

Needlepoint

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Maybe he thought of them as tapestries if he thought about them as anything other than something to do. In the end, he didn't have enough to occupy himself. He'd been a doer, not a contemplator. He looked ahead to the end of the day, and behind him to that morning. Surgeons focus on the thing in front of them. Only after a heart attack at fifty-two did he begin to worry about tomorrow. Because he had been raised as a too-precious only child, he learned to value hard work and the success that was expected more than the mystery of life. Lord knows, he worked hard, and demanded diligence of himself and others. He did not complain, as some modern doctors do, about the calls in the night, the weekend interruptions, the bother. He considered it his duty and his joy to answer the phone in good spirits, and always do what needed to be done, never really thinking about his income.

When robbed of his pleasures, first by illness and then age, he seemed uncertain how to replace the drive to the hospital each morning, the intense routine of his days, his responsibilities. So, perhaps what he was making really were tapestries, a record of where he had been, as well as a craft.

He certainly would not have thought of it as art.

They were not beautiful, his copies of Norman Rockwell's *Post* magazine covers, coasters with the imbedded initials or names of family members, cushion covers of odd color combinations and even stranger geometries. Some were stitched into patterns stamped onto the mesh canvas of kits he bought, complete with the thread and instructions, but many

of them he made up. Before the life he had either constructed or had simply happened to him became truncated, he'd have thought making these objects too female. Then he would have scoffed at the idea of a grown man, a surgeon, doing needlepoint.

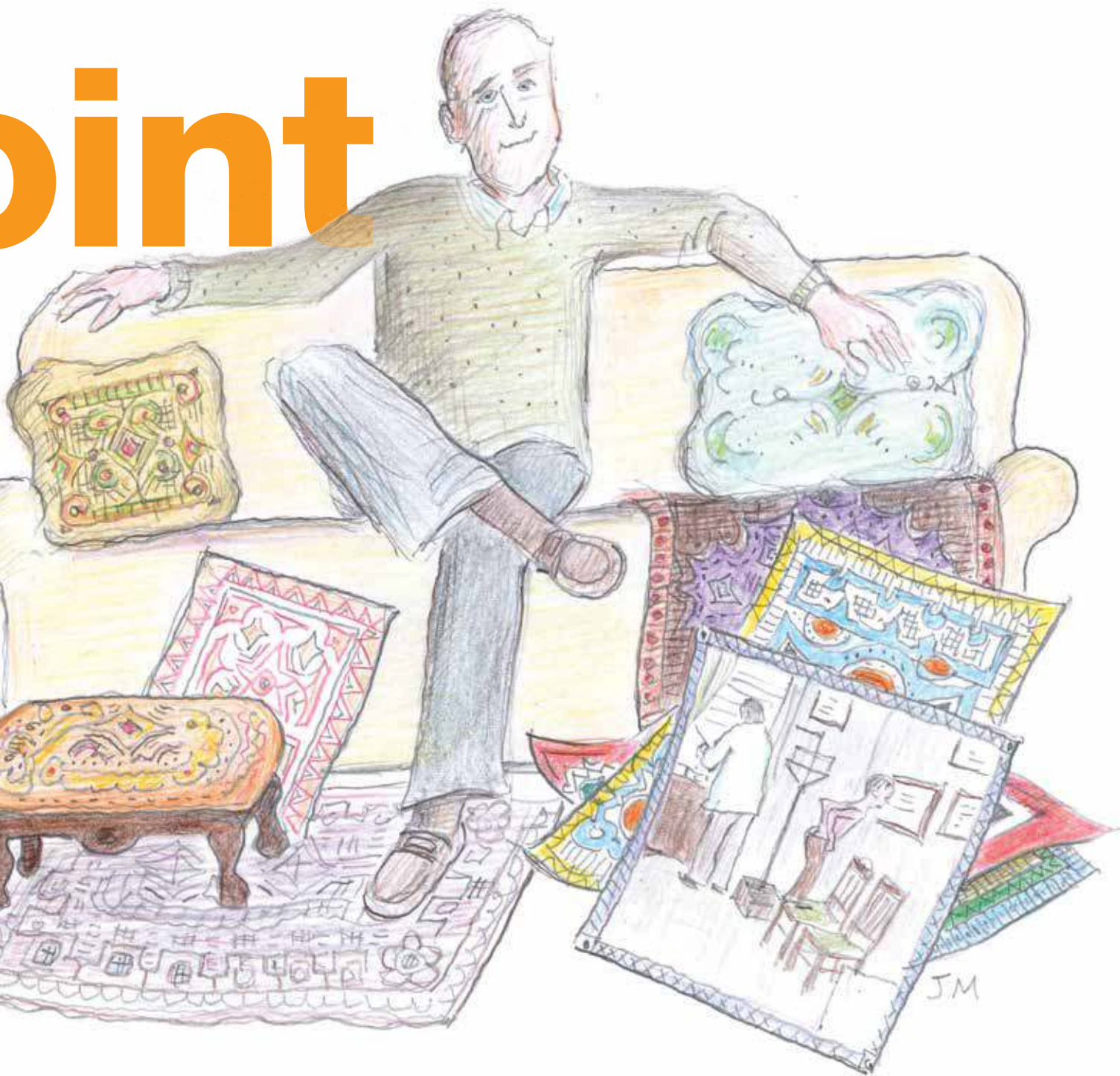
The biggest of the Norman Rockwell reproductions is a famous one from 1955: a boy of about eight years, pants dropped, stands on a chair with his nose an inch from a wall full of diplomas while, off to the side, a white-coated doctor is busy loading his syringe. Surely most American children have such a memory, and all doctors. Greatly admiring my doctor father, I took pride in the magazine cover when it appeared through our mail slot just before my twelfth birthday. He might have, too.

