

# PURE WOOL

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"Pure Wool" is a work of creative non-fiction. Based on events that occurred, story specifics that cannot be ascertained have been invented.

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The sky howls and grasses strain toward them like hands pushing them back. The tortured complaint of axles. The horizon unfolds ever forward ahead of the wagon bearing its load toward a distant continent. The trunks hold only necessities—tools, clothing, food, blankets.

Heinrich walks beside the wagon with his daughter Maria. His youngest, his mid-life child, the precocious toddler who sat among the wood shavings in his shop, wearing the curls pulled from his plane in her hair.

Now, bound with husband and daughters for Canada, an inner dread tells him she will never return. The only one of his children to go, following her husband—as she must.

He is too old now to start again half a world away. With the civil war over, perhaps they can recoup something, begin to put their disordered lives right again. Whatever his choice, he cannot protect her as a father should. He can give her nothing. But they spared a blanket. His and Greta's best one. Four pounds of wool from his sheep encased in patched cotton. Something too poor to stand in for all that is in his heart.

Now, he must turn back—to the sheep, to the milking, to a life apart. That’s how it is now. Not only in his family. They shoot out of Siberia like seeds and fall who knows where over the horizon.

Her hands full of raw wool, Maria turns to staunch her tears on the shoulder of her dress. After last week’s letter they overwhelm her like this. Her father had his misgivings about those restless Wedel brothers and their eagerness to leave. What could come of such a gamble? With each letter—they come years apart now—the same story of those who couldn’t risk. Interrogation. Prison. Hunger. Death. Except for a nephew in Ontario, she is the only one. The rest—lost.

Her daughters think the letters she keeps with the handkerchiefs odd. They never tell you anything, Mama. They only list Bible verses and preach. Why don’t they send you any news? But Maria understands what her daughters do not: the code to evade the censors.

*I greet you with Job 3: 24-25 and Psalm 55: 2-5. For sighing comes to me instead of food, my groans pour out like water. What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness, no rest, but only turmoil.*

*My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught at the voice of the enemy, at the stares of the wicked; for they bring down suffering upon me and revile me in their anger. My heart is in anguish within me: the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.*

Peter Nickel greets you with Judges 16:21. *And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes, and brought him down and bound him with fetters and he ground at the mill in the prison.*

But we do not lose hope. Psalm 12:5-6. *Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, "I will now arise," says the Lord; "I will place him in the safety for which he longs." The promises of the Lord are pure.*

Pure. She remembers her neighbour Anna misreading the labels in Steadman's. Pure Wool. Anna thought it meant *poor wool*. Went all over town—Laver's, Eaton's, the Co-op—getting more and more frustrated trying to find good wool. How they laughed afterwards. *The promises of the Lord are*—no! She will not allow such thoughts.

They weren't rich over there. Though hard, it's better here. She and Jacob have a tar-papered house on a few acres of stumps and stones. They sell eggs, the creamery buys their milk, and Jacob has found work. They

struggle. Their English isn't good. Still, they count their blessings. They worship unmolested and can vote. The children who survived are healthy and go to school.

Nothing here, though, matches the childhood world she knew before the Great War, the Revolution, the Reds and the Whites.

For a moment the smell, the air thick with lanolin, and the oil on her hands takes her back. To the sheep—especially the lambs in spring—cavorting across the steppe like a flying carpet. To strong arms wresting the sheep to the ground, strong backs bent over the sheering.

Afterwards the washing, the endless drying in the sun, the carding. The blanket bees. Women and girls leaning over tables binding the wool and the casing with strong, thick knots. Circles of *Schups oon Tsap* stitching and knotting. Sometimes singing. Then tying the corners of the finished *Dakj* to the cover. Her mother holding one end, her sister-in-law the other, shaking it out.

Now she and her daughters, Irene, Mary, and Betty, card the wool. Together they remake the *Dakj* that has grown lumpy. Maria spreads the wool over the new casing, her hands teasing the batting into place, getting it even. It isn't work that can be rushed, she muses, as she looks across to her daughters who pull the dry clumps into long strands.

Much like a life pulled apart, reformed and renewed. Time. Work. Patience. Persistence. With these a shapeless mess can be transformed. Once a blanket is remade, it is so much warmer than before.

Wrapped inside she feels her father's arms. Hears his voice—*miene eensje Mejal*.

Now that she is gone, do you want Mama's *oolle Dakj*? Jacob asks Mary, the eldest. Step-mama doesn't want it. She likes store-bought bedding which properly fits the bed.

He looks apologetic. Turns toward Maria's photo that remains on the dresser despite the new wife. Step-mama was single until I married her. Had her own money all her life. She could afford proper things I could never give your ma.

This *Dakj* I don't want to throw away. Do you remember? Your grandfather gave it to us when we left. Pure wool from his own sheep. We used it all our life here; someone should keep on using it.

Yes, Dad. I do remember. And I remember even better all those hours washing and drying and carding when it got lumpy. Don't worry. We'll use it. Otherwise all that work will be for nothing. It will be handy for those nights it really gets cold or when we have company or when Van and I go hunting. There's nothing as warm as that blanket.

Dad, do you remember how Mama cried when the letters came? She'd walk into the bush until she could calm down. Then she'd lie down for a little while under the *Dakj*. Somehow it always soothed her. I don't think we ever understood how hard it was to be the only one left.

Mary folds the blanket, her mother's scent still in it. Feels the weight of it as she lifts it, brings it toward her cheek, and nuzzles into the cover, silk-soft after years of washing.

