

THE LACE WEAVER

By Lauren Chater

The Lace Weaver

The Winter Dress



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For the knitters of Estonia, wherever they are scattered

Each lace shawl begins and ends the same way – with a circle. Just like the stories we tell to keep ourselves warm. Everything is connected with a thread as fine as gossamer, each life affected by what has come before it and what will come after.

Sometimes a shawl is not just a shawl.

It is a voice, a force, a way of remembering. And every shawl we have made is precious, delicate enough to pass through a shining gold wedding ring.

This is our story.

Prologue

Elina

December 1939

THEY SAY ESTONIA HAS FIVE SEASONS.

Bitter winter. Pale spring. Autumn, when the forests are carpeted with mushrooms. Summer, with its blue cloudless skies and rich harvest of fruit. Lastly, my favourite: the thaw. That month of watery deluge when the ice floes break up to flood the land. In those weeks, it is impossible to get from place to place in the forest without a canoe or bog shoes to skim the marsh. The tide makes food scarce. One learns to get by on what exists in the pantry: lingonberry, gooseberry, juniper jam spread on thick slices of *must leib* – the black bread so prized by our people that a loaf, clumsily spilt, must be kissed to restore favour.

The pantry grows barer as the flood levels rise. The damp creeps into everything. And yet, I have always loved it. The isolation. I know that my granddaughter, Kati, feels the same. Forced inside, with the animals penned safely away and the outside chores impossible to complete, there is more time to be spared for the knitting of lacy shawls.

It is almost like winter, when the days are so dark the sun struggles to shine in the sky for an hour or two before fading away; but the thaw has none of winter's cruel bite. Even now, closeted in my daughter's house with the fire burning

nearby, my hands are too stiff to take up the needles. The best I can do is hold the wool between arthritic fingers and let the spinning wheel do the work. Spinning wool is all I can be trusted with now, a job given to the infirm or the very old, and since I am both, this seems to be my fate.

The treadle beats softly on the floorboards in time with my heart.

What a pity I will not be here to see the thaw arrive this spring.
'Grandmother?'

I look up. Kati is frowning, brows drawn down over eyes which are the crisp yellow-green of windfall apples. The knitting needles are held loosely in her hands, the wool a thin curtain of lace between them. I find a moment to be satisfied, to be proud, before her expression makes me frown in return.

What were we speaking of?

It's so hard for me to follow a thought, a memory, these days. I'm never certain where it starts or where it will end. It might begin with the National Awakening; with the writer Carl Robert Jacobson and his rival Jakob Hurt, that collector of tales who set out in 1872 to record and preserve Estonia's folk history. I might move on to the expulsion of the Baltic German nobles from their lands in the 1890s and then to the declaration of Estonia's independence in 1918, the war with the Russians that followed, the victory and years of peace since. And of course there is my own history, less solid perhaps, the dates open to interpretation. A childhood in Haapsalu, a little seaside town on Estonia's western coast. Warm days on the promenade sitting knee to knee with Mama, knitting shawls to sell to the tourists who poured in by ship or train beguiled by the promises of the local mud's restorative properties. Folk songs at choir practice. Tales by the fireside.

Dances at the local hall, where I met the man I would marry; the man who would convince me to trade the narrow streets and brightly coloured timber houses of my youth for a farmer's life among apple orchards at the edge of the university city of Tartu.

'You were talking about the War of Independence,' my granddaughter prompts.

'I was?'

'Yes.' A pause while she tucks away wisps of fair hair which have worked their way loose from her plaits. 'And about Grandfather.' Picking up her needles, she shakes them. The yarn is coiled in her lap, starkly white against the dark blue wool of her skirt. I recognise the skirt as a discard from her cousin Etti. Marta has lengthened it by adding a panel at the waist, so the hemline falls to brush Kati's shins. The result is not fashionable. I may not see well, but it's hard to miss the way girls get about in Tartu these days in skirts which barely graze the knees, displaying lengths of calf as smooth as buttermilk, even in winter. I don't fancy Kati minds so much. Hasn't she, after all, tasted the very thing those girls crave; the sweetness of a friendship which has blossomed into love?

I knew at once, of course. She didn't even have to tell me. One look at the flush in her cheeks when she says her sweetheart's name brings memories of my own courtship flooding back. The sweet smell of floor wax mixed with kerosene from oil lamps strung up around the hall. Eduard's palm resting against my back as he guided me through the polka steps.

I let my foot pause upon the treadle. The yarn slackens in my hand. From outside the window comes the rhythmic thump of snow falling from the eaves. I let its meter dictate my words, thinking of my husband's fate. It's a story I've not told often

and I wonder at my choosing it. 'He was part of the Tartumaa Partisan Battalion.' I pause. 'He was killed in the Battle of Paju.'

