

**Gathering Dust**  
*and reading other people's journals*

For C,

Thank you for being kind, fair and forgiving.

“Letters are just pieces of paper,” I said. “Burn them, and what stays in your heart will stay; keep them, and what vanishes will vanish.”

*Haruki Murakami, Norwegian Wood*

4:36pm Saturday 10th August 2024

Dear Friend,

Two weeks ago, I found a leather-bound journal in the front yard of an abandoned house in Collingwood and read it cover to cover. It was a morally bankrupt decision that I loosely defended with the fact that it had clearly been left in the yard for months. Weathered by brutal winter rain, the leather binding had buckled and cracked, and dead leaves had nestled themselves nicely between each page. I can't be blamed for picking up an old notebook right? People write stories that start with shit like this. We all read Anne Frank's diary so... Or maybe it's ok because she's dead?

I told a friend about this dilemma over coffee and she said it's ok because, in a way, to write is to ask to be read. I think she meant it in an existential or spiritual kind of way. The steam rising from her coffee and curling around her gaze gave her some air of wisdom. I'm not convinced though. Having kept a diary for over 10 years now, writing is more of a habit spurred on by posterity. I'm not sure I want my writing to be read. Jessie writes because it's meditative. It's her first time keeping a journal for a longer period of time; the last entry was over a year ago now.

Anyway, I ultimately console myself with the thought that writing is not truth – words, even less so and memory, even less so than that. The journal entries that I read are not the same as the ones Jessie wrote; they disappear from my consciousness the moment I turn the page as I'm sure they disappeared from hers. Language will put the world into words but it won't matter; it will all lie vacantly in the past where the truth remains concealed – gathering dust.

This friend said that the real sin is if I don't try to reunite Jessie with her diary. At the time, I didn't know whether I would even try. Plus, what does she know about sin? She's fucked two married women, our highschool teacher and my brother. She asked if there's anything juicy. I told her not really, which is not really a lie and not really the truth. Gathering dust.

The first passage I read when I leafed through the journal is about Leo's perfect cock – how long and beautiful it is. I won't go into too much detail but, in essence, she rode it for hours and hours and hours. She loved how it felt in her mouth, how it made her squirt. Their time is spent sucking and licking, kissing and talking. Lust is about having your mouth full – abundance itself. Her handwriting was scrawled and desperate; it makes me think that their passion must be overwhelming. However, the way she recounts the events is over-the-top and sentimental. It betrays the romantic fictionalisation that writing, no matter how sincere, necessitates. Anyway, can you really blame me for reading on after that? It's gossip! Drama! Sex! Sadness! All weekend, in the privacy of my own room, I engaged in the solitary orgy of reading that same

passage over and over. That's how I let time pass, bringing myself to climax, drinking orange juice and microdosing shame. Disgusting, I know.

Jessie's a horse girl. In one of her earlier entries, she writes about her new horse and wanting to start an equine therapy practice. She names the horse Nico and sketches him over and over; they're surprisingly accurate except for the :) face. The drawings make me smile. I like them because they're kitsch. Only a couple of entries later, Nico dies from a cruel illness. It takes me by surprise because it happens so quickly and unexpectedly – I just met the guy! What spans a couple of months for Jessie, is mere minutes for me and I feel her grief palpably. Amongst all the deaths that Jessie laments (and there are more than you'd expect), I find Nico's to be the most cruel. The kitsch turns into the tragic. I hope there is a horse heaven where all :) -faced horses with black coats go to rest.

On the other hand, I hope Leo goes to hell. Naturally, there are the good things: sex, swimming in rivers, reading books to each other. But, as is always the case, they want different things and he doesn't really communicate anything and she ends up dropping him off at the train station thinking they'll never see each other again. The only thing more Naarm-core than a pair of Salomons are men who lie and can't commit.

This is the longest I've journaled in a while. Maybe that friend had a point when they said all writing is, in some way, asking to be read. Since I started keeping a journal, I've started all my entries with "Dear Friend" (a reference I'm now too embarrassed to confess but iykyk). Presumably, this infers a mystical reader who listens to my thoughts and with whom I can break the fourth wall as in *The Office*. Leo sleeps, perhaps regularly, with Jessie's best friend and roommate, I look down the barrel of the camera to **you** – can **you** believe this prick?

