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A speech on quilting

As you know, I'm a lawyer when I'm not sewing (or knitting). As such, I subscribe at work to e-mails that tell me of the latest decisions of the important courts here in Canada. There is one such e-mail prepared weekly by a local law firm. I always scroll to the end where, after the serious stuff, there is a section titled "Last Word". Today, it was about a speech given at a conference on quilting (Quilt Canada 2010) by Allan Fradsham, a criminal court judge in Calgary, Alberta, where the conference was held.

Here's the text. It's long but amusing, and so worth a read:

“When, some years ago, Gloria told me that she was going to build upon her years of sewing experience, and take up "quilting", I thought she was telling me that she was going to take up a new hobby or a new craft. I was completely oblivious to the fact that what she was really announcing was that she was taking up membership in a tightly knit (if you'll pardon the expression) group of individuals whose loyalty to one another makes motorcycle gang members seem uncommitted, and whose passion for quilting activities makes members of cults look positively disinterested. As is the case with many spouses, I was completely unaware that there existed this parallel universe called quilting.

However, to be completely unaware of a world-wide sub-culture operating right under our noses and in our homes is a bit obtuse even for husbands. But there it is, and here you are. And, most oddly, here I am. You might wonder how all this came to pass; I know I certainly do.

I cannot now identify what was the first clue I detected indicating that Gloria had entered the fabric world equivalent of Harry Potter's Hogwarts. It might have been the appearance of the fabric. Bundles of fabric, mounds of fabric, piles of fabric, towering stacks of fabric. Fabric on bolts, and stacks of small squares of fabric tied up in pretty ribbons (I later learned these were "fat quarters" which to this day sounds to me like a term out of Robin Hood). The stuff just kept coming into the house as though it were endless waves crashing onto a beach. And then, just like the waves, the most amazing thing happened: it would simply disappear. It was as though the walls of the house simply absorbed it. Metres and metres (or as men of my generation would say, yards and yards) of fabric would come into the house. It would arrive in Gloria's arms when she returned from a shopping excursion. It would arrive in the post stuffed in postal packs so full that they were only kept together by packing tape (these overstuffed Priority Packs are the equivalent of me trying to fit into pants I wore in law school). These packages would arrive having been shipped from unheard of towns and villages in far away provinces or states or overseas countries (I am convinced the internet's primary activity is not to be found in pornography; that is just a ruse, the internet's real function is to facilitate the trafficking and distribution of fabric). Wherever we went, be it in Canada, the U.S., Europe, wherever there was a collection of more than three houses, Gloria would find a quilt shop from which she would pluck some prize from some bin with the enthusiasm and unerring eye of an archaeologist finding a new species of dinosaur.

And of course, the reason that there are quilt shops everywhere is because there are quilters everywhere, and I mean EVERYWHERE. A few years ago, Gloria had been visiting her sister-in-law in Kelowna. While there, she found and purchased a Featherweight sewing machine. I understand that making such a find is a matter of such joy that it may eventually attract government taxation. When it came time to fly back to Calgary, Gloria worried about what the people at airport security would have to say when she tried to take the machine onto the plane. She need not have been concerned. Now, airport security takes pride in preventing me from carrying onto a plane a small squirt of toothpaste left in a rolled up toothpaste tube if the tube in which it is lodged did at some point in the distant past, contain a prohibited amount of toothpaste. My spot of toothpaste is a national security threat. However, when it came time for Gloria to go through security with the Featherweight, which is made of metal and has needles in secret compartments, airport security came to a standstill. Why? Were they about to confiscate the machine, and detain the person who dared to try to board with it? Of course not. They gathered around it in awe and admiration, asking Gloria questions about where she had found it, and expressing admiration for her good fortune in finding it. And why did Gloria get such warm treatment when I am shunned for trying to maintain some degree of oral hygiene? Well, the answer is obvious; the assembled airport security staff were all quilters, complete with the secret handshake.

Maybe I should have twigged to what was happening when the washing of all this fabric led to having to replace our washing machine, which was clearly not designed for such industrial use. Now, let me pause here. I understand that there is an intense debate within your world about whether or not fabrics should be washed upon purchase. I do not wish to be caught in any cross-fire between the two camps, for all I know, as an outsider, I may not be authorized to even know of the controversy. I do suspect that if men were making the decision, quilting would involve lot less fabric washing and a lot more beer drinking.

I did eventually discover where all the fabric went. It went into drawers, cupboards, shelves, and, eventually it completely filled up a closet, which took up one full wall in Gloria's newly built "sewing room". What we now call Gloria's "sewing room", we used to call "the basement".

I have discovered that one of the art forms mastered by quilters is the ability to purchase container loads of fabric, conceal it in the house, and camouflage the purchase so that it slips right under the nose of the unsuspecting spouse. As a loving and obedient spouse, I have on many occasions found myself in quilt stores where I serve two useful functions: I can reach bolts of fabric stored on top shelves; and I can carry numerous bolts of fabric to a cutting table. However, I have also started to listen to what is said in quilting stores, and one day, in a little quilting shop in the heart of Alberta farming country, I heard something that made it clear to me that quilters are so clever and, dare I say, devious, that there is really no sport for them in fooling we naive husbands. Gloria had decided to buy some fabric (which is similar to saying that Gloria had decided to breathe), and had gone to the till to pay for it. Upon running through Gloria's charge card, the clerk quietly said, "Now, when you get your credit card statement, don't be alarmed when you see an entry for our local feed store. We run our charges under that name so that if a husband looks at the credit card statements, he will think that the entry is just something he bought at the feed store for the farm". That sort of financial shell game would make Goldman Sachs proud. I knew at that moment that there had been a major and probably irrevocable shift in the world's power structure. I concede it is basically over for the non-quilting husband.

