

Blankie

By

Sara Laboe

Blankie

I. Fragments of Ingrid Elizabeth III (1989-2007)

Soft. Smooth. Cool against my neck. Wait—flip her with a silly, pretend-confident snap of the wrist: now the colorful children shapes on her white background are facing the right way. Her border runs perfect along the side of the sheet. I'm a letter in an envelope. Lying in bed, rolling the little yarn knots on her surface between the pads on my fingers and pressing them into the tender skin around my fingernails.

Spin her like pizza dough over my head. I'm in the living room with some brothers, eyes to the ceiling. She's whispering secrets against my palm. She's tickling my fingertips and being lovely to my eyes. No one is watching, Judge Judy is on, so we twirl like a top 'til we're dizzy and fall into the giant clean-sock basket. Blankie lands on top of my head and I pull her all the way over, static in my hair, a light kind of darkness.

Pretending to be blind—*don't open your eyes because you can no longer see*. Wrap her around my shoulders and feel our way to the bathroom. We don't really need the bathroom, but we need the pretense to test out our other senses. Pretending to be paralyzed— *don't move a muscle because your body is dead*. The gentle pressure of her fabric on my skin holds me accountable. How long will it be until I can move again? Never, never, never. If I stay paralyzed for a long time, my body begins to drift away and then I'm invisible. A massive eraser wipes me away from my toes to my chin.

A whisper, barely louder than a breath, drifts down to me from Jen-on-the-top-bunk. "Sara. Sara, I have an idea." Before I can break my paralysis, I see my sister's feet sliding out into the abyss of our dark room. They're followed closely by various knobby limbs and stringbean

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extremities. That bend and then hang limply over the side as they slip past the edge of her bed to hover over mine. She carefully slows more and more until the tip of her toes reach my bed, and then drops the whole stem of her body all-but-silently down onto my bed, her long dark hair petaled around her face.

It can't be heard, as that would inevitably lead to the discovery of my sister having left her bed. We each kept an ear open for dad's sneaking steps on the stairs outside our door; he's always trying to catch us in the act of being bad—it's the only time he knows what to say to us.

"Blankie needs a name," Jen's words tickle my ear. "You're going to have her forever, right? She should have a real name." I'm briefly shocked into silence. "Ohmygosh, *yes*," I agree eagerly. Jen has the *best* ideas.

We begin the festivities by deciding to bestow upon her the name "Ingrid." Our mom's boss at the hospital is named Ingrid, and Jen and I secretly find the name exotic and absurd-sounding, frequently pressing our faces into the blankets to stifle our quiet waves of laughter as we call each other Ingrid in our dark room. In her infinite wisdom, my sister proposes that "Ingrid Elizabeth" had a certain regal sound, and we reason together that adding a number at the end would give it an even more distinguished ring. We come to the natural conclusion that being the third one of something means you weren't the first or second, and so, therefore, you must be even more royal and important to be a third.

With the matter settled and the meeting adjourned, we are able to move on to other nighttime activities of great importance. Jen pulls herself back up onto her bed and then lets one arm dangle back down for me. In one hand I grip her pinky, with the other I grip her thumb,

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and with both hands on the wheel I take us away into the night sky and steer us up, down, and side to side like we're on a roller coaster without limits.

II. Sad Turtles (2006-2009)

“Throw me the Sad Turtles, will you, Jen?” My 17-year-old sister reaches back to drag the blanket off the edge of the couch and tosses him, from where she lies on her stomach on the floor, to where I’m perched on the recliner. She doesn’t move her eyes from the TV; in fact, none of our brothers, two on the couch and the youngest on the floor near Jen, even do so much as glance away from Jerry Springer and his howling audience through my exchange with Jen. The fights are the best part—Jerry Springer has way better fights than Maury, and this one is nonstop hair pulling, face slapping, and tank top yanking. Two of the boys have massive bowls of Life cereal perched on an upturned palm halfway up to their slack mouths, a big spoon suspended somewhere nearby in the other hand. Mom and dad are at work; I’m the one in the recliner this time so I’m responsible for watching out the window for their return.

