



DEAR THIEF

SAMANTHA
HARVEY

'This generation's Virginia Woolf'
DAILY TELEGRAPH

VINTAGE

Dear Thief

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‘I’ll write to you. A super-long letter, like in an old-fashioned novel.’

—Haruki Murakami, *After Dark*

December 2001

In answer to a question you asked a long time ago, I have, yes, seen through what you called the gauze of this life. But to tell you about it I will have to share with you a brief story.

One night in the hot summer of '76 I was staying with my grandmother, who was dying, and I was reading a book of Buddhist stories. My grandmother was asleep in the rocking chair, inhaling with feathered breaths. Her exhales were smooth and liquid, which seems to me now the surest sign of a life's exit—when the act of giving away air is easier than that of accepting it. In fact I knew she might be facing her last night but I didn't do much to cling to those moments. I was sitting on the sofa in my underwear with my legs drawn to the side, watching her for minutes at a time while the breaths fluttered in through the dignified gap between her lips. She was sweating around her brows, and at the base of her throat. I remember vividly her sapphire pendant in the dip there where the skin was moist.

My grandmother had gone beyond the point of caring about death. She'd phoned me the previous night to say she was on her way to the ever-after and could do with somebody to feed the dog; I never did know what she thought would happen to the dog after she was gone, though maybe she had no concept of after, or no stomach for it. When I had spoken to her I called

my parents at their hotel in Kerala in India and told my father that his mother was dying; I packed a small number of things, including the book of Buddhist stories on my parents' bookshelves, and made the journey to London the next morning.

It had meant walking at first light from Morda to Oswestry, to catch a bus to Shrewsbury, to catch a train to London. I went along the lane that you and I had walked so many times, from my house to Morda village, one-and-a-half wingspans wide and hedges of six feet, crossing brooks and dipping away from sight only to appear again in triumph five hundred yards later, shaking the valley off its back. Gently monstrous; roaring in the glory of spring or summer. This is how I think of that landscape when I stop to remember—although I know, before you raise a sceptical brow, the over-optimism of memory.

My mother had told me to take money from the cloisonné box on the kitchen dresser for the train fare. I was twenty-four but I had almost nothing of my own. This is what happens when there are cloisonné boxes in the kitchen and folded leather wallets in the pocket of a father who so brims with a love he can't fathom that he must give and give in order not to suffocate with the excess—a daughter who isn't so much spoilt as made resourceless and who lives life in a state of constant guilty gratitude. Though happy all the same; I wouldn't want you to think otherwise.

It would take at least two days for my parents to get back from India; that was why I left Morda early, because it was me, and me alone, who would see my grandmother leave this world. That was the first time I ever did something for which somebody else could be truly grateful and is why I remember that walk along the lanes and the journey to London and the sweat on my grandmother's throat. I remember it because it was the first time I felt neither indebted nor childlike, as if the whole kindly legacy that was my parents had been removed from the equation and left me freshly sprung on the sofa in the heat of the evening and the presence of death—defiant of death, but somehow courting it too. Now and again my grandmother would wake up, look at me, smile vaguely, then sleep.

The Buddhist stories I was reading that night were about discipline and faith and letting go of the things that are liable to pass. There is the man who

grieves so much for the son he thinks has died that he refuses to accept, years later, the man who returns and calls him Father. Do not cling so hard to your own version of the truth, says Buddha, else you will fail to see the real truth when it comes knocking. There is the story of teacups: the student asks the master why Japanese teacups are so delicate and easy to break. The master tells the student that it isn't that the teacups are too delicate, but that the person who drinks from them is too heavy-handed. It's not for teacups or grass or mountains to change, says Buddha. It is for us to adapt to what is. Do not clutch, do not judge, let pass. Everything is impermanence.

