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Illustrations by Franklin Habit

The problem ladies have all the answers!

The Secret to Looking Great in a Handknit

Yo My P.L.s!

How do I tell a newish knitter in my knitting group that she needs to branch out from raglans? Her shoulders droop and her bust sags and she looks four inches shorter and ten inches wider. She would look so much better in a set-in sleeve. But she persists with raglans because they are "so easy," and that's what her mother always made, so she already has all these patterns. Extra credit if you can talk her out of using cotton yarn so her stitches come out all wonky.

Tracey (not her real name) (actually her real name)

Dear Tracey,

This is your lucky day. One of the Problem Ladies is going to share a Personal Story That May Be Relevant!

Once upon a time one of the Problem Ladies needed a new jacket. She was feeling sensitive about her Tummy Situation. It was book tour time, and she was nervous about how she was going to look when being interviewed on local television stations for thirty seconds (between the traffic and the weather) at 6:01 a.m.

On a visit to London, the Problem Lady sought the advice of a trusted friend with experience and training in fashion design. Careful to speak in tender euphemisms, she asked her friend to help her shop for a jacket that would be "figure flattering" and "perhaps skim the waist a bit."

To which the friend replied, "Oh hell yes, we've got to do something about your STOMACH." They then went shopping, and the Problem Lady tried on 500 jackets. With the help of the blunt, yet trusted friend, the Problem Lady learned that if she is to look her best, there must always be a Diversionary Feature, preferably off-center, at her waist. A belt. A bow. A screenprint of David Bowie. Now this Problem Lady has a go-to collection of jackets and tops that she can throw on whenever she needs to appear on local morning television or go out in public. The trusted friend

still occasionally emails the Problem Lady photos of famous pot-bellied people wearing fetching outfits, with a cheery note: "This will be fab for your stomach!"

The moral of this story: your friend, if she is wise or even halfway sensible, will be relieved and grateful to be told by a kindly-intentioned, blunt, yet trusted friend, that raglans don't suit her. Soften the blow by telling her that, honestly, raglans don't suit most women. Think of the fun she'll have looking for set-in sleeve patterns on Ravelry!

Overcoming Dithering

Dear Problem Ladies:

I have yarn. Shedloads of yarn. (Well, not quite literally shedloads—perhaps ten dog kennels' worth of yarn.) I also have patterns. Lots and lots of 'em. I even have a little time to knit at the moment. I am a lucky duck, I know. My problem is this: I can match the patterns and yarn together pretty well, but then they never seem quite the perfect match for one another. Too much yarn left over, perhaps. Or the yarn is too spongy for the pattern or something. Or not quite the perfect shade of gray. I'm beginning to wonder if I'm just making excuses not to knit. What can I dooooo, Problem Ladies?