When my father started as an intern in 1939, the first sulfa antibiotics had recently been introduced. Medical x-rays were only fifty years old. Surgery required open-drop ether to produce anesthesia. Most diagnoses still depended on looking, feeling, listening; doctors had to get a sense of the patients they tended, and create a kind of understanding with each one of them. They had to appreciate the illness or injury with these hand tools, but also to see their patient and to be seen, because that was most of what they had. He was very good at this, and his patients loved him, as did the other doctors, nurses, and staff in the several hospitals of our town. In the nurse's stations, halls, and elevators of these hospitals, in the gas stations and grocery stores, on the streets, people recognized him. He always had a story to tell, a pat on the arm to the sorrowful, advice to offer. As a consequence, he was at home anywhere in the town.

But the home he valued most was the OR. While there



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may have been a primitive idea of teams when he was operating, surgeons were clearly the star players.

My father's parents, like almost all parents, had prepared him for the last generation rather than the next one. The lives of his parents and grandparents had all been informed by the death of Czar Alexander II, the election of Handsome Karl Lueger in Vienna, the collapse of the Hapsburgs, and what followed. They were the dispossessed, whose only refuge was an ancient culture branding them the other. When they left Yiddish behind in that part of Eastern Europe sometimes called Russia, sometimes Poland or Galicia or Lithuania—depending on who had the nuttiest ruler or the biggest hired

army—and arrived in America, what they brought with them in their baggage was fear. Fear and mistrust.

By the time my father was born, the fear had been buried under several layers of success in the new world. He had his own room, a careful education, a pony, and most of what he asked to be given. When he stumbled, he was picked up, put right, and told to be a bit more diligent. From his beginning, the world was filled with toys. First the wooden playthings of the early twentieth century, then the pony, then cars, schools, alcohol, women. Before he married my mother, he'd entertained himself, while at the same time advancing in an expected way, although his path was not always a straight one.

The wife and infant, the war, the work as a flight surgeon in the Ninth Army Air Corps, then the residency: he took it all up manfully. He did believe in responsibility, and in what he knew. And what he knew was simply what he believed, with footnotes. It seems to me now that the experiences of World War II fixed forever his view of the world. How could it not? He was twenty-eight years old when he went to Europe, not to kill people, but to try to keep them from dying.

My mother's voice was softer. This was in part the moment, in part her nature, and in large part her life-long disingenuous insistence that I, the eldest, had been born three months premature but somehow had survived even before there was a pediatric ICU.