It wasn't at this point that I saw through your *gauze of life*, though; actually, far from it. In my grandmother's hot, silent room, nothing had ever seemed more permanent. When I was a child I had played on the floor of this room, shifting tiny figurines of soldiers, horses and goats around invisible territories. I was ringed by the chocolate-brown velvet sofas and biscuit-brown velvet chairs and the standing lamps and occasional tables and the smell of burnt honey that had knotted even into the carpet, the caramel carpet; this is how childhood comes to me, in terms of sweet food lavishly spread, uneaten, slowly going to waste.

Nothing had changed since those days except that everything had degraded and two decades of light had beaten the colours back a shade. But here, the little change only proved the lack of any dramatic one, and it was the same with the dog—the dog that had been here when I was a child was dead, but here was its offspring lying in its shadow by the rockers of the chair, just as always. Don't you think—don't your senses lead you to admit—that nothing has ever been less gauzelike than this great wall of reality we're faced with, day in and out?

In any case, at one point I got up and poured some iced water for my grandmother, and turned out all the lights in the room except for the lamp next to the rocking chair. The pool of sweat at the base of her throat had dried up and her skin had flattened a tone—and I mean it this way, like a piece of music gone off-key. Her eyes were open and she'd taken my hand. 'You'll grow into yourself,' she said, and it was the first sentence she had put together for hours. 'Grow into myself?' I replied. 'Yes—in spite of everything, we've always looked poor, our family, it's the big bones and height and these

dirty tans we get, but your mother became quite beautiful in the end, and so will you.’ ‘Yes,’ I said, though I wasn’t sure I agreed, either about my mother or about myself. ‘Have you fed the dog?’ ‘Yes, Nana, don’t worry.’ ‘He gets manipulative if he’s not fed.’ ‘Really, what does he do?’ ‘He plays mind games, he gets witty.’ ‘How so?’

She closed her eyes and shook her head faintly. ‘Well, it’s okay,’ I said, ‘I’ve fed him.’ ‘Where is he?’ she asked. ‘Down here by your feet.’ ‘He’s alright?’ ‘He’s out like a light.’ ‘He’s *alight*?’ ‘No—he’s asleep.’ ‘Asleep?’ ‘Yes, fast asleep.’

Then her brow crumpled and the feeling was that she’d lost her footing suddenly and tripped another yard down towards death. It is hard to explain these things now, they sound invented, yet this is exactly how it felt—the tripping downwards towards death. I got the book and read her a very short story called ‘The Burden’, and as I read I could see the scene the two of us made: two women, one, I suppose, in the prime of life and one about to leave life altogether, their dark hair and luring (so Nicolas once said) features making them unmistakably related, one dressed in beige and the other hardly dressed at all; my grandmother was right, my mother’s side of the family had always had a degenerate and hungry look. My father’s genes were more refined, but recessive. I think by that age, twenty-four, I still hadn’t stopped hoping to turn out like him.

You know it is said, and has been proven, that people are more likely to die when they are left alone, a fact I didn’t know then but must have sensed in some way, because during my reading of ‘The Burden’, which was not more than a couple of paragraphs long, my grandmother closed her eyes again and prepared herself for what it was she now saw coming. I did wait; I waited by her feet for an hour and did nothing but hear her breaths and preempt the last one. Sometimes there was a gap of fifteen or twenty seconds after the exhale when I was so sure it was the end that I’d grip her hand tighter in farewell—and then a sudden gasp and the air would go back in again. Each time this happened I became more tense and almost irritated until it felt as though I were willing her to die faster. So eventually I kissed her forehead, put on a dress and took myself outside.

She lived by the river a way downstream from Woolwich Arsenal and upstream from the old firing range at Rainham Marshes. A pacifist sandwiched by war, she used to say. She had a grand, decrepit terraced house in one of the wharfs before they were demolished and turned into what they call luxury dwellings. When we were children she would climb down the bouldered flood wall with us and take us onto the beach, and we'd walk or run in swirls following the oil that had marbled the mud and sand—and we weren't to tell our parents, who had forbidden us to go anywhere near that quick and filthy shore.

