



The Embroidered Shawl.

Women secretly pass something to each other down the centuries. A way in which to share the burden we don't quite realise is there until we feel the weight of it at junctures in our lives, the genetic imprint in our bones that we carry with us. Whatever our differences are we share something that filtered through us from woman to woman. Tides of amniotic fluid swirl and shape us, the maternal transmissions of taste and knowing. Akin to emotional truth it's part of how we perceive the world around us and the Earth under our feet. The harder we search, the harder it is to pin down exactly what it means to each of us, because in all honesty not all of these women who came before me were very easy to live with, nor did they need to be, nor am I. But still for me it's always there perched on my shoulder like a witch's familiar or running through my spirit as a seam of gold particles runs through a riverbed.

I visualise this gold seam as an old piece of embroidery that one of us made on fine woven cloth long ago. As each generation passes repairs are made, threads replaced, colours evolve, holes are sometimes woven closed, or left as they are for the wind to blow through, scar tissue. I once read a quote that said “scars let the light in” these holes in the shawl are similar; frayed edges, light let in but also the gritty little pain of memory. It alters subtly with each woman according to how she carries it and what it shelters her from but it is nonetheless infinitely precious and it is strong, it is definitely strong. I hold it for now in my own bones, my own perception of this world, the crumbling soil of my garden under my bare toes as I plant out seedlings in the spring, how my fingers chill in the January winds because I am always losing my gloves, my heart sinks when it rains and just like my mother I dislike the blank pale grey of an overcast sky that does nothing and just sits there hanging over us, a featureless face. The torrid oppressive heat of summer in this damp country does not agree with me, just as it did not agree with my grandmother, her breadth of hip is likewise my own, as well as a womb that seemingly has an agenda autonomous to our body’s: bleeding and haemorrhaging, mushrooming growths and blood, always the blood... filling it and leaving it the tide too strong, over the top and unnecessarily wasteful.

I could see it needed repairing because the embroidered shawl that has now passed to my temporary keeping is threadbare, with blood patches and crusted with dried tears. The smell of the weft and warp is singed and burned, filled with the dust of long journeys in painful shoes.

They originally came from the North and the East of Europe from places where the borders had shifted throughout history but the culture was largely Teutonic. The deep forests and small villages that clung to edges of them, countries that no longer really exist on a map and are now part of another place, great empty tracts of land partially filled with an ever decreasing forest. They had papery skin that freckled and creased quickly, which they passed down to me. They were various shades of blonde and had eyes that were hooded and coolly appraising, the blue grey of the North Sea, the tides around

the coastal islands and the grey bellied sky. A seagull's wing clips it the low hanging, rain filled clouds with white and the wind is always straight - cold and stiff. Wintry smiles can crease the corners of those hooded eyes with a rare sudden warmth. I get my dark hair and eyes from my Father, but my hands are like theirs, hands that are stubby and capable. My Mother's hands are now worn and twisted by arthritis, heavy in their touch and clumsy, but they used to be tender gardeners' hands, always warm and firm. I remember my Mother putting her broad palm on my forehead when I had a headache or when I was ill as a child, a light relief flooding through me and a sensation of something inside my skin relaxing. Father always said that my mother had healing hands and they could heal up to a point, the small hurts and basic everyday little attritions, she could heal that. This all changed when my father died and my mother was left alone "a widow" she would say "I am a poor lonely widow" there is a kernel of romance in that statement still. My father died on an overcast morning, a morning when the sky was pale grey that hurt your eyes, the sort of day where he used to say *the sun will burn that haze off and this afternoon it will be beautiful. Just wait and see* and my mother was left alone, in a sombre ranch like house on a hill, in The Perche area of northern France, when night fell there was absolute darkness around that house on the hill. That earthy flame of hers dwindled and sank and she began to hide behind her memories of my father and her new friend the Widow. My mother's hands become more twisted and mottled everytime I see her. A clammy moisture has replaced the warmth, a tepid querulousness, she is not at peace, she does not accept her present life and is always searching for a way out. That big break in which everything will be alright again and as it was, neither does she admit to mistakes. Consequently her hands never lie still in her lap but fret, twist and wring. Ceaselessly mimicking her inner turmoil.