I catch a handful of thick fleece and the rest drops like snow across my lap; silent weight. I lift the blanket by two corners, a hand on each, and swing him up into the air— so he’s relatively flat and comes to settle gently over my legs. I grasp the fabric towards the bottom with my toes and tug down until my feet are both tucked underneath; I drape the rest carefully up and over my shoulders, pausing to discretely drag the soft fabric across the underside of my chin. I like it when my whole self, even my arms, is secure underneath so I feel like a mummy— no gaps between the edges of the blanket and whatever surface I’m on. Sometimes, in bed, I practice rolling in a way that tucks me in wicked tight.

This blankie carries a different set of rules than Ingrid Elizabeth III. My Sad Turtles are allowed in the living room, the kitchen, and the car— sometimes even when we sneak down to

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the basement he remains draped around my shoulders. He accompanies me almost anywhere in our house except the bathroom and the Little Boys' Room. Jen made the Sad Turtles, and she made him for *me*. She's been making blankets left and right—making lots of things, really. For mine, she used pink fleece fabric busily populated with sleepily smiling turtles—mama turtles and baby turtles. She found it at Joann Fabrics downtown, but I don't really know how it is that she knows how to— is able to— make stuff that can be used every day, like my Sad Turtles. He's made of two Sara-sized fabric sheets sewn together, inside out, by his two longest sides and then turned right way out. On the two short ends, my sister cut three-inch strips in the fabric along each side, and then tied the strips to those that lined up with them from the other side.

* * *

Now the Sad Turtles live in my barracks room with me. I didn't bring them to Basic Training; I left them behind with the other items I care deeply about but which might have invited unwanted attention in an environment where I would likely have no privacy. The only book I dared bring is a complete collection of stories by Poe. I couldn't imagine anyone taking issue with some regular old Poe. I retrieved all of my special things—journals, books, my Sad Turtles— during my two-week-long leave between Basic Training and AIT.

I've just been dumped back in my barracks room by Ogunnaike, the soldier in my unit who got here—to Fort Campbell— at the same time I did last month, and who lives in the barracks room next to mine; we share a wall. I thought he was my friend; I thought he liked me; I was fitting in, I thought. I stand swaying in the middle of my room for what feels like a long time before spying my Turtles hanging off of my unmade bed. They look satisfyingly out of place on my twin bed with the solid green Government Issued bedding—a comforting presence, a link

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to my sister. My knees weaken and give way, and I sit on the floor, reaching to slowly pull the Sad Turtles off the bed and over my drunken self, my damaged body—all the way over my disheveled head.

I can't think; my whole body is achy and boiling hot; my brain is a tangled mass of burning nerves and misfiring neurons. I'm also extraordinarily wasted, which is adding to my general sense of confusion and panic. But it's over now, right? And everyone loves O, the motivated PT star of our unit. And I'm only 20, and alcohol is not allowed in the barracks. And no one would believe me if I told; *and I would have to tell*—to say the words I'm dancing around even inside my own mind. And I would be in trouble for drinking and being a female alone in a male's private room without another soldier. All of this could have been so, so easily prevented if I wasn't so foolish and naïve. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Then, a single soft double-knock at my door. I sit up unsteadily from my position on the tile floor, bobbing and weaving within an invisible storm. I wait, listen, scarcely breathe. Totter to my feet feeling all-the-way broken, burning and smoldering with shock, shame, and sore muscles. Shuffle to the door. No one is there; it's just the rest of the clothes I was wearing in a pile outside my door.

III. Sojourn Women's Shelter Blankets and My Attempt at Recreating Them (2014-2015)

I cling to these blankets; I have nothing else. But they're not even mine.

