where are you?" His heavy boots thundered into the house.

"We're up here, Pa," Jeb said.

Still, Ma did not move. Jeb looked for a long minute, while Pa was downstairs demanding to know what happened and if we were all right. Shrugging hopelessly, Jeb went to the trap door, pulled it up and lowered the ladder.

"You better come get Ma," he said.

Pa had to pry her fingers from the now-cold kettle and carry her bodily downstairs. Jeb followed and then held up his arms to take Jessamine from me.

I had to bolt for that trip to the bushes, and while I squatted there, I prayed that when I came back Ma would be her old self again, proudly telling Pa how she'd saved us from Indians.

She never did tell him, and we had to do it for her, Jeb and I both babbling at once, while Ma sat in the rocking chair where Pa had placed her and never said a word, never moved, didn't even seem to recognize us. When at last the story had come tumbling out, Pa looked around at the mess the Indians had made--broken crockery, flour and sugar and salt spilled before they were stolen, blankets ripped off beds--and my doll flung into the fireplace, probably the cruelest blow of all to me--and then he went to kneel by the rocker.

"Margaret, you saved our children. You . . . you are the strongest and most wonderful woman I know."

She smiled just a little and reached a hand out to stroke his beard. I thought that smile

meant Ma was back to herself, but I was wrong.

It's been a year now, and she still sits in the rocker. I cook the meals and clean the cabin and care for little Jessamine, but Pa says to give Ma time. "She'll be all right," he tells me. "She's just had a terrible shock."

Pa has butchered a beef, and it's time to make candles. I try, remembering what Ma said about patience, but my candles are lopsided, and they bend in the candlesticks instead of standing straight and tall. I want my Ma to come back and dip candles. It's a fine art, candle-dipping is.