

Crafty

Joseph, my nine-year-old great-grandson, slouches into the living room, his sleek arms hanging. He plonks himself down beside me on the sofa causing me to drop a stitch off my knitting needle.

“Grandma Doris, I’m bored. There’s nothing to do.” He crosses arms with an air of defeat.

“Nothing?” I replace the lost stitch onto the knitting needle. “Do I look like I’m doing nothing?”

“That’s girl stuff.” His right leg kicks out as he says this. A reflex, like he could kick this woman-like hobby further away from his person.

“Men knit too, you know, but maybe only those who are confident enough to knit,” I say, “and they need to have patience and be good at math too.”

In the corner of my eye, I see him glance at me then he leans in to examine my craft. I come to a six-stitch cable and reach for my cable needle then slip three stitches onto it.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“I believe I’m speaking English, Joseph.”

“No, I mean, I don’t know any guys who knit.”

I lower my knitting onto my lap, ready for a break anyway. I turn to Joseph. “My father—your great-grandfather—knitted socks during the war.” Joseph’s brown eyes widen.

“Knitting is a skill for not only the fingers, but also for the mind, you see. And anyone who knits never gets bored.” I raise an eyebrow at Joseph who by this time has uncrossed his arms.

“Your *dad* knitted socks?”

“Uh-huh.” I spread and wiggle my fingers; my right baby finger cracks.

“But my mom doesn’t knit.”

“She does; she just doesn’t have time for it. She’s too *busy*. I taught her myself when she was about your age...when she was bored. And her mother though she was more willing to learn.”

He sits there examining his hands then watches me as I resume knitting, clickety-clacking away on the needles.

“Whatcha making, Grandma Doris?”

“I’m making your Mom a cardigan for Christmas. Don’t tell her.”

“But it’s June.”

“Knitting takes time, Joseph. That’s why you need patience to knit. People without any patience get bored very easily, you know.”

He shifts sideways and lifts his bare knee onto the sofa. “How do you learn patience, besides knitting?”

“Well, most hobbies teach it. What do you like to do?”

“Pacman and Donkey Kong.”

“Pacman and what?” My great-grandson has switched languages on me. “What’s that?”

“It’s a game, Gran, a video game.”

“And you are now bored of it?”

“Well, yeah.”

I consider carefully what I’m about to say, as it will require the utmost patience from both of us. “Why don’t I teach you to knit, Joseph?”

“Oh, no thanks, Gran.” He stands, ready to escape.

“Why? Can’t you count?”

“Yeah! I’m in the top three in my math class.”

“I know. Your Mom told me. Well done for grade five!” I place my knitting down again and reach into my knitting bag for a spare ball of yarn and knitting needles. I find the blue tweed wool. “Why don’t I show you for, say, five minutes, so I don’t waste any of your time? Then you decide if you’d like to learn more or not.” When he doesn’t answer, I look up to find him ruminating. “Come sit beside me again, Joseph.”

With a resigned sigh, he returns to sit beside me. “Five minutes.”

“Of course. Now, first you have to learn to make a slip knot. Sailors know how to make slip knots.”

“I can do that.” He takes the blue yarn.

“Of course, you do. All smart boys know how.”

“Good. Now slip it onto this knitting needle and hold both needles like so—one in each hand. Try it this way and see how it feels.” I then teach him how to cast on more stitches and how to knit one row. “Now we can knit another row to get a ridged fabric, or we can purl to get a smooth fabric.”

“Which do we want?” he asks.

“Well you know how to knit, so I’ll teach you how to purl now.”

His pinched look of determination tells me he wants to succeed, if only to please me. But soon, he loses his grip and a stitch falls off. I’m ready to come to the rescue, but he ignores his mistake and keeps purling.

“Joseph, you’ve dropped a stitch.”

“That’s okay.”

“Well, it’s not actually.” His deep-set eyes narrow at me, like his grandmother’s sometimes still do. “When you make a mistake in knitting and then ignore it, it will always be just that: a mistake. But what do you think happens if we fix it?”

“It disappears?”

“Sometimes.” I lean back on the cushion; my back’s acting up again. “If you do your best to correct a mistake, it can disappear or it could look a little rougher than the rest of the stitches. But over time it should blend in.”

“So I gotta fix it?”

“What do you think?”

