



Stories of Stuff

Oiled Wood
by Shelley Trower
Co-authored with Pat



When Pat was seven, she went to live with her Granny on the Island of Guernsey. Her Granny was always knitting. She smelt of lavender and eau de cologne, and Pat adored her. She knitted by the fire, in church, on the bus, in the cinema.

One wintry evening, the fire blazing, the wind whistling down the chimney, there was a knock at the door. Pat ran to open it, finding somebody at the door she'd never seen the like of before: very wrinkled, dressed all in black with a strange type of bonnet on her head.

'I know you knit well', the woman said to her granny who had come to the door. 'I've seen your handywork at the agricultural show.' She spoke with a strong accent, her first language being Guernsey-French patois. She'd travelled from the other side of the island, on two buses. She'd never been to this side of the island in all her life. And here she was to teach Pat's Granny how to knit the traditional fisherman's guernsey jumper. She was skilled in the art of knitting these Guernseys, for which there was no written pattern. Since she had no relatives to whom she could pass on her skill she was afraid that it would die out. It would take a few months to learn to knit using the circular needle that she presented as a gift. Pat's Granny was to acquire the necessary quantity of oiled wool that helps give the jumpers the power to resist sea spray and rain.

Ever so slowly, all through the winter the garment grew, with much unravelling and re-knitting, and never an instruction written down.

Once Pat's Granny had learned the Guernsey way, the woman declared herself satisfied that she'd passed on her skills to a worthy pupil and bade her to pass them on to others. With that she departed and they never saw her again. Pat never knew her name, but a few years later her Granny took her to the other side of the island and told her she'd been buried with her ancestors among the silver birch trees.

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The first jumper her Granny knitted was for Pat's father. It turned out too small, so her mother had it. Then her Granny knitted jumpers for everyone. Pat can never remember a time there wasn't a Guernsey in the making.

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Forty years later, after her mother died, when Pat was turning out her flat she found that Guernsey in a drawer. It was moth-eaten and badly darned with the wrong-coloured cotton. She went to put it on but it was too thin and fragile. Pat took it home, wrapped it in tissue paper. Sometimes she'd get it out, to remember her grandmother and her mother. It was her most treasured possession.

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After Pat's husband died, she decided to downsize. Her husband had loved their large garden, but it was becoming a wilderness. When Pat went to pack up the contents of the drawers, she found the Guernsey there, but it was falling to pieces. It was 70 years old. Pat buried it in the garden, and the next day was surprised to see that a beautiful silver birch had sprung up overnight on the same spot.

Stories of Stuff is a community arts project discovering the stories inspired by treasured objects. It has been created by The Writers' Block.

