

My mother doesn't make candles any more. Her candles used to be the smoothest and straightest in North Texas. They burned bright with an even flame and never smoked. Ma ran candles in the late fall, when Pa had killed a steer and she had rendered the tallow. She'd make more candles than we needed for daily use for the whole year, just so we could have them all around the house at Christmas. Sometimes, in the summer if she could find beeswax, she made a second batch, but beeswax was hard to come by.

Ma knew just how much clay from the Red River bottoms to put in the kettle so the candles would have some color, and she knew how long to wait for the dirt to color the tallow and then settle to the bottom so that the candles wouldn't be gritty. In front of our cabin Pa had built a stone pit just sized to hold the kettle above a fire, and Ma spent hours there, dipping a wick over and over again, hanging the finished candles to dry, admiring her handiwork when she was done. Sometimes she poured the hot tallow into a mold and it would set in a hour or two on a cold December day, but there wasn't any art in that, she said. Ma liked to dip her candles by hand. "Mama, can I dip a candle?"

"No, Elizabeth, you haven't the patience yet to make it smooth and straight. Someday . . ."

I sat and watched and waited for the day I was grown enough to dip candles. To be able to dip a candle was the mark of a woman to me. It wrapped up in one skill all the things that a woman did, and I dreamt of the day I had a husband and children of my own to care for. When I was grown, I would dip candles.