

the museum of the lady with only one neck

PERRI KLASS



*The author embarks on the heartbreaking task of emptying
her mother's apartment and in so doing reclaims
what she'd knit for her.*

1. WHAT IS LOST: *the gray Icelandic sweater*

My great guilty secrets as a knitter are related: I am almost always warm when I am inside, and I do not comfortably wear wool near my skin—or anywhere else. I love the look and feel of wool, and I absorbed very early the idea that knitting with wool was nobler and classier than knitting with anything synthetic. This was in New Jersey, in the 1970s, when I was in high school, and learning to knit was a gesture in the direction of a vaguely sixties sense of craft and authenticity. Wool was natural. Wool was Whole Earth Catalog. Wool felt good on my fingers—even the slight edge of itch was a tactile pleasure. I liked working with it. I was happy to pay more for the thick skeins of 100% wool, and I disdained the cheaper synthetics of the time—which, at least in my memory, were available in crass unnatural colors, and were strangely puffy and alien to the touch. And those cut-price yarns were

clearly associated with the fabrics disdained by right-thinking hippie-leaning adolescents because they belonged so definitively to style-challenged leisure-suit-wearing grownups: Doubleknit. Polyester. Synthetics.

But even then, I couldn't comfortably wear wool anywhere near my skin. My drawers all through college, graduate school, medical school, held a succession of wool sweaters, not that I had knit for myself (I was more of an intermittent scarf knitter), but that I had at least bought with pride. When I was nineteen, in England with my parents, my father happily chose himself a Harris Tweed jacket, and I chose a lovely lavender crewneck shetland sweater, proud, like him, to be spending money on the real thing—but I never wore it. There was a beautiful gray Fair Isle sweater—was it a pullover or a cardigan? I can close my eyes and see the white and blue and gray Fair Isle pattern—never wore it. There were some glorious woolen shawls I bought in India as a medical student, when it turned out that January, the cold season, brought out the New Delhi shawl sellers, and I admired the graceful women keeping warm in embroidered wraps over their saris—two of those shawls are hanging in my closet now, but when I want a shawl, I reach for something made of silk or cotton or rayon.

So I like the feeling of woolen yarn running through my fingers, but I get itchy if woolen fabric is anywhere near my skin—even a couple of layers out. So much for the Whole Earth Catalog. And as I say, even as a teenager, I also tended to feel warmer than the people around me. And after I had children, my metabolism changed, and I found myself generally too warm for sweaters of any kind. To this day, year round, I wear my business jackets over sleeveless cotton garments; two real layers leave me too warm.

Why am I telling you this? It's my long-way-round lead-in

to mourning my mother, who as she got older was often cold, who liked her apartment overheated the way they overheat New York City apartments in buildings with lots of elderly people, my mother, who wore a winter coat on days that I went to meet her wearing a T-shirt—my mother, who let me knit for her. So it's my lead-in to describing the doleful, prolonged, and heartbreaking task of emptying her apartment, since she died last spring, and reclaiming the things that I knit for her.

I'm not going to catalog the categories of sorting my mother's stuff (books and more books, clothes, jewelry, manuscripts, endless unidentifiable travel souvenirs, photos, unmentionable boxes still packed from her previous move) or anatomize the sibling discussions about who does what or who gets what. Taking apart the apartment feels like taking apart a life, because that's what it is—or at least, like taking apart the carefully constructed exoskeleton, laid down over the years and the decades. The truth is, it's a very sadly recent apartment—sadly recent because my mother had, with great effort, on her part and on my part and on my brother's, moved out of the apartment where she and my father had lived for more than twenty years into a smaller, nicer apartment, right around the corner from me. And to get her moved, we had sorted through vast quantities of stuff, we had made all kinds of decisions—and then, as probably happens with every move, we had gotten tired of making all those decisions, and let the movers pack up a bunch of stuff we couldn't face sorting, or couldn't quite classify—so those unmentionable unopened boxes are waiting in the closet. But I had helped her unpack the clothes she wanted into her new drawers, alphabetize the books she had kept onto the shelves, hang the paintings, put the dishes in the kitchen cabinets, back in late 2012. And now, less than two years later, she was gone and lost and had taken with her all the meaning of those drawers

and shelves and walls and bookcases. And her clothing became the garments left behind when the body has departed.

