

1997 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Winner

# THE EMBROIDERED JACKET

By Carol Clark Ottesen

**M**Y FAMILY IS REALLY WEIRD. BELIEVE ME, I know. Maybe not weird like people in the mental hospital but more like they're playing possum, I mean like lying down in the street pretend dead with your feet up pretending you're dead sort of thing. And I'm writing this down just to get it straight in my head, but I don't think there's anybody out there that's going to believe me. For one, I'm only thirteen, and second, to the entire world, we're the model family. Maybe it's because Mom is sick and all and we have to pray a lot. You know, people really want to know there's a perfect family somewhere.

Or maybe it's because Dad is bishop and he always solves other people's problems. I know I'm one of his problems. Not that I'm immoral or unclean or that. I just don't fit.

Mom says if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all, but the trouble with that is you go around feeling like a bursting balloon or else a smiling idiot. I just can't keep my mouth shut. Seems like I'm a possum too, only one of those out on Highway 89 with the insides hanging out like pink peonies. Deadly honest. I mean, like I was about the jacket she embroidered for my birthday. But first, I'll tell you about the family deal.

Like once our family had to give a demonstration in church of what an ideal family home evening is, and I said flat out I wouldn't do it. My friends would laugh their heads off if they saw me up there being perfect. But my parents said I wouldn't get my allowance if I didn't, and would I please braid my hair so it wouldn't look like a bramble bush? And no lipstick. Well, I didn't braid my hair, and I wore lip ice. Ground my lips together so they'd be as red as my sister's. I didn't have a part to say until family council at the end where we bring up schedules and problems. My sister was supposed to say she had to babysit on Thursday, so could I do the dishes that night. Then I was supposed to say, "Yes, I will." But I just couldn't help it. I said, "No way. I did them twice for you last week."

Dad held back, but his face froze in a smile. He said, "I'm sure Mary Lou will be glad to help you out," and he just went on. But I do help. My sister goes on dates and does her college stuff, and I'm stuck with the dishes. It's the truth. Well, some-

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times I get nosebleeds after dinner. I really do. And have to lie down, but that's because I have to.

But anyway, we went on with that little performance which would have been pretty boring except that my little brother Joe kept climbing up on the piano to get the brownies. Stepping right on the keys which everyone thought was pretty funny. Dad had thought we should have refreshments like we really do sometimes as a reward for sitting through the lesson, but after, he was sorry. All the ladies thought Joey was so cute and hugged him to their bosoms, but Aunt Mable just sidled up to me without a word, tried to pat my hair down, and squeezed my hand so tight it hurt.

Now Aunt Mable is a case. Plays the piano right over everybody's conversation. Locks the door, and makes me sit on the green velvet sofa. She says, "Listen to my new arrangement of 'In the Garden.'" Well, I'd like to be in the garden, but I can't escape. She makes mistakes all the time, but she made an album once. She asks all the relatives, "Wouldn't you like to have my album?" They say, "yes," and she says, "That will be eight ninety-five."

My parents wanted me to learn piano like Mable, but I said no way. Singing is my thing. I'm out in front, and the piano is in the background. I was singing like Betty Hutton the other day when I was folding clothes, really belting "She says, 'Murder,' she says / every time we kiss / he says, 'Murder,' he says" and Dad yells, "Tone it down. That's enough murder for today."

My sister plays the piano, of course, and she is Miss Perfection and the biggest pain in my entire life. It's not like she's mean. She just ignores me like I was some earwig in her dirty socks, looks at me like, Oh poor, demented Mary who has not yet matured to my level. Sometimes I wear her clothes, and she tells Dad, and I get it—on the legs with a willow. But it's worth it. I wish she'd just get mad at me, but she just walks away with this big burden named Mary Lou on her back.

Then I hate it when Mom's rich brothers come from Phoenix and say to my sister, "You dear girl, with all this responsibility, caring for your mother, giving her shots, and giving piano lessons besides! What a wonderful girl!"

Then they slip a silver dollar in her hand. They never give me more than a quarter and a look like behave yourself so you won't be a burden to your sister!

But I get her back because we sleep together in a double



BRUCE READE

***"I prayed for an embroidered jacket just in case all that stuff about praying is true. But honestly, I hope God really isn't like a genie, like he grants you three wishes if you say the right words."***

bed and I eat soda crackers and brush crumbs all over on her side. Or sometimes I get a carrot and lie there in the dark, crunching as loud as I can. Then when we'd rub backs, I'd have her do mine first and then pretend to be asleep so I wouldn't have to do hers. She makes me so mad.

Once Dad walloped me because I lay on the floor on family night in my chenille robe with my legs propped up on my chair. I was just watching the robe slide down my leg and not paying attention and he stops the lesson, takes me down the basement stairs and I get three licks with the "Reminder." He wrote my name and the date on the board part. He said something about acting respectful at family home evening like I was in church. Then he hugs me on the way up the stairs, to make sure he does that "show an increase of love" stuff, but the next day, I have a bruise on my behind, and I have no idea what I really did wrong. In the shower after gym, the next day, Marilyn looked at me and said "Who kicked your butt?"

I told her to get out.

