

Midwinter Break for other kids means time to zone out on the TV, listen to iPods, surf Facebook. Midwinter Break for me means a week at Aunt Rosa's, just the two of us, with Uncle Josh up north and out of the way. We call it our girls'-only week, our seven-day sleepover, and it's a time for pancakes and hot chocolate and baking cookies. We always go to at least one movie and spend at least one day browsing boutiques downtown. Normally Mom drives me into town in the family Jeep, and we'll gurggle and clang down dirt roads, passing fields and barns and farmhouses, watching the snow turn gray and gross as we get closer to town.

This year, to mix things up, Aunt Rosa comes to get me instead.

She arrives at the farm in her brand-new electric car, one of those new-fangled "green" two-seaters. By the time she stops at the end of our long gravel driveway, the red paint job is covered with a fine spray of snow. "It looks like a country car already, Rose," Mom jokes when my aunt rolls down the window.

Her younger sister laughs. "I think a visit to the farm was just what it needed." She sees me coming down the front steps of our big slant-roofed farmhouse, and waves and toots the horn in greeting. "Hey there, sweetie!"

"Hi, Aunt Rosa," I say with a grin, stretching one arm through the window to give her a half-hug. "I'm so excited!"

"So am I, dear. Let's not waste any time—go throw your stuff in back, and we'll get a move on."

She pops the trunk for me, and I set my bag down practically under her seat. "Your new car is really tiny," I tell her, taking two steps to arrive at the passenger door.

"And a lot more efficient than my old one, you can believe that."

"Here, don't forget this," Mom cuts in, coming around the front to hand me a binder overflowing with homework. "You need to get started on your science project." I say okay, even though all of us know I won't get to it, and then Mom slings an arm around my shoulders and kisses me on the cheek. "Oh, I'll miss you this week, but I know you'll enjoy yourself. Have fun, Perennial." She smiles and pulls my door open for me, and I sit down and buckle myself in. Aunt Rosa turns the car in a tight U-y and we head toward the road, with my mom waving from in front of the house. I don't wave back because my face is determined to fold itself into a pout. No one but Mom calls me Perennial, because really, what kind of name is that for an eighth grader

trying to have a life? It labels me as even more of a farm-freak flower-child than I already am, and even in my out-of-the-way school, it gets me laughed at.

We drive without speaking, cruising down Main and past the strings of white Christmas lights lining the storefronts, and then sweeping over the river and up into the subdivision. The car comes to a stop on the gentle curve of Aunt Rosa's driveway, which is all smooth, poured tan concrete—nothing like the line of poky gravel back home.

My aunt turns off the car and, without warning, reaches over to ruffle my hair. "Come on, Penny, cheer up. We have a whole week to ourselves here, so whatever's bothering you, just leave it behind on the farm." I can't argue with that kind of reasoning, and I certainly can't argue when she follows it up with, "Let's get planning."

I do as she suggested and let all my farm-related worries roll away, and then I smile and brush my reddish bangs out of my eyes. "Okay, let's start now—what are we doing tonight? Did you rent a movie, or is there something good on TV?"

She raises her eyebrows at me and grins. "I have an even better idea." And she gets out of the car and closes the door before I can ask more questions.

It's already kind of late and getting dark out, so once I've tossed my things into my home-away-from-home guest bedroom, we get started on dinner. We're having spaghetti tonight, with garlic bread and a tossed salad and meat sauce that Aunt Rosa simmered in the Crock Pot all day long. It tastes so good that I go back for seconds, which, being the youngest of five and the only girl, I rarely get to do at home. Once we've loaded the dishwasher, my aunt tells me to follow and leads me into a room across the hall from my bedroom. I've never been in here before, and it's a small, cluttered space, with bolts of fabric and random newspapers and things leaning against one another. Small tables are shoved against the walls, half-buried under the clutter.

"Oh, I'm sorry you have to see it like this, Penny," Aunt Rosa says, tossing a smile over her shoulder and drawing the curtains over the room's single window. "I was planning to tidy up all week, but I just never got around to it. Anyway, welcome to my craft room." She weaves through the mess with practiced ease, moving toward one of the tables while I bump into some of the junk and knock over a big bolt of orange cloth. It spills open across the floor, and I bundle it back up before turning to my aunt, who's busy dumping some things off a small table. She folds

up a wooden leaf and pulls and flips something back, and then there's a sewing machine in front of her.

"Whoa," I say over the fabric in my arms.