There were two of them and they were smaller than any blanket I'd ever had. Each was all soft pastel colors, loosely hand-crocheted rows. There are mistakes and some sloppiness, as though the artist was a beginner just learning, and I loved these endearing inconsistencies more than anything else about them. Donated to the shelter by some kind soul, presumably for babies and children in the shelter, I assumed a shortage of supplies prompted the staff to start just issuing two of them to each suffering woman during intake in lieu of one full-sized blanket.

Now I'm home; well, I'm at my parents' house, anyway. My Sad Turtles are gone—devastatingly abandoned with almost all of my belongings (Including my awful car. Good riddance.) in Litchfield, IL last week after everything happened. I can't get the shelter blankets off my mind, so I've decided to recreate them. I want to make and present them to myself— a special gift. Actually, I'm going to crochet one big blanket that will represent me as a person, contain a variety of my favorite colors, and be hefty and substantial. It will be much bigger than other blankets; I will be able to burrito myself up into it three layers deep.

Jen is here right now, too, suffering through her own traumatic life-altering series of events. She keeps offering to help me, but I need to do this on my own. I have to make it for myself. I get two new skeins of yarn every few days when Jen lets me trail along with her to the craft store in her car—it's the grey Focus she bought when she got back from Afghanistan a couple years ago; I love Jen's car. It smells like her half of our childhood bedroom.

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Each time we venture to Joann Fabrics in town I pick out two different colors. Standing in the center of the aisle and facing the soft, colorful wall of potential, my eyes lose focus and I let the yarn blend together—one giant rainbow yarn wall. From there, I wait to see which splash of color my eye is drawn to most that day. Once I have painstakingly chosen two colors in this way, my sister buys the yarn for me because I don't have any money, neither in the bank nor outside of it—not a single dollar. Jen said she is going to give me some money before she leaves because there is no one else.

The blanket is not coming out right, and it makes me cry. It's pretty big now, I have used at least eight or ten skeins of yarn, and it's turning out much too heavy. Since I've never crocheted anything to completion before, I started out making my stitches too tight, so each skein of yarn takes hours to use without actually making much progress on the blanket. It's not even an option for me to start using more relaxed stitches now because then the blanket won't be uniform. I've had to place it into a medium-sized duffel bag Jen gave me to tote it around and work on it; I've been only pulling the top few lines out of the bag while I add more rows— a stubborn refusal to let go of the project despite its obvious and abject failure. I *need* to make this for myself; I need to either finish it or perish in the tightly-stitched ruins I've created.

But, like, the thing is an abomination. Yarn Monster.

IV. Hangabers (2015-2022)

“God, Sara, just let me make you a blanket. You can come with me and choose whichever fabrics you want me to use for it.”

My crafty sister has taken pity on my sad attempts to do everything for and by myself. “*Fine*,” I say, with an exasperation I don’t really feel. Our brother Scott crash-landed back here with us just a couple days ago suffering, also, from a major crisis; Scotty has just been medically discharged from the Army. He and I are already fantasizing over the quickest way out of our parents’ house (they very obviously and openly resent our presence in “their” home), which looks increasingly like the two of us finding an apartment together as soon as possible. One of the things that happens when we are together, especially three or more of us, is that our sibling-speak returns right away. We are over the top with each other, always trying to make each other laugh for our own amusement as much as each other’s. This is the way we can carry each other, even when we’re too tired to carry our own selves.

Jen is driving us to Joann Fabrics, and I’m hunched under my barely-cracked window smoking a cigarette, holding it right up to the opening so the smoke will all get sucked out of the car. Jen is letting me smoke in her car for some reason, despite the fact that it’s frigidly cold outside on this January New Hampshire day, and despite her aversion to cigarette smoke; she can always tell when I’m having a rough time with my PTSD.

I’m telling Jen about how mom actually pursues me when I try to sneak outside at any time of the day or night for a smoke, but not to confront me about smoking—no. Instead, she

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needs to know every time I sneak out to smoke so she can try to *glare* her disapproval into my soul. I'm recounting this morning's episode of Mom's Eternal Disappointment.