Hands are symbolic of the heart. The life in your hands and what work you undertake with them are an expression of your own heart. The hands are a conscience, your heart leads and the hands follow.

Life has more often than not, as it is for everyone, been a mystery as to how it exactly works, there are people who seem to sail through life from one happy situation to another, and then there are people like us, who seem to sail from one catastrophe to another, we stumble down the path and fail to interpret

signs and signals correctly. There are different things that we can do, in the time honoured fashion of women without any power over their lives we reach to the arcane and superstitious. We all know knowledge is power and if I can see auguries to the future and if I am able to tell you the outcome of that sticky situation you are in, I have a certain amount of power of a sort. Odd, ancient and more obscure than I ever realised, they are books that don't easily allow themselves to be read and more often than not they act as a mirror in which you gaze and you only get your own thoughts and opinions reflected back at you, but little of another's truth. I travel with a well worn deck of tarot cards in my pocket, my mother has a small gold pendulum she swings and my grandmother could speak to the dead directly. She performed hair raising seances in secret with my grandfather during the war, the supernatural events that occurred became the stuff of family legend, there was no question that it was the truth and that it had really happened. We believed.

I had been consulting and reading my cards since I had been around fifteen, I loved them they were a safety their positive images were a comfort, in so much of my life things seemed to happen that I had no control over and I believed the cards helped me and gave guidance, after years of interpretation I realised that I had never heeded any of the warnings they had given. The reassuring presence of the Empress, the Sun baby, the ten of cups with it's clear promise of overflowing life affirming love. These were my sign posts and they still are although I have learnt to interpret them without my own wants and needs in the way. It takes courage to read them honestly and clearly to yourself and not bend the meaning to suit what you want at the time, making up alternative stories. I have had my children now and grey hairs are threading through what once was brown(they're silver and bit coarse, not like the hair I have had so far) and only now I understand what the cards really mean, and only then in flashes, summer lightning illuminating a garden. Throughout the years that were painful and never ending I read my cards often, time and again and never stopped to honestly interpret what they were telling me. I was only interested in seeing what I wanted to see. Thinking I could bend the way things were to my own perception, the way I wanted to see the world. Time and again I saw what they were telling me with a clear eye and still I was blind and refused to be honest with myself – The knight of swords..the tower..judgement..three of swords. The alignment of your thoughts and need for knowledge and safety has

to be just right, an opening not clouded by emotion. My mother never managed it, she has the clear intention but her mind has become hazy with half understood truths and a need to create a reality that suits her, and now that she grows old, her surroundings become dimmer and her own reality is taking it's place.

For four generations these mothers of my mothers had settled in a town near the sea where the rivers empty themselves in large sheets of churning water. Near the sea, but far enough away to be removed from the rich underbelly of life that a harbour town would have brought; The Hague was a place where life was a little more gracious, if you were born in the right part of the town. The royal family had a palace on the outskirts of it, and residences in it's centre. The wealthy and aristocratic (sometimes they were both) settled in the beautiful tall, eighteenth century houses that marched well bred as a Bach fugue along cobbled streets. The eaves and windows stretched elegantly toward the sky, wisteria wound itself around wrought iron balconies and linden trees spread a lush canopy over the boulevards with rustling whispers. The sea air scrubbed the sky clean, and there was always sand in the corners and cracks in the pavements, little pale shells swept into the flower beds and paths of the parks. The light was clear as through a glass lens when it rained it swept in long strings of beads over the land and townscape.