She smiles at that. "I agree—it's pretty cool, isn't it? I was thinking—I don't know. Stop me if I start sounding crazy. But we never really do much of anything on our Midwinter week, so what if we started a craft project this year?" She turns and takes the orange cloth from me to roll it back up. "Like, an aunt-and-niece quilt, kind of. What would you think of that?"

"Me, sewing?" I kind of shake my head and start to lean against a coat rack-looking thing, and then stop when it topples over with a crash. "I don't know..."

"Oh, but we'd be using the machine, of course. Hand-quilting takes forever—trust me, I've been there." She sets a hand over her heart in a "Believe me, we are *not* doing this by hand" kind of gesture. "If you don't want to do the actual work, you're welcome to just help with the designing and cutting, and I'll be here to walk you through all the steps. What do you say?"

An image of the quilt in the master bedroom on the farm pops into my head. Mom made it when she got engaged, and Aunt Rosa helped so her sister could take a part of her old life with her into the future. I've always loved the way the colors come together in triangles and squares of red and mauve and rose-petal pink, making diagonal lines of diamonds across the surface. The hand-sewn stitches are so tiny and fine that it's hard to notice them, even when I look for them on purpose. The quilt is like my nonexistent sister, or another brother—it's a part of my family, a constant in my life, and great to cuddle with on a cold night.

And what if it was *mine*? What if I *made* something like that, a piece that might remain in my family for years, a piece that my kids or nieces and nephews might know as being stitched together by *my* hands? That's what Aunt Rosa's offering here, and it's too good to resist.

"Okay," I blurt, and I'm ready, just like that, to jump into this quilt-making thing feet-first.

"Let's get started."

"That's my girl." Aunt Rosa turns to another table and shoves a stack of old newspapers into a corner, releasing a sigh of dust. "Sorry about that," she says, and then sneezes, three times in a row, at the top of her lungs.

"Bless you," I tell her, and we chuckle before turning to the newly uncovered surface, a green mat covered with a grid of thin yellow lines.

“This is where the magic starts,” my aunt tells me, patting the mat with one hand. She steps forward, pulls the orange fabric out of my arms, and rolls it back into a proper bolt. “Do you want to use this color, then?”

“Sure. I guess.” I’m too busy looking at the gridded lines to really pay attention to what she’s saying. “Um, so, what is this, again?”

“This,” she says, and then pauses to open a drawer on the side of the table. After a minute of rooting around, she comes up with a yellow-handled tool that looks like a pizza cutter with a retractable blade. “This is called a rotary cutter. It’ll slice right through your fingers, or scratch up a hardwood floor or tabletop something awful.” I cross my arms, hiding my hands as she continues. “But it’s the only tool around when you’re talking about cutting fabric for a quilt. Nothing gives a better or straighter edge. But you have to line up that edge before you make any cuts, of course.” She slaps a wide ruler made of clear plastic onto the table. “That’s where this bad boy comes in.”

“But what about the green...?”

“Oh, that’s a special mat for the rotary cutter. It keeps it from damaging anything, so long as you long only put fabric in front of the blade.” She claps her hands around the rotary cutter and gives me an eager grin. “Alright, ready to get started?” Before I can answer, she clarifies, “Let’s just figure out the size and pattern you want to work with, and we can do the actual cutting and everything tomorrow.”

When I agree, my aunt brings out a fat book of all the different patterns and blocks you can use to build a quilt, and for a long time we just sit there, poring over possibilities, totally unable to make up our minds. Should I go with Log Cabin, a wimp’s beginner-level block made from rectangles? Or should I try something that would definitely be out of my depth, like the gorgeous Road to Oklahoma or Butterfly at the Crossroads? And then there are the colors—it turns out Aunt Rosa has cotton in a lot more shades than just orange, and, as she tells me more than once, “We can always run out and buy something new tomorrow.” But what colors work together in a block, and how will those fit with the colors in other blocks? How will those fit with the quilt as a whole? It’s like painting, I realize—you’re pulling shades and shapes together to make a composition. And my composition skills have kept me from getting past a B in every art class I’ve taken throughout middle school.

“Any ideas?” my aunt prods after we’ve spent a good couple of hours getting nowhere.

“Ugh,” I reply, setting a hand on my forehead. “I don’t know where to start. There are too many options and colors and possibilities...”

“Maybe you could try Ohio Star.”

“What’s that?”

She reaches past me and flips back a few pages in the book, and her finger lands on a photo of a quilt block. It’s made up of nine patches, with a diamond in the middle surrounded by four triangles. Around this, there are four sets of triangles set in hourglass shapes, and together the whole thing forms a star with four sides, eight points.

