

## Interior Design

by Judy Fort Brenneman

It began with cloth.

She was at the Pied Pepper cafe, sitting across from Jan, listening as Jan chattered on about kids and school, office politics, mutual friends. They met every Tuesday at the Pied Pepper, a habit begun when Denna first joined Jan's department at Dewco. Jan had made it her mission to push Denna to the next level. When Dewco laid off half the department, Jan refused to give up. "Just because the bean counters fired everyone they hired in the last two years doesn't mean you're stuck," she firmly told Denna. "We'll get you in at Digi-Temp; they'll even give you training. You'll find something great, I just know it."

Denna obediently interviewed with Jan's friend and two weeks later got her first assignment, doing almost exactly the same thing she'd done at Dewco, only this time for the temp agency. It wasn't so bad, she tried to tell Jan. Jan sighed, convinced that Denna just wasn't trying hard enough.

Denna shrugged. She appreciated Jan's advice, but knew there wasn't any point to it. If things didn't work out at Digi-Temp, she'd go to another company and do the same work. It'd been that way ever since she left home years ago; she didn't see any way it was going to change.

Denna picked absently at the rolled hem of the green napkin in her lap, catching a fingernail in the edge and making little flick noises as she pulled it across the stitching in the fabric. The cloth of the napkin was tightly woven and a little stiff. Probably treated with something, she thought, coated to prevent stains. She felt her fingers rub the napkin, trying to rub away the coating, trying to find the cloth inside. The napkin stayed stiff; she rubbed harder.

Suddenly Denna realized that Jan had stopped talking. She looked up, startled and guilty. "I - I'm sorry," she stammered. "It's just, well, work..."

Jan stared at her a moment, frowning slightly. "Are they giving you anything new? Have you asked about training? Oh, Denna, you really should, you deserve better," she said.

Denna looked down and shook her head, letting her thin brown hair fall across her face. "No, it isn't that, the work is fine," she said. "I guess I'm just tired."

"Yeah, I know how that is," Jan said, smiling, then launched into a story about their old department head at Dewco who was overworking everybody in the department and who, Jan was convinced, would get the axe any day now.

Denna nodded and smiled, pretending to listen. Jan's voice seemed part of the background noise of the restaurant; she twisted and smoothed the napkin in time to its rhythms. When the waitress brought their bill, Denna pulled a five from her purse and laid it on top of Jan's in the small plastic tray. A bright streak of red was smeared across the crumpled bill. Denna turned the bill over before Jan could see, and shoved her hand back into her lap. Her fingertips were red and raw from rubbing the napkin; blood oozed from a forefinger and thumb, leaving dark moist streaks on the stiff cloth. She curled her fingers around the napkin and jammed them into her coat pocket.

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Denna sagged into a seat on the bus. She'd made it through the afternoon, but hadn't been able to stop thinking about the napkin. She thought about the flick, flick of her nail across the stitching that formed the hem. She thought about the texture of the cloth, the tightness of the weave. She thought about the slight dampness made by the dark streaks. She thought about pulling the napkin out of her coat pocket during the afternoon break, to see if it was really there. She thought about whether stealing a napkin that you'd bled on was really stealing; after all, blood stained, so they probably would have had to throw it out, wouldn't they?

She kept her hand curled around the napkin in her pocket as she pushed through the door to the apartment building and climbed the stairs. The hallway, lit by a single bulb in the center of the stained narrow ceiling, was empty. "Good," she thought, as she hurried to the far end of the hall. She paused a moment at the door, glancing back down the hall as if she expected to be followed, then quickly slipped the key into the lock.

Once inside, Denna twisted the bolt back into place and leaned against the door. Her eyes darted from the window that overlooked the street to the short hall that led to the back room, from there to the kitchenette, with its rusty sink and ancient gas stove, then back to the window to start the circuit again. She waited, holding her breath, her gaze touching and catching on the third-hand furnishings.

The yellow glow from the street lamp cast gray shadows on the worn carpet. Traffic sounds hummed quietly, a distant lullaby. Nothing in the apartment moved. Slowly, she began to relax.

