



A Stitch in Time

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Ethel Grosberg sat in her mother's favorite old recliner and worked on her needlepoint. To say the recliner was worn was an understatement. The sun coming through the windows of her third story walk-up had long ago faded the royal blue corduroy to a dingy denim blue with a gray fuzz peeling off like dead skin. One spring had worked itself free of the musty, moldy padding to poke at Ethel's thin, bony hip and to trouble the arthritis growing there. It hadn't escaped the paper thin material that still clung to the frame, but it would burst free any day now. That was why Ethel now worked on a new pillow for the seat to protect her from the vagrant metal spring.

Ethel loved to needlepoint and crochet. She looked for any excuse to pick up her instruments of choice and to create a new masterpiece. Pillows, wall hangings, afghans, and such had endeared Ethel to one and all in her building, and even though her eyes were not as clear and her stitch not as true, Ethel's creations continued to be snatched up. Why just last week she'd finished that baby blanket for Mrs. Sanchez's new baby girl. The woman had six children, but each had to have his or her own blanket from Auntie Ethel. It had taken Ethel twice as long to finish this one than it had the last because she kept dropping stitches and losing her count. Her eyes kept blurring the design. They often seemed to play tricks on her anymore. Why just the other day she'd thought she'd seen her dead mother standing over her in bed.

Mrs. Grosberg had worn the same handmade flannel nightgown and lace cap she'd worn every night since Ethel was a child and had had her thin white hair braided into the same skinny white braid Ethel remembered her mother wearing for as long as she could remember. Beatrice Grosberg had appeared to her daughter as clearly as she had in life, along with all of her knick knacks and things. And then she was gone. Ethel knew she'd been dreaming because her mother had passed on nearly eleven years prior and Ethel had packed away all of her mother's things before moving into her parents' room, just as she had her father's belongings fifteen years before. She was all alone in the stodgy old apartment. Alone with her stitchery and memories. She'd been an only child who had grown up with her parents and never found a reason to move away. Most of her friends were long ago buried in the city cemetery and she'd never married or had children.

Bounce, bounce, scuff. Bounce, bounce, scuff.

Ethel smiled to herself. There was Billy Nedermeier playing with his rubber ball just like when they were children.

Bounce, bounce, scuff. Bounce, bounce, scuff.

She remembered how he'd play with it for hours, bouncing it against the wall, then the floor, and then catching it to start again until one of the adults in the building would yell at him to stop. He'd had curly dark hair and dark eyes with the longest black eye lashes Ethel had ever seen on any boy. His mother had always dressed Billy in a little sailor suit and hat.

Bounce, bounce, scuff.

Ethel had been so jealous of his fine little suit and hat and of the black patent shoes that Billy was always scuffing and smudging.

"Ethel. Can you hear me? Ethel," he called.

"I can't come out and play with you, Billy. I must finish my pillow first. Almost done. Almost done," she called. Ethel hummed a little to herself. Her father had hated it when she'd made any noise. Children were to be seen and not heard, but he'd been dead for more than twenty-five years so she didn't figure it would matter if he heard her or not. He hadn't heard her begging or pleading when she'd wanted to marry Ralf Watkins. He'd ignored her cries as if he hadn't heard them and left her to pine in her room and to dream of running away to elope.



"You didn't hear me then, Papa," Ethel murmured. "You never heard me."

Ethel shifted a little to lessen the contact between the bothersome spring and her hip.

Bounce, bounce, scuff. Bounce, bounce, scuff.

"I'm coming, Billy. I'm coming. Just be patient. `Patience is a virtue.'" Or so Mama had always claimed. Of course Mama was good at waiting for things. She'd waited all of her life and gotten nothing but a casket for her troubles. Ethel figured that must make her mother one of the most virtuous women in the world.

Ethel's needle pierced her finger, sending a jab of pain up her skinny, shriveled arm. She sucked on the bruised, bleeding digit until the pain ebbed and then returned to her work. She was going to finish the pillow before the chair's spring broke loose and bit any deeper into her flesh.