Jessie's best friend, Ida, is not free from blame either but I never held any faith in her. The second thing I read from Jessie's journal was a letter that she had written to Ida. It had been torn from the pages of the journal and tucked into the front cover. She starts by writing that she knows things are weird between the two of them right now. It's a line that always hides more than it reveals and reminds me that I really shouldn't be reading the letter. But anyway, I did...

As I'm writing this now, the guilt is ambushing me. I'm not sure I can tell you what was in the letter, especially because it was clearly never delivered to its intended recipient. Somehow this feels like the line? I will say that it wasn't about the Leo debacle, although, I guess that is why things were weird between them. I'm speculating.

I think that I could probably be a better friend and lover to Jessie. Then again, probably not. Maybe what I mean is that I want to be a better friend to her than Ida was, a better lover than Leo could ever be. I want her to be happy. Still, I know that any hope of friendship has already been

dispelled by my voyeurism. In my daydreams, I imagine that I tell her the truth and she forgives me and we become close. I let her read my journals and she likes me the way that I like her. In reality, my journals don't reflect well on me and she would likely think that I'm unkind, unfair and unforgiving. The question of what it means to be a good person, let alone a good woman, chases me in circles. I think about cheating on Alex but only because it's wrong and that turns me on. I donate to those living under someone else's war. I flake on plans and leave the party without saying goodbye. I bake cakes for people's birthdays. I scorn Ida even though I don't know her or what really happened. She hurt Jessie and that hurts me. I am the victim of my own design. Women have always been too cruel to each other and no matter how many feminist waves come crashing along the shore, the violence is the same, and we forgive ourselves nothing.

The last entry I can recall is about Jessie's trip to Tokyo with her mum where she thinks about coming out to her as bisexual. She's barely come out to herself as bisexual. In the end, she doesn't get around to it because the weather's too cold; I get that. You should not have difficult conversations when your body is already braced against something else. When I tell this bit to that friend, she reminds me that she was the one that gave me that advice. I'm sure I heard it from a teacher but I let it go. The only advice she's given me is to masturbate in the Uber on the way to a party so your eyes shine. To be fair, it is good advice.

A couple of days ago, I found the courage to look for her on Facebook. She was not hard to find. A unique last name and a picture of a horse captioned simply – Nico. Up until that point, she had been mystical to me, the only real proof of her existence had been the vague idea emanating from the pages of her journal. I thought that putting a face to it all would help lend reality to the events that I had read, but when I was scrolling through her photos, I got the real sense that I had no idea who she was. The few photos that she's in always have her face partly obscured – by a giant pair of sunnies or a scarf draped over her head or a dog she nestles her face into. Her hair is curly and then straight and then short and then blonde.

Without a concrete image of her, I turned to star signs which I've never really believed in. Her birthday is in February. A quick Google search told me she's a Pisces. The first website I clicked on says that Pisces want to dissolve into love, transcend the material world and live as a romantic poem. I remember thinking – what the fuck is that? Horoscopes are always vague enough to give one the illusion of self-enlightenment. But if that's what you're looking for, you discover yourself in a whole new way when you put your life to words with glimmering idioms and syrupy sweet anecdotes.

All this rambling was to say that I messaged her on Thursday. She confirmed it was her journal, and we arranged for her to pick it up this morning. So, yeah. I gave it back. Earlier I told you that truth has little bearing on words and memory and I really do believe that. It's impossible for me

to give an account of what happened when I gave the journal back. It's a strict game of fiction. So I've had enough of trying to leap over my own shadow. Plus, my hand hurts. Here is all I can offer you:

I give her the journal and a slice of pistachio cake.

She gives me a small bouquet of flowers.

She tells me it was in her car when it was broken into. The robbers tossed it.

She then says it feels like fate has brought us together. I think to myself that fate is really just the small steps we take toward each other with outstretched arms.

I feel a putrid sense of dread.

"I didn't read it. Once I figured out it was a journal, I didn't read any of it."

She smiles and says that she would have.

That's what happened.