

The Town Drunk

Presents

Women of the Lace

Sandra McDonald

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Before you ask why I'm robbing this civil war museum in Pennsylvania, let me tell you how my grandmother and I spent several years stranded on an island in the South Pacific, and how she taught me to make lace using coconut shell needles and pig-hair thread.

As we worked she would say, "Kings and queens, and brides all a-flutter, and starry-eyed housewives, and gentlemen dandies, and even lowly milkmaids, all dreaming of knots and patterns, and willing to poke each other's eyes out for the finest they could get. Those were the golden years, child, before machines started crapping out lace by the mile. Ladies of the castle started it, something to do while their men were out hunting boars and infidels. The merchants' wives followed, and then the farmers' wives, and then the peasant girls, who had to pluck the hairs from their own heads because they couldn't afford anything else. Lace was a precious commodity, a fine art, and a secret source of women's power. But then Mattie Washington went and ruined it all. Yes, Mattie Washington and the great lace factories of Mount Vernon.

"Now, Sue Lu, I can see from your face that you're thinking me a liar. Your own grandmother, weaving stories to pass away the hours until some cargo ship rescues us from this lush green mountaintop in the middle of the ocean. I have the sinking feeling our ordeal will last many weeks, and I intend to keep your spirits buoyed as we search for edible breadfruit and fight off the amorous intentions of the grunt-pigs, who even now are peering at us from the bushes with unnatural lust in their eyes. But everything I tell you is true, and can be used as a warning about our family's history and power. There's a saying, 'Give a woman some lace and she'll dress fancy for dinner; teach her how to make it, and she'll have needle pricks in her fingers for the rest of her life.' You, my darling girl, are going to have the pricks.

"So. Mattie Washington. Her story really starts long ago with a little girl named Caterina. Caterina was an orphan, you see, never knew the kiss of her mother's lips, never bounced on the knee of her father, but she came from a well-established hoity-toity lineage, and her fate was always controlled by the knobby hands of men. Her uncle, the Pope, made sure she was raised properly, at the knees of nuns. The *murate*, they called

them. A secluded order in the very heart of Florence, Italy. Little did the Pope know that they were pagan sorceresses who had long hid their magic, lest they be burned alive. They taught little Caterina how to knot the powers of the earth so that she could protect herself wherever the winds of politics blew her. They also taught her the most sacred rule of their order: magic lacemaking must never, ever, be taught to boys or men.

“‘No problema,’ little Caterina said. ‘I understand completely.’”

Grandma continued, “When she turned fourteen, the Pope took Caterina from the convent and married her off to the future king of France. Unfortunately, the future king was already in love with someone else—a very powerful witch, a wicked and terrible woman. You must believe in witches, Sue Lu. They roam the earth even in these modern days, and you can see their power in the winds that dashed our ship on the rocks and stranded us here. Anyway, all Caterina could do was squeeze out royal babies, endure the humiliation of her husband’s whore living in the suite of rooms directly above hers, and continue her needlework. She didn’t dare weave any magic against the mistress-witch, for everyone knows that evil sent forth returns twofold, but for her ladies-in-waiting she made lace that could cure a woman’s monthly ills, or bring on a child when one was dearly wanted, or eradicate the venereal diseases so common to the court of France. Many tried to learn her secrets, but Caterina trusted them only to a little girl named Marie, a child-queen who was also the pawn of powerful men.

“Caterina and Marie—oh, the lace they made! Their silver needles flashed like lightning long after the rest of the court had gone to sleep. Their designs were so beautiful even the most cynical hearts in the palace wept with awe. The mistress-witch grew mottled with envy and tried to drive a wedge between them. She spilled turkey gravy on Caterina’s finest threads and made sure Marie was blamed. She swallowed Marie’s bobbins and had the servants tell her Caterina had stolen them. But none of the mistress-witch’s plans bore fruit, and she was sent into exile into France and then Germany. Marie married Caterina’s son, sealing the women by law as well as magic. Then the son died, and heartbroken Marie returned to her homeland to do battle with her fierce, duplicitous cousin, a queen who called herself a virgin.”

Dear Reader, I can see you making connections in your mind. Dimmed memories of history lessons are starting to surface. But at the time I heard these tales, I was just a small girl with no access to encyclopedias of European monarchy. Sometimes Grandma changed the story. In one version, the mistress-witch succeeded in poisoning Caterina’s heart, turning it black with loneliness and pain. In another variation, the mistress-witch filled Marie with vile ambition and deception. The only constant is that Marie did go back across the sea, to the land where she was called Mary, and was immediately arrested.