As you have been told, I sit as a criminal law judge, and as such I often find myself sitting on drug trials, or issuing search warrants in relation to drug investigations. I must say that the more I learned about the quilting world, the more I started to see similarities between that world and the drug world. It has caused me some concern.

We all interpret events from our own perspectives using the lessons we have learned through life. When I saw the extent to which Gloria's collection of fabric was growing, I began to worry. In the law relating to drugs, the amount of a drug one has in one's possession is an important factor in determining the purpose for which the person has the drug. For example, if a person is in possession of crack cocaine (to use a drug with an addictive power equivalent to fabric), one look at the amount of crack the person possessed. If the amount exceeds the amount one would realistically possess for personal use, then one may reasonably draw the inference that the purpose of the possession is not personal use, but, rather, it is for the purpose of trafficking the drug. So, you can imagine what I thought when I saw Gloria's collection of fabric grow to a point where she readily admitted that she could never use all that fabric in several lifetimes. I reluctantly concluded that I was married to a very high-level fabric trafficker. Mind you, in order to qualify as a trafficker, one does have to part with fabric, and I see very little evidence of that happening.

In fact, the more I thought about the parallels between the quilting culture and the drug culture, the clearer the similarities became. Consider the jargon. I have learned that this vast collection of fabric, which is stored in our house, is a "stash". Well, drug dealers speak of their "stash" of drugs. Gloria speaks of doing "piece" work. In the drug world there are often people who bring together the crack cocaine dealer and the buyer; think of a real estate agent, but not as well dressed, through perhaps somewhat less annoying. Those people speak of breaking off a "piece" of crack as payment for bringing the parties together. Sounds to me like a type of "piece work". Those who transport drugs are often called "mules"; I have frequently heard Gloria refer to me as her mule when I am in a quilt store carrying stacks of fabric bolts (or did she say I was stubborn as a mule?). Well, it was something about mules. And I should think that this whole conference is a testimony to the addictive qualities of quilting.

In my role as a Sherpa, I have accompanied Gloria on various quilting expeditions, and I have been impressed by many things. One is, as I have mentioned, that no matter where one goes, there will be a quilt store. The proliferation of quilt shops makes Starbucks outlets seem scarce. One day Gloria led me into a hardware store, which seemed odd to me, that is until I discovered that, as I walked towards the back of the store, the store had become a quilt shop. The metamorphosis was extraordinary, and very crafty (if you will pardon the pun). At that moment, I knew how Alice felt as she followed that rabbit down the rabbit hole. Suddenly, one was in a different universe.

Another thing I have learned is that the operators of quilt shops have great business acumen. In one of Gloria's favourite shops, upon entry I am greeted by name and offered a cup of coffee. If the grandson is with us, he is allowed to choose a book to take home. It is all so friendly that I don't even notice that I cannot see over the growing pile of fabric bolts which fill my arms. I wish that my doctor did such a good job of distracting me when it is time to do a prostate exam.

I have learned that quilting is both international in scope and generous in spirit. I have learned that quilters are quick to assist those in need, and that they have always been prepared to stand up for what is right. For example, I think of Civil War quilts, which often conveyed messages about the Underground railway for slaves escaping to Canada. I think of the One Million Pillowcase Challenge, and the Quilts of Valour project. At one point, I thought of suggesting the creation of an organization akin to "Doctors Without Borders", but decided that an organization called "Quilts Without Borders" would indeed be illogical.

And of course, there are the resultant quilts. We have quilts throughout the house. They adorn beds, chesterfields, the backs of chairs. They are stacked on shelves, they are stored in drawers, they are shoved under beds, they are hung on walls. There is even one on the ceiling of the sunroom. They compete for any space not taken up with the fabric, which will eventually result in more quilts. I live in a cornucopia, which disgorges quilts instead of produce. I have decided that quilts are the zucchini of crafts. But who can complain? Quilt seriously, each one is a work of art, and an instant family treasure. While family members and friends are delighted to receive them, I churlishly begrudge seeing them go out the door.

Though I tease Gloria about the all-consuming nature of her obsession, I am constantly amazed at the skill necessary to create those works of art. I stand in awe as I watch her do the mathematics necessary to give effect to (or correct) a pattern. When she quilts, she combines the skill of an engineer, a draughtsman, a seamstress, and an artist. Her sewing machines require her to have, as she does, advanced computer and mechanical skills. She knows her sewing machines as well as any Hell's Angel knows his Harley. She uses measuring and cutting tools and grids, which would challenge the talents of the best land surveyors.

In short, I am very proud of what Gloria does, as each of you should be proud of your own skills and creations. They are impressive and very evident at this Conference. On behalf of those of us who wouldn't know a binding from a batting, I simply ask that when you finally and formally announce that have already taken over the world that you find some simple tasks for us to do to justify our existence. You might call those tasks... the QUILT PRO QUO.

Gloria and I very much appreciate your warm hospitality this evening.

In closing, the hotel management has asked me to remind you that those found cutting up the table cloths for quilting fabric will have their rotary cutters confiscated and forfeited to the Crown."