"What did you do wrong, now?"

I just stood there hoping the water would wash it off.

But Dad never gets mad in front of Mother. He came home from work one day, and I was sitting in the living room reading. He walked into the kitchen, and the floor was so dirty he stuck to it. I think it was orange juice.

"Why haven't you mopped this floor? You don't just sit when there is work to be done."

I said "It isn't Saturday yet, which is when I mop the floor."

His voice boomed so loud I was afraid Mother would hear from her hospital bed. "You mop it when it needs it, do you

hear? What if someone came and saw the floor like this?"

I heard, but I didn't get why it had to be cleaned that minute.

It's just us living there. Like the visiting teachers are going to go into the kitchen and report Dad to the stake president? Give me a break.

I'll tell you about the other kids. My brother is twelve and is sort of out of it. He just comes home and goes to his room upstairs and counts his money from his paper route because he wants a horse. Not that we could have a horse. But I think he'd be happy with any live thing. He brought a couple of cats home, but they got diarrhea and disappeared. Dad said they went to heaven. I hope heaven doesn't look like the pound. But maybe it does, with stray people locked up looking for a family to be with eternally.

My brother Joe and sister Ginny are five and six years old, and they're okay. Just kind of there. When they come home from school, they get excited and run in Mother's bedroom to show her their papers. Mom asks them to read to her and to come close so she can touch their faces. Because it hurts her, they know not to jiggle the bed, which is one of those big steel hospital things. Mom is so skinny my big sister can hardly find a place to give her a shot. The other day, her bracelet fell off her wrist, and she gave it to my sister "for keeps." My aunt Mable always says things to people that come like, "The big 'C' is a devastating evil," or to us, she says, "Don't say the word cancer in this house." The kids just say Mom is in bed taking a nap.

What I really hate is the way my dad and my sister smile so

sweetly when the neighbors bring over the tuna casseroles. See, the neighbors decided to get together and bring dinner in each night to our poor family, but what they didn't do is somehow get together and decide what they'd bring. You can't believe how many tuna noodle casseroles we had to eat. When I saw some lady come up the walk with a Pyrex dish in two hotpads, I knew what would happen. She'd hand the tuna casserole to my sister, then go into to Mom's bedroom, then come out wringing her hands and crying.

I hate it when neighbors look at us like we're poor deprived children. If we are so deprived, why don't people bring something beside tuna/noodle casserole? Sometimes the stuff would have pimento in it, and that was worse. Every time we'd take the lid off, we five children hoped for Swiss steak, but there was that fish smell again. Is it nice to bring us what their own kids wouldn't eat?

Dad said, "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth." But I looked it right in the mouth and I didn't appreciate having casseroles stack up in the fridge and then have to get the dishes cleaner than they came to give back.

Now I need to tell you about the embroidered jacket, which bothers me a lot, but I can't see where I could have done any different. See, Mom couldn't move from side to side, so she had an arm rest to hold her hands up so she could do hand-work. She couldn't sit at the sewing machine to make clothes anymore, so I hinted around that I'd like to have her embroider on my red wool jacket. It was pretty plain and unlined, more like a shirt I saw in the window of Williams Western Shop, with yarn embroidery on the back. I had told her I'd love to have something like that. I even prayed about it, just in case. When I say just in case, I mean just in case all that stuff about praying is true. I mean, I hear it all the time. Like if you lose your wallet, pray, and you'll find it. I did that once, but I didn't find my wallet, and I decided I just didn't have enough faith, or maybe I wasn't good like my sister. But I hope maybe it's because God isn't like a genie, like he grants you three wishes if you say the right words.

So anyway, prayer or not, Mom did embroider my jacket. I didn't know she was doing it for me until one day in February, she called me to her bedroom and asked me to sit down by her bed. She didn't talk for a minute, just getting up energy, I guess. She looked out the window. It was two months before my birthday, but she had her hand on this package sitting on her stomach wrapped in white tissue paper.

She turned away from me, and she looked out of the window. "Mary Lou, look at that icicle on the eaves. It gets shorter every day. By your birthday, it will be gone and the tulips will be blooming."

I knew that. "Yeah," I said. I was trying to be patient. And I'd be glad when winter was over. I picked up the package.

"It's for you," she said, looking out of her face with eyes that were deep and soft. She was sort of happy.

I unfolded the jacket. It was embroidered all over the front with a wreath of pastel flowers on each side, and little rosebud things were on the yoke. I just looked at it. The one I wanted had been embroidered on the back. And it wasn't flowers. It

was people, all different kinds of people in really bright colors, all holding hands. I turned it over, and I knew how hard she had worked, but I couldn't fake it. Besides, I had told her what I wanted. I thought, *gol*, nobody ever listens to me. I couldn't believe it! I had had real hope for this jacket.

So I just blurted out, "The embroidery is on the front instead of the back and—flowers. I didn't want flowers. I said I wanted *people*. Like all different kinds of people in bright colors." I couldn't believe it. All that work, and it wasn't what I had asked for. I put it on the dresser and walked out. I didn't want to look at her face. I know she had tried, but that wasn't the stuff I had wanted. I felt she was trying to make me like what she wanted embroidered on that jacket, and that really hurt my feelings.

