



Source: Chee Chee Leung, 'Scribe of Egypt's king returns to history's pages', *The Age online*, 22/02/07.

Tags: death, child/parent, corporeality, plants
Writer/s: Clara Brennan

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

The old woman lay in the centre of her huge, canopied bed. Her fine hair was unwashed but hung in its usual style, an asymmetric hair-helmet that had turned slowly from red-gold to faded yellow, skimming her ears and cut high on the brow. She was immaculately made-up, with rouged cheeks and lips, kohl on her creased eyelids and powder dusting her papery skin and décolletage. In her silver brocade bed-jacket she appeared at once an errant knight, gypsy, mystic and a well-seasoned actress. In the centre of her forehead she wore a smudge of ash and in her left hand she held and stroked a rabbit's foot. She was propped on a bank of pillows that bore the embroidered initials PS and she gazed fixedly towards the window, enjoying the light and warmth on her skin. Her son sat on the edge of the bed, her breakfast tray on his knees, buttering her bread with precision. She suddenly noticed the white hairs at his temples and put down the rabbit foot.

'I think I shall die today', she said decisively. Her son unscrewed the pot of jam.

'Any requests for your last meal or will this suffice?' he asked, gently placing the tray onto her lap.

'It's perfect. But you know—I have been craving figs.' She laughed. Her son was about to send the maid to town for some, but she continued:

'But it's impossible. Impossible. Figs always liquefy my bowels. And you know what they say about death—people often mess themselves. So undignified, the last faux pas, the final stage-fright!' She laughed inwardly for some moments. Then her face became serious. 'I am going to tell you about your birth. I am the last one alive of those who found you, and it is high time I told you the story.' Her son, with the contented and somewhat amused expression of one who has asked for this story his entire life and had resigned himself to never hear it, pulled himself further onto the bed so that his legs stuck out straight.

She cleared her throat.

'You were born of a tree', began the old woman. Her son suppressed a laugh. She continued: 'You were discovered one cold afternoon on a high plateau. We had begun a tour of the cold country, three performances a day, I played all the heroines and fell in love with the director—you know that story—we had six inches of snow and decided to abandon the theatre wagon for one day, to play in the snow. Your father and I and three others from the village drove the sleigh up the highest hill we could find, with the intention of careering back down without the horse. One tree stood at the top of this hill. And as we approached we discovered you had been

abandoned at the foot of it. When we found you amongst the roots, you had wriggled loose of your swaddling, and you were lying naked and newborn, exposed to the icy winds upon a wax jacket with the initials CJ sewn onto the collar. As I drew closer to you I saw that your umbilical cord had fused to the tree trunk. Navel to navel! You were coated in a film of blood and you were joined to the tree as if it was your own flesh-and-blood mother! And as I gathered you up in my arms I got a shock—your tiny body was so warm your cheeks were burning'. The old woman drew a handkerchief with the letters TK from her sleeve and dabbed at her eyes.

'I know it's a strange story—but it's the truth! You were such a beautiful baby! And we would not have kept you if your parents had been found, but lucky for us no one came forward, and we waited a long time. I truly believed you were given to me by that tree, and I felt at ease accepting this gift from a—tree—for who could have known we would otherwise be childless?' The old woman blew her nose loudly and regarded her son. 'Are you angry with your Mother for never telling you this? Do you understand how I so wanted you to be my own flesh?' Her son reached over the breakfast tray to embrace her. 'What kind of tree was it?' Her son asked. And they both laughed heartily. 'An oak, it was an oak tree!'

The old woman and her son passed the morning pleasantly, and at around four o'clock she died mid-sentence as they were discussing a new play he had just seen at the state theatre. Her son sat in silence with a handkerchief over his nose and mouth to avoid the permeating smell of diarrhoea his mother had left behind. He stroked the sockets of her eyes. He decided to clear up the shit himself. He fetched a towel bearing the initials EG and a basin of water from the en-suite. He peeled back her nightdress to mop up the spillage. He dragged the messed undersheet from beneath her body and tossed it on the floor. Finally he fetched a clean pair of knickers initialed with the letters ZP from her closet and drew them up over her ankles. As he pulled them with difficulty toward her torso he felt a sharp pain in his finger but continued dressing her. Then he rang the servant's bell.

Within the hour the house was surrounded by press and photographers, who for once waited solemnly and unobtrusively; lining the driveway with their hats in hand and their heads bowed. The son looked down at them from the bedroom window as his mother's shrouded body was carried on a pallet to the back of the coroner's van. He looked down at his finger where he had caught it as he dressed her and discovered a large splinter imbedded right up to his fingernail.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Clara Brennan.