Much of it is still there, The Royal Theatre where Pierre performed for most of his career is still there. It's beautiful facade unchanged but inside it has been extensively restored and is now a serene space with illuminated glass stairways and leather banquettes. Portraits of famous actors line the walls but Pierre is not among them. His heyday was too long ago, he is largely forgotten apart from photographs, old film reels and scripts, carefully preserved in the museum of theatrical history in Amsterdam. The dignified and elegant Hotel des Indes on the Voorhout is still there, just as it was. Emma and Johanna would easily recognise it, the lighting is golden, candles on chandeliers glow under small shades and there are embroidered couches with small tables to set your glass on and huge urns with beautiful flower displays. There is a colonial touch in the old murals by the entrance hall, of boats and palm trees, Kentia

palms in porcelain pots brush their bladed leaves against the fluted pillars.the atmosphere is hushed, expensive and unchanging.

I am writing about a part of this city that no longer exists,was torn away in flames. It is still there in old photographs and maps, but actually it is nowhere anymore. For my mother it is a strange experience to walk down a boulevard lined with trees in her memory, go through her front door, hear the sound of the gate shutting behind her; and then open her eyes to see it as it is today.Link fences and grey cement office blocks, a smooth aluminium tube that the tram now passes through,jarringly. People walk to and fro looking harrassed and tired under the far away sky. When the sun comes out the light is harsh and white, stabbing a your eyes and making you frown. Here and there are patches of wasteland between brand new crisp cornered buildings their air conditioned lobbies silent, hung with contemporary art on oyster coloured walls, a lipsticked and fashionably dressed receptionist taps at a computer and sips her coffee cup , her eyes not leaving the screen. Buildings are regularly torn down and replaced because the price of the land is at a premium and each new corporation wants their own signature building. The patches of wasteland draw me to look closer at them, they remind me of skins drawn back, glimpses into the past like an overlay, or those photographs that segue back and forward between then and now, usually accompanying “then and now” articles on news websites, interesting to watch the outlines of people in fedora’s, or large hats with feathers, corsets fade and merge with parked cars, lamp posts and facades still there, irrevocably changed, still there. Yellow bricks from the gardens and the russet ones from the walls, fragments of plaster are ground into the earth. Cindery dark streaks of soil mix with the shattered roof tiles. You can’t erase it completely however much the council throws subsidies at it and the land here looks as though there were no building plan or revitalisation scheme at all. Buildings are planted and adjusted to fit wherever there is space. It looks odd because the basic structure of the old pre war streets is still there, under the dull asphalt, The overall impression is of someone trying to put scattered building blocks in some kind of previous order. Pockets of memory remain and at the far end of the street the iron railway bridge is still there, and at the top end of the street at the edge of where the bombs fell, houses remain as though nothing had happened. Openings and timeslip moments are just beyond the corners of your eyes, missed by most.

The house that blew apart was on the 2de Adelheid Straat, number 191, it was pretty and had been built in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it had four floors and lofty ceilings, striped awnings in yellow and white that arched over the tall windows creating a pleasant bright shade in the front rooms in the summer. I have never been in it, or seen it, because it was gone before my parents had even met each other. But I have heard the stories and been in similar houses, seen pictures.

The iron railings and the gate dark against the roses, push open the gate and hear the faint iron creaking sound. Walk up the yellow ochre brick path, laid in a herring bone pattern and up the two steps to the glossy dark green front door that was sheltered from the elements by an archway, a brick porch, dark sienna brick inlaid with the same yellow ochre ones. Grasp the handle next to the door and pull it down. Here the bell ring down in the hall, and here the footsteps of the maid coming to the door, opens it. The maid herself is nameless, like so many of them then, and her face is as serviceable and wholesome as a loaf of bread. Step into the hall (you've been invited) and the hall smells a bit like polish and gravy, brown sauced cooking and nutmeg. The musty smell of heavy victorian textiles and a tang of methylated spirits, used to clean the windows to a sparkling clarity reflecting the sky. The hall is open and marble, with a sweeping staircase curving up to the second floor. A balustraded gallery runs around the hall, you can step from your bedroom or study and gaze down into the hall. The gallery is lined with painted bookcases, painted in dusty blue green edged in gold. There are doors leading off left and right and you can glimpse a drawing room to your right as you come in. The walls are papered with a duck egg blue wallpaper. Pink and green parrakeets flit between magnolia branches, on the other side it's a bit hard to see because the door is half closed, but there seems to be a piano. And a great vase of flowers. The rest of the rooms remain out of bounds. You stand there waiting for the maid to take you to the lady of the house. The floor in the hall is black and white tiles like a chessboard.

