

THE PATCHWORK PRINCESS OF THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP

by Carole Boston Weatherford illustrated by Molly Windsor

Once upon a time, there lived a slave girl named Lila. In the slave quarters, she walked on stilts, rode stick horses, and played marbles and horseshoes. Lila's only toy was a rag doll named Precious who wore a patchwork gown. Before being sold off, Lila's mama, Ayo, had sewn the doll. "Hold Precious tight," Ayo told Lila the last time they hugged.

From then on, Aunt Suzie, the cook and midwife, took Lila under her wing. The old woman taught Lila to piece quilts from scraps, treat ailments with herbs and roots, and make meals from leavings.

The Civil War years were lean. Even the master's family ate fatback and turnips. When the Yankees came, Aunt Suzie and Lila left the plantation for good.

Carrying the rag doll, an iron pot, an axe, a knife, and a bundle of quilts and rags, Lila and Aunt Suzie trekked to the Great Dismal Swamp. With quilts and fallen branches, they pitched a tent.

By day, they built a small cabin. Aunt Suzie hung a wreath of bluebells above the door to ward off evil spirits. And she warned Lila, "Gators feed after sundown."

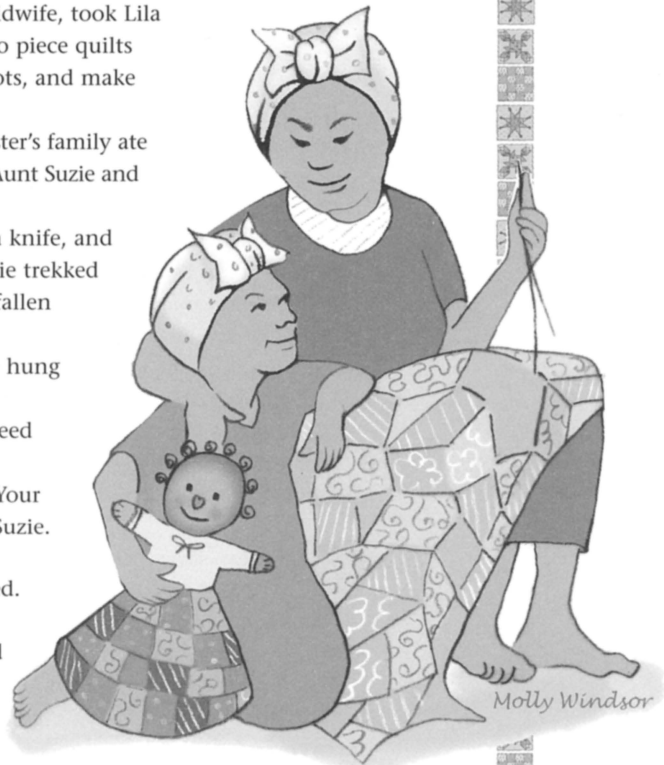
Safe in bed, Lila soaked up family stories. "Your grandfather was an African chief," said Aunt Suzie.

"That makes me a princess," Lila declared.

"This cabin is your palace," Aunt Suzie joked.

The two laughed till they cried.

The old cook and the young princess passed time fishing, carving wood, weaving baskets, sewing quilts, and gathering herbs and roots. In the swamp, they met runaway slaves who had been hiding out for years and ex-slaves on their way to someplace better. Aunt Suzie and Lila gave what help they could. They patched clothes, nursed sore feet, and served meals of wild game. Sometimes, they even birthed babies.



Molly Windsor