“I guess so.” He looks down at his work, then back at me. “Will you help me?”

“I’d be happy to. Now let’s go back to the problem.” I get him back to the dropped stitch then let him figure out how to get it back on. He manages.

“It’s kinda like not saying sorry,” he says, out of the blue.

“How do you mean, love?”

“When you don’t say sorry, you’re not trying to fix a problem.”

“I suppose you’re right. Saying sorry helps, but sometimes it’s not enough. Sometimes people need time to forgive. The important thing is that you try to make things right. Even in knitting. Now then, continue purling to the end then we’ll turn the needle around and knit again.”

“Grandma Doris?”

“Yes Joseph?”

“Can I see your dad’s socks?”

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Despite the odd bomb detonating, Joe knitted rhythmically, almost trance-like. The socks were nothing special, knit in rough, khaki wool. Camp would soon break as they were to advance upon the enemy. Joe imagined poking an eye out with the needle he held and immediately felt remorse. It was neither noble hand-to-hand combat nor would he use a knitting needle as a weapon. His gun would do enough damage when the time came.

He finished off the round then stabbed the four, short needles into the sphere of wool and replaced it alongside the radio in his pack.

Later, Joe crouched down in the slimy trench; the stench of death forming an oppressive barrier around him. He couldn't smell it now, but knew it was there. The mask protecting him from mustard gas fumes itched worse than the socks that Mabel had knit for him, now scrunched at the base of his toes instead of covering them—hence the need for new ones.

Someone hollered, “Gerries at two-o'clock!” then gunshot broke out. Joe grabbed his Vickers and adjusted his helmet forward. Only his mask-covered eyes would be exposed to enemy aim.

He spotted fire from an opposing machine gun in the distance. Joe fired at it then sprayed a volley of fire along that line, imagining they were lined up much like his own troop.

Silence.

In what seemed only a minute, he couldn't guess at how many Germans he had hit. Fred arrived beside him.

“Ja hit any?”

“Dunno. You?”

“I heard him go down so I assume so. On his way over, the loony Gerry.”

Moving out in twos! The command came from somewhere far-left.

“I'll go first. You cover me,” Freddy said, and was out of the trench before Joe could stop him. Fred had kids, a wife, so Joe wouldn't have minded going first. It was only right. Instead,

Joe aimed his gun and fired away from Fred, looking for any signs of the enemy's Stg 44's. Shots were exchanged and yellow smoke grew thick. Joe's breath fogged the mask after he caught sight of Fred going down. His heart fired an assault of its own. He pulled back on the trigger again to match it, or drown it out.

Joe climbed out of the trench lowered his gun, and ran over to Fred through the mist and smoke, thinking better not fire and announce his presence. He heard the shots covering for him.

Fred lay akimbo, bleeding from his femur. "Jesus wept, Fred." Joe pulled the scarf from his neck, pulled his mask down further, and fashioned a tourniquet, wondering if the mustard gas had saturated the clothe, he wrapped Fred's leg in. Fred screamed and Joe knocked on his mask to quiet him. Fred began to cry. "I'm sorry Freddy, I'm sorry. Come on, old boy."

Joe heaved Fred to a standing position feeling that if he did anything right in this war; it would be to save this man who had stood by him throughout this ordeal. He slung their rifles over his shoulder then pulled Fred's arm over his back taking a firm grip of Fred's body. They hobbled back; German bullets dotted their last three steps.

In the trench, the medic rushed over to give Fred a shot of morphine and began unravelling the tourniquet. "He may live."

Joe released a deep sigh then went back to his work of killing the enemy.

He should have gone first.

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"These, my father wore when he died, and here are the ones he was knitting for himself at the time."

“They’re full of holes.” Joseph’s nose scrunches.

“Well, my mother wasn’t the greatest knitter. My father taught me. She probably knit the holey ones. And these? During the war,” I explain, “My father probably didn’t have a lot of time for knitting. So this sock—that can normally be knit in a day or two—may have taken him weeks.” My heart pinches with the memory of what was and never will be again.

“You mean he was knitting while fighting?”

“In the quiet times, yes. Dad knew knitting was both soothing and practical, plus he needed new socks.” I smirk, though I’m misting.

Joseph studied the sock still on the needles. “Why didn’t you or your mom finish them?”

