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image info

Vanaema's Gifts

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AS I WAS GROWING UP, MY ESTONIAN grandmother, Elise Vares, was a mystery to me. She came from a faraway country that my family was unable to visit and spoke a language I didn't understand. Yet, she was affectionate, attentive, and generous. I also recognized that she was hard-working, disciplined, and determined.

The word for grandmother in the Estonian language is *vanaema*, literally translated as "old mother." It is a name that conjures up the image of a wise woman, a caretaker of customs, and a defender of past traditions. My grandmother was all these things, but my primary memory of her is that she was an artist who used vivid colors, shapes, and designs to

preserve the needlework traditions handed down through generations of Estonian women.

Rather than complain about being forced to leave her homeland behind, my grandmother chose to preserve her cultural identity by pouring her soul into her needlepoint projects. More than thirty years after she died, her spirit lives on in the needlework art that decorates my walls and the pillows that brighten my sofas.

My grandmother was a petite woman with steel-gray, permed hair and luminous eyes. When she married my grandfather in 1918, shortly after graduating from high school, Estonia was fighting for its independence from the Soviet Union. As the battles raged around her, she learned how to manage my grandfather's medical office. Once Estonia established itself as a free country, she became my grandfather's main support after he was elected Mayor of Viljandi, their hometown.

My mother remembers that my grandmother was capable, efficient, and demanding as she balanced her daily work in my grandfather's office with being a mother to three young children and staying active in local women's organizations. Despite the demands on her time, she made sure that her household was *alati korralik* (always in order), as was customary for Estonian women of her generation.

Years later, when she visited our home, I thought her compulsive eagerness to sweep the kitchen floor was a quirky, Estonian custom. It took me years to realize that she was merely continuing her lifelong quest to make sure the world around her was in order, no matter how chaotic her life might be.

After she retired and moved to an apartment near my family's home, I was struck by how uncluttered it was. My grandmother did not display sentimental collectibles, nor did she allow piles of unread magazines and

unanswered mail to collect on her desk, as I am wont to do.

As a child, I thought she simply preferred living this way. Years later I realized that her apartment was stark because at the age of forty-six, she was forced to leave behind everything she owned. After she escaped from Estonia at the end of World War II on the last day before the country was occupied by the Soviets, she left behind a life that she was never able to revisit.

During the war years, my grandmother buried her only brother, her father, and her oldest daughter. Not wanting to desert her widowed mother, she resisted leaving Estonia until the last possible moment. It was only after she was assured that she could return to Estonia after the war did she agree to travel with the rest of the family. It was a promise that was never fulfilled during her lifetime.

Living out of a suitcase for the next six years, she struggled to untangle the messy strands of her life and find a place where she could settle with my grandfather. Once they arrived in New York City, my grandmother found work as a professional seamstress, crafting custom-made drapes and other types of window dressings.

According to an old Estonian saying, a woman without a needle is like a cat without a claw. For my grandmother, sewing was a way to create an ordered space in her life. She took pride in her even stitches and carefully aligned seams. At the same time, she learned to speak English in simple, halting sentences that contrasted with the torrents of words she could unleash in Estonian.

Envyng her obvious skill, I encouraged her to teach me how to use a sewing machine. One afternoon I went to her apartment with a pattern and some fabric, hoping to make a shirt, but after only a few hours, my grandmother took over the project before I could finish it.



kept in touch with only a few Estonian friends from her former life. Instead, she devoted her time to an endless array of needlepoint projects based on traditional Estonian embroidery patterns that she remembered from her past.

Estonian women have created needlework handicrafts for thousands of years. Their artistry is reflected in folk costumes labeled *rahvariided* (the clothes of the people), distinctive outfits that were unique to each region of the country. During my grandmother's time, Estonians proudly wore their regional attire to song and dance festivals, showing off their brightly colored striped skirts, embroidered shirts, belts, and headdresses.

Estonian women were also renowned for their intricately patterned mittens, crocheted lace shawls, and decorated belts. Their embroidery adorned the sleeves of shirts, the hems of skirts, the borders of socks, the rims of belts, and the edges of braided headgear. In addition to being decorative, old superstitions held that the embroidered borders could protect against evil and misfortune, while also bringing good luck.

She told my mother I was too impatient to learn how to sew. Rather than appreciating that a shirt needed to be created seam by seam, she complained that all I could think about was rushing to finish the project.

