

A Guide To Love, Loss, and Lucky Socks by Shannon Hayes

I tried not to give much thought to the fact that it was Friday the 13th as I sat down with a cup of coffee a little over a week ago and began reading through my emails. My eyes fell on a note from a friend, Melissa. I clicked and read and learned that she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer.

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Melissa is the second of my friends to be diagnosed with breast cancer in the last six weeks and the fourth this year. I am beginning to fear it may be contagious. My fingers hovered over the keys as I tried to think of appropriate words to send Melissa in these frightful hours.

I found none.

Friday the 13th was also the day of my dad's back operation. The inauspicious date had raised a number of eyebrows among our friends and neighbors when we announced his surgery. Dad was often asked why he accepted this appointment.

"They had an opening," was his plainspoken reply. But I knew he was scared, and chimed in with a bit of arcane history about the origin of Friday the 13th superstitions, hoping the explanation would ease his fears.

The phone rang. The hospital was running ahead of schedule (I suspect there were a few cancellations owing to the date), and they had unexpectedly moved his surgery time up by one hour. My morning coffee respite would have to come to an abrupt end. Dad was on his way to pick me up, and we needed to leave immediately.

Setting my cup beside the sink, I grabbed the pieces of a baby blanket I was working on for my newborn nephew, TJ. I should say that TJ is not my biological nephew. He is not even my nephew by marriage. He and his 2-year-old sister are the children of my brother's best friend, Matt, who lived next door when we were growing up. Matt and his wife Erin moved back to Schoharie County, N.Y., a few years ago, and now they live only a few miles away from me.

They never asked me if I wanted to be a surrogate auntie. They never had to. TJ is only a few weeks old and already my heart skips at the mere sight of his little face.

Dad pulls into the driveway and toots the horn. Saoirse hands me a get-well card she has

made for her Pop Pop; Ula dashes to her money jar and hands me a dollar bill, hoping that will help. They go to the window to wave to Pop Pop in the car. I am glad that he cannot see through the darkened glass because they are sobbing. I dash out the door.

The conversation is awkward as my parents and I wind our way along narrow roads on our way to the hospital. I make chitchat about my newest book projects, about the farm customers. I try to appear upbeat and optimistic, but I am a phony. I am frightened for my dad. I am distressed about Melissa, worried about her 3-year-old son.

We check in at the hospital, and dad is promptly whisked away to pre-op. Mom and I are shown to a waiting room. We try to choose a seat where we don't have to watch a television blaring weather reports, pharmaceutical ads, and sports scores. Like passengers waiting for a bus, we sit with our bags in our laps, unsure how long we will be in this space. She begins to cry.

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I push my bag to the floor and grab her hand. It has been years since I have held my mother's hands. I marvel at their strength. After a few minutes, she pulls away to wipe her eyes. I lean down and pull from my knitting bag a thermos of hot water, a thermal cup, and a bottle of valerian extract. I make her a cup of herbal tea to calm her nerves.

She takes a few sips before the nurse comes to find us. She leads us down the hall and behind a curtain, where we will wait with my father before they begin the anesthesia.

I recognize dad's face, but nothing else. The clothes that define him have disappeared: the stinky, floppy hat he wears in summer; the sweatshirt riddled with holes and caked with manure; the droopy jeans with grease smears and grass stains across the thighs. He is wearing a hospital gown. His threadbare socks and chronically smudged glasses are the only vestiges of his daily life as a farmer.

"The lucky socks!" I call out to mom suddenly. "Find his lucky socks!"

"Oh yes!" Dad forces a cheerful note of enthusiasm into his voice. "I can't forget my lucky socks!"

Mom rummages in his bag and finds a pair of brown woolen socks I made for him for his surgery. These lucky socks, I am hoping, will defend him from the effects of Friday the 13th. We pull off his ragged crew socks and replace them with the thick wool ones, trying not to shake his legs too much. He is unable to help us.

I fight back my tears. Just like he doesn't need to know about Melissa's cancer, he doesn't need to witness my fear for him. He moves his legs slightly and winces. The irritation of his nerves is bad. One doctor told us it was a miracle he wasn't blacking out. Mom and I hold our breath as we watch the suffering flash across his face like a bolt of lightning.

There was only one chair in the little curtained off space where we waited. I offered it to mom, then perched on the side of dad's bed. The truth of the moment weighed heavily on all of us, and we were losing our ability to make idle chatter to camouflage it. Was this the beginning of renewed vitality and joy? Or was this the beginning of the end?

