

How to Knit a Heart

by Camden Whitlock - written on January 30th, 2023; edited on March 10th, 2023

Relationally, I am a ball of yarn. Soft to the touch, easily shaped, with a surprisingly satisfying conclusion. I can saunter along a loom in tempo, a rhythmic cadence with which you can create anything desired, in which you can get anything you want from me. I bend and twist and curl my edges along the depressions, the cavities of your selected instruments, finding you the next knit, the next solution, the next answer. I grow steadily, over days, sometimes weeks, sometimes months, into something that will make you more attractive, more desirable, warmer. When you're done with me, you'll keep me for a while in my newer, tightened and perfected state, until I begin to curl and fringe along the border, growing older with my lint. You'll part with me, to a Goodwill or, more likely, a dumpster, forgetting that I ever existed, that you ever spent days, weeks, months, years working on and with me, wearing me, using me. You'll move on to another ball of yarn, ready to again create, except you're more skilled now - this time it will be perfect. This time, it won't be me.

In the month of November, there were two common presences in my ritzy apartment bedroom - a 5'11" man-boy sporting a backwards camo hat and dark-washed jeans, and multiple thick balls of yarn, often connected to bright blue and green looms. The man-boy tended to come around at night, from 5:00pm to the early hours of the morning, when he'd make some inappropriate excuse to leave before the moon. The yarn was always there, waiting to be picked up again. I never really seemed to have

patience for the yarn, too worried about the impending doom that characterized my relationship throughout the two months it, miraculously, survived. So it sat, patient, counting down the days until I'd have the time to knit again.

Knitting is a hobby I only recently picked up. Bored in my hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina over a particularly lonely winter break, I found myself wandering the aisles of a Walmart. I picked up a starter kit - Beginners' Knitting for Dogs. *No*, I thought to myself, *I'm too impatient and clumsy for this*. Repeating this doubt down the brightly-colored, glaring lines of plastic product, I spied the looms that would become my destiny: gray and blue and green, with a pink pluck-like object used to carry the yarn and an orange needle. Hastily, as if a Walmart pirate would come to steal my new, gleaming bounty, I grabbed the box and made my way to the self-checkout counters, with much excitement. Tasks, and structure, had always been good for me, and here was one: learn how to knit on a loom. *How hard could it be?*

It turns out, it was quite difficult. But I persisted: first knitting a couple hundred rows of nothing out of the cheap, sparkly thread I had purchased, I convinced myself I *was just learning the stitches, nothing to worry about*. When I threw all that nothing away, I started on my first completed project: a hat, just like the one illustrated in the convenient beginners' manual included with purchase of the looms. Since I had already mastered the e-wrap cast-on and e-wrap stitch, I was well on my way to making a foolproof product. I finished it within a day, through classes and lectures, the newness of the semester occupying my head like the yarn occupying my hands. When it was complete, I was pretty happy with it. Nothing special to me now, but a white and brown

and blue, silk-soft and rolled-edge thing. I made the mistake of asking him if he liked it. I'd been wearing it all evening, to the grocery store and dinner, and he'd said nothing. But I wanted to know what he thought of the thing I had spent all that time, all that effort, all those resources creating. I had it on, smiling incautiously with anticipation, stupidly happy with what I had created.

"It looks fine. Like a ski cap." he said, distractedly.

I nodded, my smile waning to a sliver of the satisfaction I had felt. *Fine? Just fine*, I thought, *and he didn't even care enough to comment on it in the first place. I should've expected this*. I know now that it was stupid to expect anything more, to ask for validation without using exact words to describe what I wanted. Our relationship was characterized like this: by disdain and disregard. A user and the used.

For weeks, someday to turn months and years, the hat will sit, discarded and unworn, tucked behind a black Columbia rain jacket and on top of a boxed copy of the Wesleyan Bible. The yarn, so carefully pulled and tucked and woven, in and out, over, under, over, will wonder where it failed so terribly, why it was so unusable even though it had molded itself into exactly what was wanted, what was desired, what was needed. The yarn will spend long days and nights in a gray endbox, the top only removed to select another object, something better and more worthwhile. The yarn will realize, slowly, that it has fallen to this demise not because it was worthless, but because he thought it was - and that was all that mattered.

I paced the crushed-cream of my carpeted bedroom until I wore a little path in the fibers, trying to decide what I would knit next. *A pair of socks?* I thought that would do, as I'd never attempted such a treacherous task before and I was, as is my nature, exhilarated by challenge. I turned to the hunched figure sitting at my small desk, which he said was 'made for elves,' expecting the computer-stricken husk to be similarly enraptured by my pursuits. Of course, he was not - as I mentioned, he was preoccupied with whatever was going on through the screen of his flat phone, the 2D world viably more interesting than his very 3D girlfriend in front of him. *Should I ask what he thinks?* Of course I shouldn't. He was not concerned with my interests or hobbies, my aspirations or dreams - he was especially not concerned with my next knitting project.