She sat down at the small kitchen table, pulling the napkin from her pocket. She held it gingerly by a corner, watching it sway softly, the dark green almost black in the faint

light. Slowly, she drew the napkin toward her face, looking for the dark red streaks. Hidden among the folds, they blended in with the darkness. She sniffed cautiously. Perhaps dried blood didn't smell, she thought as she smoothed the napkin over her lap.

She traced the largest streak with a forefinger, absently stroking her still-raw fingertip along the cloth. A small scab snagged against the cloth and pulled free, releasing a tiny bubble of bright red. Denna stared at it a moment, then wiped her finger clean on the napkin.

With a sudden sense of determination, she crumpled the napkin into her fist and flipped on the light switch. She looked around the small space, blinking in the sudden light, then spied the junk drawer next to the sink. Digging through bits of old hardware, twine, and batteries, she found the small packet of nails she'd bought when she first moved in. They were still unopened; she'd never bought any pictures to hang on the walls.

She tugged at the cardboard backing with her teeth, ripping part of it away from the plastic bubble that held the nails, as she walked down the short hall to the back room. She flipped the light switch on and stood in the center of the room, turning slowly in the glare from the aging light in the ceiling, studying the room's meager contents. A mattress lay on the floor, shoved into the corner opposite the window, blankets rumped in the middle. A small dresser stood beside the window, next to a clothes rack that held a half-dozen blouses on wire hangers. The rest of the room was bare: bare walls, bare floor, bare window except for a paper pull-down shade.

Denna turned, turned again, studying the walls, the window, the edge where ceiling became wall, where wall became floor. Suddenly she stopped, staring intently at the wall above the bed. She set the nails down on the mattress and gently rubbed a small area of the wall with the napkin. She pulled her shoe off, fished a nail out of the packet, and, standing on the mattress, used the shoe to pound the nail through a corner of the napkin and into the wall.

That night, curled on the mattress with the blankets wrapped tightly around her, she dreamed. In her dream, she danced in a green meadow that stretched up an infinite hillside to meet an infinite sky. She turned and twirled as she danced, a flowing dress greener than the grass swirling around her body, its soft folds caressing her skin. A shimmering green scarf, held aloft by the merest touch of her fingertips, floated above her in the whispering breeze, catching bits of red and gold sunlight.

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The next evening, Denna got off the bus a stop early to shop at the grocery. She slid the handles of a red plastic basket over her arm, tucked a quart of milk into the corner of the basket, and headed to the produce section. Pre-packaged salad, a single potato, and two certified-organic carrots all found their place in the basket.

She ran her fingertips across the stacks of fresh fruit on the display tables—nubby cantaloupes, smooth apples and plums, the bumps and blisters of early squashes and gourds—stopping when she reached the peaches. She closed her eyes and breathed in their sweetness, her hand passing lightly across the sharp-fuzzy softness that prickled against her still sore fingers. A hand brushed hers, and she jerked back with a gasp.

"Sorry—didn't mean to startle you. You O.K.?" She looked up and recognized the man who lived in the apartment at the top of the stairs, at the other end of the hall from hers. She nodded and quickly looked down, cheeks flushing.

"We live in the same building, don't we?" he said, "over on Meridian?"

Denna nodded again, holding the red basket tightly in front of her, voice frozen in her throat.

"I'm Mike, Mike Borchert," he said, and started to put his hand out to shake hers, but the basket was in the way. He rested his hand on the peaches instead.

"Denna," Denna's voice wobbled.

"Yeah, I thought I'd seen you. Mom mentioned you, too—maybe you've met her? She just moved in with me a couple months ago, had a stroke but she gets around O.K. Doesn't like the stairs to the apartment, though."

Denna remembered seeing them both once, when the bus was late. Just a glimpse really; an impression of white walls, wooden bookshelves filled to overflowing, an old sofa, a tall man about her own age holding the door open for a woman with white hair leaning against a walker. He had glanced at her as she hurried on to her own apartment.

Denna watched Mike's hand as it moved restlessly over the peaches. She realized that he was wearing the red apron of a store employee. She couldn't think of anything to say. Her face felt hot; she was sure it was bright red.

Mike deftly grasped four peaches, holding them loosely in one hand, long fingers cradling them. "It's O.K., really...These peaches are great, aren't they?" He shook open a paper sack from the display and gently slid the peaches inside. "Best of the season, so far," he said, and scrawled a big "N/C" on the side of the sack and tucked it into her basket.

