

Red cashmere cardigan, *j'adore*

Key words

Trauma, heartbreak, care, love, fashioned identity, communication

I'm with my mother in a brightly lit room in Leicester at the height of summer. There's a frightening sense of anticipation between us and, as she lays there, suddenly and urgently ill, I think about her pink-painted toes on her recently pedicured feet, and the white sheet that covers her, obscuring them from others in the room. This is not secret, but I realise that no-one else is thinking about this small act of self-care, and in the scale of events we're facing, how much does this matter? She dies the next day, and my thoughts and behaviour are thrown into panic and confusion at how I'll deal with life now she's gone.

Slowly, slowly and over a long period of time my mind goes back to the better times we shared together, and I think particularly about our clothes and utter commitment to our fashioned identities. I start to think about my mother in terms of her working identity, a sense of agency that was visible to me only as I got older, her stylish wardrobe that in her later life remained impressive – no elasticated waistbands, only tailored flares and Jackie O sunglasses. I had become familiar with her stories of growing up in rural Wales, far removed from consumer culture, but nevertheless her strong desire to stand out. Her narrative also pointed to a strength and sense of accomplishment she found in making her own clothes, and as the first person in her family to go onto higher education, I've always linked intelligence with a capacity to make. I thought my mother was the most stylish woman I'd ever encountered, and I gazed adoringly upon her brightly patterned Capri pants and a sunshine yellow, hand-knitted halter top as we set off on our seaside holiday, or the sea-green lurex knit evening gown on her way to a party.

In my own life, my mother's sense of care and love manifested itself in the sheer joy of textiles, from the clothes she made for me as a child – the navy baby clothes and hand-knitted sweaters to an intricate smocked dress that I still have in my possession. She told me that, as a shy toddler, I often hid behind her skirts if I felt threatened. As a rebellious teenager I wore old clothes, expertly altered and dyed in keeping with a punk aesthetic – and I recall my mother proudly introducing me to what I considered conventionally-dressed parents of children she taught as we passed by in the local market.

One particular narrative stood out, dating back to the late 1990s when some choices I'd made in my personal life didn't work out, and I was at a low ebb. Never one to interfere or pass judgement, my mother nonetheless helped to soothe my broken heart silently and without words. I'd arrived back in London after a short trip to Sao Paulo; it was January, the depths of winter, and I was short of money as I'd spent freely on what was intended to be a trip of a lifetime. I felt low in spirits and I could not disguise my despair to those around me. I struggled through those days, barely able to function either professionally or personally, feeling a sense of shame that my relationship had failed, and every part of me hurt. My mother and I spoke on the phone regularly, but we rarely dwelt on things that had gone wrong. Later that month, I saw the postman trying to squeeze a tightly-packed Jiffy bag through the letter box. I could see it had my mother's handwriting on the address label, but she'd made no mention of sending anything to me. I gave it a cursory squeeze but I went to work without opening it, fully aware of the Queen of Delayed Gratification moniker my friends gave me at the time. Nevertheless, I started to feel brighter knowing she'd sent me something. Later on, as I opened the carefully sealed bag, I felt inside and ran my fingers over the contents - the softness of the cashmere was an instant balm, and I found myself pulling at the bag, ripping the packaging until I saw a luxurious red cardigan rebound from its cramped surroundings. Though she was far away from me, I felt enveloped by love and compassion and warmth – it was like being embraced by my

mother in a silent but powerful way, and the trauma of a failed relationship was diminished by this simple piece of clothing so thoughtfully chosen, packaged and posted – folded so neatly that it could be delivered straight to me and not to the delivery office, which would demand a separate and troublesome journey. I still have the cardigan and feel her warmth when I wear it – the colour so clear – a true red, no yellow or blue casts, and the softness of the cashmere still imparts a sense of care and love.

I think about our life together, acknowledging that our chosen vehicle of communication was through the language of fabrics and clothes. As adults, we became so tightly bound together that her loss from my life was, and remains, profound. But now, as time passes, I think how glorious it was that she was in my life and the wonderful moments we had together, and I applaud her pink painted toes, even at the edge of life.