



Nesting instinct

I hadn't realized the full symbolism of my latest children's story until I read it to a dying friend, writes **EMIL SHER**

I HAD only written two drafts of what would become *Mittens to Share*, my latest children's book, when I decided to dedicate it to a dying friend. The book had yet to be illustrated and wouldn't be published for another two years, but John was in his last days and I wanted to tell him about my plans while I could. I was at loose ends. Anything I said would only underscore the unspoken: John would not live to hold the finished book and read the dedication.

John and I had met a continent away. We were both in our early 20s and had made a two-year commitment to teach in rural villages in Botswana. It was there we found the soil in which an enduring bond took root. Our paths didn't cross often after we returned to Canada, but when they did there was an ease and love that was marrow-deep. We danced at each other's weddings, rejoiced in the birth of each other's children.

"Let's have John and Becca over for dinner," I suggested to my wife one fall day. Throat cancer had slowly robbed John of his energy, but last I had heard he was fighting the good fight. I made a note to find a recipe for an easy-to-swallow soup. Then I received an email from a mutual friend. John was in palliative care and

wanted to die in the comfort of his home. I was guided to a newly minted blog titled John's Circle of Care.

As John's illness progressed, the blog posts mirrored his slow, inevitable decline, chronicled through the exquisite prose of his wife, who, with their two daughters, was always nearby.

"John is beginning the task of building a nest for himself, that mysterious work of turning inward and surrounding himself with essential things," Becca wrote of her husband of 20 years. "Bits of memories, snippets of conversations, stillness and breathing, a sense of being surrounded by love. He is tucking these twigs all into place to create a safe shelter for himself."

I had an urgent need to see John before I left town for the winter break; I knew it would be my last chance for a final farewell. That's when the thought surfaced: I would bring a draft of the picture book I was writing, and would dedicate it to John and his family.

"Read it to him," Becca said as we made our way up the stairs to their bedroom.

It was not what I had planned.

I held John's hand, listened to his laboured breathing. And then I read. It's a simple story, about a girl who loses a woollen mitten but

finds it by the story's end, bits of the mitten having been poached by a bird to line its nest.

It was impossible to know how much of the story had reached John in the nest he had built for himself, but when I stood up, he squeezed my hand and spoke, his words slurred, his voice corroded by cancer. But I knew he was offering thanks, and one word passed through his lips with summer-rain purity: "friendship."

Before we hugged I looked into his clear eyes, then felt his frail embrace. I stepped out of the room – I could barely breathe – and left the story behind.

The next day (the last full day of John's life), I was a province away, driving over the mountain that defines Montreal. I beheld the winter trees I passed toward the summit, bare branches sleeved in snow. I searched for nests so I could evoke John's name. I scoured the early-morning landscape and was discouraged when I couldn't find any. And then I thought: we are the nests that embrace family and friends as surely as a twig-and-mud home holds a family of birds.

I dedicated *Mittens to Share*:

For John, Becca, Stella and Sophie

And then I added another simple but essential phrase.

And the nests they weave

Emil Sher is a playwright, screenwriter, and author in Toronto. *Mittens to Share*, illustrated by Irene Luxbacher, will be published by Scholastic Canada in October.