

# HOW TO READ THE LACE

## ALEX PENLAND

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

It's a potholder. Hidden in the story that it tells—the light corner char, the skipped stitch repaired with a repeat in the next row—there are instructions. Chain 30. Turn. Six blocks of six double-crochet stitches. Turn.

“Carl’s mother made it,” says Grams. She likes that I’m looking so closely. “Right when we first got married.”

My fingers trace a textile diary. Here, where the yarn came undone a bit, and she left a strand to loop behind the weave. The subtle fray that peeks behind the weaves where she wove in the ends. The uniform cotton.

“I always liked it,” says Grams. “Looks light, but I’ve had the darn thing fifty years and it never wore down.”

Lace is like that. It’s pretty, but it’s tough. My favorite thing in the world is to watch a friend when I pull and stretch at a recent creation—they react like I’ve dropped expensive glass on a stone floor. Crochet doesn’t care. It’s not even like it has to bounce back—the stretch gets it where it needs to be.

“Think you can copy it?” Grams asks.

The pattern is simple. I have never seen my great-grandmother’s hands, but mine mimic hers now. Six blocks more, skipping a stitch in the middle. Six blocks again the next row, then chains and singles to even out the squares. She died long before I was born. I don’t know much about her. Only the pattern of the cloth.

I wonder: would she like me? Me who never goes to church, who doesn’t believe in God, me who’s dated women and moved across the world?

Repeat until it's the size you like, she tells me. Then do it all again on another panel.

Black-sheep-of-this-side-of-the-family me?

"Fasten them together", she says.

Academic me? Spinster me?

"Single crochet around the edges", she says. "Picot. Make it lovely. Everything needs a little grace."

I'm holding the lace in my hands. My great-grandmother's original is on the left, yellowed and softened with time. Mine is on the right, crisp and white and clean. Hers removed my father's first birthday cake from the oven; it has saved a dozen tables from the heat of Christmas dinner.

I wrap them up in coloured paper. When Grams opens her present, she immediately goes to the kitchen and stores them on the hooks by the oven. Dinner's cooking.

This year we'll protect the table together.

*Alex Penland is a former kid adventurer: after a lifetime of running rampant in the Smithsonian museums (and occasionally in the field on various expeditions), they settled into their current PhD studies at the University of Edinburgh. Their fiction has appeared in Orion's Belt magazine and the Strange Lands anthology by Flame Tree press, and their poetry received an honourable mention in Writers Digest's Annual Contest.*