2plyonRavelry

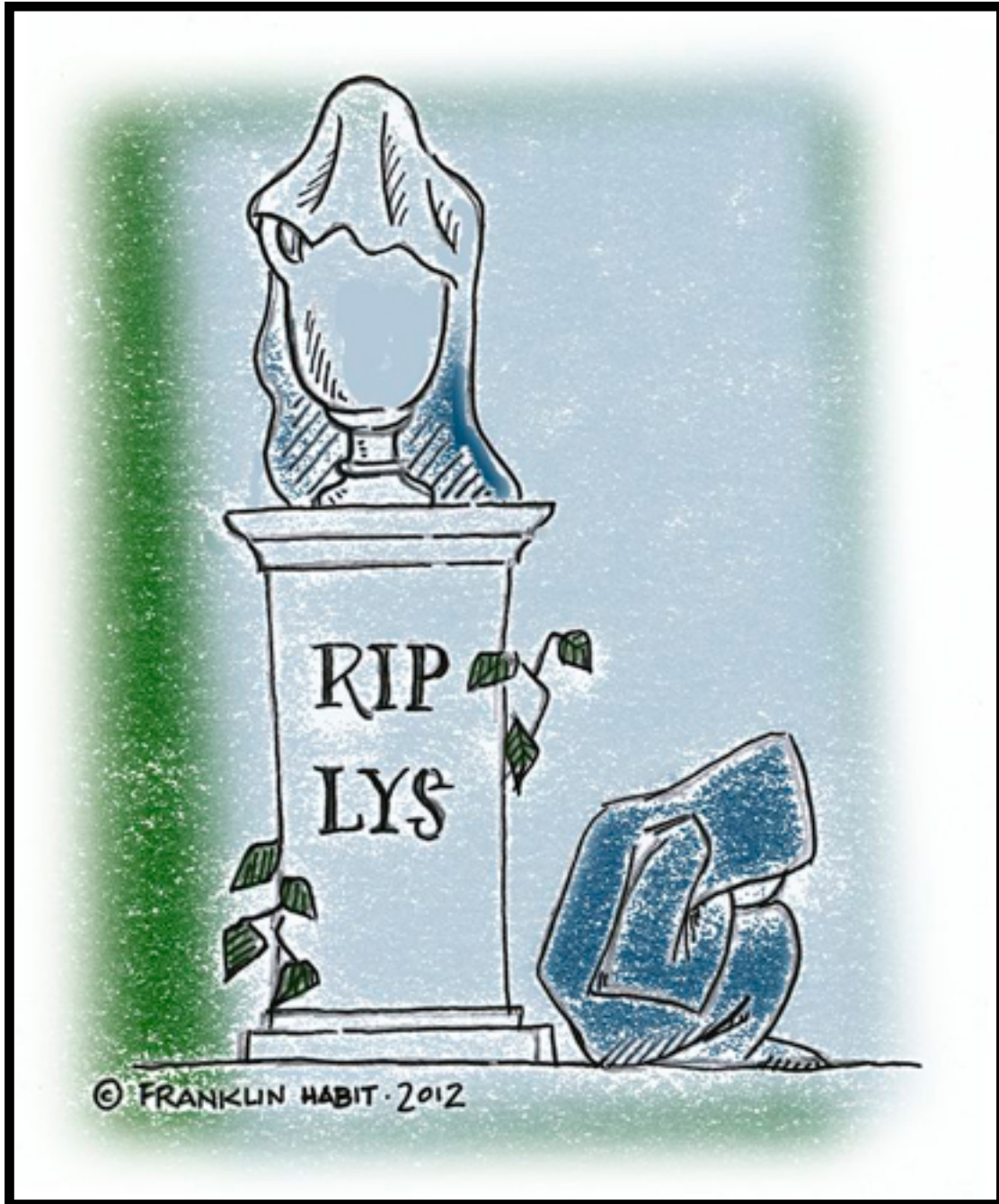
Dear 2plyonRavelry:

There is a saying that we turn to whenever we are a) late on a deadline, b) pretending we are better at something than we actually are, or c) suffering from unrealistic expectations. We are often in these situations, so we're thinking of putting this saying on a needlepoint pillow. (Needlepoint pillows are the 1970s equivalent of tattoos today.) We find it helpful whenever we're stuck, and from what you describe, we're going to declare you stuck. Here's the saying:

Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

The quickest way to get over the fantasy of the perfect project is simply to dive in with what you have right there in front of you. Pretend you are trapped in a motel room alongside an interstate (oh wait, that was the middle school lacrosse tournament we attended last weekend) with only your stash and your patterns. It's all great stuff—you don't buy yarn you hate, right? And you only buy patterns you like to make, correct? Trust those instincts, and give yourself no more than thirty minutes to match yarn to pattern. You have got to get busy on that stash, right this second. It's making us nervous, knowing that there are ten dog kennels' worth of perfectly good yarn waiting for its destiny.

(By the way, "dog kennel" is an excellent unit of measure when talking about yarn quantity.)



Grief 101: When Your Favorite Yarn Shop Closes Down

Dear Problem Ladies,

My beloved local yarn store just went out of business. No more knitting night, no more on-the-spot helpful advice about Japanese knitting chart mystery symbols, no more emergency runs for the other kind of pastel plastic stitch markers or the last skein of the dye lot, no more lovely new yarns to contemplate (and fondle) at my leisure. What should I do?

Unrelated: I recently noticed an accumulation of greenish paper stuff in my pockets. What's up with that?

Love,
Suddenly Flush in Katonah

Dear Let's Call You Susan,

In 1967, psychiatrists Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe embarked on a study of whether stress contributes to illness. They surveyed more than 5,000 medical patients and asked whether they had experienced any of 43 life events in the previous two years. Each event was assigned a weight reflecting its relative stressfulness. The more events the patient added up, the higher the score. The higher the score, the more likely the patient was to become ill. Death of spouse was at the top of the list, with a weight of 100, divorce 73, jail term 63, and so forth.