So when I started by blathering on about wool and how I can't wear wool and how I'm always warm, what I really wanted to say was this: my mother is gone. Her body is gone, a body I had come to know so well in so many ways—feeling her pressed close to me, holding my arm for guidance and safety as we moved about the city, supervising her medications and accompanying her to her doctors and her eye doctors as she tried to fend off the encroaching blindness that terrified her so—and then, in the terrible last two months, when she was sick, hospitalized, in pain and in terror and in confusion, the body that betrayed her and broke down. Her body is gone, and when I think about that, I start crying.

And among the clothing left in her apartment, in her closets and her drawers, now that her body is gone, are the pieces I knit for her, for my mother, who would let me work with wool. The vests were hung carefully in the dress-clothes closet, each in a plastic dry-cleaner bag. The ornamental scarves were in a bottom drawer. The outside clothing—the warm scarves and hats—were up on the shelf in the coat closet, with the gloves, above the winter coats she wore when the temperature dipped below sixty or so. The only major thing I couldn't find was a silver-gray sweater that I made her more than a decade ago out of bulky Icelandic wool, thick and rich and hairy stuff that I couldn't have worn on the coldest day of winter. It worked up fast, and it came out a little too large—but it was warm and heavy and I can picture her wearing it, but only in her old apartment. I can't find it now, and I can't remember seeing it in the new place, so I'm left wondering whether we lost it in transition somehow—or whether it's actually in one of the unmentionable boxes. I don't particularly want that sweater—obviously, even if it fit me, I wouldn't wear it. But I

can't help looking at the brighter colors of the items that I have in front of me, and thinking of the gray sweater, which once kept her warm in her overheated old apartment, and of how much is lost and gone.

2. MAGIC AND MEMORY: *the two variegated woolen vests*

She wore these vests a lot. What should I do with them? There are a couple of vests, knitted in expensive hand-dyed variegated wool, wool I bought when her eyesight was better, and she could appreciate the mixtures of pink and mauve and blue and green and brown. She wore those vests a lot. The first one buttoned up the front, closed with a row of pricy ceramic buttons, little crafty jewels—but she told me that with her worsening eyesight, she couldn't manage the unbuttoning easily, so she kept it permanently buttoned, and took it off over her head. So the next one looked like a cardigan, with a fake seam up the front, but it didn't really open at all. She wore those vests a lot, and when I tell you that, of course, I'm trying to tell you that I took care of her, I did, I decorated her and kept her warm and made sure that everyone with any sense of fibers, fiber arts, or fashion would have known immediately to look at her, my mother was someone who mattered, someone for whom garments were knitted, in careful patterned stitches, out of expensive hand-dyed wool.

I want to make it clear that left to herself, my mother would have been perfectly fine wearing sweatshirts or a cast-off red cardigan sweater of mine that dates back to high school and is rather mysteriously constructed of fake leather patches and zip pockets and thick scratchy always-pilling maroon wool. I know I had that item with me in college—I thought it was rather cool, though I had moments of doubt about those zippers—but I didn't wear it

much, because—well, you know about me. But somehow it ended up in my mother's closet, zippers gleaming, fake leather patches resplendent, wool pilling. She would have been happy to wear that sweater over her shirts and under her winter coat. But instead I made her the vests, and she wore them and wore them.

The first one, the pink and mauve one with the fancy ceramic buttons, is made of wool that we bought together (though I didn't tell her the price, which would have shocked her) and is knit in a pattern of triplets, knit 3 purl 3 (and then in the next row, I think, knitting the purl stitches and purling the knit stitches, so you end up with a kind of extended moss stitch). Whatever the exact details, it was a stitch pattern I was able to memorize, back when I was knitting the vest, a decade ago, and I can remember the kind of almost subconscious chant that played in my mind as I was knitting one two three purling one two three, and meantime doing whatever else I needed to do. I knit that vest through a lot of meetings, one two three, one two three. I knit it through Game 7 of the 2004 American League Championship Series, when the Red Sox triumphantly crushed the Yankees, in Yankee Stadium no less, and went on to the World Series, where they would win for the first time since 1918.

