

by Franklin Habit

One.

It hadn't rained for months, but the atmosphere of the shop was damp. Damp and still. Nothing moved when I came in. Not the gaunt figure behind the cash desk. Not the angular figures bent over the adjacent table.

I thought of Howard Carter poking his head into the tomb of Tutankhamun. Like Carter, I saw wonderful things, but no signs of life.

The figure behind the desk shifted slightly and spoke. "Yes?"

"I, well, I'm looking for, um, I was wondering..."

"Yes?"

"I want to learn to knit."

There was a flicker of movement at the table, as though a scuttling rat had disturbed scraps of rag scattered across the floor of the tomb.

"Yes?"

"I know the—I forget what you call it. How to start. And how to do the knit stitch. But that's all, and I really want to make a sweater."

"A sweater."

"Right. So I wondered if you have classes?" The scraps of rag tittered. The gaunt figure flinched.

"We do."

"Great. Then I guess I'd like to sign up."

"Sweaters are very complicated."

“Oh. Should I start with something simpler? Do you have a basic class?”

“We have classes, but we have no classes that would be appropriate for you.”

“Oh.”

Silence.

“Could I learn from a book?” “I don’t know. That depends on you, I suppose.”

“Do you have a good how-to book?”

The figure flitted, shadowlike, from the desk to a shelf and dropped a floppy, dusty sheaf of pages into my hand.

“Thank you. I’ll take this, then, I guess. And some yarn. I have needles already. Could you recommend a good yarn for a beginner?”

The scraps sighed in unison.

“Good yarn is not inexpensive, you understand.”

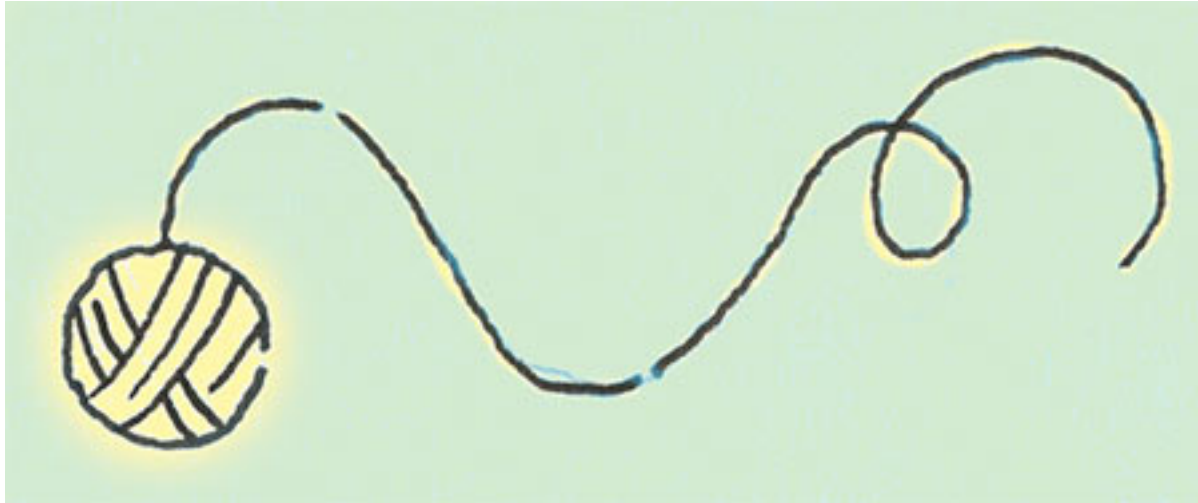
“Well—I guess I need some anyhow.”

My bill came to slightly less than four hours’ wages. “Thank you,” I said.

“Come again,” said the figure.

The door closed with a hiss and a thud.

“I’ll show you,” I thought.



Two.

Outside, it was absolutely identical to one hundred thousand other slices of cinderblock in ten thousand other strip malls across the American rust belt.

Inside, it was a hug from grandmother. Not just any grandmother, but the grandmother who set the pattern for the cookie baking, lace-collared grandma beloved of Madison Avenue and children's holiday movies.

It smelled like clean wool and hot cinnamon. The stock was neat but gently tousled, like a favorite nephew's hair.

The owner leapt from her armchair as though she'd been waiting all year for my arrival. "I have to show you something that's just come in," she said. "Do you like silk? Of course you do, everybody likes silk."

She made me a cup of tea. Not a mug, a cup. With little pansies around the rim. We talked about old movies while she deftly knit a pretty, cabled hat for a local girl who'd lost her hair to chemotherapy. I bought an entire bag full of silk-blend lace-weight for a ridiculous amount of money.

"I'm so sorry you're only passing through," she said. "I'd be happy to have you visit with me every day. And Wilbur just loves you."

Wilbur was the shop dog, who fell asleep with his shaggy head on my knee.

We parted with a peck on my cheek and a promise to keep in touch.

Six months later she was arrested for tax evasion and illegal stockpiling of weapons.



Three.

If the shop had an official name, nobody knew what it was. The only signage was a warped pine plank above the door with Y-A-R-N painted on it. So we called it Yarn.

Yarn was a compact establishment: one room, no frills. There was no place to sit and knit, but it didn't matter because lingering was not encouraged.

"This is a store," the owner was heard to remark, to everyone in particular, on more than one occasion. "You want to sit and look at things, you can go down to the multiplex."

We shopped in a brisk, businesslike fashion; yet sometimes we were still too much for her.

"Out," she would say. "Everybody out. I've had enough of this. I need a smoke and I don't want anybody stealing stuff while I'm on my break."

She didn't give lessons, she didn't wind yarn, and she didn't do special orders. But the sale bin was always full of good stuff. Cashmere at 70 percent off?

"Screw it," she said. "I want it out of here. The company rep was a bitch on the phone to me last night and she can kiss my ass."

One day we dropped by after watching Julia Roberts at the multiplex and Yarn was gone. I don't mean closed, I mean gone. Leveled. The whole building. We couldn't even find traces of the foundation. There was a sign saying the land was for sale.

We thought maybe we'd dreamt the whole thing, but then one of us found a ball of cashmere in the dirt. She made it into a scarf.

Designer and illustrator Franklin Habit is the proprietor of the popular knitting blog The Panopticon (the-panopticon.blogspot.com) and the founder of Yarn Shaming (yarnshaming.tumblr.com). He loves yarn, but yarn does not always love him back.