When I got married for the first time in 1975, she proudly gave me a linen tablecloth with crocheted borders. "It is handwork," she pointed out as I unwrapped her present. Holding up the detailed stitching, she encouraged me to recognize the beauty in the intricate patterns and to appreciate the hours that were required to complete it. In the hectic life I was living, I found it hard to imagine spending my time working on a similar project.

After my grandfather died, my grandmother became indifferent to the world around her. She never learned to drive, rarely watched television, and



As my widowed grandmother retreated from the world around her, she resolved to replicate the needlework artistry that Estonian women had crafted for generations. Working from a well-worn book of Estonian designs, she set out to produce an array of needlepoint rugs, wall hangings, and pillows that she gave away to relatives and friends.

When I visited her shortly after my grandfather died, I noticed that my grandmother had converted her dining room table into a workstation that overflowed with piles of wool yarn, needlepoint pattern books and assorted pieces of mesh needlepoint canvas. She worked there every day, hunched over her latest project, losing track of the days,

weeks, and months that passed by. Pushing her needle in and out of her canvases, she created her designs on a stitch by stitch basis, as time came to have little meaning for her.

Surviving on cigarettes, coffee, and chocolate bars, my grandmother immersed herself in a world filled with brightly colored flowers, snowflakes, stars, and geometric shapes. She experimented with different design patterns, chose contrasting colors and created bold shapes in an ever-changing array of compositions.

For Christmas one year, I was delighted when my grandmother gave me a needlepoint tapestry that covered the space above my couch and swirled with flowers and intertwining vines. A year later she created a poster sized wall hanging

for my office that sparkled with cornflowers, daisies, tulips, and zinnias. The flowered patterns shimmered in shades of red, blue, and yellow, and were framed by a deep crimson border.

Over the next several years, my grandmother loomed two floor-size rugs for my apartment while also crafting a cascade of pillows in endlessly varied geometric patterns. Never keeping any of her needlework for herself, she gifted her wall hangings, rugs and pillows to my mother, my aunt, my sister, and my cousins.

Through her art, my grandmother tapped into her identity as an Estonian woman and reconnected to the traditions she remembered from the country she was forced to leave behind. Over time, as she continued to complete one project after another, we failed to realize that her grasp on the world around her was slowly slipping away.

At first, we thought she was just becoming forgetful and a bit eccentric. When her stitching became uncharacteristically bumpy, we worried about her eyesight. As the months went by, however, we became aware that she was often confused, wary, and distracted.

By August of 1982, my mother realized that my grandmother could no longer live alone and arranged for her to move to an assisted living community. Yet, within only a few months, she was forced to leave the facility because she kept wandering away. Constantly searching for an unlocked door, she appeared to be searching for a place that she could recognize. In the end, my mother took my grandmother into her own home where she lived for the last five years of her life.

As she slowly lost her connection to the person she once was, my fierce and defiant grandmother became docile and childlike, out of touch and out of step with the world around her. She paced from one end of my mother's house to the other in an endless loop. By 1987, she lost her ability to

recognize other family members and in her final days was unable to speak.