As he walked away, she peeked into the sack. The peaches, round, almost perfect, hardly any bruises, nestled together. Each glowed with a deep red blush, the color of sunset.

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Denna set the groceries next to her purse on the tiny kitchen table and pulled out the paper sack of peaches. She lifted a peach to her face, rolling its soft ripeness across her

lips, smelling its promise of sweet summer. She bit into it, the fuzzy skin sliding away from the soft fruit, the juice dribbling down her chin, through her fingers, and onto her blouse. She stared at the damp spots on her blouse for a moment, then brushed at them with the still-fuzzy side of the peach. The peach skin tore, leaving a trail of juice, skin, and bits of pulp on the pale blue fabric. She sighed, set the peach down on the table, and walked to the back room to find a clean blouse.

She held the stained blouse in her outstretched hand, watching it sway slightly in the breeze from the window. She moved toward the laundry basket, then stopped, staring at the wall beside the green napkin. Slowly, she mopped the wall with the peach stains, then nailed the shirt to the wall next to the napkin.

That night she dreamed of a green meadow. Peach trees swayed at the edges of an infinite hillside, and tiny red flowers blossomed in the green grass.

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Denna hadn't been in a fabric store since high school home ec class. The only reason she was here now was because Jan needed Halloween stuff for Jason, so instead of lunch, they were wandering the aisles of FabricHouse. Jan loaded pumpkin-colored calico and green felt squares into a shopping cart while Denna meandered through rows of tables with their upright bolts of fabric, fall colors and costume prints and Christmas-is-coming craft supplies.

She wandered past the remnant table, idly picked through the rolled bundles, then drifted to a long row of calicos. She ran her hand across the tops of the bolts, colors from muted blues to vibrant reds and yellows, all with the same smooth, tightly woven cotton texture. They reminded her of something, she wasn't quite sure what. She paused, resting her hand lightly on pale pink fabric with tiny blue flowers scattered in an almost-random pattern. There was a quilt, she thought, a quilt with this fabric, only with more colors. Someone sat on the quilt. A sister? Yes, a sister, it must have been her sister, sitting on the edge of the quilt, and part of the quilt was rumped and had fallen to the floor. Her father was kneeling in front of her sister, his hands on her bare shoulders, one hand partly covering her chest. Her sister was crying. Denna could see the tears but her sister's lips were pressed tight so she wouldn't make any sound. As Denna watched, her father turned to look at her, one hand sliding down her sister's leg. As he turned toward her, the dolls—that was it, there were appliqued dolls on the quilt, each a different color, each with a bonnet, each in its own square on the quilt—the dolls disappeared, their colors smearing and running together until they were gone.

"Denna? Denna, what's wrong?" Jan stood beside her, speaking softly, asking her if she was O.K.

"What?" Denna focussed on Jan's face, feeling confused.

"Why are you crying?"

"Crying?" Denna raised her hand to her face, surprised at its dampness. "I don't know. . . I think I had a blanket like this when I was little. . . pretty silly, huh?" She sniffled and rubbed her nose with the back of her hand.

Jan gave Denna a quick hug, ignoring Denna's slight flinch. "Let's skip work this afternoon. Looks like you could use a break. C'mon, I'll even call your boss with a good excuse."

"Thanks Jan, but I don't dare. I really need the job. I'm fine, really I am...maybe I'll buy some of the calico, just to remind me."

Jan nodded, satisfied. "If you wanted, you could even make a quilt of your own," she said. "There's fliers up front for classes. I'll pick one up for you."

While Jan hunted for the fliers, Denna drifted past the calicos, stroking them lightly. They felt sad to her, even the brighter ones. At the end of the row, propped on shelves along the wall, were bolts of fleece and fake fur. She pushed her hand against a tawny fleece, watching her fingers sink into the deep pile. She moved her hand down the length of the bolt, watching the fabric spring back into place, covering the tracks of her fingers. She stopped a few inches from the bottom, noticing a dark brown splotch only partially hidden by the thickness of the fabric. She pulled the bolt from the shelf and carried it to the cutting counter.