He liked things his own way, and he was habitual. One cup of Folgers instant coffee in the kitchen at seven, just as the rest of us were getting up. He was down the short stairs, out the never-locked back door to his Buick by a quarter after, and off to make rounds or to operate. He never ate anything then, although as a boy he took me with him some Sundays and I discovered he often had a doughnut or two in the surgeon's lounge later in the morning.

He liked to schmooze. In those years, doctors all smoked in the hospitals, and between cases he sat back in one of the comfortable upholstered chairs, another cup of coffee balanced on one chair arm, a jelly-filled on the other, waving around a Chesterfield to make his point. Because he was a thoracic surgeon, other doctors sometimes brought chest x-rays into the lounge for him to interpret. They didn't look at what are now called the images on a screen, advancing and retreating through computer files like a movie, but hung the films on illuminated view-boxes that they all gazed into, and pointed at with fingers still clutching their cigarettes. He was generous when asked for his opinions, and known for being correct.

When he took me with him to make rounds, he showed me to the staff, to his friends, to his patients. "This is my son, Ricky," he announced, as I stuck out my hand to be shaken, or said hello. I tried to do these things the same way he did; I thought it manly. We took the stairs between floors, and I sat waiting in the nurses' station on the wards while he saw his patients. The nurses were all nice to me, brought me juice, and told me what a wonderful doctor my father was. I admired him, too, and thought it nearly magic to watch him pull out a stack of metal covered charts, expertly flip through the pages looking for what I couldn't then know, and finish by writing "an order" that ended with his scrawl I could barely recognize as a signature.

He was what he did.

By noon most days he went to meet his friends at the Elks Club. A dark green awning labeled BPOE stretched out onto Second Avenue announcing this haven, a square two-story brick building that, along with its parking lot, occupied most of the block, even though the building itself was not large. In the dining room, waiters wearing white jackets brought them

midday meals that would have satisfied farmers at the harvest. They all had accounts at the club, and charged the food. After lunch, they often moved to play bridge for an hour in an unventilated room filled with so much cigarette smoke that people simply passing the doorway coughed.

More waiters navigated between the small tables that cluttered the card room, empty of anything else but a bar along one side. Bridge partners faced one another, either hunched intently over their hands or leaning back in a sturdy wooden chair, the kind with wraparound arms, as if unconcerned. Bridge for my father was consequential, one of those things that had to be done properly, like removing a lung tumor. "No!" he sometimes exclaimed while still smiling, but with exasperation. "How can you lead that card when I bid four no trump?"

There were three rooms to his office on the seventh floor of the Mott Foundation Building. The opaque glass outer door window lettered in black read:

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Richard L. Rapport, MD
Practice Limited to Thoracic Surgery
and Diseases of the Thyroid
Hours by Appointment

His secretary sat at one end of the long outer waiting room, the walls of which were lined with eight Harvard University chairs, a school that he'd attended for a semester and a half. Through a door to the left of her desk patients entered a consulting room, and then passed through another door to be examined. There they had the option of sitting on a standard examination table, or standing behind a gigantic fluoroscope that he operated himself. This machine, mounted vertically so that a patient could stand behind it, was of doubtful integrity and made disturbing noises. It probably leaked enough radiation to mutate fish swimming in the river two blocks away.

He made rounds, consulted, and operated. He played the piano, composed, and wrote most of the music for the 1955 centennial celebration of the town's founding. Vice President Richard Nixon rode in an antique Dort automobile as he led the parade for that event, while I watched, along with the grandson of the founder of what had originally been the Durant-Dort Buggy Company, from the window of my father's office.

In the summer, he sometimes drove with us to my grandparents' summer place on Saginaw Bay. My grandparents had never owned a house when my father was young. They lived their entire married lives in a spacious four-room apartment especially remodeled for them in the Durant Hotel. Heavily draped windows faced the town's main street. When we visited there, women operators took my brothers and sisters and me to the fourth floor in elevators closed in front by an

expanding gate, and made to go up or down by rotating the knob on a dinner-plate sized bronze wheel in the right front corner of the lift. In 1949, they had their only house built, a handcrafted four-bedroom lodge they called a cabin, on Crescent Beach, a spit that extended some five miles into the Bay. My mother, brothers, sisters, and I stayed there for much of the summer, supervised by my grandmother, a demanding woman who never forgave my mother the “prematurity” of her first pregnancy. My father usually came on weekends. He drove the Lyman boat powered by a twenty-five-horsepower Evinrude while we waterskied, and sometimes he skied too, until he hurt his back.