“The so-called Virgin, who was anything but, feared Mary so much that she kept her locked up for twenty years, in castles and manors and fine country estates. There wasn’t any television in those days, and hardly any books at all, so Mary got herself some bobbins and thread and began to stitch away the hours of her life. Pinto in aria, gros

point de venise, bobbin lace, needle lace—there was no technique she couldn't master, no pattern too difficult. She was a master of guipure roses so pure, so delicate, that the lacemakers of the Low Countries went crazy trying to imitate them and were carted off to insane asylums to build windmill blades instead. Great oceans of lace spilled from Mary's hands and into the hands of authorized smugglers, who sold it for money to support her cause against Liz the Slut. They say that Lizzie sold off twenty acres in Hyde Park in order to purchase some, and that when she learned it came from Mary's hands she had Sir Walter Raleigh thrown into the Tower of London for bringing it to her. But she kept it, she did. Lizzie wrapped herself in it, she wallowed in it, she hung it from her ceiling and pretended it was the sails of a magic ship carrying her to Russia, and to men with fur hats and strong hands and borscht breath, and to canopy beds built from ice and whale ribs.

“Eventually Lizzie got so jealous of Mary's lace that she ordered her put to death. The Secret Society of Lady Lacemakers, an organization headquartered in Bruges, immediately dispatched secret agents to Fotherington Castle, where the dreaded sentence was to take place. Those petite but brave Belgians used ancient Hebrew knowledge to fashion a golem—that's sort of like a robot, you see, but without all the wires and light bulbs—to take Mary's place, but the golem was having none of that. She escaped out the castle door to wander in woods and marshes, where she lives to this day, protected by the National Heritage Foundation. Mary, meanwhile, was taken to have her head chopped off. They stripped her of all but her simple dress and petticoats, made her kneel down, scooted her little dog out of the way and thwack! The executioner swung his axe.”

“They cut off her head?” I cried, there on the shores of the Indian Ocean.

“Who's telling this story, you or me?” Grandma said, with a gimlet eye toward the sea. Yapper, her Yorkshire terrier, raced back and forth in the surf, barking at crabs and dolphins and sea-monsters that only he could see. “Back in London, Liz the Unloved passed all sorts of laws saying who could wear lace, where you could buy it from, who was authorized to make it. There's nothing like outlawing a thing to make it more enticing to everyone else. After the Slut Queen went to sleep in her cold stone grave, thousands of little shops sprung up like wild mushrooms. Lacemakers sailed to the New World and started the Plymouth Colony. They went with the outlaw outcasts to Australia, because even the cruelest criminal's heart softens when he's wearing something frilly under his trousers. Lace missionaries sailed all the way to China and sat outside the walls of the Forbidden City until the Dowager Empress herself took up needlecraft.

“Is that a rescue boat I see?”

No, not a boat, just a strange shape of clouds on the Atlantic horizon. By then we had made several inches of lace, using the patterns grandmother had drawn on palm fronds with turtle blood ink. Bit by bit she was teaching me the secrets of the *murate*, as passed from Caterina to Marie to one of her most trusted ladies-in-waiting, who in turn passed it to her daughters, and their daughters, and eventually to a young woman in the American

colonies named Mattie Custis.

“Mattie was a sheltered little thing, gentle and refined, quite unaccustomed to hardship. Then her husband went and died on her, leaving her two small children and a fortune to manage. Those were unsettled times—revolution was in the air, and sickness in every household—but soon she met an army colonel named George. He loved Mattie more than any man had ever loved a woman, though sometimes his wooden teeth cut her lips while they were kissing. She, in turn, loved him so much that she laced *murate* spells to protect him from the Hessians, from bullets and fire, and from drowning in the Delaware. In every portrait you ever see, any painting or print in museums or books, you can be sure George is wearing Mattie’s lace under his clothing. Close to his root of power, if you know what I mean.