Jan looked skeptical. "You think that will work?" she said. Denna shrugged and smiled. How could she tell Jan that the fabric wasn't for sewing? How could she tell her that she'd been hanging things on the walls for months now, that the fabric would go there, too, that somehow it was exactly the right thing to put in a specific spot on the wall or the floor or the window? How could she explain it, when she didn't even understand it herself? All she knew was that this piece went there, and that one went someplace else, that that's what felt right, so right it resonated down through her bones. Sometimes when she finished putting something new in place, her skin tingled. Sometimes she'd feel a warmth flow through her arms or face or abdomen. Sometimes it felt as if her face were glowing, reflecting the light from a hidden fire.

And the meadow! Jan wouldn't understand that. She'd think Denna had gone over the edge, that work or being alone too much or not eating the right foods had made her crazy, and that she ought to see a therapist. Then she'd want to come over and see what the room looked like, and that was definitely not O.K. with Denna. *The room is not for Jan*, she thought.

"Half a yard," said Denna, turning to the woman behind the cutting counter. The woman seemed impossibly old, her thin frame and bent back giving her hardly enough height to

reach the table, let alone unroll the fabric. Denna reached out to help, but the woman expertly flipped the bolt around, measuring out the half-yard.

"Exactly half? Or perhaps you need a bit extra?" asked the woman, marking the edge of the fabric several inches farther down with a bony finger. Denna stroked the fabric, realizing that the woman was right; she needed just over half a yard. The woman smoothed the fabric along the cutting guide and tapped the brown splotch. "This flaw is permanent," she said, peering at Denna through bifocals. "Do you want it?"

"Yes, I need it," said Denna.

The woman cut and folded the fabric, then reached under the counter and pulled out a worn handbag. She reached inside and retrieved a small, ornate box. "I can't discount the fabric—it's already on sale—but I have something that might go with it. I think it will work for you," the woman said. She set the box on top of the fabric and slid them both across the counter to Denna.

At home after work, she pulled out the fleece and the box and laid them across the floor of the back room. After months of work, she was sure the room was almost done. The mattress, covered with a smooth flannel blanket, now rested on a small frame, its wooden headboard adorned with a silk flower trellis. Picture postcards and curtains with geometric patterns framed the window. Most of the ceiling was swathed in pastel gauze. A dozen small rugs covered the floor. The top of the dresser was sprinkled with rose petals and baby's breath, dry and crumbling but still fragrant. The green napkin and peach-stained blouse were centered on the wall next to the bed, with bits of fabric and colored paper spiralling outward from them.

Denna moved the fleece to the center of the bed, smoothing it carefully over the blanket and letting the dark brown part hang over the edge. She sat on the floor and leaned against the side of the bed, resting her head on the fleece. She smiled as she felt a satisfied hum at the base of her spine.

The fleece felt warm against her head and shoulders. She tucked her toes under one of the rugs, pulled another one across her lap, and drifted off to sleep.

The meadow was greener this time, and the scarf that floated above and around was flecked with darker reds and gold. She danced slowly, gracefully, her smooth steps glissading up the hillside to the line of peach trees.

She danced closer to the trees than ever before and discovered that a beautiful doll dressed in gingham leaned against the trunk of the closest tree. The doll wore a bright yellow sun bonnet trimmed in blue ribbon. The ribbon fluttered gently.

As Denna reached for the doll, it put its hand on its red cloth lips as if to say *hush*. As Denna stared, too startled to say anything, the doll grinned and ran behind the tree.

Cautiously, Denna stepped past the tree, but the doll wasn't there. She heard a giggle and saw a flash of yellow disappear behind the next row of trees.

A game, she suddenly realized, a hide and seek. She laughed and raced after, green scarf sparkling and floating along behind.

The orchard ended and the laughing doll stood in a field of overgrown grasses. The rim of her sun bonnet bobbed like a wildflower in the wind. Denna walked slowly to her, holding out her hand. The hand that clasped Denna's was warm and soft and small.

They walked hand in hand across the field, stopping amid a tangle of tiny bright flowers growing around a small rock cairn. Folded neatly on top of the cairn was a square of thick brown cloth. Denna unfolded it and spread it out on the ground next to the cairn.

Denna and the doll sat beside each other on the cloth, backs pressing against the rocks, feeling the coolness of the rocks, the warmth of the sun, the softness of the cloth.