Because the summer was hot and the river low I was able to walk right along the water's edge that night of my grandmother's death. If you want to guarantee staying alive, my grandmother used to insist, you must stay high on the foreshore so that you don't get sucked into the mud. I went a long way east towards the marshes, walking an imaginary plank in the dusk.

Across the river there was the open scrub-land and what looked like a huge shadow cast by nothing—the Gallions Hotel, where, in times past, people would stay before getting on steamships to India, to China. Just here the Thames is half river, half sea. A thousand pale horses frothing at the bit. It is close to a mile wide, they say, and usually churning and milky, with a driving wind; they also say that there is a primordial forest under the water where it bends at Gallions Reach and that the current swells over rotted upturned roots.

But on this night it was differently milky, it was low and languid as if basking. Maybe this was when the gauze started to show itself and things began to lose their ordinariness, with the moon fattening in the night heat and everything quietly expanding. On its south bank there is a stretch, or at least there was then, where a patch of woods and thicket comes all the way down to the shore so that, with the warmth, the sand, the silver light and the curious stillness, you feel like you could be somewhere tropical. A shifting, a partial collapse; I don't know. I might have just as easily been with my parents in India, or they might have stepped out of the trees barefoot onto the beach, my mother with her tan and Amazonian height, my father quiet and rangy behind her.

Just after the trees the river kinks right and the beach is narrow or sometimes gone, and every time I had walked that far before I hadn't been able to get any further. You can climb up from there and then drop back down to the shoreline after the kink, where the beach is wide, maybe at its widest, which is what I'd always done. That night was the first time I'd walked right round the corner of the river, and it was there that I found—or anyhow found myself walking on—something that wasn't sand or stone, but bones.

When you trod on them they gave a civil clink like a knife tapping a fork or a porcelain cup shaking in a saucer. They were hip bones, femurs, shin bones, tiny pivoting joints, a ball without a socket and a socket without a ball, the smooth plates of kneecaps, long scooped jawbones that belonged to something probably bovine, or maybe equine. It wasn't a scattering, either, but a pile that had lodged itself in the moonlit sedge by the flood wall.

I put some of them out on the sand. They had a low, resigned calm. Nicolas has since wondered if they were from an old glue factory that had been upriver, on the Isle of Dogs, and had washed up at the kink where the current is forced to shift direction. Just a guess, though. Possibly they had sat on that shelf of the riverbed for years and had only been exposed by the low tide. Or maybe they hadn't been washed up but had been dumped there, though who would bother? And what for? One way or another they must have been in the Thames for a long time, given how smoothed off they were by water and how hollowed and porous, as much shell as bone.

They were greyish-white and washed clean. These most functional of things, but so abstract when you look at them out of context. They could be sculptures. So I mused for a while on how beautiful they were, with a kind of self-conscious appreciation that annoys me, because really I am only thinking of how sensitive I am to be able to see their beauty. I scooped them up into my dress. I was overcome by them. Everybody is aware that the Thames is a great swallower of bodies and much loved by the suicidal, and that corpses and parts of corpses do wash up on its shores—but this wasn't the case here. May it be known that when I took them I knew without doubt that they were not human, and that if they had been human my feeling wouldn't have been what it was.

I filled the sling made by the lap of my dress and walked home to my grandmother's like that, with my skirt gathered up in my fist. My grandmother was dead when I got back, as I knew she would be. I poured my hoard onto the bed in the spare room she always kept ready for family visits, and then I sat at her feet and put my head in her lap. My parents later railed at me for leaving her there in the rocking chair all night and said I should have reported her death straight away, but I saw no rush, I see none now, and I would not do it differently if I had the time again. Her death was so powerful and calm a presence in the room—the same calm I mentioned in relation to the bones on the shore—that it felt as though her life and all its interminable errands and demands and dramas had waited for this ecstatic moment of its own end, so that it could revel a little in that end, so that it could know that all of those seemingly interminable things did eventually terminate. And it could be comforted by that and rest in its own familiar space in the rocking chair by the lamp with its dog, for a while longer at least.