"I notice I'm alone in the kitchen and I all but dive through doorway of opportunity (the doorway to the breezeway, in this case), creeping out to the garage and slipping through the side door undetected. I gently close the door by degrees and twist the doorknob back into place until everything within the locking mechanism has settled without a whisper. Keeping my body pressed against the outside garage wall I double-oh-seven it to the back of the house, making my way around to the side of the deck. My head is on a swivel as I attempt to creep through what seems unnaturally crunchy and rudely audible snow—like, it feels personal; I sense something on the wind... No, there is no one. I let out a long frosty breath and let down my shoulders, pull out my cigarettes and lighter, quietly pop open the pack, slide one out, and light 'er up. I exhale a smoky, blissful sigh into the frozen air—straight up into the sky—and take in the beautiful alien-ness of my parents' backyard under several feet of snow, and then I feel it: someone's eyes.

"Suppressing a chilly rush of panic, I force my eyes to focus, harness and reign in my breathing— and start to spin a slow circle, still taking drags from my cigarette. I'm mid-drag and three quarters of the way around when I see them and am gripped by a frozen wave of terror: Mother, dun dun *dun*! Smoldering eyes glued menacingly to mine, brows and lips arched sharply down in cartoonish outrage, she's just a few feet from me and her whole furious body is visible through the glass door from the breezeway to the deck. Her nose is practically pressed up against the glass, plumes of smoke from her nostrils, and fists clenched white in toddler-tantrum fists. I nearly pissed myself."

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We burst out laughing as we each side step out of the car and scurry over the icy lot into the toasty-warm craft store. Both of us stop for a moment once we're through the motion-sensor glass doors, savoring the heavenly paint-and-wood smells before turning wordlessly together toward Fabric Fields.

"Sara, can I use this one?" I turn inquiringly and it takes a moment for my brain to process the innocent sincerity of the question with the obnoxiously loud fabric she is holding inches from my eyeballs. It's a garish pink plaid with some football team's tacky green logo littered over the surface, repeating itself loudly every three or four inches. I'm horrified to discover that I actually *recognize* the logo because it was the favorite team of some sociopath I dated/endured for several years. "Well, that is *exactly* what I had in mind," I manage at length, in a dead-serious tone. We end up settling on a light-blue fabric with big smiling cheeseburgers across its surface. They each have skinny black stick-arms and seem to be dancing with glee, all askew and chaotically angled. All flailing and flimsy. The fabric is so random, so delightfully obscure, it almost doesn't make any sense; this is why I want it. We choose a silky red fabric for the border; I love how the contrast of the blue fabric and red border feels right when my eyes look at them side by side.

"Hey, remember in *Housewives of Beverly Hills* when the kid was saying 'Hamburger' but kept pronouncing it 'Hangaber?' Hilarious." We head back to Jen's car and sit quietly, peacefully, inside with the heat on for a while before deciding where's next.

"Will you be okay? After I leave, I mean." She asks. I am safe with Jen. "I'll be okay. Scotty and I are going to live together once I get a job." We don't talk too much about it. No point.

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I am holding the big plastic bag of fabric on my lap because I want to look at the fabric on the way home; I place my hand in the bag, on top of the pile, and simply rest it there. Jen is going to stitch a real, actual border with the red fabric. Looking closely at the two fabrics, feeling them beneath my fingertips, I tilt my head down and smile privately to myself. Jen is the only one in my life who can make me feel like I might be a real person, and a wave of happiness and pride— my sister thinks about me and cares about me even when we're not together— washes through my whole self. I capture the moment gently in my palms like a lightning bug and shield it from the world, sneaking secret glances at it but trying not to be greedy.

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"Saza house! Saza house!" I hear my 2-year-old nephew, Tillman, through the phone shouting excitedly from Jen's lap when he hears that she's talking to me. Tilly loves my house—a nice little cabin with lots of space and privacy up in Lake Toxaway; I still work in Brevard, where Jen lives with her husband and son. "Soon, baby," Jen tells him.

