How to “Thread the Needle”

by Diya Mathur

If we’re being honest, it was just another one of my phases. Last year it was embroidering, and this year it was thrift flipping. I had spent a couple of hours a few mornings ago endlessly watching YouTube videos about how to upcycle clothing. As an environmentally-conscious-lover-of-fashion, I wanted to learn to do the same and called my mother on the phone asking if she could teach me how to use a sewing machine. She excitedly agreed and arranged boxes of thread and spare cloth on the kitchen table, waiting, days before my arrival.

Days passed and my internship ended. I returned home to the sewing machine and my eager mother. She soon began her tutorial, explaining the purpose of each of the machine’s knobs, how to change the patterns of stitching, and how to overcome the common issues I was bound to encounter. As I sat next to her, trying to internalize everything she was saying, I watched her maneuver the machine like a retired athlete—familiar, yet out-of-practice. She continued to maneuver the machine for a few more minutes while I patiently observed.

“And now, we can thread the needle.”

While this was a seemingly simple task in this more intricate operation, I watched her eyes blink away the excitedness into realms of frustration. Her Parkinson’s diagnosis had once again made an uncomplicated action become tedious, once again taken away the simplicity of her happiness. I offered to take over, but she refused my help, determined that she could prove herself wrong. But we both knew it wasn’t just her tremoring hands stopping her. It was her aging eyes, her blurry vision, and her reduced hand-eye coordination—a mosaic of the side effects of time and her medications. She struggled a while longer before soon accepting the inevitable outcome. Sighing, she handed me the thread and needle as she continued on with her tutorial.

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We received her diagnosis August 31st, 2018, the beginning of my sophomore year of college. It came with little surprise, since we had all suspected it, but the official title of the disorder crystallized all of her symptoms, making them feel more real than before. Knowing the prognosis, I could no longer brush off her newest twitch or latest limp as temporary. This time, this diagnosis, was anything but temporary. Each new tremor, compounded by the last, added to the declaration that she was officially on the decline.

It made the 165 miles apart from her feel even further.

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She calls me every couple of days while I’m away at college. I put her voice on speaker phone as she recounts her day’s pain levels and walking patterns. I quietly listen, while folding my laundry or responding to some emails, never forgetting that I can never truly see her misery through the phone. She spends five minutes or so explaining her day, talking about her coworkers and interactions with her nursing home patients, before concluding with something along the lines of, “Today, my tremors were manageable. I was able to walk for most of the day normally without too much pain, but yesterday was better.” This is always my cue to return to the present. I know to remind her that today was just as good as yesterday, that her friends encounter struggles that they may not tell her about, and that if nothing else matters, she is a wonderful mother, all before soon changing the subject and telling her about my latest bhangra practice or my plans for the upcoming weekend.

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Every time I return home, my mother unfailingly greets me with a loving hug, a plate of my favorite homemade Indian food (daal makhani, bindhi, parathas, and a side of suji ka halwa), and endless questions about the trip home. As always, I eat the highly anticipated food as I recount the traffic and weather on the road, which is routinely followed by her updates on all of my upcoming dentist and doctor appointments. We both cherish one another's presence, satisfied, but in our own ways.

After a small lull in our conversation, I take a larger bite of food in anticipation of what's coming next.

"Have the tremors gotten worse?"

As the resident nomad of the family, I am the only person in the world she asks this question to. I only come home for a few days throughout the year, so she knows that I can see the disorder's progression with more clarity, with more distance, than most. In the beginning, this question never fazed me because I never hesitated to tell her the comforting truth, but time creates distance and distance thieves comfort.

I take a second to pretend like I'm analyzing her status, acting as if I'm formulating a response. Seconds pass, and I finally look into her anxious, wrinkled eyes. Reciting what I had previously practiced in my head, I tell her she's doing much better than the last time I visited. That her medications are working even better now. That her morning yoga and ayurvedic treatments and afternoon mile walks and new diets are making all the difference. She hesitates for a moment, trying to decode my truth, before soon realizing the sincerity of my words. Happily, she leaves the room, and I am left to watch her gait and hand movements, for real this time.

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Every so often, I return to the sewing machine. While it started off as a tool to attempt yet another thrift flipping project, it has now become part of a therapeutic sort of activity. I often spend hours at a time at our kitchen table analyzing my newest finds, imagining each cloth's previous owner and envisioning its now future potential. My most recent project, a denim jacket, was the product of three articles of clothing, three independent past lives altered to now fit mine. Yet, it never escapes me that the longer I spend assimilating projects like the jacket into my day-to-day life, the harder it becomes to ever remember their old ones.

Although I still ask my mother for the occasional piece of help, I've learned a great deal about the workings of sewing machines: how to adjust their dials, how to change the patterns of stitching, and the most beautiful, the most frustrating lesson of them all: how they only know how to move forward.