The second vest, thicker and brighter in reds and blues and purples, was made a year or two later in a kind of triumph; I could see that she was getting lots of use out of the first one, and thus I felt I had an excuse to buy another big bag of expensive wool. Another simple pattern of knit and purl, something I could memorize and carry with me, and the kind of pattern—and the kind of variegated wool—which doesn't really show the occasional mistake. But I look at that vest now and it's a little bit shadowed; it's wool I chose without consulting her, since looking at different choices would have been too harsh a reminder of her failing

eyes, it's the one without buttons—since it was too hard to find the buttonholes.

My mother, as you can probably tell, was not much for fashion. She shopped—when she shopped at all—for cheapness and for what would give her no trouble. Anything which required special care—hand wash, hang dry, or, god forbid, dry clean—she regarded as not just problematic but as actually evil, morally dubious, or, at the very least, too fancy for the likes of her—by which she meant, morally dubious. She could carry off dramatic clothes; she actually aged into a rather distinguished septuagenarian, with a gleaming cap of short white hair (I probably don't have to tell you that she did not go to beauty parlors—when her eyes got too bad for her to cut her own hair with her nail scissors, she began going to places called Quick Cuts, or maybe Cheap Cuts, and then, when she could see even less, and she was more generally frightened about moving around the city, she let me take her to a place I found down in Greenwich Village where a kind lady tended to her eyebrows and her face, and a pleasant gentleman gave her speedy flattering haircuts—I didn't tell her how much they cost). My mother could carry off a scarlet silk Chinese jacket, or a plum velvet overshirt. But she used to tell me, almost accusingly, that when she wore the things that I gave her—or that I bought with her—or, as she might put it, that I made her buy—other people were always telling her how nice she looked. She made it clear that she was a little wary of me; I was somehow privy to the suspect secret signals which told other people what was plain (and cheap) and what was fancy. And of course, if you complimented her silk jacket or her velvet overshirt, she would respond, half proudly, half defensively, “My daughter bought it for me,” or maybe, “My daughter chose it,” in tones which made it clear that, left to herself, she would never have gone in for anything of the kind (if

someone happened to compliment a garment she had chosen for herself, which, for obvious reasons, didn't happen so often, she would generally respond either by pointing out that she had bought it for almost nothing at a discount place, or by explaining that it came from a catalog of superwashable-guaranteed-to-last-forever travel garments, and could therefore be squished into a tiny little ball and packed into a baggie).

But she wore those two vests a lot, and she didn't mind being complimented on them. She professed herself surprised that everyone could tell right away that they were handmade, that people fingered the fancy yarn and played with the ornate buttons—but I think, dare I say it, that she was proud of them. Proud of the yarn, proud of the buttons, proud that the vests had been hand knitted for her. And I wrap her in those vests in my memory; when I try to remember her well, not sick, when I try to remember her happy in her world, I picture her in one of those vests—usually the one with the fancy buttons, knitted for her out of wool that we chose together.

3. THE USEFUL AND THE USELESS: *the hat and scarves*

So as I said, I knit a lot of scarves. They work well for the kind of take-it-along knitting that I do, pulling things out in meetings or on airplanes while I'm watching bad movies (I know that if I were a good person, I would be knitting bigger, more ambitious projects, even if they had to be made in pieces, but I'm really bad at putting things together—and yes, I suspect that's more than a metaphor. But I have quite a few unfinished projects lying around the place: an elaborate intarsia cardigan where I never made it through the second front, another simpler jacket that I think is actually complete, but I've misplaced the second sleeve, and another where I

bogged down when I tried to figure out how the sleeves fit into the armholes). So the sweater and the vests for my mother were major projects—but there were a lot of smaller ones along the way. I emptied out the top of the coat closet in her apartment and found a pile of the things that she would put on as she was going out, in her constant effort to keep warm in the world.

There's a red hat I knit in some long ago phase of hat-knitting, red and pink, made of a slightly tweedy yarn—it's flat as a pie on top, a disk that swirls into a central bobble, and then textured on the sides, with bands of stockinette and reverse stockinette pouching out, and a rolled I-cord at the bottom. It's actually very big and stretchy—so big and stretchy that I stuffed all the scarves into it and carried it home as a kind of woolen bag full of small knitted items, to be laid out and reviewed, as if I were getting the exhibits ready for a glass case, the small items in the Museum of My Mother.

