

# SOMETHING TO HOLD ON TO

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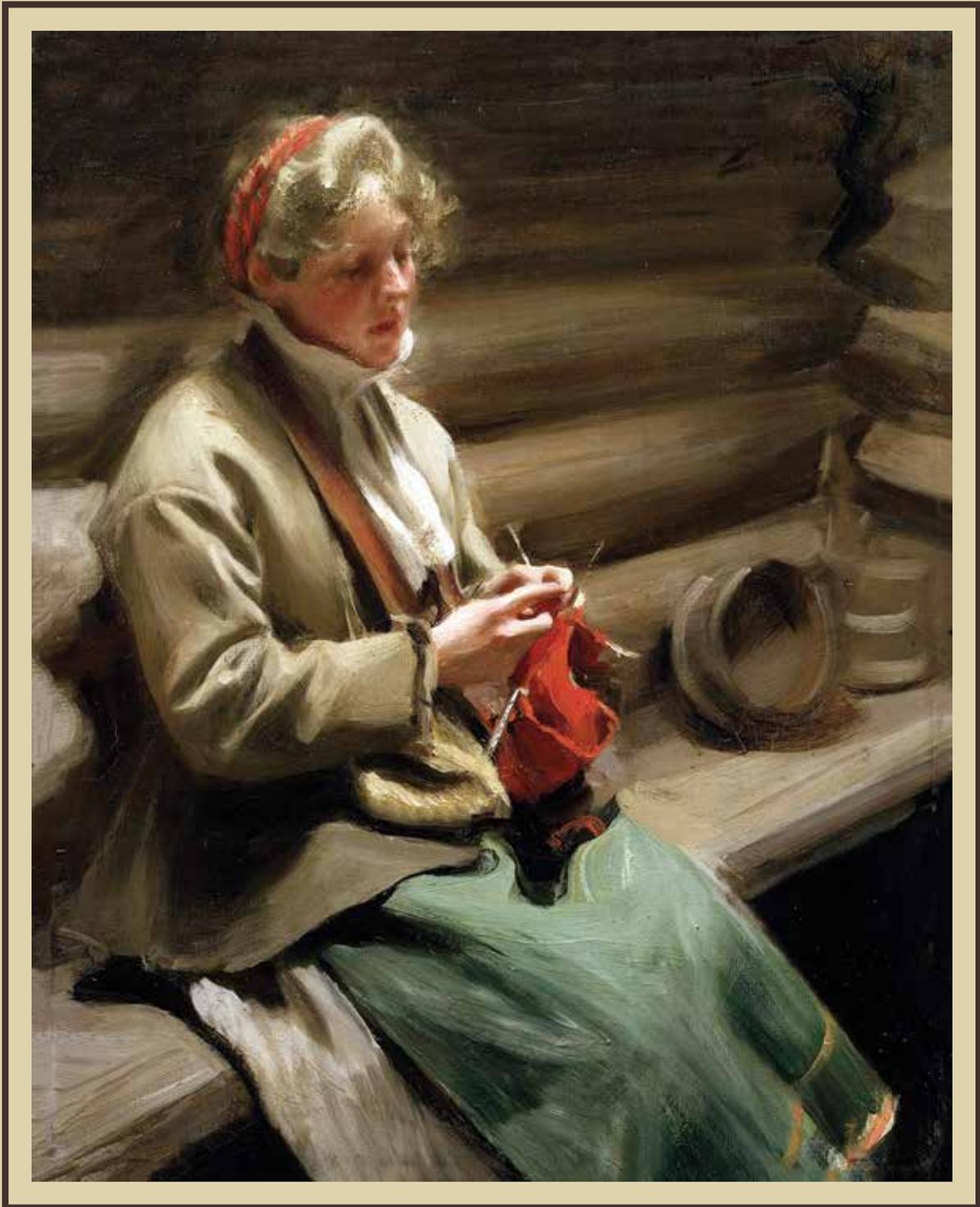
**I** MADE EACH OF MY THREE DAUGHTERS a sweater when they were little, a simple pattern with a seed-stitch heart in the center of the chest that created texture, little bumps of purls on an otherwise smooth surface of stockinette stitch. None of the sweaters was completed on time, and I am still piecing together the third, despite my youngest daughter having outgrown it years ago.

Knitting does not come easily to me. I am primarily left-handed, but right-handed for certain tasks, and unequivocally ambidextrous for others, so I am constantly left-right confused. Learning to knit—teaching myself slowly, book after book, until I finally

found instructions that made sense to my brain—was a trying undertaking. I frequently forgot how to do certain stitches and techniques, how to read a pattern or chart, and how to look at my work the right way or to tell one stitch from another. After nearly twenty years of knitting, I still struggle.

The first sweater I ever made was for my eldest daughter, Zoe, and I started it in anticipation of her first birthday. I planned to make the largest pattern size—2T—because she was tall, and I knew it would take me a long time to finish. I worked away at it, and eventually I had all the pieces ready to sew together, but then I couldn't bear to finish it.

In the long months that I worked on



Anders Zorn, *Dalecarlian Girl Knitting*, 1901

that sweater, my first husband, Steve, was slowly deteriorating from terminal brain cancer, and I'd gotten it into my head that when I finished the sweater, he might die. Grief does funny things to the mind, so every time I picked up a tapestry needle to sew the sweater together, I balked and set it back down again. Logically, I knew that no amount of prolonged knitting could save his life or impact the effectiveness of his treatments, but my anticipatory grief was fierce and overwhelming. While we remained hopeful beyond any level of reason, the truth was that his diagnosis was terminal and his odds were not good, and so I tucked the pale blue swatches with their trailing tails of yarn back into my knitting bag for another day, another time.