And so, this gauze. When you talked about it before, did you mean that sometimes, very occasionally, everything that had appeared very solid about the world loses substance? I mean, one is sitting there perhaps, on the bed on a hot night with crossed legs, and there is an inversion. One feels—or I should say, I feel—as if I could put my hand through the window glass or the wall as easily as through fog, and yet I can barely lift my arm and move it through air. This is because it seems that there is no point. I seem to be only air myself, and there is no point in shunting air through air. Nothing to achieve in that. Is this the kind of thing you mean?

For example, I look at the bones I collected in what might have been a dream—except it cannot have been a dream because the bones are there in front of me—and I do not recognise them as bones at all, but as arbitrary groupings of matter that have no past or future or meaning of any kind. My own bare knee fits this category too, and I stare for half an hour at the orange street light that glows off the curve of the kneecap.

I feel no grief at the death of my grandmother because life as I'd always known it shows itself now as only the negative space made by a much vaster reality. When I think of my grandmother in the room directly below,

fundamental and as still as a root, she is perfect in my mind's eye and the more my mind looks, the more she too becomes a grouping of matter, unassigned and timeless. To say she is dead is senseless, just as senseless as it is to say I myself am alive.

If this could be one example of seeing through the gauze of life, then the answer to your question is resoundingly yes, I have seen through it. I think I sat in a trancelike state for hours that night and it was only when the sun came up that I moved. Then I flannelled my grandmother's face with cold water gently, as if not to wake her, and called the hospital. It was about six-thirty or seven in the morning that she was finally taken to the mortuary.

As for 'The Burden', the story that became the last spoken words my grandmother heard, even now it springs so energetically to mind, and it goes as so: Two monks are walking down from the foothills of the Himalayas to the nearest village. When they reach the village it is raining and by the time they head back up towards the foothills with their bag of walnuts, rice, dhedo, vegetables, spices and the like, the streets are flooding and turning to mud. A beautiful woman is standing on the other side of the road trying to cross. The older monk passes his bag of shopping to the other, takes off his shoes and walks straight through the puddles to the woman, then he lifts her and carries her across. Later that evening after prayer the young monk seems worried and almost shifty and he keeps looking at his companion as if there is something he needs to say. Finally the older monk asks what troubles him and he responds, 'We aren't supposed to touch the opposite sex and yet earlier today you carried that woman right across the road.' The older monk thinks about this for a moment and it looks like he might have no way of defending himself. But then he glances over each shoulder, opens his arms to show how empty they are and he replies, 'Brother, I left her at the roadside where I put her down—it's you who is still carrying her.'

On the whole I do not think of you any more. So it was strange when you came into my mind like that, standing over my bed with your spine stacked tall like a wonder of the world and with the thighs of someone who hasn't eaten for a year, hovering as if you wanted something.

Thanks to this I am at my *escritoire* at just gone four in the morning with my hand welded to a pen with a split nib, suddenly curious about you after years of an incuriosity you might call callous. It's been a mild and dreary Christmas but now, on Boxing Day night, it has started snowing, and I've had to go and find a blanket from the airing cupboard. As soon as the first flake of snow fell I thought of you, as it landed on the pane in that ludicrous wet collapse that removes all the mystery. I tried to put you from my mind but you wouldn't go, so I got up. That was at about midnight, when the music from the jazz club a few doors down was coming to an end, and it was almost as if the first flake fell on the last note.