Did you sleep well? Mary asks as she slides the pancakes onto Sarah's plate.

Oh yes, Auntie Mary. I had the best sleep ever. That blanket you have is the best in the world. It's so heavy and warm; it's like sleeping inside love.

Van passes the syrup and says, You won't find another blanket like that one anywhere. It's made from pure wool. Handmade from the sheep on your great-grandfather's farm in Russia. He gave it to your grandma when she left for Canada.

Mary pauses with Van's cup in hand before pouring the coffee. Her eyes are always seeping, but now she blinks harder. Mother was the only one of her family—except a nephew in Ontario—who got out, you know. They didn't know it would get so bad. Didn't know that there wouldn't be

another chance. Your great-grandpa walked beside her for miles the day they left. Eventually, though, he had to turn back.

Why?

Van reached for the cream. The animals. You know they can't wait. He had to take care of them.

Why didn't he sell the animals and go with her?

Her brothers were against it. They thought there was no point, thought everything would soon be all right again. And he was old. Starting over isn't easy when you're old. It would be hard to get into Canada if you brought someone old. She went because she was married to your grandpa. Wives go with their husbands. They have no choice. Sometimes it's hard.

Sarah considers her many hard choices as she unfolds the blanket Mary has handed to her. Wives don't always go with their husbands. Not anymore. Though the casing is patched in several places and worn in others, its warmth and heaviness remain constant. How many times has she slept under it over the years? Always it has been her favourite. Now the *Dakj* is hers.

The folks had nothing after the war, Mary says. There wasn't much we could bring from Russia; there's not much to pass on. But you've always

loved this *Dakj*. Unless Van and I were hunting, it was too hot and heavy for me.

That's what I love about it most, Auntie Mary.

I know. I know. Since you were a little girl, more than anyone, you have always loved that *Dakj*. I don't need it now, not in an apartment. I won't be having company anymore now that I'm not at the lake and don't have the room. It's not fancy, but since you're the only girl, *de eensje Mejal*, I thought maybe you would like to have it.

Though she hasn't said so, Sarah needs the blanket. She's been using her ratty sleeping bag. When the ex cleared out, his share was everything they'd bought together. That included the bedding and the bed. Not that she wanted it, not at all.

Later, when she spreads the *Dakj* over the pad from the patio chaise that is making do as a mattress, she can't resist. She slips underneath though it's not yet eight o'clock.

*I'm smothered in the love of all my ancestors* is the last thought she registers. On waking she looks at the clock in disbelief. She hasn't slept for more than twelve hours in as many years.

The *Dakj* is terribly lumpy now, Sarah tells Irene. I haven't used it in over a year. Big gaps in spots. Some of the wool is coming through the casing and the cover is rotting. I guess it's pretty well had it.

Mother used to take it apart, wash the wool, dry it on the lawn. Irene re-tells the familiar story. You'd have to haul it in and out every day. It took days before it dried. Then we girls would have to help her card it. Man, that was a messy, itchy job. The oil in the wool would get all over your hands. It's a lot of work. So much easier to go buy what you need now-a-days.

Her dad gave her that *Dakj* when they left Russia. Who knew that it would turn out as it did? That she'd be the only one left. We kids really didn't understand her then. Or why she cried so much those years.

Later when they moved from the farm she could have bought something nicer. They had a little money then, but I think she kept it because it was all she had left of her dad.

You know, Mom, if I could figure out how, I would do it. Maybe it's not much by some standards, but I don't really want to toss an inheritance. It might take time to find out, but it wouldn't hurt to ask around, see if it's possible. You never know.

I wish Grandma could see us doing this, Mom, Sarah says as their hands move deftly from pin to pin across the *Dakj* draped over the two

tables squeezed side by side. She and Irene pull the cotton thread across the pristine white casing, make a stitch at the pins Sarah has placed at five-inch intervals, then snip the thread into ties which they knot before removing the pins.

She'd be so excited to see it, Irene answers. When you first started, I wondered what you would want to do that for. It's such a lot of work. And such a big mess. But now that it's done, I'm glad you did it.

It wasn't all that much effort to pull the blanket apart, wash the wool in pure soap, step on it as if crushing grapes in order not to mat it. Nor was it hard to squeeze it out, rinse it the same way, squeeze it again, and dry it in the sun. She'd never quite believed them, but her mom and aunts were right: it took days.

Still, Sarah knows she's cheated. Knows she wouldn't have done it if she hadn't learned of the carding machine at Birkeland Brothers on Main or hadn't had the step-by-step instructions from their website to guide her. Exchanging a bag of wool clumps for a made-to-measure batting bypassed the long, itching hours required in earlier days. Making and pinning the casing filled a few hours.

The tying, too, is almost finished, and it's not yet lunch time. Sometimes it seems that everything about her life has been almost effortless only because Maria had no choice but to bow to one that was unfair and endure.

Sarah looks across the nearly finished *Dakj*. Her mother's head bends to her work, hair the same colour as the casing, hands still nimble with the threads. The moment expands, opens and holds all the vastness of a Siberian plain, the groaning wagon, her grandmother's tears, her mother's hands steadily knotting, and all unknowable time. The horizon unfolds ever forward toward the inevitable moment when she will be the one left. She feels the words in wool between a father and his daughter—*miene eensje Mejal*.

Blinking hard she exhales slowly. Knowing she cannot sustain it, she lets the moment go. She contains it. Sarah bends over the *Dakj*. Together, their hands move in quiet rhythm. Stitch, knot, and trim. They join the casing through the wool, the past through the present to the future. Hold the necessities. The ties that bind.