We're sure that Holmes and Rahe were super-smart guys—absolutely top shelf—but clearly they did not knit. The Problem Ladies' research has shown that the loss of an established LYS is weighted in the high 400s on the list of Stressors Affecting Knitters. The reason is simple: all those other things could happen to you, and that would be bad, but if you still had your LYS you could soldier on, score some sweet skeins, and nurse yourself back to health. Once the LYS is gone, your life is a Tarantino movie.

Whatever you do, Susan, please don't panic. There are still many wonderful purveyors of yarn and pastel plastic stitch markers. Gather your strength, knit from your stash for a decent period of mourning, keen if you must. Then, slowly, begin to look upon this loss as an opportunity to explore new yarn purveyors. Abundance awaits you: brick and mortar shops, indie spinners and dyers at fiber festivals and on the Internet. Perhaps open a savings account, or fund the cure of a widespread disease, with the cash that the closure of your beloved shop has liberated.

And Susan, one more thing: that row in your WIP with the Swarovski crystal stitch markers? That's where your fellow knitters carried you.

Should an Old School Knitter Discover 21st-century Knitting?

Dear Problem Ladies:

A woman I work with was taught the very basics of knitting by her grandmother at the age of seven. More than 50 years later, my friend only knits basic scarves and afghans and has yet to discover superwash wool, cashmere laceweight, hand-dyed sock yarn, Noro, Ravelry, KALs, Friday-night knitting groups, and all the other joys of modern knitting. I have two questions. 1. How do I gently introduce her to knitting in the 21st century without overwhelming her? 2. She has no stash! This is a serious problem that must be corrected! Can you give me some suggestions for selecting parts of my stash to give her so that she can have her own yarn collection?

Anne

Dear Anne,

We met a woman not long ago who uses only Lion Brand Fisherman's Wool, that sturdiest of sturdies. She makes two cardigan patterns, one with a zipper and one with buttons. Navy blue or cream. That's it. When we discovered that she didn't know what the word Malabrigo meant, we realized that we had come across a member of a tribe as rare as the Yanamamo: an unsullied, untainted Old School Knitter.

We think you need to leave your 20th-century knitter alone. We don't think she will be able to handle what happens when she gets an eyeful of a typical yarn store. She's likely to go wild, doing the yarny equivalent of what happens when Western culture infects the rest of the world. She'll get drunk on eBay, overshare on Ravelry, post embarrassing photos of her stash. You don't want to be responsible for that.

The Sinking Feeling, Or, Facing into Imperfection

Dear Problem Ladies:

I've been working on a Fair Isle cardigan for a while. The colors are lovely, the pattern isn't too hard, and the steeking was fun. So what is the problem? Well, I had the sinking feeling while working on the yoke that it was getting smaller. "That's just the shaping and you'll be cutting it open so you'll be fine," I kept telling myself.

We all know where this is going. It is too small now on the top. I'm going to finish it anyway because I'm sure I have a tiny friend somewhere who will love it. But for next time, what is a good way to keep things from getting super small when you are doing Fair Isle? Pulling at the floats? Going up a bit in needle, just knitting a size bigger? Any advice would be great.

Ikisti

Dear Ikisti,

First of all, you have our condolences. This is the part of knitting that many people cannot even talk about: the close call. The almost-perfect. The thing that almost was.

It's such a dilemma, isn't it? Do we finish the thing that's not right, or do we rip it out and try again? We have gone both ways on this one—we have left deeply imperfect sleeves on sweaters, and we have ripped out entire Fair Isle sleeves. Usually it's project fatigue that leads us to leave imperfections in place. Sometimes they matter; sometimes they don't.

So here are some Fair Isle tips:

1. Turn your work inside out, so that the floats are on the outside. This makes the floats a tiny bit longer, and they can't pull tight as they sometimes do when on the inside of knitting in the round.
2. Be sure to spread the stitches out on the right needle as you launch a float behind them—this makes the float the right length.
3. Going up a needle size sometimes works, though it can be hard to tell exactly how much this changes your gauge—until you've already knitted a lot.
4. Knitting a size bigger is also dicey, but it could work. Part of the problem with knitting Fair Isle sweaters is that it can be hard to know exactly what your gauge is. A Fair Isle gauge swatch is tedious business. You knit the gauge swatch flat, but you're most likely knitting the garment in the round. Sometimes that swatch doesn't accurately reflect the knitting that happens once you're using circular needles. This is why we like knitting Fair Isle blankets—size doesn't matter!