I sat on the edge of the bed trying to breathe in squares, the way a yogi or swami will tell you—breathe in for five seconds, hold for five seconds, out for five, hold for five, in for five. It made me thirsty. Does she think it was worth it? I wondered. This is what came to me when I pictured you there. Not: Is

she happy, is she free, is she alive?—no. Does she think it was worth it? I would look to your face for an answer, if only I could see, in reality, in the flesh, that face. I got up for water, then for tea, then I sat in the armchair by the window and watched the snow. It has settled so thickly. Have you ever noticed the absolute chaos and panic of snow if you look up and watch it explode out of the sky? And yet it lands with order and without a hush, and sudden wellbeing is bestowed. How so? You can see people's happiness condensing in billows of laughter; the few people who've walked along the street in the last hour from the bars along Goodge Street have all been laughing.

What I mean to say is: I haven't resorted lightly to writing to you. It's just that you appeared so expectantly at my bed earlier that I wondered if what you wanted was an answer to something, and the only vaguely urgent question I could think of you asking in all our long years of knowing each other was about the gauze of life. My hand has cramped in the process of giving it, and I think it is an uncertain start, an overly cautious and laughably sincere start, everything considered. And now actually I realise that far from wanting an answer, you have probably forgotten you ever even asked. It was seventeen years ago, eighteen even; hard enough to remember what happened two thoughts ago, let alone back in a life since lost.

But despite having been up most of the night I'm not tired at all and an energy is coming from somewhere behind me that might be the snow, falling without pattern. I wonder now why I didn't just answer the question when you first asked it. I don't understand myself, or for that matter the passing of time. Seventeen years! Can you credit this? No, nor can I. It's late; I'll make one more tea and go to bed.

I didn't go back to bed. I went out in the snow because it won't stay fresh for long in London. I went along to see Yannis, a Cretan who runs the Greek store on Hunter Street and opens up every day at five a.m. to make his own pitta bread and custard pastries, and we took coffee out onto the road and spelled out sweltering in the snow with our tracks—or, I should say, sweltering because I did my half upper case, Yannis saved energy by doing his lower, and our halves didn't quite meet. Yannis loves the snow, I remember this from last year. He relishes its crunch, like biting into an apple, he says. He tells me that Crete is never purified by snow and so it grows ever hotter and more corrupt; I say that the snow does not purify but temporarily shrouds, and ends up becoming dirt if it covers dirt—but Yannis is not ready to hear this and tells me I am like his wife, unromantic; like all modern women, passionate as a pot plant.

Before you say it, I know. I swore I would never live in London, but that was because of the Cold War. Nobody would take the time to wipe Morda off the map, and if you are raising a child it is of genuine concern that the place they live is not suddenly wiped off the map. Times are different now that we are not waiting for the Russians to extinguish us, even you have to admit it—and people are different too. I think our hearts do have a chance to warm up

a little when not so full of fear, and ever since moving here I have found London to have a kind of sincerity, safety and solidness, like a stout old uncle, like Yannis almost.

There is also of course the jazz club, Jimmie Noone's (Jimmie's, as most people call it, and which I can never help reading, with a certain sadness, as 'Jimmie No one's'), which goes on until one or two in the morning on a Friday and Saturday night. In the summer the saxophone wafts in through the open window, and below that the clarinet, and below that the river of piano. I drop to sleep with birds singing in my throat. There seems to be no specialism; one night it is swing, the next avant-garde, or big band, bebop, ragtime, or Charlie Parker, Nina Simone and Thelonious Monk tribute evenings, 'Ruby, My Dear' played with the tenor saxophone alongside the piano, which makes it far more beautiful to my ears. Countless nights I have gone about life, cooking or reading to the sound of this jazz, and occasionally there will be a singer whose voice will make me stop and listen, or stop and sing, or stand with hands on hips racking my brains for the name of the tune, or look out of the window as if I might be able to see the sound. Sometimes people passing by will dance together in the street, tipping from foot to foot if swing, or swirling limbs if Latin, something like 'Blue Bossa'. As I can confirm from my living-room vigils, people often stop to dance to 'Blue Bossa'. I can imagine you doing just the same. And at those times, amongst others, I will think to myself: London, God bless you! For the summers that are warmer and stickier than in the countryside, and for all this free music. And being here then will seem like a homecoming.

