

Knot and Pull

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Knot and Pull

KIM GRONINGA

KNIT. CLICK CLICK. PURL TWO. CLICK click. Knit. Click click. Purl two. Click click. When the tiny metal tapping grew louder than Lydia's voice, I knew I needed to pull back to my larger surroundings, settle into my whole self. My eyes moved beyond the metallic needles to Lydia's hands—bumpy and aged, busy—then to the red garment growing in her lap, a gift for the bishop's grandchild, she'd said. Looking, finally, to Lydia's face, I realized two things: One, her lips were moving. And two, it was a good thing I was taping this interview.

I swallowed hard and darkened my eyes with their lids. The bishop's wife offered coffee. Today I sipped water, instead, recording stray words—*rice, classes, pray*—while checking off bullets on my list of prepared questions.

Lydia spoke of her home in Jerusalem—of daily checkpoints, poverty, and blindness. But Lydia herself drew my attention more than her words. Especially her hands. The way they could knot and pull and click and twist and tie one long string into a continued set of loops that *was* something. They did this independent of her retelling of the string of events that looped her life. While her mind and speech relived a past kindness, her hands created a physical object with an actual purpose. While retelling the childhood story of her own fading sight, two inches of fabric emerged from the machine of her hands. Clearly her fingertips could see the yarn. Pointed index fingers trapped and released its red body, pinned it to the metal, and then let it go. In rhythm. Knit. Click click. Purl two. Click click. “Our cupboard was empty (click click) and I brought from home my rice (click click) but I was not needed (click click) to cook my rice, for neighbors (click click)

brought us enough rice and sugar (click click) for all the girls.”

LYDIA TRAVELED TO AMERICA TO SPREAD the story of the school she founded in Jerusalem: Peace Center for blind adults. And I was in a former bishop's elegant home interviewing a blind woman from the Holy City and becoming hungry from all this talk of rice.

Then Lydia's voice stopped.

I, too, fell silent. My face flushed. Lydia was counting, backwards, removing stitches from one of her needles. A handful of red yarn, unknitted, gathered next to her on the couch. The silence stood. She corrected her work, and I became lost in my own pile of kinked and unraveling loops. As a child, my sister and I pulled thousands of stitches out of an afghan our mom had nearly-completed. We delighted in the wriggly threads that zigged and curled like unbraided hair around us. Surely our mom was exasperated, but I recall no reaction. She must have remained calm in the face of our destruction. Now, thirty years later, the time had come for my own unraveling. But not for Lydia. She quickly got her fingers back on track and continued where she left off. “When my neighbors asked me to start this school, I told them I didn't know how to start. But I don't worry. Because if we are to continue, then it will be so.”

Losing my place in this interview and the flash of heat that accompanied it swung me back to the nausea side of my pendulum and the living room of the bishop's home began to spin around me: the rich brown piano; colorful kafkas from Tanzania; the bishop and his smiling wife; a family portrait, two sons and a daughter; Lydia and her red knitting. Brown piano, colorful kafkas, man and wife,

sons and daughter, Lydia, red, piano, brown, colors, bishop, sir, yes, ma'am . . . My hand reached to cover my eyes and the bishop's wife asked if I was okay. After a moment, I swallowed and put my fingers on the water glass now slippery with dew and bleeding to the edges of the coaster. I excused myself as having too many late nights recently—meeting deadlines, choosing photos. Blaming it on a virus or bug was out of the question. I didn't want my hosts to think I'd bring the flu into their home, especially when they had an overseas guest. But I couldn't tell them the truth: that a three-month-old fetus was swimming around in my belly. They were friends with my boss. Readers, in the past weeks, were requesting more stories by me. My career was coming together and coming apart at the same time. This baby wasn't even born yet and already she was sliding my life off its needle.

Even if it remained unspoken, it was still the truth. Soon there would be a real person, an actual miniature human being, filling the gap in my handshakes.

“Please, Lydia,” I said. “Do finish. You were talking about the women who work at the school and how that covers their room and board.”

Lydia continued, but her words faded into the background while her hands and the growing red rectangle came into focus. In the slow whirl of movement, they became my mother's hands and the afghan she knitted in my father's hospital room. He knew he was dying—asked my mother to take notes regarding his funeral wishes. He named his casket bearers. She refused to write it down. My mom hates the question about what he said to tell me. There's no answer; he didn't say to tell me anything.



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BEFORE LONG, THE QUESTIONS HAD ALL been asked and Lydia's stories to answer them had all been told. I took hold of her amazing hands and said I admired her and hoped Peace Center would continue to find ways to meet their needs. She smiled and wished me luck, also. I didn't know with what exactly but didn't take the time to question her. I shook hands with the bishop, thanked his wife, hung my bag over my shoulder, and headed for the faraway door. With the neighborhood spinning around me, I made it to my Neon and drove a block away before pulling over and throwing up in my garbage can. I stopped at the grocery store for rice and headed home where I threw out the garbage can, ate the rice, and slept for three hours.

My husband returned from work and we watched *Jeopardy* together. Then he made me a chocolate-banana milkshake and transcribed my interview with Lydia. The next day, I penned a story about Lydia's school for the blind which ran as the magazine's top feature and subsequently generated several thousand dollars in

donations to the Peace Center. I was glad for Lydia's students and pleased to have the piece in my portfolio. And though I often thought of Lydia, I didn't expect our paths to cross again.

FOUR MONTHS LATER, A PACKAGE arrived. Wrapped in brown bag paper and postmarked Jerusalem was a tiny pair of pants and two tiny sweaters. The pants and one sweater were soft pink and the other sweater was a deep aqua blue with ribbons interlaced throughout the neckline. I lifted them from the cut twine and torn paper and held them to my face. "I knitted these for your baby," the note said. "My dearest Kim. I hope you are well. Love, Lydia."

Shrinking against the Post Office wall, my swollen belly with tiny elbows and knees rolling by, I told my baby I was sorry for being so afraid. I told her the only promise I could make was to always love her. Then—weekday legs around me, picking up mail, paying bills, moving on—I held my daughter's first outfits and cried. □

ELISABETH MURAWSKI

Concubine

I am a lily going bad.
What cure can stop
the eating of my spine?

I watched the scene become
a part of me, my food.
I should have known
his arteries would be stone.
He has no one.
He dines alone.

Who brings the antitoxin?
I am coughing up the carpals
of his hands!

My rotting stem
raves below water. What
the painter cannot see
the carp can.

I listen to his aria again.
Sabers out to smash
my constitution!
No laughter spreads
a shoulder of new land.

Convicted bees tear my gown.

The dying pelican zeroes in.

Wet poisons baffle
agents of the fountain.