

I will come
I will come and
find you

The Embroidered Shawl

Anna Potter

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For Mum. I love you.

Anna

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 see it, 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 every time 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