You will know the *escritoire* I sit at to write this—the one that used to be in the hallway in my parents' house, with its tambour top that no longer rolls smoothly, and the six miniature drawers full of pointless things my father found and could never bear to part with. I inherited the desk from him, and I have not got rid of those things. I am sorry to tell you that my parents both died by the mid-nineties, my father first, then my mother three years later. Really, they were better than me in so many ways—richer, happier, more travelled, more generous and loving, more panoramic of mind. Since being in my hands the *escritoire* is a mess. Of course, it was never a mess in their hands, except inside the drawers where it couldn't offend the eye. So I have

invented a foolish little measure for keeping some order, to do right by my father all these years beyond the grave (in the way we do keep trying, all our lives, to do right by our parents, whether we know it or not): there is a piece of Roman jet, a conch and the oval of amber you gave me that sits on the beech like a spoonful of honey; these three are always on the desk somewhere, gauging the mess as groynes gauge the height of the tide, and if I can see them I know—with a sense of daughterly relief—that the mess is not winning.

I've lived in this flat for two years, which is not long in terms of belonging to a place but long enough to be exempt from the charge of passing through. This might account for the look that I know is often on my face, that I catch sometimes in the mirror, a look of wary attachment, suspicious belonging. But then maybe the look is not that at all but just the general cross-purpose muddle of the ageing face in which all kinds of incompatible things have collided. Surprise, torment, pleasure, peace, disillusionment. All of these separately and at once. And on the subject of surprises—and I would like you to contain your mirth and judgement if you can—I have taken full-time work in a care home; maybe this explains the wary look, suspicious of death perhaps, or what awful ambush waits for our bodies around the corner.

You are opening your mouth to object about this care-home job (like some born-again Christian foisting your light upon the world, you will say), but what of it, my friend? For once you have no right or means to reply, and so I continue. Until I moved here I was living in my parents' old house, which I inherited from them with the *escritoire* and everything else. So large and alive with their successes and love—but you know the house was too big for one person, too big for two people even, and when Teddy and I were there we thought we could hear it expanding around us. When Teddy left home for university four years ago I stayed on for a couple of years until it became unbearable; then I sold it and came to this flat.

Even before Teddy left we had resorted to living mostly in the kitchen. The red room had fallen out of use since a family of starlings got bold and moved into the chimney stack, and in hindsight I think that was the beginning of their dominion. Those rare occasions when we did use the room the starlings' occupancy meant we couldn't light the fire, and so the room

was for summer days only, doors open wide to the moths, dust, flies, mice and spiders; Teddy set up his tripod and photographed the room's gradual surrender to nature, a process that completed itself beautifully during the second winter of the starlings' stay, when the birds came down through the open damper and got into the house. He caught shots of them in flight above the dresser, in front of the television, in front of the mirror above the fireplace, and it was that one, that single fortunate shot of a starling and its reflection in flight in an Art Deco mirror, that got him his place on a photography course at university and prompted me—now that my only child had, as they say, flown the nest and I was alone—to leave the village.

I bought this place without looking any further: not so far from Russell Square, much beyond what I could afford, but I had looked on the outskirts and it seemed to me that it wouldn't do; so I had to use some of the nest egg I'd set aside for Teddy from the sale of my parents' house in Morda, and even then I couldn't say that what I bought is anything more than basic. It is one of those many London Regency buildings that lost its decency a good hundred and fifty years ago and was carved into flats, mine having two small bedrooms, a windowless kitchen, a big, light living room, but then this, this magnificent thing—a stained-glass window at the back, in the bathroom, with the image of a hummingbird braking hard at a fuchsia, all electric blues, greens and reds, an uplifting sight when the evening sun comes through and one that makes me think always of Teddy's photograph.