"Sara, I don't know how much longer we can keep doing this. At some point the risk of getting sick starts becoming less significant when our emotional needs are being so neglected," Jen says to me. "What if we *only* see each other and no one else?" We feel so helpless— everyone does.

My old dog, Maggie—the goodest of girls—is laying on my Hangaber blanket on the couch, her greying brows flickering in the light from the wood stove across the small room; I guess it's mostly become Maggie's blanket these days. I've been keeping it on the couch for her because it's adorable that she loves to lay on it so much. It makes me really happy that she loves

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it like I do, but also that I can allow that to happen without feeling jealous or worried about it wearing out faster. Watching Maggie take comfort in my Hangaber blanket makes me happy.

V. Quilt (2023)

Lately, and with increasing frequency, Jen and I find ourselves sitting on our deck together, just the two of us. It's usually early in the morning, after Jen has dropped Tillman off at first grade but before she has to start work (and I, school). Jen bundles up in one of her homemade quilt creations and hands me one to use without my having to ask. We chat as we make our coffee and bring it out onto the deck with us; we automatically sit in our usual places on the side-by-side deck chairs facing our beautiful yard.

I cherish our mornings outside, squinting into the sun and sharing our deepest thoughts and recent epiphanies. We laugh until we lose our breath at the adorable way Tillman used to replace all of his Rs with Ls—as in, “Chlistmas pleasants.” I pause to marvel that he was still so little as to be speaking that way when the three of us first moved here together. Sometimes we cry about how vile humanity can be to itself, to us, to people we know.

Presently, Jen is scrolling through something on her phone. “Wait, you’re going to be 5 years sober next month? That’s insane,” Jen says with sincerity; the date is marked on my calendar we both use for ours and Tilly’s schedule. “I know,” I say. “It’s that thing they say about time moving slowly but passing quickly. Wait—passing...slowly... You know what I mean. That thing.” We both lean our heads back contentedly in our chairs, the sun on our closed eyelids, and take a few deep breaths.

“So, I’ve been thinking about something, and I want to give you your Christmas present now,” Jen says. She’s using that slightly halting voice and different cadence that means she is a little nervous and feeling vulnerable. “Yay, presents!” I say with excited little claps. Jen gives the *best* presents. It almost shouldn’t be allowed—how beautiful and personal any gifts from Jen

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are. Jen goes inside and I'm left in the quiet morning's softly biting air. I listen to, watch the birds by the creek visiting the feeder I put up last spring—socializing around it on the dewy grass.

Birds are fascinating, and I like to watch their foreign games. Tiny dinosaurs.

Jen opens the door, and a moment passes before she bashfully quick-steps out sideways, facing me, holding the most beautiful quilt I've ever seen draped across her arms like some glowing holy shroud. "It's a queen-size quilt that will fit over your whole bed," she blurts excitedly, brimming with pride. "I made it with reinforced stitching so it's more durable because of the pets on your bed, but still super soft." Jen goes on to list more special features she added to the blanket specifically for me (me); some of the backing she used looks almost identical to Ingrid Elizabeth III's—she'd found that fabric at a thrift store and knew it would remind me of Ingrid. Some of the fabrics are animal prints, some are nature, some are beautiful patterns or strong, bold colors. There is magenta, blue, orange, every shade of green on the spectrum.

Jen is proudly describing the incredible artistry and commitment involved in the making of this quilt, and I'm still sitting in a state of shock, gaping at the blanket in her arms like a stunned deer. Finally, I realize my sister is presenting this blanket to me right now, like, to keep, and my arms shoot out to gently accept it from her arms.

Without a word, I wrap it around my shoulders, looking down at the way it falls all the way to the floor, and we sit back down together. Sure enough, it's soft. It's big, hefty, and warm.

It's everything I needed.