We sit in silence. There is pain in talking about such things, but it will not be long, I suppose, before I join him. The ache in my bones is worse now. At times I find it difficult to move from my bed. On the coldest days, not even the tempting smell of Marta's rye bread can shift me. Of course, I don't complain. Estonian women are not given to moaning about their lot. My own mother was up and scrubbing linen mere hours after I was born; a story she used to tell with a shrug of her broad shoulders, as if such feats of female accomplishment were not worthy of admiration. They were simply facts, as certain as the seasons, as unchanging as the slaughter of sheep in spring or the harvest of hay in June.

Sometimes, it is as if I can already sense my husband; I might turn and find him sitting in his favourite chair, watching me with eyes the deep mirror blue of the Haapsalu tide. At such times, I am seized by questions. Am I ready to let go? My family still needs me. I still have so much to say. Who else will listen to the knowledge I have to pass on? Who else but Kati will care to remember that the finest yarn for knitting can be found on the back of a lamb in the soft depression at the base of the neck, or that the best needles are lilac wood, oiled with sheep's fleece? And what of war? For the past months, there has been restlessness in the town. Rumours fly about like wayward flags snapping in a cold breeze. There are military demonstrations on the Russian border that suggest a time may soon come when the fragile peace in our land will be broken. I have seen the invasion in my dreams a dozen times; heard the rumble of tanks, tasted the gunpowder on the air. How will my family survive, my friends in the knitting circle? It will be as things were before the

War of Independence. Estonian language outlawed. Old tales reinterpreted until they reflect a Russian taste. Who will keep our stories? Who will guard our history until it is safe to tell?

I sense Kati watching me, although she pretends to concentrate on slipping her stitches onto the next row. Her fingers dance around the needles, barely touching the fine yarn. She holds her hands slightly bent, thumbs flat, the way I taught her. In the lace already knitted I see my favourite shape leap out: wolf's paw, a pattern I designed many years ago as a child, long before we moved into this farmhouse nestled among the firs.

Why a wolf?

In Haapsalu, we did not see wolves. The coastal air was too laden with salt for their taste. Such creatures prefer the scent of balsam. It was foxes who came to our doors and windows. Foxes who rummaged in the kitchen peelings for scraps and riled up the chickens, melting away through broken fence palings when we shouted at them from the window.

It was not foxes I dreamt of as a girl, though. It was wolves, travelling fleet-footed through the snow, dancing across the marshes, skirting farmhouses on their way into the deep forest. I've always wanted to see one but it has never occurred. Perhaps I knitted my desire into my work. I wonder if Kati, too, dreams of wolves or if she, in reverse, dreams of the sea. She travelled outside Tartu but once as a child and so can only imagine Haapsalu from my descriptions – the sweeping promenade, the lap of the tide, the narrow streets which all lead down to the sea.

It comes as if I have conjured it; a howl that pervades the room, a lone animal cry from the darkness beyond the window. I'm not surprised. Winter is wolf season. Best check the bolts and count the ewes, my husband would say. Yet I can't help but

think that the sound is symbolic, a portent meant for my ears.

Kati begins to rise to her feet, unnerved, but I shush her with a gesture and take up the yarn again. The wool unspools in my hands, the fibres separating briefly before the spindle draws them in, twisting them together in a soft rope. 'When I'm gone,' I tell her, 'I will send you a sign. You will know it's me. I will wear the pelt of a wolf.'

She makes a small noise of disbelief.

'There will be no need to fear,' I continue. 'I will travel alone. Everyone knows a lone wolf is kind.'

'You're dreaming,' she says softly. After a moment, her needles begin to click again. 'You're tired.'

I smile to myself. Let her think she is right.

In my mind, I turn away from my husband's ghost. His face is full of sorrow, and for that I am contrite. He reaches out a hand to touch me, but his fingers find only mist. One day, I tell him, we will be together again. But not now. When he begins to fade, his eyes are last to disappear.

'Grandmother,' I hear Kati say again, but it is as if we are speaking from opposite ends of the forest. The trees form a barrier between us. The air is sharp with sap and silt. My limbs no longer ache. They pound the ground and blood thrums in my veins. Old songs and stories cry out from each twig and leaf. My breath is a plume of white mist.

It would be easy to lose myself in the intoxicating sense of freedom, but I hear Kati's cries drawing me back. A weight settles over me like a mantle of snow. There are shadows up ahead. Horrors nobody else has foreseen.

I have made a promise I intend to keep.