

Red Poppies

by Rosemarie Wurth-Grice

Bewley stood at the clothesline, lifting the wet embroidered pillowcase from the basket and straightening her back to hang it to the sagging line. A washboard leaned against the tub and the sun used it as a mirror as Bewley brushed a wisp of auburn hair from her sunburned face. She noticed the sleeve of her blouse was missing a button. Another item to add to her mending tonight, she thought, after the children had gone to sleep.

Bewley tried to ignore the Kentucky heat as a drop found its way down her neck and between her shoulder blades. It was hot for seven in the morning, and mid-October. The children were still sleeping in the house.

Tom would not be home from the tobacco market for another week. She hated the fall when he had to leave them. The days were long and the nights longer, but with the chores of running the house, tending the farm, and taking care of the children while he was gone, she didn't have time to think of her loneliness.

She methodically bent down to the basket, lifted the wet sheets to the line, clipped them and scooted down a step and repeated the motion. The sheets filled most of the line. Teddy's diapers hung on the end, looking even smaller next to the sheets.

She was pinning Anna's white cotton dress with the bright red poppies sprinkled across the bodice to the line. She looked over the dress and decided it would only fit Anna for this fall. Her twelve-year-old daughter was growing fast, and next year she would not be able to fit into it at all. A sweat bee hovered closely to her hand. She tried not to disturb the bee for the thought of being stung annoyed her. She was placing the second pin to the line when her hand began to tremble. It was slight, but she couldn't stop her hand from shaking.

"Mama, I'll start the biscuits," Anna called from the back door.

"Don't forget to warm Teddy's milk too," she called back, grateful that Anna was old enough to help her with the chores.

She grabbed her trembling hand with the other one and tried to steady it. The dark knowledge that had been loitering in the shadows of her thoughts for the last month became glaringly clear. She had been here at the line hanging the wash that day too. She hadn't noticed when the collie ambled up out of the woods. She hadn't noticed him zigzag across the yard and slink under the swing that hung from the apple tree. She hadn't noticed the foam bubbling from his mouth. She had just pinned the baby's bib to the line when she heard a low growl behind her and turned to see the mad dog lunge for her and to feel his teeth graze her calf.

She had jumped back, nearly falling over the basket at her feet, and had run to the house, pushed the door shut and looked out the kitchen window to see the collie stagger and sway across the yard and down the dirt drive.

It wasn't until after he disappeared and her breath evened out that she noticed her stinging calf muscle. When she pulled up her petticoat she saw a trickle of red running down her leg and disappearing into her brogan.

The realization of what had happened swept over her as she rushed to get the water and bar of lye soap from the dish to wash the wound.

She had pushed the incident back in her mind, thinking if she had been infected it would take a few weeks before she would know for sure. She had washed the wound well that day; perhaps she would not contract the dog's hydrophobia. Yet, she woke each day with a certain dread that a symptom might occur. Today she had woken with a dull headache that had persisted. She thought it was just the heat, but now as she held her trembling hand, she knew.

Bewley had been thinking it out for weeks. She walked across the yard to the barn, led the mare from her stall and hitched her to the buggy. The barn was dark and cool; the air was thick with the scent of hay and horse. She led the mare out quietly and tied her to a post, then went back to grab a rope that hung neatly coiled on a nail. Her hand still trembled as she held it.

When she was finished, she entered the kitchen. Anna came in, holding Teddy. She saw her mother's now pale face and the rope in her hand.

"Mama, what's wrong?" she asked.

Bewley looked up at her daughter, searching for what to say.

"Four weeks ago, a dog wandered into the yard and bit me."

Anna stepped forward, alarm in her voice. "Are you all right, Mama?"

Bewley stepped back and looked straight into her daughter's eyes. "No, Anna, I'm not. That dog was sick, real sick. And now I'm sick too." She saw her daughter's eyes narrow and her lips tighten. "You're going to have to be strong. Do you understand?"

Anna didn't understand, but she knew her mother well enough to know that if she said she would have to be strong, then she would have to muster every bit of strength she had. "Do I need to get help, Mama?"

"Yes, child, but first you've got to do something and it's going to be hard, but you've got to do it. Get a bag and pack some of Teddy's diapers and clothing, and some of yours. It's going to be a slow ten-mile ride to town across the mountain. You will need to take water and some biscuits."

Anna followed her mother's directions, packed the bags, got the biscuits and water, and picked up Teddy.

"Now child, I need you to take this rope and tie me to that old oak tree."

Anna's eyes got wide. "But Mama . . ."

"When I get to feeling really bad, I'm going to be like that old collie dog that bit me. He probably didn't know what he was doing. The sickness made him mad. I won't know what I'm doing either. I don't want to hurt nobody."

Anna fought to speak. The knot in her throat tightened.

Bewley walked into the yard; the late morning sun was brighter than before. Anna took the rope and watched as her mother stood with her back against the tree.

"Mama, I can't."

Bewley stopped her.

"Yes child, you can. Now do as I said."

Anna wrapped the rope around her mother's lean body, leaving one hand free for her mother to bring a flask of water to her lips. She picked up little Teddy, who had been sitting in the shade of the oak watching the spots of light on the ground. Anna held Teddy tight and climbed onto the buggy.

"Ride, Anna. Be a brave girl and take care of your little brother," Bewley called out.

"I will, Mama," Anna called back as she took the reins and set the mare into a slow pace.

Bewley watched the two ride down the lane and out of sight. A small breeze picked up, and Bewley could see the dress with the red poppies begin to flutter on the line. No, she thought. Anna won't be able to wear that dress next year—she is growing up so fast.