“Now, George was no fool. He asked Mattie to make lace for all the Continental Army soldiers, so they too would be protected in battle. ‘But George,’ she said, ‘magic on such a large scale may not be a wise course of action.’ In turn he said, ‘Mattie, my dear, the fate of a nation rests entirely on your milk-white shoulders.’ Reluctantly but patriotically, Mattie agreed. A thousand orphan girls were brought to Mount Vernon for training. Eighteen hours a day, seven days of the week, while the drums of war beat outside, those brave girls stitched lace squares that soldiers could tuck under their trousers.

“‘It’s not enough,’ George said. He told her they needed more, more, ever more. The Hessians had their own magical powers, you see. Their leather belts had been crafted back in Germany by the vengeful mistress-witch, who had used bloodshed and violence to unnaturally prolong her wicked life.

“Mattie and the poor girls of Mount Vernon couldn’t keep up with the demand. Every evening they slumped over in exhaustion, their vision gone dark, their dreams tormented by needles. George brought in a thousand boys too small to carry guns and said, ‘Teach them your magic, my dear.’

“‘George,’ she beseeched him, ‘is this war so necessary? Is there no chance of peace?’

“‘Mattie,’ he said, his gaze stern, ‘if you love me, you will do this thing.’

“Poor Mattie was so in love, so desperate to save her country, that she broke the number one rule of the *murate* and did as he asked. The boys bent to their task with sharp eyes and nimble fingers. But no matter how hard they tried, the lace the boys made was defective. On the battlefield it attracted bad luck, ill fate, the ricochet of bullets, the scourge of infection. Thousands of soldiers died.”

Sometimes, at this point in the story, Grandma would excuse herself to go walk in the jungle. I would sit by our signal fire with Yapper in my lap, thinking of dead soldiers in bloody meadows, until she returned.

“What happened, finally?” I would ask. “Didn’t we win?”

Grandma rubbed her hands by the flames. “It took several years and a costly infusion of Mohawk Indian magic, but George’s army eventually triumphed over the British. That, of course, is a different story.”

Eight years after we first washed ashore, Grandma and I finished making a large lace banner and affixed it to the highest tree on our island. A year after that, a wooden ship bearing the flag and colors of Florence, Italy came sailing into the bay. Its crew of hearty nuns hoisted us over the side, and the Captain Nun, resplendent in black lace and white sneakers, said, “That’s enough of a vacation for you, Martha. Back to work you go!”

“Martha?” I asked Grandma. “Are you—”

“How could I be?” Grandma replied, brushing sand from her wide feet. “To believe that, you’d have to believe that two hundred years ago, riddled by guilt and compelled to make amends, George’s widow faked her own death, fashioned her own life-extending potion from the fertile fields of Virginia, and began traveling this wide, crazy world as a vagabond, a gypsy, a crazy old woman who tells tall tales to children. You’d have to believe that she can only rest easy once all the lace that was made by the boys at Mount Vernon is returned to the headquarters of the *murate*. Much was destroyed or buried, but the rest resides in far-flung attics and museums and antique shops, or in the grimy hands of the mistress-witch herself, and all must be recovered before more ill fortune is brought into this world. But lastly, you’d have to believe that this is no idle game, no amusing lark or adventure, and certainly not the problem of innocent great-great-great-great-great granddaughters such as yourself.”

I was eighteen years old by then, older than Catherine deMedici was when she married Henry II, older than Mary Queen of Scots before she was widowed in France, older than Martha Washington when she met her first husband. When the ship returned us to San Francisco, I decided to accompany Grandma on her quest. But she ditched me on the docks by jumping on the back of a speeding lettuce truck. She cried out, “Farewell, Sue Lu! Remember the pricks!” and I haven’t seen that beloved woman since.

So now you know why I’m cracking open a glass cabinet in the middle of the night and stealing away a scrap of lace that bears the telltale knots of the *murate*. You know why I’m shimmying up a lace rope to the museum skylight, and why in the morning I’ll be standing in line at the local post office with a package addressed to a convent in Italy. Meanwhile, if you happen to see a woman who looks like Martha Washington, tell her I’m looking for her. We women of the lace have to stick together, you know.

Sandra McDonald is a former Navy lieutenant and Hollywood assistant with a master's degree in Creative Writing. Her short fiction has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons*, *Talebones*, *Chizine*, *Say...*, *Lone Star Stories*, and several other publications. Her novel *The Outback Stars*, a mixture of science fiction, military adventure, and romance, will be published by Tor in April 2007. Visit her website at <http://www.sandramcdonald.com>.