Here's a scarf I knit my mother that really worked for her—it's made out of a bulky wool, variegated again, blue and mauve, and I made it in a knit one purl one rib so it doesn't curl at the edges. I barely even remember knitting this—just the sense of satisfaction at how quickly it grew on the needles. She wore this one with her blue fleece coat which is the coat she wore when she thought it was cold but not freezing. When she thought it might be freezing, she had a down coat, and also an old heavy parka that had been my father's, but she saved those for really severe weather—the kind of weather when other people also wore winter coats. Most days, she wore that blue fleece jacket, and that's how I picture her, moving around the city, these last years. Days that we were going somewhere together—to the doctor, the eye doctor, to the movies, to the place where they cut her hair—I would call her up and say, I'm coming to pick you up, I'll meet you on the corner (I could have

said, wait for me in the lobby of your building, where you can sit, but I knew she wouldn't do that). And I would come down the street and see her waiting on the corner, in that blue fleece jacket, leaning forward a little in my direction, peering ahead, trying to recognize me as I came into view.

And here's a scarf that my younger son made for her—garter stitch in thick stripes of white, blue, black, gray, maroon. Back and forth, back and forth. It came out nice and thick and soft, and she wore this one as well. She expressed awe that he was able to knit—she had often expressed awe that I was able to knit, since she said she couldn't knit or crochet or sew. Or sometimes she said she had once knit something, long ago, but it had been a disaster. But my mother was a person curiously devoid of hobbies—there was something stripped-down about her. She had a list of interests, of things that she cared about, and it was a good list, even a great list (reading, writing, teaching, family, food, theater, New York City . . .) but she didn't have room for a whole lot of extra little interests around the edges. She thought it was peculiar that I knit, and after I took her shopping for yarn, I suspect she came to think of it as yet another way that I had found to spend money on unnecessary luxuries. But when her grandchild took up the needles, of course, it became yet another piece of evidence that he was unusually dexterous and intellectually gifted (actually, the scarf was the single knitting project that he ever finished).

So the two scarves from the coat closet were well used. But here's one from her bottom drawer that I don't think she wore very often, a silly ornamental number that I made out of a novelty yarn, pink and light blue with lots of big white bobbles. It's a thin scarf, meant to be slung around the neck as a dashing decoration. I went through a period of novelty yarn scarves at one point, grabbing up balls of ribbon yarn and eyelash yarn and bouclé yarn and

yarn with slubs and bobbles. I gave many such scarves away as gifts, and I kept a few for myself, and to be honest, I very rarely wear them. And I can't look at my mother's scarf without remembering a conversation we had after I gave it to her—she had opened the present, admired the scarf, looped it around her neck. It's very nice, she said. It looks great, I said. I just bought some more yarn, I added, I'm going to get to work and make you another. My mother looked troubled. "But Perri," she said, "I only have one neck."

4. UNNECESSARY LUXURY: *the red shawl*

For my mother's eightieth birthday, six years ago, I decided to knit her a shawl. I had found a pattern I really liked, with two ribbed arms that you tied in front that opened up into a large shawl panel in the back, with alternating thick bands of stockinette and reverse stockinette—imagine wearing a cardigan sweater by tying the arms together around your neck, so that the sweater settles over your shoulders and back. That's what this was like, a big soft cloud over your back, and then these two ribbed handles that you could tie. The yarn I bought was the yarn for which the pattern was designed, luxury stuff, a silk and mohair blend in red and purple, with some silver metallic elements, shining against the scarlet. I can throw it over my shoulders now and feel it settle softly, and I can note the somewhat clumsy join on each side where I picked up and knit, probably with smaller needles, to make that glossy ribbed arm.

My mother, of course, wouldn't have noticed the clumsy join. And I can remember her unwrapping the shawl, on her eightieth birthday, in the course of a rather over-elaborate evening celebration that my brother and I had concocted, which included stops at his home and then at two different restaurants, and any number of

toasts and speeches. She admired the shawl, of course, and I demonstrated the way she was supposed to tie the arms, and showed her how gracefully it would fall across her shoulders, and how it would keep her warm. She assured me that the colors were beautiful, as indeed they were—and still are.