I thought I was too old to be surprised, but this had me speechless. “I don’t know. I suppose it’s because he wasn’t around to wear them.”

Saved by my granddaughter entering the room, I reach for a Kleenex to dab my eyes. Shirley takes us in. “What’s going on here?”

Joseph announces, “I’m learning to knit.”

“And that’s got Grandma Doris crying?” She laughs. “Go easy on my Grandmother, Joseph.”

“She’s crying because her dad didn’t finish knitting his sock.”

“I see. Well, maybe when you get better at knitting, so *you* might finish it.”

“No.”

We both turn to him.

“Why not?” Shirl asks.

“It’s not right, and besides, they won’t fit me.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I say, needing a change of position. “Anybody want some tea?”

“I’ll get it.” Shirley returns to my kitchen.

“How about you, Joseph? Would you like me to make you a cuppa while you practice your knitting?”

“Do you have chocolate milk?” He picks up the needles.

“No, but I can make you Ovaltine. It’s sort of like hot chocolate, but not as sweet.”

“Okay, I’ll try it.”

He’s so intent on knitting that I don’t demand manners. Instead, I shuffle off to the kitchen to help Shirley.

“I couldn’t help hearing,” she says, “He was talking about saying sorry.”

“Yes, and I couldn’t help myself. The teaching moment presented itself nicely. Is he okay at school?”

“That’s just it. He needs to apologize to someone but is reticent. I suspect it’s playing on his conscience, which is a good thing.” The kettle boils and Shirley pours the water into the teapot, her slender fingers still graceful from years of ballet. “The fact you’ve got him knitting is miraculous.”

“I better get back in there before he gives up, but first, I need to make him Ovaltine.”

“Ovaltine? That’s a first. Just leave it out. I’ll heat up the milk.”

I kiss her cheek and return to my knitting student. How to go about this delicate subject again? When I return to the living room, he sees me and sighs, dropping his needles to the sofa beside him. “I’ve lost my place.”

“Oh, that’s easy to fix,” I say, lowering myself to my spot. “Your Mom will be in with your Ovaltine, but would you like a candy in the meantime?”

“Chocolate?”

“Not today. I think I have Wearthers.” My husband kept the side table cupboard filled with sugary delights until his death last year. I still keep a few of my own favourites there. “Oh, and mints.”

“Mints, please.”

As we suck our mints, I lift his bumpy swatch to see where he went wrong. “Ah-ha,” I say, finding the spot. “See here? You purled instead of knitted and your yarn got caught on the wrong side. Let go back to that place. I’ll do it for you this time but watch me closely. It’s like knitting backwards.” Joseph’s chin rests on my arm and digs into my flesh. He watches the retreat back down the needle. “Your mind must have wandered at this point here.”

“Yeah. I guess you really need to pay attention when you knit.”

“At first, while you’re learning, yes, but after, your fingers learn the moves. It becomes almost automatic. I can watch TV or have a conversation without thinking about knitting or losing my place.” I pass back his knitting. “It’s called muscle memory.”

“I think I need to say sorry to someone.” He blurts it out as if unloading cement.

“Oh?”

“This new kid, I like him, but other kids make fun of him.” He resumes knitting and falls silent.

I wait until he gets to the end of the row and then ask him, “So why do you need to say sorry?”

“I think I ignored him yesterday.”

“I see. You’ve hurt his feelings.”

“Yeah.” We turn the work around, and I help him purl down the opposite side. “What are we making?” He asks.

“It’s called a swatch, a sample of what you might make, like a scarf or blanket.”

“Or socks?”

“Yes, when you get better, socks, but you must practice first.”

Shirley brings in the tray of tea and Joseph’s Ovaltine and sets it on the coffee table which is littered with my books and knitting paraphernalia. “Grammy, you really should clean this up.”

“Then I won’t be able to find anything.” I turn to Joseph. “So when are you going to apologize to your new friend?” I cast a side-glance to Shirley who raises her delicate eyebrows.

“Tomorrow, I guess.” He has to stop knitting to tell me this then continues his work.

He does remind me of his grandfather, resolute and persistent. “Will you let me know how that goes? You can call if you want.”

“Sure, Grandma Doris.” Silence follows and I leave it at that. I sip my tea, and after a few moments, he asks, “Can I take this home?”

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