The change happened at twilight and then it became mysterious and odd, the air thickened in unexpected places and the temperature fluctuated unnaturally. Grainy shadows moved objects and disturbed the curtains. The house had once

belonged to a Reverend. He had been a troubled and twisted up frustration of a man who had ended the gnawing rage in his chest by hanging himself in the stairwell. Johanna did her best with the taciturn and unwilling house and crammed it full of expensive and beautiful antique furniture that she bid for at auctions – the money flowed like water and she would hire a boy with a handcart to take it all home. She furnished the house in the latest fashions much swagging of silk and delicate porcelain. A sugary Watteau painting hung over the fireplace in the dining room and Impressionists glowed from the walls. The library was a gallery on the first floor filled with rare and precious books. One of these books was wide and flat, and had a scuffed orangey brown leather binding. Pierre came across it while browsing the books when he had just married Emma, adjusting himself to this new home. Johanna had bought it with a job lot of other leather bound books that she thought would look nice on the shelves of the library cabinets, up around the gallery. He pulled this book out and opened it carefully, it was obviously very old and the spine made worrying cracking sounds. The pages were foxed and ancient, giving off a deep musty scent, delicate detailed drawings of saints in various attitudes of pain and martyrdom, kings pondering questions and twisted teutonic trees and hills, hares and hounds. The signature hidden within the penstrokes of the drawings was a square topped A with a small D in it. Albrecht Durer. There were rows of books around the walls of the gallery that ran around the entrance hall. It was a large airy house, but in spite of the shadows and whispers and art it was curiously empty at its heart like an elaborate stage set where people didn't really live. The sound of horses and wooden wheels going past the windows, and later an occasional motor car rattled along the cobbles, while the Linden trees cast pleasant deep shade from the summer heat.

Johanna

There was music in the room filling her heart like cream in a saucer, for a cat. Her fingers plump and short fingered with rings that bit softly into her flesh moved over the smooth, cool keys.

She played Chopin by heart, improvising when she forgot what came next, notes that flowed as drops of water. A warm gentle rain of sound to be dancing around her and through her; she shut her eyes. Playing the music made her body move involuntarily and she felt light and graceful, it was the music that made her feel it, the Chopin, Chopin it was alchemical. While her eyes were closed and her fingers sought out the keys, there was this delightful buoyancy. She played for a while, first through one nocturne and then a sparkling, showy prelude designed to impress, diamonds flashed on her finger.

All the while her daughter Emma sat with that young man, Charles, his name was, in the blue chinoiserie drawing room across the hall. Sipping tea and chatting with another friend, a girl with a low laugh and sharp eyes, her dark plucked brows like punctuation marks. Johanna could hear their murmured conversation and intermittent laughter, the different voices like birds twittering on about tedious little subjects that made her ears itch. The tinny sound of the gramophone had drifted through playing a jazzy little tune tinkling flat notes clinking out of the large flower like horn on the top of it. A suggestion of melody, and Johanna had stayed bent over the flowered cushion cover she was embroidering stitch, stitch, stitch dragging the deep red silk through the teal fabric until she could no longer stop herself. A little wickedness rose in her "some real music" she murmured with a smile to herself and laid her embroidery aside.

She thought of the swirl of his ear, his shoulder and the intimate space between where she would never rest her head. The music she played was a handful of soft feathers blown into that warm delta, curling on his shoulders, nestling there.