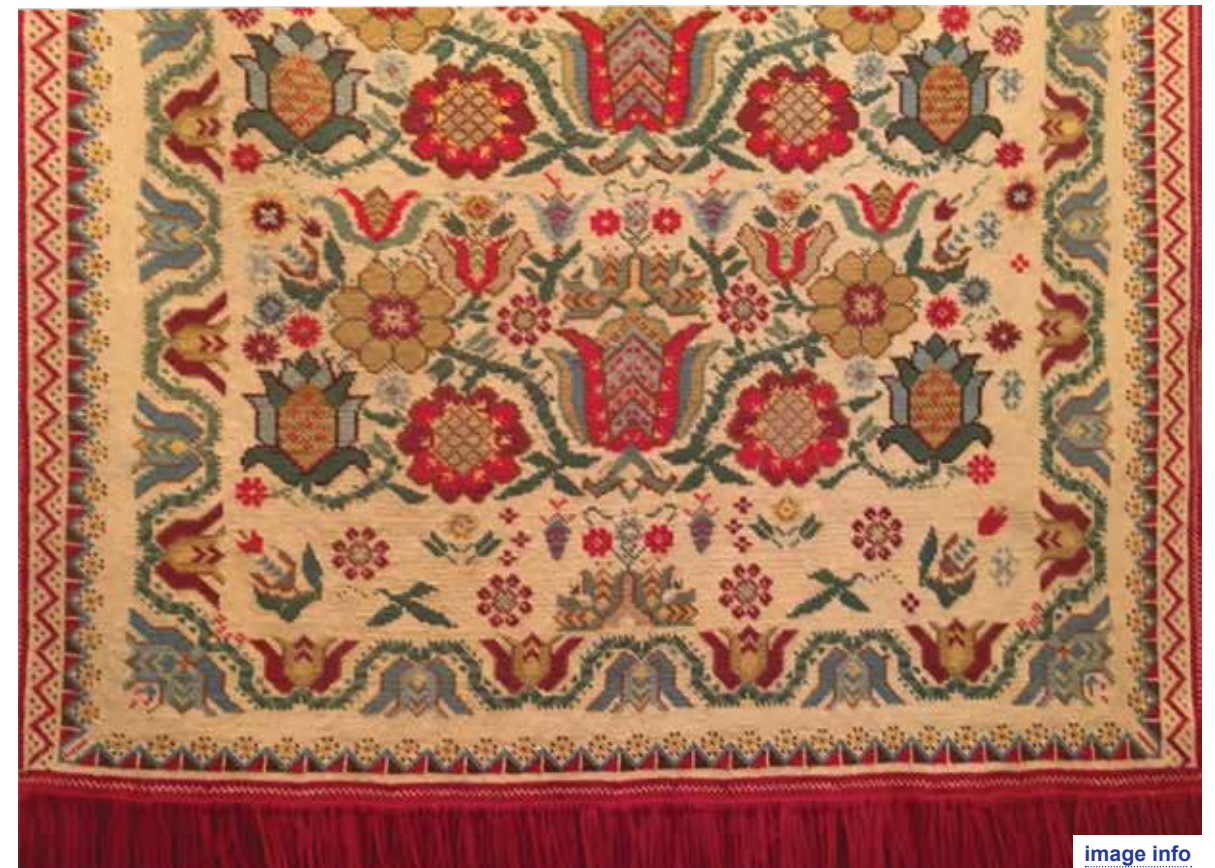
When she died, my grandmother's funeral was attended only by immediate family. She was buried next to my grandfather, more than four thousand miles from Estonia and the life she once knew. She died four years before Estonia freed itself from the Soviet Union in 1991.

I believe my grandmother would have been heartened to learn that after Estonia regained its independence, people throughout the country began once again wearing their traditional folk attire to celebrate the cultural events that were hosted across the country. After being outlawed during the Soviet time, folkdance groups reconvened in authentic regional outfits to perform at dance festivals in Estonia and around the world. In recent years, the Estonian National Museum celebrated the country's needlework traditions by curating an exhibition that featured one hundred and fifty traditional folk costumes from across Estonia.

Looking at my grandmother's needlework, I think of her pushing her needle in and out of her canvases as she counted the thousands of stitches that made up her artwork. Since I am now the same age my grandmother was when she embarked on her needlepoint projects, I wonder what lessons her life offers to me. What advice would she share about the importance of preserving traditions? How would she counsel me to think about the legacy I might leave for future generations?

Throughout her life, my grandmother modeled the importance of maintaining order and structure, especially when the unpredictable world around her was in disarray. With her strong work ethic and determination, she chose to manage those facets of her life that were within her ability to control.

Even though she was separated from her



homeland, my grandmother never lost her identity as an Estonian woman and endeavored to represent that part of who she was through her art. Through her needlepoint gifts, she wanted to share the beauty that can be found in Estonian embroidery and needlework and to pass along those traditions that without her effort would otherwise have been lost to me.

As different as I always thought we were, I now appreciate the strong imperative my grandmother felt to leave a legacy for those who came after her. Some say we never die until the last person forgets who we once were. Through her art, my grandmother chose to leave a testament to her unique talents and to the cultural heritage she embodied.

In an old Estonian fairytale, a grandmother, called *Vanaema*, works at her spinning wheel

all night long, provided she can find a needle and some yarn. Also called the Twilight Mother, *Vanaema* is said to be a connection to the generations of Estonian women who continue their spinning and weaving in the underworld. On a quiet night, they make their presence known through the clicking sounds of their needles.

As I sit at my own worktable, stitching together words and crafting the stories I want to tell, I sometimes hold my hand close to my grandmother's needlework and try to imagine that her animating spirit is guiding me along. She is with me still, as her artwork offers a visual connection to our shared family roots and to the strong foundation she created for sharing the beauty and order that she found in the world. ❖