I worked on the sweater in small bursts, often sitting on the couch in our living room, the center of life in our little house. In the winter, the woodstove roared; in spring, the peepers sang through the air; summer, the sunsets were vibrant through the western windows; and in the fall, the swamp maples were a shock of crimson among the evergreens. When I started the sweater, Steve was still trying to work, we were weighing treatment options, and we were thinking about trying for another baby. In the time it took to knit the sweater's pieces, residual fatigue from radiation therapy had left Steve permanently disabled, he'd undergone a second "awake" brain surgery, and the first of his chemotherapies had already failed.

I was so proud when I finally finished the sweater, though it was many months past Zoe's first birthday. Not only had I overcome the unease of grief that had settled low in my belly like a stone, but it was also the first project of this magnitude that I had attempted. After all the pieces were sewn together, the sweater was done, and Steve had lived through the final weaving-in of the ends. Maybe, I thought, there was still hope.

The sweater fit Zoe, and she wore it many times before she grew out of it, and I tucked it away in our cedar chest along with our hats, sweaters, and other woolens. Steve spent much of his life in the woods, and he loved to wear wool, but he never received much of my early knitting. I think I made him only one very awkward hat, brightly colored and with ear flaps, and he humored me by wearing it on occasional jaunts in the forest behind our home.

Around when I tucked Zoe's sweater away, Steve started to go downhill, and fast. Not long before Zoe's third birthday, Steve started hospice, and he died two months later at the age of thirty-one.

Down the road, I fell in love again, and I got married again. Our daughter, Lilah, was born in the spring on the edge of summer, and I decided to make her the same sweater, a seed-stitch heart in the center. Life was busy and chaotic, but I worked on it here and there. I once again aimed for the biggest size of the pattern, and I was in luck this time, as



Ivan Khrutsky, *Old Woman Knitting a Sock*, 1838

Lilah was petite. Soon, she was two years old, and I was pregnant with another daughter. In a race against my due date, I finished the sweater when Lilah was two and a half, and it fit her well for a season before I tucked it away in the cedar chest alongside Zoe's sweater.

With my youngest daughter on the way, I picked out yarn for what would be my third and final seed-stitch heart sweater, but I did not manage to start it. This pregnancy drained the energy from me in a way I had not thought possible, and I was older too, managing challenging medical complications and two other

children. Finishing Lilah's sweater had been enough of an accomplishment, so I decided I would work on the new baby's sweater during my maternity leave as the last days of winter shifted into the early days of spring.

Maris arrived in late February of 2020, nearly three weeks early and almost a Leap Day baby. Close on her heels came the pandemic. With my older children suddenly home and my second husband, Brian, starting a new job in the ICU of our local hospital, my maternity leave vanished, a rug pulled roughly from beneath my very



J. Alden Weir, *Knitting for Soldiers*, 1918

tired feet. I couldn't even think about knitting. Eventually, the children went back to school and childcare, though Zoe remained virtual for the rest of the school year and our daycare was plagued by constant exposures and quarantines for the next two years straight. I went back to my job as a brain injury advocate, far more stressed and exhausted than when I had started my "maternity leave" ten weeks earlier.

Maris was our chill, somnolent pandemic baby. She was squishy and sweet and slept like a dream. But life loomed strenuous and foreboding, and

the early months of the pandemic were a terrifying time to have young children, especially an infant. I finally started Maris's sweater when she was around six months old, managing a few rows here and there. And then Brian, also an officer in the US Navy, was deployed, and I found myself alone for a year, with three young children and no nearby family, in the middle of a global pandemic. I set the sweater aside and barely touched it for months.

Brian left for the deployment as a healthy thirty-four-year-old, and he returned a year later with his health

devastated by long COVID. He had always been extremely fit, and now he couldn't climb stairs without becoming breathless, his heart raced for no reason, and his fatigue crushed the life out of him. I worked a few more rows on the sweater, but mostly it sat on a shelf.

Meanwhile, Maris blew through clothing sizes and topped the growth charts for height and weight. By the time I finished the sweater, I thought, there was no way it was going to fit her. It would have to just be a keepsake or maybe something she could put on one of her bigger baby dolls during play.

The situation seemed symbolic of all that had happened around us in the first months and years of her life—the world in chaos and disarray, a pervasive sadness and grief, nothing going as planned. The knitting of my oldest and youngest daughters' sweaters, I realized, bookended the greatest losses of my life up to this point: my first husband's death and my second husband's devastated health, both before the age of thirty-five.

By the time Maris's third birthday rolled around, the sweater was still incomplete, and she was three sizes beyond. I planned to finish it, even if she would never wear it.

Now, I'm lingering on this final sweater longer than necessary since there is no deadline or hope of it fitting Maris. I'll knit a hat for a friend's baby, then knit a few rows on the sweater. I'll work on a blanket or scarf, then knit a few rows on the sweater. At this

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rate, it might take me years to finish, but I'm okay with that. I can savor the experience a little. It's my last one.

I'm not sure how much my daughters will care about their toddler sweaters. Maybe they will adore them and gift them to their own children. Maybe the sweaters will sit, folded, in our cedar chest or my daughters' future closets for the rest of my days, untouched and unworn. Maybe, when I'm gone, they will finger the soft yarn and think of the hours and love that went into each sweater's construction. Or maybe they will realize, should they ever seriously pick up knitting themselves, just how much of a novice I still am.

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