“It’s a fairly simple block that’ll teach you everything you need to know for more complicated projects,” Aunt Rosa explains. “I made my first quilt with Ohio Star, and it’s still one of my favorite blocks.”

I examine the images more closely, taking extra time to stare at the picture of a small sample quilt. “It kind of looks like the pattern on Mom’s big comforter, the one you helped her make.”

“That’s right. We used a couple of different blocks in that quilt, but mostly this one.”

I stare at the page for a few more minutes, trying to brainstorm a color scheme without success. “Well,” I say with a shrug, “maybe we can work on it tomorrow.”

My aunt glances at her watch and gives a little jump. “Goodness, I should’ve kept better track of the time—it’s almost eight o’clock. Your favorite TV show will be on any minute, and I think there are some hot-chocolate packets in the pantry with your name on them.”

“Really?” I look up sharply, all thoughts of blocks and patches gone from my head.

“Absolutely, dear. We might even have time for some popcorn, if we get moving right away.” We get up and go out of the room together, and in the kitchen Aunt Rosa wastes no time in setting a couple of pans on the stove. She comes from a farming background, just like my mom, and both of them have chosen to forego microwaves in their houses. Sometimes my friends ask me how I live without a microwave, but honestly, I don’t get how people live *with* one. After watching my mom make tea in a copper-bottomed kettle and reheat leftovers in the oven or our cast-iron skillet, I can’t see the point. I mean, everything tastes better if without a microwave involved.

That certainly holds true tonight when Aunt Rosa pours the hot chocolate into mugs and the steam swirls up around my face, smelling of crushed cocoa. We pour a carton of whipping

cream into a bowl and beat it into a frothy cloud, adding sugar as the popcorn pings open inside a second pot. When everything's ready, we take our snacks into the living room and get comfortable on the couch, watching the opening credits of my favorite sitcom roll across the screen.

But I can't focus on the show tonight, and I sip my hot chocolate too fast and kind of burn my tongue, and then the salty, over-buttered popcorn and fluffy, cool whipped cream are reduced to mere textures in my mouth. My mind drifts back to those quilt squares, and the patterns upon patterns that can be fashioned from them. There are literally millions of possibilities—any one tiny variation in color, in the size of a given block, in its placement in the quilt as a whole, would result in a totally different finished product.

I'm still thinking about it as we chuckle over the concluding jokes and wash the popcorn pot and put the mugs away. I'm still thinking about it as I settle into a luxurious lavender-scented bubble bath, the kind I never have time for with my smelly brothers needing to take showers. I'm still thinking about it while I brush my teeth, and I smear toothpaste in my hair because I can't get those cuts of fabric out of my mind.

I'm still thinking about it after I'm all settled into bed and Aunt Rosa has said good-night and pulled the covers up to my chin and turned off the light on the way out. This is the part where I close my eyes and don't open them until the smell of breakfast wafts into my room in the morning. Instead, I'm lying on my back, staring at the stripes of light coming through the slats of my Venetian blind. They're kind of like the long, skinny rectangles needed for Log Cabin blocks. Or maybe, if they got cut up into squares, they would make a patchwork. Or they could be snipped into triangles, or semicircles could be stenciled out of them. There's enough length for any combination of those shapes, and more.

I turn over with a sigh and pull my blanket over my head, blocking out the ceiling. The comforter is warm, and I stretch a hand out to finger the small stitching, realizing that it must have been sewn by hand. I'm lying under a quilt, probably another one by Aunt Rosa. I sit up and take a closer look at the diagonal stripes of color running across its surface, at the way the gold borders come together with the springtime-pale green diamonds and dark blue triangles. And in that instant, I know what I want my quilt to look like.

It has to have orange—it'll revolve around it. Orange for firelight, for candles, for the whole-body comfort and peace that I find at Aunt Rosa's house. Maybe dark blue, some kind of

cobalt, for the wintery darkness outside. Brown, for hot chocolate. Creamy yellow, for popcorn. Something green—with trees—for the farmhouse and the woods. Something bright and playful for downtown, for the buzz of the city as a whole. I keep playing with ideas, holding up different colors together inside my head, until I drift off to sleep.

“Well,” Aunt Rosa says with a grin when she shakes me awake in the morning, “did you have any good ideas in your sleep last night?”

“Oh yeah,” I reply with a yawn, stretching my arms out over my head.

“And?”

I give her a grin. “Definitely Ohio Star.”