When I was sixteen, I drove with him up to the cottage, just the two of us. By then, I was away at school, and had become suspicious of his authority. We couldn't talk to each other, and most of the two and a half hour trip was in silence. We were both embarrassed. We didn't know how to talk to one another just then, and the silence in the car that began on that day continued through the end of the Vietnam War.

Five kids later, a surgical career abridged, lunch every day at the Elks Club behind him, and the more than a few girlfriends no longer possible, his heart didn't work very well. He never saw the end of it all coming. He still made rounds in the morning, although the Catholic hospital had closed by then, and still took the stairs up one flight. More than that caused him shortness of breath. After the angina became too bothersome to ignore, he submitted to a coronary artery by-pass operation in Ann Arbor, although it frightened him, he admitted. Knowing what actually happens in an operating room can do that. While he recovered, the nurses and other doctors he knew faded from view, people he did not know became heads of the committees, sometimes in the halls and elevators no one recognized him at all. He gained weight, walked more slowly, wheezed.

That's when he started needlepoint.

The first thing to arrive in our mail on the West Coast was a set of coasters. I'd never seen my father repair a leaking faucet or paint a wall, much less try to make something, but he had put effort into the needlepoint. One of the four-inch beige squares was decorated with my wife's abbreviated name in orange block letters, and another with my initials.

The next time we visited my parents in the Midwest he had given up his solo private practice. When he'd opened his office thirty-five years earlier that life was manageable. He had kept at it even when it was difficult after his own operation, but maintained that he couldn't stand the idea of working for someone else. He couldn't have. Although he still saw patients in a walk-in emergency room he'd helped establish through the County Medical Society, I'm not too sure what kind of advice he might have provided for patients with hypertension, congestive failure, or urinary problems. But still they called him doctor, he flirted with the nurses, and he had a little work to do a few days a week.

The yard occupied him. He came to the garden late in life, having made fun of the vegetable patch my mother had established on the vacant lot next to our house in the fifties. Now he sat on a low stool along the edge of the flowerbeds, pulling weeds and adjusting the borders. He mowed the lawn twice a week. He watered.

When he watched a game, any game, sitting on the dramatically hand-embroidered couch I remembered from my grandparent's apartment, he did needle work. Maybe the couch, which was beautiful, had planted that idea. Sports he liked, and he had firm opinions about players, coaches, and schemes, even though I had never seen him play any game except golf. Once he suggested to me that he'd been a baseball catcher in school, but I don't think it was true. He took lesson after lesson from a variety of golf pros, and had a style that was his alone, but his scores never budged.

Between moments of providing instructions to players from across the living room at the TV, or complaining about officiating, he made his tapestries. They became more elaborate with time, if never more graceful. Soon stacks of them began to pile up beside his desk, the desk from his first office on the seventh floor of the only high-rise professional building in town that now filled his small basement study. He hauled them out from time to time to show us when we visited, just as my mother pulled out silver platters, ancient piles of dishes, complete settings of silver flatware including fish forks, finger bowls, handmade table cloths, and never-used champagne glasses to display. She promised she'd give it to us someday, though we had no use for any of those things, and then she stuffed it all back in under the counters until another child showed up. She loved each of her children almost equally, but in far different ways, and by means that she could show better than she could ever say. The most deeply emotional parts of her character were constrained by circumstances, and by my father's mother.

I think I know what all that cargo meant to my mother, but I was too young and unformed to ever think to ask my dad what the needlepoint meant to him. I have all those stacks of the things I'd pretended to admire in my basement now, artifacts reminding me of old hospitals, Tiger games, missed calls, and sliced tee shots. They might have simply been something for him to do, but maybe they did have meaning that only he understood, a way for him to see more clearly that which had disappeared.

It's painful to me that I never asked him.

He was trying to show us something.

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