

Letter to America

by Claire Capel-Stanely

Heath Ledger died yesterday. At least, Australian yesterday. The time zones are different, I can't think how it works now, backward or forward. But I suppose it must have been over twenty-four hours ago, in America. He overdosed on something. This is strange. I didn't even like *Brokeback Mountain* that much. I found out when I got home last night.

Anyway, this was my yesterday. I went to work, and this was in the morning, and this was in a chain clothing store, the name of which might make a difference to how you hear the story, and so I won't tell you what it is. What I mean is that you might already have some kind of idea about this shop, because know you've been here and you might know it. You might have some kind of idea who works in it. I know you think I'm being ridiculous, but see, now I've already given you ideas about me, just by saying nothing. I'm not making sense, I'm sorry.

I just want to keep the details to a minimum. I want you to be able to read this and hear the story and not have any idea about me now, what I am like, how I have changed or grown up, or whatever. Try to do that, please. I do not want you to reply with a brief, dishonest thank you, how are you, autobiography. I am not saying that you are dishonest. I don't know if you are or not. It is just how these things mostly go. Besides, I don't have any plans to visit you anytime soon (I can't afford it) and I don't think you have plans to visit me. So it would be pointless. So I will just tell the story.

I do not like my work, but I like not liking it. I like to complain about my co-workers, and the pay and the music we have to play. If Dizzee Rascal implores me one more time, through pounding base and shuddering electro, at more decibels than is conversationally appropriate, to 'fix up, look sharp' swear I will scream. And so on. I realise that there is a lot of tidying to do, even though it is only eleven o'clock. A girl in a purple checked dress and tights comes up to me right now (I'm folding underwear) and asks what the sale is. 'This whole table is \$5', I tell her, 'and 20% off everything else'. I have just told a 15 year old that she can bag a whole table for \$5, but it doesn't matter, she understands what I mean. I am working til close today. So I am at work.

I wonder where you work over there? Do you work? Do you go to uni? Or 'college'? Don't answer that. I still think you are a little girl, but of course you are not. I haven't thought about you in so long. Friends that you have when you are a kid always seem unreal later on, when you're not friends anymore. I think about what I was like when we knew each other, I don't usually think about what you were like. I know it must be the same for you. It is like a dream, a bit.

Yesterday, it was so hot. The kind of sun that is white and heavy, and gets in your eyes wherever you look. I was glad, almost, of being indoors and of florescent lighting because the sun was worse. In the afternoon, though, it rained so hard, and it came on so fast. I couldn't ride my bike home, I really couldn't. The rain was so bad. I had to stay at work longer, until it cleared. So I sat there, behind the counter, everything dusted and clean, with the lights off, and I waited.

I watched the water *plink plink* high off the ground, until I saw it slop towards the store in big gushing sheaths. The mall cleaners (ok. You can know the shop is in a mall) had to sweep the water away from all the shopfronts with these big orange plastic sweeper things. They weren't having much success to be honest. I watched them, and I didn't help, because I'm not supposed to, of course, and I felt, for some reason like I couldn't tell them I was there, because I would have to raise the plastic security roller door and even though it wasn't locked, it seemed rude to interrupt the cleaners, and what would be the point anyway. I would be in the way. It is just that it is always strange to watch people when they don't know you're there.

But the rain was so loud, and heavy and it was strange because it had been so hot. You know what it sounds like when there is such a loud, constant noise like that? Rushing rushing rushing like that. It sounds like silence, or something similar. It sounds like the buzz in your head before you go to sleep and the sound of it sounds like your own brain thinking, until you realise that you are, actually, thinking.

Do you remember the day we drank straight green cordial over ice cubes and pretended it was a cocktail? It was summer, do you remember? Of course you must, it was always summer when I stayed at my grandma's and you came over with your mum. But your dad wasn't there that time. It was so hot that day too, and we swam in the pool, do you remember? I suppose we did that a lot, on those hot summer days on the farm, looking for snakes around the edge and in the water before we dipped our white feet in there. Every year it was dirtier than the last, furry green scum built up on the sides. My grandma wasn't up to cleaning it as frequently as it needed cleaning. We swam, as usual, and dried in the sun, drinking our Coola cocktails.

