

Blanket

Taking special care, one stitch at a time

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Sometimes, when you pull on a loose end too hard and too suddenly, the ball starts unravelling at an alarming rate, metres of yarn pooling haphazardly around you; an avalanche of movement prompted by the tiniest of tugs. Life spiralled in this way for my sister for a while, after she woke in the early hours of the morning on 11 March. Her waters had broken.

Arthur Harry, her first child and my first nephew, was born on 13 March this year. He was just over three weeks premature, but it was a traumatic delivery, with the umbilical cord caught around his neck. Bundled away before my sister could comprehend what was happening, he was immediately transferred into an incubator in the Special Care Baby Unit. Wired up to an incomprehensible number of monitors and machines, Arthur was unreachable to his mum and dad, except via two small holes through which their shaky hands could offer a comfort he didn't yet understand. But with a pandemic reaching its own unfathomable fingers into many other families' lives at the same time, he needed all the protection he could get.

I, certainly, couldn't be of much help. We couldn't visit because we shouldn't visit, and having not had any children myself, I often couldn't bring myself to utter the words of support that bubbled weakly to my lips. In that touch-and-go first week, when Arthur was hanging on a thread, time spun my mind into a whirlwind of emotion: hope, despair, passion, despondency but always, woven through it all, an unconditional love that was rooted

exponentially deeper with every photograph and whisper of news from the hospital.

The waiting had begun. Instead of fighting the passing of every frustrating day, I had to believe that time really was a great healer, that it was on our side. And there was one way I knew I could tie myself down to earth for a few hours and shelter from the storm.

When I began crocheting a blanket for Arthur, my sister was four months pregnant and I'd never seen a pattern in my life. I hooked and tucked yarn clumsily into some semblance of the right stitch and moved on. I did not dwell on imperfection or tire of my own mistakes, and gradually I made some headway.

Time when I was crocheting was at least predictable, something that you can never say of the minutes, hours and days that a newborn survives only thanks to a plastic womb and the precious perseverance of NHS staff. Crochet was a constant when seemingly nothing else was, able to stabilise my see-sawing mental state. I yarned over in the park or on the sofa, on my own or in company, whether I'd had a good or bad day. As my hook dove and rose through my work, the ball twitched reassuringly beside me in response, enjoying a life of its own.

The blanket was to be made up of squares - that was the extent of my plan. Squares and lots of them, until Arthur was alright. As soon as one was completed, I set about choosing colours for the next and began again from scratch, stitching each round with more confidence until on 27 March, Arthur too had got to grips with the new,



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far more vital life skills he had been learning. He was allowed to go home.

Making the blanket made seeing Arthur a fact, no question marks allowed. I finished the first section on 5 April, his due date. I sent it in the post, and even though it wasn't even half the size of a pillowcase, it fitted around his tiny form perfectly. I am currently working on a third panel, and when I finally meet Arthur, I plan to crochet all three parts together. Not having met the object of my affection, I laboured blind (and inconsequentially, compared to my sister). But such is the power of love that it can string us along through the hardest of times, erasing doubt and colouring the future with the bright hues of certainty. ♦

Jenny's oh moment is family meals. “They're so precious nowadays. The overlap of loud, loved voices and honest laughter.”

PS Baby Arthur has now met all of his doting aunts, uncles, grandparents and great-grandparents. His world has expanded beyond his imagination, and so have our hearts!