

Fabric

by Dianne McKnight-Warren

My father failed in business in the 1950's when Dutch Elm Disease killed the elm trees in our Kansas town. He owned a fabric store on a brick street lined on both sides by elms, the doomed trees that transformed every Midwestern town into a magical kingdom and sidewalks and yards into leafy bowers. The elms shaded whole houses in deep green.

My father was large in spirit and kindly, like the elms. He lived by the words, "The customer is always right," and people smiled like they really meant it when they were in his store.

He was passionate about fabric. He sold patterns and thread along with zippers and buttons, although he never showed much interest in sewing. And he was never interested in fashion, not even in the little ways it trickled down to a small Kansas town. He named his store The Fabric Center and he filled it with bolt after bolt of cloth held upright in stands, the ends of the bolts draping over themselves like a hundred Madonnas. The effect of all of them together must have been powerful on him: yards of velvet, linen, polished cotton, and his favorite, gabardine, falling in perfect folds barely touching each other.

In my mind's eye I can still see my father measuring fabric. With a flick of his wrist he'd flip a bolt and count the thuds on the table, slow when they were new and heavy, faster as they got lighter. When they were nearly empty he could spin them like tops.

Then the elms died. Almost overnight, it seemed, they were gone, sawed down to stumps, hacked into pieces and thrown into panel trucks. The branches swished against each other and sounded like fast breathing as the trucks carted them off to the dump to be burned.

With no elms to break it, the wind blew harder around town. Litter collected in the gutters, lawns turned brown, stores closed, the shabbiness showed through. People moved away or

shopped in cities on weekends where they bought ready-to-wear clothing cheaper than they could make it.

My father stayed on at his store until it was almost empty and dark. He sold the last of his goods to a man who would sell them at auction, and my father got a job thirty miles away in the warehouse of a furniture store where, at fifty, he moved furniture all day. Then he had a job at a fiberglass factory where he hurt his eyes so badly he was hospitalized for days. And ten other jobs like them until finally at 62 he retired and opened a store again.

By now he was in the east, in a city, and he found a place to rent on a noisy street in a bad part of town. The building's floor sagged in the center like bones were broken there, and it had plate glass windows my father had to board up because people through rocks through them repeatedly.

He built tables out of two-by-fours and plywood for the canned goods and cigarettes and carpet remnants he bought at salvage auctions. He bought fabric at the auctions too, huge bolts with soiled edges, for a few dollars. At his store he sold everything cheap, the fabric for a few cents a yard. Or he traded with customers who brought in old furniture and lamps, books, doilies anything they wanted to get rid of that someone else would buy. He took the boards off the windows and the plate glass was never broken again.

Regulars came in often: women tickled to get such good deals on fabric, others who traded for food or cigarettes or brought their kids in for candy, people looking for vintage treasures. Older men hung out just to talk. They'd leave politely when I came by which wasn't often because I lived a hundred miles away. They called my father Mac, or Mr. Mac, and they talked to him like they'd known him all their lives.

He made enough money to go home to Kansas when he was old and when he died he was buried in the cemetery on the outskirts of town next to the grain elevator. It's a peaceful place now because of the elm trees the town planted there. A different kind of elm, a different shape, and young by tree standards, but already they help to shade the graves. And the new trees are disease resistant, bred to

withstand everything, even the tiny beetle that spread the fungus that brought the giants down.