But I have to tell you what happened. The morning of my birthday was another boring day with my sister burning the wheat cereal for breakfast and me putting on a dress that wasn't ironed. As usual, the nurse came to change Mom's dressing on her bed sores. Mom cried out as she always did, but I just kept going like I didn't hear it. What else can you do? I fixed my peanut butter sandwich for lunch. Dad came in looking pretty tired and said he wasn't going to work. I didn't ask why. I noticed he didn't eat any burned cereal. I was glad I had mopped the kitchen floor the night before because I know he'd blister me if he stuck to the floor today.

When I came home from school, Joe and Ginny were playing Lincoln Logs downstairs. With Levi's all green on the knees, Chipper Nelson was sitting in the living room, waiting for my sister to give him his piano lesson. But my sister was in the bedroom, and I didn't know why. Well, I went to the bedroom door to listen in case they were talking about me.

Mom had a faraway voice, and she was telling my sister to go in the closet and get some material for her wedding dress. Now my sister wasn't getting married—no way—her boyfriend's still on a mission. So I thought, Oh, no, Mom's losing it.

Then I heard my sister say to her, "It's okay, Mom. Just go to sleep."

Then mom whispered something I couldn't hear well, but I know it was about me because I heard her say Mary Lou. Probably about the jacket. But I couldn't help that. Then my sister went into the bathroom and blew her nose real hard and came out to tell Chipper to start his scales, and she'd be right out.

Dad was on the phone calling the nurse about Mom's bad leg, the one in that traction thing. It was cyanotic, meaning turning blue. I learned that last year. He told the nurse to come over, and when he put the phone down, he saw me just standing there. He looked at me funny, like I was all new. Almost like when he used to come in my room at night and pull the covers up tight over my chin, bounce me a couple of times, and sing, "Mary Lou, I love you. Cross my heart, indeed, I do."

He put his hands on my shoulders and said, "Mary, go get the rest of the kids."

I said, "What for? Everything is nice and quiet with the kids

downstairs.”

“Go get them.” he said all hoarse and scratchy, so I could hardly hear.

I got them, and we walked in mom’s bedroom and looked at her sleeping. Dad said she was beautiful when she was young, and I squinted my eyes to see if that could be true. I used to get in bed with her sometimes and just stare at her face, like the big pores in her nose, and just wonder if she was ever a teenager. She was probably all perfect, never grounded for being late or never talked back to her parents. Now her mouth was stretched over her teeth, and her skin was like the thin layer on the outside of an onion. But maybe she was pretty once, or maybe Dad just thought she was beautiful because he liked her. The two kids sat on the floor, Joe with a couple of Lincoln Logs and Ginny making him miserable as usual by saying, “I can read, and you can’t.”

“Mom’s sleeping, guys.” I flipped Ginny on the head. Those guys just don’t get it. My brother Don trailed in with muddy tennis shoes dragging on the rug, but nobody seemed to care. He was quiet and didn’t ask his usual stupid questions. Chipper was plodding up and down the keyboard with scales, and my sister was out there just sitting on the piano bench with him. You might know. Mother’s having another crisis, and Miss Perfect goes right on with her duties!

Not until the doctor and nurse came in did I knew some-

thing was up. Then my sister got rid of Chipper and came in, too. But we’d had scary times like this before. It just couldn’t be. If somebody dies, it’s bigger. I mean, like soft music instead of scales pounded on the piano, like kids stop playing, or there isn’t traffic noise, or the sun stops shining, or *something*.

Nobody was talking, and the doctor just held Mom’s wrist. It was like the quiet between the time you fall off your bike and when you hit the ground. Way in the background, somebody said, “She’s gone,” and it echoed around in my head before it got to my brain. I wanted so bad to cry, but for some reason, I just couldn’t. Gol, she was out of her misery. I thought about my embroidered jacket, but I couldn’t help that. I had just been honest. I had wanted *people* embroidered on my back, not flowers on my front. It was like she sewed those stupid flowers on my skin.

The kids were crying because everyone else was. I don’t think they really got it. Nobody even noticed when I walked out of the bedroom and went to the back porch and gave the latest godforsaken mongrel cat some milk. She lapped it up fast, and I stroked her back, wondering why she was alive and Mom wasn’t. I was glad she was there, though. Seemed like it helped to stroke her back and hear her purr. A little later, the little kids came out of the house chasing each other. They were laughing like nothing happened, and ran through the newly blooming flowers, kicking the heads off the tulips. ☒




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## SLOW CLOUDS

A breeze bends the cottonwoods,  
grazes an extravagant denim sky.  
Tonight the late late chores will wait.  
The two of them ease into the cot on the porch,  
watch the cows move through the sand like slow clouds,  
connect the blazing dots of planets.  
Daily dust sticks to the ground.  
She traces the contradictory highways in his hands.

A rolling moon makes them sleepy.  
Tomorrow, maybe gusts to roar and needle,  
sting the raw canyons.  
But the night is smooth,  
and the blue length of his sleeve  
dusts her bare arm.

—MARILYN BUSHMAN-CARLTON