

## **Wool Gathering by Jackie Elliot**

*A story written in 'Marmalade Yarns' as part of the Frome Festival's 'Writers in Residence' event, July 2010. Entries had to include the mandatory words:  
'I wondered if the magic was still there.'*

Pat hated knitting. Perhaps it was having to follow someone else's pattern. (She didn't do prescriptive.) Perhaps it was all those hours she'd spent picking up dropped stitches under the critical eye of her Grandmother in the wool shop after school as her mother worked. How she had longed to unravel the twisted skeins and produce a chaos of woolly soup! As soon as she could, Pat wore shop-bought clothes, woven fabrics and snapped her detested plastic knitting needles. "Yes," thought Pat, studying her street-map, "I was a rebellious child. Things are different now, very different." Pat turned to inspect a side street: an Indian take-away and some offices. No sign of the old shop. Like everything else, the town of Frome had changed over the years.

People at the Garden Café directed her up the hill to find the new 'Marmalade Yarns' wool shop. As she trudged, Pat again doubted her grief-counsellor's advice. Could revisiting scenes of her childhood really ease her mourning for Ted's death?

She stepped into a woollen cave. Cubby-holes on both sides were stuffed with multicoloured balls of yarn, skeins of subtle shades and bagels of softest angora. Pastel lavenders vied with glowing golds and vibrant reds. All sounds were suddenly softened, absorbed by wool. Multi-dyed rainbow hues and speckled tweeds assaulted Pat's vision, screaming for her attention. Grandma had worked among white, practical grey and navy with unmentionable, brown-paper-wrapped parcels of 'ladies' goods' below the counter and unalluring underwear behind a curtain. Drab. This was NOT. Pat laughed out loud and, to hide her confusion, bent to look more closely at the shelves. 'Patons', she recognised; 'Bliss' and 'Mango' were new. Then she saw 'Hot Sox'.

Her legs smarted as they recalled the itchy, knitted, grey socks of her schooldays with their hated, tight, elastic garters which she had gleefully catapulted away as soon as she moved on to tights. (She thought, "Such a small rebellion, compared with our daughter's.") There had also been those stripy knee-highs she had worn for dancing; they'd called it clubbing.

Clubbing! It was at the youth club that she had met Ted, dear dead Ted, the love of the life.

"Alright, dear?"

Pat looked up. "Fine, thank you," she choked. The shopkeeper patted her trembling shoulder.

"Take your time, dear."

Pat grinned weakly. She had yards of time now and so little to fill it. She returned to her examination of the wool. At least the names made her smile.

'Rainbow Glitz'! That would be their daughter, Sophie, in her rock-chick phase: loud, angry, nocturnal. She had dropped out of school, drunk, taken drugs, caused her

parents to age and played a mean guitar. ‘Soph.’ lived in Australia now with two sons of her own. “Perhaps I should knit something for our grandsons,” Pat mused, startling herself.

‘Big Softie’! Ha! That was her Ted. Strong and caring, he had coped with Sophie’s furious teenage years and her own resulting depression. He was a man with feelings, a man who understood both his wife and his daughter, her mainstay. She needed him. She squeezed the springy ball for comfort.

“It’s an inspiring texture,” commented the shopkeeper, “Kind of keeps you going.”

Pat smiled but couldn’t believe that wool could sustain her. She needed Ted. She sat amidst the softness of the wool, staring at pattern books covered in soothing pink and the palest blue.

“That’s it,” the shopkeeper said, “When things are hard, wool can be a help. Many of our customers find this a gentle place.”

Tears welled.

“I’m alone,” said Pat, meaning that there was nothing left.

“Have you good memories?” The woman’s Scottish accent probed cautiously.

“Oh, yes, wonderful.” Pat felt her spirits lift; found a cup of real coffee in her hands. With joy she recalled the good, Ted-filled days.

As she drew to the end of her story, her listener nodded.

“There, it’s all in the yarn. People talk in here and it helps them. You enjoyed, if not the knitting, at least playing with wool in your Grandmother’s shop. You should use it for your memories.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Pat called Sophie in Australia again. Yes, it was expensive but this was to report an improvement. That was important.

“...Yes, a new wool shop ... I didn’t really believe the counsellor about childhood memories of Frome. I wondered if the magic was still there. ... NO, not a jumper OR socks, certainly not socks. Sophie, I’m knitting a picture -‘intarsia’- of my memories. It’s my woollen autobiography.

Jackie Eliot

With thanks to ‘*Marmalade Yarns*’.