



## KNITTING GOOD-BYE

Faced with a family tragedy, a daughter-in-law turns to knitting to give, and find, comfort.

BY SARAH ZOBEL

I have been a knitter most of my life. It started with an impractical acrylic potholder for my mother when I was 8 and peaked in college, where I made my first legitimate project, a heavy Icelandic sweater. Having accomplished that, I immediately stopped knitting.

When I picked it up again a decade later, I fell into a knitter's rut. Although I'd occasionally whip up a pair mittens or a hat, for the most part I stuck with long, straight, instantly satisfying scarves. And then one winter day I decided, at age 42, to try my hand at knitting a blanket. It didn't seem like it would be overly complicated, and I didn't know how else to help my father-in-law.

Jack had been diagnosed with cancer three months earlier. After twenty years of heart attacks, small strokes and assorted less-significant health issues—a period that amazed his seven children not for the variety of ailments but for Jack's ability to rebound, catlike, after each one—he was at last diagnosed with the one disease that he, a multidecade smoker, had feared most: lung cancer. We received this news in a dinnertime phone call. Jamie, his fifth child and my husband, sat stiffly on the couch, asking questions of his sister on the other end of the line. It was, of course, only the first of many such calls. And we, some 500 miles away, were helpless to do anything but wait for the next one.

When Jamie and I started dating we were living in Washington, D.C. It didn't take long for me to understand why no one called Jack "Dad" or "Grandpa." To his family he was simply "Happy," a nickname that his eldest daughter bestowed on him years ago. And he was happy—at times, perhaps, naively so, but who can judge that? Certainly I, with my glass-almost-entirely-empty approach to life enjoyed the simple expectation

of cheerfulness that Jack had of those around him.

From time to time Jack would tell me that in another life we'd have been an item, and I'd nod and laugh, as unlikely as it seemed. After a couple of years we moved to Boston and saw Jamie's parents less frequently, at holidays, or in the summer, when they'd visit us. Our one-bedroom apartment was a fifth-floor walkup, and by the time we'd reach our door Jack would be laboring. He'd sit in the corner of the living room, in an armchair that had a window on either side, and light up. Jamie and I weren't smokers, but it hadn't seemed right to deprive the man of his cigarette. So long as we didn't have to breathe it in.

At Thanksgiving we flew down for the long weekend. Our sons gave Jack two balsa planes, in recognition of the many planes he'd brought them on his annual summertime visits to our house. He and I sat quietly inside by a window and watched Jamie and the boys send the planes into flight. Jack was perpetually cold then, already. He'd lost his hair to chemo and would spend the entire weekend in a fleece jacket, wrapped in wool blankets. When we left for the airport to return home he held my hand a little longer than usual.

In January I went to my favorite yarn shop to look for a simple blanket pattern. I found one, a series of stripes of increasing and decreasing widths, and bought twelve skeins of yarn in beiges and creams. My sons marveled at all the yarn, a soft acrylic/wool blend, and when Jamie came home from work that evening he asked what it was for. "I'm going to make a blanket for your father." Jamie raised his eyebrows and I shrugged. "I don't know what else to do." He nodded in simple, mute agreement.

And so I began to knit, as though *everyone's* life depended on it. It was a simple back and forth, no fancy stitches or cables, and I could let my

mind wander or not, whether it wanted to focus on the grocery list or Jack, life or death. Every once in a while I would picture him in our apartment in Boston, smoking happily.

The blanket grew quickly. "It looks nice, Mom," one or the other of my boys would say, pausing as he passed to give it a stroke. "Happy will really like it." Sometimes that would open a conversation about Jack's condition; other times he'd move on in silence.

In early March, Jamie prepared to visit his parents, to take his turn among his siblings as their father's caregiver. By then, Jack was suffering the expected side effects of the intensive radiation on his brain. The night before Jamie's departure, he interrupted his packing to ask if the blanket was ready to go in his suitcase. I shook my head and burst into tears.

"It's so dumb!" I said. "What was I thinking? It's not worth finishing!"

Jamie put his arms around me and asked me to complete it. "Please," he said. "I want to be able to give it to him." I understood, then, that the blanket was not mine alone, but ours—Jamie's and the boys', too—the mitigation of our collective guilt at being so far away.

I'd known all along that Jack was dying, of course, that he might not live as long as it would take me to knit a blanket for him, but I'd allowed myself to imagine a scene in which he sat peacefully by a sun-filled window, the blanket spread across his knees, as he watched spring arrive. So I finished the last few rows, cast off the stitches, wove in the yarn ends, took one last look at my work, folded the blanket and tied it with a purple ribbon, wrote a note to Jack wishing him my idyllic scenario, and handed everything to Jamie.

Within a week, Jack would stop talking, stop eating, stop doing everything but breathing. Within two weeks he would be dead. The calluses on my index fingers from the needle points' repeated poking would last much longer.

Later Jamie told me that on arriving, he'd presented the blanket to his father and read him my note. He'd put it on the pile of blankets keeping Jack warm that night, before it was moved elsewhere, by Jamie's mother, for safekeeping. She thanked me repeatedly for it later, saying how much Jack had appreciated it. I don't know that that's true, but it doesn't matter. I was satisfied just to have finished it in time, happy that it helped warm Jack, even if he wasn't conscious of it.

Knitting a blanket is easy. It's saying good-bye that's the challenge.

Sarah Zobel is a Vermont-based freelance writer. A version of this essay appeared in *Fits, Starts & Matters of the Heart: 28 Stories of Love, Loss and Everything in Between*.

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