

VICTORIA CAMPBELL

THE RED PASHMINA

On my mother's final evening on earth she had curled up in bed with a book – *Meditations: By Marcus Aurelius* (Forstater, 2000). I know this because the book lay open on her bedside table the morning we found her dead. During the night my mother's heart, which had charged every room she entered with warmth, had stopped. It was not a heart attack; rather her heart simply paused, never to beat again. After 65 years of rhythmically, dutifully pumping blood through her arteries, her quota of beats was now at an end. A blue silk ribbon marked the last words her eyes rested upon. *God sees the inner spirit stripped of flesh, skin and all debris ... you are not the body that encloses you ...* (p. 151). Eerily prophetic, these words quietly haunt me to this day.

It's not surprising that my mother's last earthly images were a collection of words in a book. She was a voracious reader. A love I also developed because of her. Our shared reading began when I was a child. Her gentle voice nightly breathed life into the words held within volumes of fairy tales. The last book I gave my mother was *Sepia* by Isabelle Allende (2001). The first book my mother gave me, as a teenager, was *The Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing (1973). Lessing's book was a new development in our shared reading, and set my literary compass toward women writers from that moment onwards. At that time my mother, a newly minted single parent, had found her 'feminist voice.' It was the late 70s and in the West patriarchal ways were being fiercely challenged. Books by other female novelists from that era started appearing on our shelves – Margaret Attwood, Erica Jong and Fay Weldon. In retrospect we were a house of quiet feminists. My youngest sibling, the only male in the family, felt lucky to have been brought up by what he called 'three raving harridans' – my mother, my sister and me. He says this affectionately, I hope.

Apart from *Aurelius*, lying next to my mother's lifeless body that morning was her amber necklace procured on a trip to Morocco; and her *red pashmina*, given to her by a girlfriend returning from Tibet.

When she was alive I attributed nothing significant to my mother's *red pashmina*. She wore it often – it was simply just another piece of her clothing. There were other items that held more sentimental value such as a bold, multi-coloured hand knitted cardigan that she used to teach primary colours to her grandchildren. Or the fur coat, which became a source of embarrassment during the animal slaughter campaigns in the eighties. But in the days after her death that *red pashmina* became significant in ways I could not image when she was alive.

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I loved my mother deeply. I am not sure what happens after death, but I do know that those left behind are punctured with grief. Hers was not a slow death, but a sudden unexpected one. In relative terms she was young-ish. Grief combined with the shock of loss, left us so unprepared – it felled us. During this time her *red pashmina* saved me from what I was sure would kill me – death caused by inexplicable grief.

It wasn't merely the comfort of the silky softness of the wool next to my skin as I swaddled myself in it daily, nor was it the fact that it had belonged to her. It was the *smell*. Secreted away in the microscopic pockets of the warp and weft were traces of her perfume, her cooking, her garden, her books – smells from her life. But above all what lingered was *her* unique scent, a familiar milky sweet fragrance. All loved ones have a certain aroma. It presents itself every time you hug; the all-senses-engaged-embrace; the one that lets you know you're *home*. Allende (1998) describes one of her characters who in an attempt to never forget his mother would; ... *run to her side, hug her, cling to her clothing in a desperate attempt to retain her presence, her warmth, the smell of her apron, the sound of her voice* (p. 28). It is 10 years since my mother's heart pumped blood through her generous body. The grief is well and truly gone. As I look at the *red pashmina* now slung casually over the back of a chair I realise in a peculiar sort of way that it helped me wean myself from my mother for a second time. I also wonder what it would say about that period of time if it could magically speak? What story would it tell if it could write? What perceptions would it share with us if it had senses ...

THE READER AND THE DAUGHTER

Written by the Red Pashmina

Three sets of women's hands have owned me. My *Yak-Butter Mother*, *The Reader*, and *The Daughter*. I have spent most of my life with *The Reader*. But her body no longer exists, therefore I serve no purpose to her anymore. I was born to serve – to adorn and to protect. But sadly I am not able to protect those I love from death. Death is curious to observe. I was there, beside her, on the night *The Reader* took her last breath. A peculiar peace settled in the room, an exquisite hush reminiscent of my early years in the Himalayan foothills. But that silence, evoking early memories, was not to last. Phone calls, ambulances, men in strange uniforms, and the children. Old and young children. *The Reader's* children, and her grandchildren. Hugging her lifeless body. Some sobbing, some not. All in shock. That was the day I went to live with *The Daughter*.

Perhaps my *Yak-Butter Mother* is dead too. I remember her, the one who gave me life – her dark bamboo like hands massaging my thready inner being into life on the clickity clack loom. Yak butter singe in the air, children laughing, somebody singing. Vague memories now. As for *The Daughter*, I am certain to outlive her. I am made of strong stuff.

The day I went to live with *The Daughter*, it was 36 degrees outside, hot and humid. Regardless of the heat *The Daughter* wrapped herself in me. Desperate

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sobbing. Fierce enfolding and unfolding. Saturation from tears and sweat. I was repulsed. *Stop!* I wanted yell. I, who had always been worn with stylish grace by *The Reader*, had now succumbed to the wrenching and drenching of *The Daughter*.

I grieved for *The Reader* too! I had loved her for fourteen years. Her presence pulsated inside me. I had sucked at her life, hiding bits of her essence throughout my weave. Layered her laughter into my warp, secreted her scent snug-tight in my weft. I became greedy to be worn by *The Reader*; I couldn't get enough of her. I wanted to be stuffed full with *The Reader's* essence, to be her ambassador in the world. But now the horror of living with *The Daughter* engulfed me. I wished for legs to sprout, so I could run away.

I don't know what came over me, but after a few hours of more tugging and wailing from *The Daughter*, I remembered what I had been born to do – to adorn and protect. The strain of resisting *The Daughter* was tiring, so I relaxed. I loosened my weave a little, ever so slightly to reveal a scent. *The Daughter* calmed and became still. I opened my memory-laden pores a little more. A smile teetered at the corner of *The Daughter's* mouth. I relaxed further allowing more of *The Reader's* essence to float in the air. A ray crept across *The Daughter's* face, no teeth to speak of, but a smile none the less. Then, holding me close to her cheek, she whispered the word *Mum*.

I know now that I adopted the role of surrogate mother in those first few months after *The Reader's* death. *The Daughter* wore me often, mostly at home by herself. Every time I enshrouded her, I released more of my greedily stored away memories of her mother. They were random – roast potatoes, beach, gardenias, etc. you get the picture. Gradually there were fewer tears and the smiles more frequent. There were several occasions when I was worn out of the home. Once I was used as a tablecloth. At another time I wiped the tears of one of *The Daughter's* friends, who also blew her nose on me. One day I was used as a picnic rug on sodden dirt. *The Daughter* refused to wash me. Even though by now *The Reader's* essence had mostly dissipated. My deep crimson blush was turning grey, my silky texture becoming crisp. I started to reek like a sewer. I was embarrassed to be seen out of the house. Then about six months after *The Reader's* death, *The Daughter* made a sound I had never heard her make before. A velvety rush of air flew out of her mouth and filled the room. *The Daughter* laughed, a laugh just like her mother's. Shortly afterwards I was washed.

There are still a few traces of *The Reader* secreted in my folds, released for my private pleasure only. But now, intertwined deep in my weave are the ripples from *The Daughter's* life. Folded and tucked away until needed. I am the keeper of quiet moments in a life of those I adorn and protect. For those who have worn me, and those who are yet to wear me, I am a silky labyrinth of familial essence. But to you, if you see me on the street – adorning and protecting – I will simply be a *red pashmina*.

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