

Purl Two... Knit Three

By Adrienne M Frater (New Zealand)

Edith sits in the chair and knits. Stabs the needle, flicks the wool, slips one stitch off and is onto the next. Not just plain knitting - for Edith knits cables that undulate like snakes. As she stabs the needle again and again, frown lines indent her brow.

For the first week of her kidney dialysis Edith sat like a stone. She drank her half-cup of tea, answered the occasional question, but mostly told herself it was all a bad dream. She sat that way Monday, Wednesday and Friday from nine until one. She heard the dialysis machine hum, saw tubes going in, tubes coming out - yet even though she knew her blood was being purged of toxins, this was something happening to somebody else.

'I do a lot of reading,' said the woman opposite. Edith nodded and studied the patterns in the vinyl floor. The swirls reminded her of ocean currents and on her second day, the currents parted to reveal continents and islands. On her third day she traced the sea journey she once made from New Zealand to England, including the shorter journey across the North Sea.

'How did it go?' asks Iris, Edith's only friend who dares talk about her kidney failure.

'I wasn't there.'

'Where were you?'

'In Norway.'

That night Edith can't sleep, so does what she always does when sleepless and re-enacts a journey. She returns to Norway, where she catches the coastal ferry so as to visit relatives on the small island of Nerlandsoya.. On the third day she meets Karle. She eyes his blonde wavy hair, smells the herring on his hands and when he brushes past, the texture of his hand-knitted jersey scalds her skin.

The wool shop's a barn and there's no one to help. Edith fans through folders of knitting patterns, finally choosing an intricate cabled man's jersey.

'A bit hard don't you think?' Iris says.

'The harder the better.'

The wool Edith chooses is the colour of bleached wood - bleached wood speckled with rust and lichen.

'I didn't know you could knit,' says Iris.

On Monday Edith casts on the back and by the time she reaches the first cables, the needles fair fly. 'Looks complicated,' says the reader, who's begun a new book.

Edith doesn't lift her eyes, for if she does she'll be back in the dialysis room. As she starts a new row, Karle drives her to the top of the island where they look down on the geometry of headlands and bays. 'You're shivering,' Karle says, wrapping her in his strong arms. His cheek is coarse sand. His lips taste of salt.

'Your tea's getting cold,' says the nurse.

On Wednesday Edith completes the back and while casting on the front, her dialysis line blocks and an alarm wails. Her fingers freeze and the grey curtains and walls close in - just as the mist closed in the day she and Karle said their farewells. As people do things to her line, she breathes in the mist she breathed when she realised Karle's farewell was forever.

The blocked line clears. The dialysis machine resumes its hum. Purl two... cable three forward... knit three... cable three back... purl two... knit one.

'Who's it for?' Iris asks, as Edith lays the jersey on the bed.

'A friend.' Edith studies the new pattern she's bought. She stroked a hank of green wool and next Monday at nine, starts knitting a jersey the colour of Karle's eyes.