In need of comfort from my fears, I pulled the pieces of TJ's blanket from the bag. Lacking

adequate workspace, I spread them across dad's lap and began stitching the squares together. Mom and dad were silent and completely still; the motion of my needle and yarn were the only activity in the room.

The rhythm of the work calmed my mind, but I felt deep sadness as I stitched this gift for my newborn nephew. I thought about that little soul, so fresh in this world. I wanted him to have a life filled with joy, but sitting on the edge of my dad's hospital bed, I knew there would be more to TJ's life than warm cuddles under wool. No matter how perfect his world is, he too will have friends who battle cancer. He too will sit on the edge of someone's hospital bed, fearing he might lose them. Some days, the battle with cancer will be victorious. Some days it won't. Some days the moments beside the hospital bed will be forgotten in the face of speedy recovery; some days they will be remembered as the last moments before his world is turned upside down.

"If you are endowed with wonderful people in your world, they will forever hold a place in your heart.."

The nurse comes. She gives dad a pill to swallow, then begins lifting the rails on his bed to roll him away. Mom and I jump up and kiss him. Sharing his penchant for black humor in the face of superstition, I tell him to "break a leg" for good luck. Mom and I hold hands once more as we follow the gurney down the hallway. The nurse stops at another door, directing us to go in and wait in a new room. Within moments, dad is wheeled out of site.

Mom and I enter the windowless room. We arrange our bags. We sit. We stand again, seeking a more comfortable location. We arrange our bags once more. We sit again. Finally, we give up and make for the cafeteria with hopes for finding a window beside which we can set up our picnic lunch.

We eat. The first hour goes by. We take the car out to find a gas station. The second hour passes. We return to the waiting room anticipating our meeting with the surgeon. I pull out the pieces of TJ's blanket once more. I stitch a square. Mom watches me. I fumble in my bag and find a second darning needle, then break off a handful of yarn. I hand it to her, and she, too, begins to stitch. The third hour goes by. We notice the time but we say nothing. We keep stitching TJ's blanket.

My thoughts from earlier in the day about the inevitable sadness in TJ's life haunt me as I whip the little squares together. But as I push my needle through the corner of one square, a thought occurs to me, something about how sadness is a sign of joy. I recall a stanza from Kahlil Gibran's writings:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.
And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises

was oftentimes filled with your tears.
And how else can it be?
The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

If TJ's life unfolds in the way I hope it will, he will be surrounded by love and connection. He will have secure bonds with his parents, with his grandparents, with his uncles and aunts. There will be people in his life he will think of as family, even if there is no biological connection. There will be moments in life when his joys will unveil sorrow, and

in their unveiling he will realize the fortune he enjoys.

A phone rings in the waiting room. My father has woken up and is ready to see us. Mom hands off the stitching she has completed, and I shove all the pieces in the bag. We walk out of the room to go find him. Mom begins to cry, fearful of what lies ahead. I take her hand once more, now familiar with the power in her grip.

All of the patients in recovery are hidden behind curtains as we make our way down the hall. We are unsure which bay holds my dad until I see a pair of brown woolen socks peeking out from one. The toes are wiggling: a good sign.

Photo of TJ's blanket by Shannon Hayes.

He is groggy when we find him but marveling at the fact that he can move his feet. "There were a lot of nerves down there," he says. "I don't think it would have been hard for the surgeon to accidentally cut one." The possibility of permanent paralysis was not lost on him. He wears his lucky socks for the next two days, refusing to take them off.

But on the third day he finally gives them up. It's Father's Day, and he is able to change his own socks. Later, at a family brunch, we are all thankful for his ability to stand, walk, and sit in a chair without being in pain. TJ's blanket it passed around. Saoirse and Ula each stitch in a few squares. My sister stitches in a square. Even dad stitches one in. Each of us wishes for TJ all the blessings and joys that life can offer.

Later that night, after everyone has left, I sew the final pieces together, then wash the blanket and spread it out on the floor. As I set the pins around the borders to shape it, I say a prayer of thanks for my dad's recovery. And then my thoughts turn to Melissa, and I begin saying prayers for her health and healing.

"That's life, TJ," I think. "If you are endowed with wonderful people in your world, they will forever hold a place in your heart, making your life a running stitch of joys and sorrows, hopes and prayers."

And that, my sweet little baby boy, is my wish for you.