How long do you reckon you can look straight at the sun? (that was what I said)
Longer than you. (You kind of sighed, because I think by that summer you knew you were cooler than me)

How long? A minute, I reckon I can do it for a minute. I did reckon I could do it for a minute. It was so hot but I reckoned I could do it for a minute.

No you can't, yes I can, no you can't.

Yes I can. And I did it, while you watched. I counted out loud to sixty and I could sense that you weren't interested, but I kept going because I had said I could, and it would be weird to stop. Although, it was sort of weird to keep going.

60.

I looked at where you sat. Strands of golden hair escaping from darker wet chunks around a big blackish blob. We didn't say anything, and I felt my head dip and sway all on its own, because it knocks you out a bit, looking at the sun like that.

You let me blink a lot and let the blob get smaller until it was a pinprick of light that I got used to for the rest of the afternoon. You never made fun of me for being such a child, such a stupid boy, but you didn't have to because I felt pretty stupid anyway.

This was also the summer when you became a girl and perhaps that's why it was the last summer we had fun together.

Then you said did I wanna see something, and I said yeah I wanna see something.

And then you got up, in your swimmers, and put on your sneakers with no socks and ran.

Come on!

I scrambled after you and I just wanted so badly to run after you and go where you were going, and do something you wanted to do. I had this feeling that you were running away from me, and I couldn't see where you were going, to catch you, because of the spots in my eyes. All I remember after this is long grass, fences and heat, and I followed you, a little blur across the long grass in your purple bathers. You were always the best at running. Later, and it must have been much later because I've been to those grain silos since, when I didn't have spots in my eyes and chlorine in my hair, and they really are ages away from the main house, it was suddenly cooler, and darker. I looked up, in the shadow of the big grain silos and you were climbing the ladder up to the top.

Coming? With your hand on your hip, swinging off the ladder. You were angry at me. Maybe you had been waiting up there for a while? I don't know. I don't know why you were angry.

I climbed the ladder, and you opened the lid thingy and slipped in the top. You grabbed my hand and pulled me down into the grain, what was it, oats or barley or something? Then you went over to the far side, dug a little hole in the grain and curled up inside it, in a little ball like a cat. Then, do you remember, you stretched out your arm and felt around for my ankle, to pull me into your little hole, and once I realised what you were trying to do I moved forward and let you. I sank my knees into the grain and curled up facing you, and the little granules fell away around us and made

the hole bigger for us, but also closed us in like a blanket. We lay like that, curled up together like cats. It was so dark, I couldn't see your face. But I was glad of the rest after all that running, and sun in my eyes and chlorine. I fell asleep.

But this is what I remembered yesterday, watching the blobby shapes through the roller door, and I don't know why this reminded me- I remembered water trickling down the side of my face, following my hairline and dripping sloppily and steadily, drop after drop into my ear. That spot is very specific and I remember shivering into the grain, the hair on my neck, crusted as it was in dust and pool water, prickling.

We must have got home somehow, because I remember we had fish for dinner and your mum was angry about the straight cordial because she thought it was disgusting. No one knew.

This summer was just before you moved to America, and you still came to my grandma's over the holidays, sometimes, but then you had different holidays and you stopped. I got your email off Adrian; he has you on Facebook. I don't know anything about you now, but I did think about that day, and I felt like I should tell you about it. I'm not sure why. It is probably more your memory than mine, I guess. And I feel so weird because Heath Ledger died and the mall is flooded. Everyone knows that he is dead, and it's on the news that he died of an overdose, that he has a daughter and he was found face down in his bed. But no one knows that we were in the silo that day, no one knows you cried.

I still don't know what you wanted to show me.

Was that it?