I ended up knitting the socks, using my smallest loom and a yarn that was too thick for the loom to handle. Instead of giving up, I pulled every other peg out of the loom until it could handle the heavy yarn. The socks turned out great, and now I wear them when I take my dog out at night - they fit perfectly into my bright-pink Birkenstock sandals that I call my 'puppy potty shoes.' But when he saw the first finished sock, he said they 'looked ridiculous' and were 'way too big.' I reminded him: "That's how bed socks are supposed to be."

"Well, they look stupid and they'll never fit you."

We seemed to be regressing, slowly, into a darker stage in our decomposing relationship: mutual hatred, but fear of change. Who would be the one to end it? Neither of us wanted to be the one to answer that question, but someone had to do it.

A sock, the first of two, half-finished under a tiny antique desk. The yarn never seemed to get what it wanted, dedication and effort - instead, neglected for the entirety of those two months, it sat, disappointed, unmoving, unloved.

I fell apart over those two months. I went to the gym more frequently and worked out more intensely, stopped eating what I wanted and started various fad diets, each ending with the invariable cultivation of starvation. As I purled I purged; as I e-wrapped the pegs of my loom I fell farther and farther, with each row, into an overwhelming depression; as my knit-stitches carried, the anxiety I felt built its essence into each thread. The pitter-patter of working needles and hooks filled my dreams: *lazy, stupid, ugly, mean*. All the exercise, the lack of sustenance, the profuse sadness and anxiousness, the new unhealthy habits and iterations of what had once been my very stable daily routine wove themselves together to create a beautiful, skinny, visibly perfect creature with deep, dark bags under its eyes and a hole in its stomach.

I knit another hat, this time starting with alternating e-wrap and purl stitches, loose enough to limit edge curling, and a big, pastel-colorful puffball topper I'd learned how to do on YouTube. He thought this hat looked perfect - much better than the first.

So I kept tearing myself apart. No food until lunchtime, maybe even after that. Hit the gym twice, no, three times a day. "Make time for it," he said, "it'll be worth it." It didn't feel worth it. I felt unraveled, a blanket with a loose end, a toddler pulling at the offending thread until the whole thing was a pile of yarn on the floor. Putting one foot in

front of the other was hard, sometimes, and I felt faint - but I kept up with my knitting, slowly but surely making something more beautiful than I felt, something that would not break or tear or bend, something stable, supportive, and healthy. I kept knitting to find something I couldn't find. I kept knitting to have something I couldn't have. I kept knitting to be something I wasn't meant to be.

On the day the loose-ended blanket finally unraveled, the toddler winning some fantasized game of tug-a-war, he broke up with me. Standing in my apartment bedroom as I watched him leave, walking out the green-gray door one last time, I was surrounded by piles of what once was - mountains of yarn, wool and cashmere and alpaca, cotton and linen and bamboo, rayon and acrylic and nylon. Thick and thin, soft to the touch and coarse, itchy enough to entice a rash, fingering weight, bulky, orange and blue and green and white and gray and every color in between. Each thread saturated, deep into every fiber, with memories of what we had been. A particular pink and white, sheep-soft wool singing praises of the love we had sometimes shared. A specific thin, fingering weight, coarse purple and white and blue thread insinuating the impending depressive episode. An orange and yellow fiber, medium in everything, special in no ways, caught my eye. *Joy*. Could I have, again, the peace I had once enjoyed so absent-mindedly? Could I rethread the loom, retrace my steps along the path I had followed to achieve my version of enlightenment, pure bliss? I sat down in my neon-pink futon chair and began to knit. *Rethread. Retrace. Carry the knit.*

Over, under, over, pull tight.

Don't cry, it will be alright.

It's only been a couple, maybe a few, weeks since then. I've been knitting a lot - instead of feeling my emotions, I prefer to thread them into the yarn, pulling the pieces of a broken heart tighter, slip-knitting carefully so the whole thing can be dismantled if needed. I'm waiting, patiently, for something, but I don't yet know what that thing is. The yarn, color, shape, size, every piece I pull, over, under, over, in, up, out, in, rejects the memories, the pain, the hazy substitute for tears and cloudy anger. I'm attempting to knit the heart back together, so tight, that the memories won't be able to fit there. So I knit them into a hat. Purl and e-wrap edge, simple knit and e-wrap body, purple puffball topper - it's the best one I've ever created.

It's also the first one I gave away.