

In Word and Thread

Restoration of Honor for Jeanne Panne

Dear Jeanne,

Above Nieuwpoort, the same wind blows that once moved through its streets centuries ago; cold, salt-laden, and unyielding as time itself. Before me lies a black sweater. In my hands, I hold yellow and red threads for cross-stitch. In your century, women stitched them into garments to keep evil at bay. They were signs of protection, signs of hope. As I let the stitches grow across the dark wool, I think of you, Jeanne Panne, a woman in a city filled with war, disease, and fear.

You lived in 1650, a time when Nieuwpoort was only just recovering from the devastation of the Eighty Years' War. There were too many mouths for too little bread; trade routes were open but uncertain; fishermen did not always return. People saw signs in every failed catch, in every cow that fell ill. And in such times, people did not look for causes, but for those to blame.

Your name was known in the town, not as a witch, but as a woman who knew how to use herbs, how to soothe wounds, how to guide a household through harsh winters. Not a wanderer, not a beggar. You were simply a local woman, part of the fabric of the community. But as so often, it was precisely the woman who helped who became suspect when the tide turned.

I place yellow cross-stitches on one sleeve. Yellow for light, for what you meant to those you helped. Your trial record states that neighbors accused you after a child fell ill, a cow died, or someone suffered misfortune. Small tragedies that would once have been attributed simply to bad luck. But in 1650, with belief in diabolical "causes" encouraged by preachers and city authorities, such events were given another name: *maleficium*. Harmful witchcraft.

When they arrested you, you were taken to the town hall. The interrogations that followed, the torture permitted under imperial law, the questions you could not possibly answer... all of it is recorded. The judges wanted details: with whom you had conspired, on which night you had gone to the dunes, which words you had "spoken" when someone fell ill. You said what they wanted to hear, as so many women before and after you did, because a body in pain can no longer hold on to truth.

Now I place red cross-stitches on the other sleeve. Red for the courage you had, for your blood under torture. A red line for the cruelty of the judgment that followed. The sentence is clear: first strangled, then burned. It was the customary punishment along the coast: the garrote at the scaffold, the wood already prepared, the crowd gathering, having learned that fear is a spectacle.

On January 28, 1650, the day of your death, it must have been cold. The coast is not a gentle place in winter. Perhaps you looked once more at the tower of Saint Lawrence's Church. Or at the harbor, where ships rested with their rounded hulls. Perhaps you thought of the people you had helped, who now remained silent.

I continue to embroider, and the cross-stitches grow like small anchors in the black wool. In your time, such stitches were sometimes sewn close to the heart: a small cross to ward off

evil, to reinforce the vulnerable parts of a garment. I imagine that you, too, knew such a stitch; not as magic, but as a sign of care in daily life, of craft and of love.

What moves me, Jeanne, is the madness of the persecutions. Women in every village knew your fate. What was burned was not magic, but knowledge. It was the knowledge of women, passed on through hands and experience. The fear of a community was projected onto you. Nieuwpoort was one of the centers of witch trials in Flanders. Yet you, Jeanne, are one of the few whose story has remained so clearly preserved in the archives; not because you were guilty, but because your sentence was so loud that it could never truly disappear.

I place the final cross-stitches in yellow and red, bound together in black: a small tribute, but with the same intention as the women who stitched centuries ago: protection, remembrance, connection.

I imagine that you would have smiled upon seeing my sweater. You would have said that knowledge must be shared, not feared. That the sea never weeps for those it loved. That your life was more than your death.

And I listen, Jeanne. Because you deserve a voice. You deserve forgiveness and recognition. You were not a witch. You were a woman. With hands that helped. With eyes that saw. With a strength that could not be understood then.

Rest now, Jeanne. Your name is no longer whispered in fear, but spoken in remembrance.

With reverence,
Micca