I meant it as beauty and warmth, but I also meant it as luxury. I knew my mother wouldn't have been able to identify the yarn—she would probably have expressed surprise that yarn could be made of silk in the first place—and of course, I wasn't going to tell her how much it had cost, but I liked the idea of yarn so lavish and colors so opulent. I liked the idea of my mother wrapped in mohair-soft silken jewel tones. I liked the idea of keeping her warm in ways that went way beyond the practical.

It was warm and soft, all right, but I don't think she wore this much. Maybe she used it now and then as a scarf, just wrapped round her neck for warmth, but it wasn't really a convenient shape for that, and I didn't find it in the coat closet with her keep-you-warm-outside things, I found it in the bottom drawer with that frivolous novelty yarn scarf, and a bunch of other nice shawls which I never saw her wear, including one I had bought with her on our trip to India a decade ago. I'm not sure any of these were really even on her mental inventory of her garments—that is, of the ones she actually reached for. I think the truth is, my mother hated the idea of shawls. She wasn't ashamed of her age, and heaven knows she was often cold, but somehow, I think, shawl to her meant old lady, in a very particular and distasteful sense, and she wasn't going to give way.

And my mother was suspicious of luxury. On that trip to India, she told me over and over that she didn't need fancy hotels, she didn't need first-class train tickets. The two of us played a game, in fact, in which it was agreed between us that I was using her age as an excuse to

travel in luxury, when in fact it was I, with my upscale tastes and my weak-minded love of creature comforts, who really needed the five-star accommodations, the air-conditioned train carriages, the taxis and hired cars. And for all I know it may have been true; my mother was tougher than I will ever be, in body, in mind, and in spirit. I was happy to smooth her way, and happy to let it be understood that in accepting a little coddling, she was actually indulging me.

So I'll try to wear this shawl every now and then, even though it's wool, even though I'm never cold. But I'll wear it in full awareness that my mother didn't, and I'll try to let it represent her refusal to compromise. She didn't mind being in her eighties, but she didn't want certain trappings which would render her, in her own mind, an old lady. It was a gesture of love on her part to accept a little luxury, but she never fully let down her guard.

THE COLLECTION

So obviously, I take the vests and the scarves and the shawl. I've already brought them back around the corner to my apartment, the vests on their hangers, swathed in their plastic dry cleaner bags, the shawl and scarves stuffed into that accommodating hat. And I'm making resolutions—I'll try to wear the shawl, the yarn is beautiful—it's wool, but I could put it over a thick shirt. But if I put it over a thick shirt, I'll feel much too warm. Or maybe I'll put it away and maybe one day I'll be an old lady and I'll be cold and I'll put it around my shoulders, and think about how my mother resisted. And the vests? I guess I fold them away somewhere. Maybe someday I'll be the right size—significantly thinner than I am now—and I'll put on the one with the fancy buttons and look at myself in the mirror and see my mother looking out.

I yearn for that glass case, for space to display and explain and exhibit and commemorate. The Museum of My Mother, hand-knitting collection. I would like to type out cards explaining the provenance of each item, to curate the yarn and the patterns and verify the dating. It would be one more way of holding on to the body that is no longer here, and the meaning of her life, of trying to hold on to the space in the world which for me will always belong to my mother. As we take apart her apartment, as we sort her possessions into categories, this particular category, this overflowing armload of knitted bits and pieces, represents years of mother-daughter back-and-forth. There's a certain amount of egocentric showing off, of course—the museum of things I made for my mother. The museum of my attempts to keep my mother warm. The museum of stitches to hold her close.

But of course, this is a time of taking rooms apart. My mother is gone, and she doesn't get a museum—or at least not the kind with glass display cases (actually, my mother would have been vastly entertained by the idea of anyone contemplating putting any of her possessions on display—her garments, her jewelry, her pots and pans—since it was an article of belief with her that she owned—and wanted—nothing of any value or elegance or distinction). The right thing to do, surely, is to hold on to the things that I knitted and recognize them as the powerful talismans that they are, and use them to remember all that mother-daughter back-and-forth. The museum will be my very private collection, and the stitches and patterns will represent for me the complex negotiations of caretaking and luxury, the politics of giving and receiving, and the joy of knitting for someone I loved so much, and attempting to warm and adorn that indomitable and very distinct body and mind and spirit.