The doll yawned and snuggled against Denna. Denna wrapped the green scarf around them both, curling her arm to hold the scarf in place and cradle the doll. She closed her eyes, letting the sun shine faint red and warm through her eyelids.

Denna awoke with a start. Bright morning sunlight filled the room. She was still leaning against the side of the bed. She sat for a moment, watching the dust motes streaming in the sunbeams. With a sigh, she untangled her feet from the throw rugs and got ready for work.

Just before noon, Jan called and asked her to lunch. Denna suspected Jan wanted to check up on her, to see how she was doing after the incident at FabricHouse. Well, that was fine; she felt better than she had in ages.

They met outside the Pied Pepper and, sure enough, Jan studied Denna a moment, forehead wrinkling in concern and said, "I was so worried about you." Then she stepped back in surprise. "My God, you're practically glowing! What happened?"

Denna smiled and shrugged, remembering the comfort of the doll and blanket.

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Denna kicked off her shoes and headed to the back room as soon as she got home. Jan had asked her about the little box the clerk at FabricHouse had given her, and she'd told her that she was so tired last night that she'd fallen asleep before really looking at it. That was at least partly true; the real truth was that she'd forgotten about it.

She picked up the box and studied it. It was wood, not cardboard as she'd assumed. The sides were smooth, almost warm to the touch. The lid was covered in intricate whorls—

hand carved, Denna thought. One of the whorls was chipped, exposing a rougher surface. She ran the tip of her forefinger along the chipped whorl, feeling the slight break between the smooth rise of the carved pattern and the faint ridges exposed by the chip. She flicked her fingernail gently against the ridges, wondering how many hands had rubbed the chip, smoothing away the splinters, trying to make the exposed surface match, but never getting it smooth enough.

She gently lifted the clasp and tilted the lid back on its hinge. The inside of the box smelled faintly of grass and earth, but was empty except for a small square of dark green velvet glued to the bottom. Denna stroked the cloth carefully, noticing faint color changes as her finger passed along the surface.

She closed the lid and stepped to the dresser, looking critically at the petals strewn across its surface. They came from a bouquet at the grocery, a bouquet Mike had given her, pointing out that it was the only one with three colors of roses. Only three roses, actually, but he was right; they were all different. She'd stammered her thanks, tried to pay for the flowers, but Mike had just laughed and said, "No, they're for you" and she'd known he was going to ask her out, so she fled, clutching the cellophane around the damp stems.

At home, she'd settled the bouquet into an old mayonnaise jar. She managed to get a paper cut when she tried to open the foil packet of preservative that was tucked into the bottom of the cellophane, finally gave up and dumped the packet into the trash and filled the jar with water.

She blotted a few spots of blood from the rose leaves and set the jar on the kitchen table, where it stayed until the petals had fallen from the roses and the baby's breath shed with the slightest movement. She'd swept them up in her hands and carried them to the dresser, relieved to finally know where they belonged.

She nestled the box among the petals, soft wings of muted color rustling and settling against its sides. She slid the box until it rested squarely in the center, lifted the lid, and stepped back.

The room shimmered. Denna was in the meadow, standing at the edge of a richly colored quilt. The open box rested in the center of the quilt. The soft green grass extended farther than ever before. A gentle breeze brought the scent of flowers and fresh peaches. Somewhere past the distant orchard, a child held her doll and slept peacefully. Denna stood watching, wondering if she could dance here, now, as she did in her dreams. She knelt down and touched the edge of the quilt, smoothing its edges with both hands, exploring its rich texture and intricate stitches with her fingertips. Slowly she realized that its pattern matched the one she had created on the walls, ceiling, floor, and furniture of her room.

She reached for the box and gently closed the lid.

The room returned to itself, and Denna stood, slowly turning in the center, arms wrapped in a tight hug around herself, as she studied the walls, the window, the edges, now hidden, where ceiling became wall became floor.

It's done, she thought. It's finally done.

Denna heard soft knocking on the apartment door. She slowly backed out of the room and walked to the door, standing on tiptoe to see out the peephole. It was Mike. She took a deep breath and opened the door.

Mike grinned at her through the doorway. "I thought maybe I could convince you to have a picnic with me," he said, holding up a paper bag. The warm smell of roast chicken floated across the space between them.

"I'm ready," Denna said, smiling back. "Come inside; I know the perfect place."

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