

THE VERY
THOUGHT
OF YOU

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ALMA BOOKS

The Very Thought
of You

*And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.*

Late Fragment, Raymond Carver

Prologue

May 1964

My dearest,

Of all the many people we meet in a lifetime, it is strange and quixotic that so many of us find ourselves in thrall to one particular person. Once that face is seen, an involuntary heartache sets in for which there is no cure. All the wonder of this world finds shape in that one person and thereafter there is no reprieve, because this kind of love does not end, or not until death—

*From Baxter's Guide to the
Historic Houses of England (2007)*

Any visitor travelling north from York will pass through a flat vale of farmland before rising steeply, suddenly onto the wide upland plateau of the North Yorkshire Moors. Here is some of the wildest and loveliest land in England, where high rolling moorland appears to reach the horizon on every side, before subsiding into voluptuous wooded valleys.

These moors are remote and empty, randomly scattered with silent sheep and half-covered tracks. It is unfenced land of many moods. In February the place is barren and lunar, prompting inward reflection. But late in August this wilderness ignites a purple haze of heather which sweeps across the moors as if released to the air. This vivid wash of colour mingles with the oaks and ashes of the valleys below, where the soft limestone land flows with numerous streams and secret springs.

It is hallowed territory, graced with many medieval monasteries, all now picturesque ruins open to the sky. Rievaulx, Byland, Jervaulx, Whitby, Fountains, these are some of the better known abbeys in these parts, and their presence testifies to the fertile promise of the land. The early monastic settlers cleared these valleys for farming, and left behind a rolling patchwork of fields marked by many miles of drystone walls.

Nearly two centuries later, long after the monasteries had been dissolved, the Georgian gentry built several fine estates in the valleys bordering the Yorkshire moors. Hovingham Hall, Duncombe Park, Castle Howard and others. Trees were cleared for new vistas, grass terraces levelled, and streams diverted into ornamental lakes – all to clarify and enhance the natural patterns of the land, as was the eighteenth-century custom.

One of the finest of these houses, if not necessarily the largest, is Ashton Park. This remote house stands on the edge of the moors, perched high above the steep Rye Valley and theatrically isolated in its wide park. For some years now, the house and its gardens have been open to the public. At one corner of an isolated village stand the ornate iron gates, and the park lodge where visitors buy their tickets. Beyond, a long white drive leads through a rising sweep of parkland, dotted with sheep and the occasional tree. It is a tranquil park, silent and still, with a wide reach of sky.

Turning to the left, the visitor sees at last the great house itself, a Palladian mansion of honeyed stone, balanced on either side with curved wings. Topping the forecourt gates are two stone figures rearing up on hind legs, a lion and a unicorn, each gazing fiercely at the other as if sworn to secrecy.

The house appears a touch doleful in its solitary grandeur, an impression which only intensifies when one enters the imposing but empty Marble Hall, with its scattering of statues on plinths. Red rope cordons mark the start of a house tour through reception rooms dressed like stage sets, leading this visitor to wonder how this house could have dwindled into such a counterfeit version of its past.

The house brochure explains that when the last Ashton died, in 1979, there remained only a distant cousin in

South Africa. Mrs Sandra De Groot, wife of a prominent manufacturer, appears to have been so daunted by her inheritance that she agreed to hand over the house to the National Trust, in lieu of drastic death duties. But not before the estate was stripped of its remaining farmland and other valuable assets. Two Rubens paintings were sold, alongside a Claude Lorraine, a Salvator Rosa, and a pair of Constables. Soon after, her lawyers organised a sweeping sale of the house contents – a multitude of Ashton treasures accumulated over three hundred years, all recorded without sentiment in a stapled white inventory.

“One pair of carved George IV giltwood armchairs, marked; one Regency rosewood and brass inlaid breakfast table; one nineteenth century ormolu centrepiece...”

Antique dealers from far and wide still reminisce about the Ashton auction of 1980, the abrupt final rite of a house in decline. It is said that a queue of removal vans clogged the drive for days afterwards.

Mrs De Groot was apparently not without family feeling because she donated a number of display cabinets to the National Trust, together with the house library and many family portraits and papers. In a curious detail, the house guide mentions that “the exquisite lacquered cigarette cases of the late Elizabeth Ashton were sent to the Victoria & Albert Museum.”

According to the notes, Ashton Park had fallen into disrepair before the curators’ intervention, and they chose to restore the house back to its most prosperous period, the Edwardian era, when labour was cheap and the house was run by a large staff of servants. “A time of lavish entertainment, with concerts,

balls, cricket matches and amateur theatricals, together with all the customary country sports.”

Today, visitors taking the house tour will see plenty of relics and mementoes of the Ashtons’ family life. The curators have hung photographs of Ashton sons at Eton, at Oxford, in cricket teams, in uniform. A look of permanence lingers in their faces.

Downstairs are photographs of the servants. The butler, Stillwell, and his staff, all standing on the front steps. Their gaze captured in that strange measure of slow time characteristic of early cameras. In the kitchens, visitors can admire the fish larder, the meat larder, the bakehouse, and a large scullery where dishes were first steamed then scrubbed, all evidence of a once thriving household.

Beyond the Morning room and past the Billiard room, a small study displays an archive of wartime evacuees. It appears that an evacuees’ boarding school was established at Ashton Park in 1939, and a touching photograph album reveals children of all sizes smiling in shorts and grey tunics; handwritten retrospective letters, sent in later years, describe the pleasures and sorrows of their time there.

In the last corridor there is only one photograph, an elegant wedding picture of the final Ashton heir, dated 1929. Thomas Ashton is one of those inscrutably handsome pre-war men with swept-back hair, and his wife Elizabeth is a raven-haired period beauty not unlike Vivien Leigh. Their expressions carry no hint of future losses, no sense that their house will one day become a museum.

On high days and holidays, Ashton Park attracts plenty of day trippers. An estate shop sells marmalade and trinkets, whilst the gardens offer picnic spots, woodland trails, and dubious medieval pageants on the south lawn. And yet visitors may drive away from Ashton Park feeling faintly dejected, because the spirit of this place has somehow departed.

This melancholy cannot be traced to any dilapidation. The roof is intact, the lawns freshly mown, and the ornamental lake looks almost unnaturally limpid. But the dark windows stare out blankly, a haunted gaze. Beyond the display areas are closed corridors and unreclaimed rooms stacked with pots of paint and rusting stepladders. The small family chapel remains, but is rarely visited; it is too far out of the way to qualify for the house tour.

Perhaps it is the family's absence which gives the house its pathos. It appears that there were three sons and a daughter at the start of the last century, and yet none of them produced heirs. By what cumulative misfortune did this once prosperous family reach its end? The guide notes do not detail how or why the Ashton line died out, yet a curious visitor cannot help but wonder.

But for all this, one can still stand on the sunken lawn and almost apprehend the house in its heyday, even amidst the signposts and litter bins. Or if it is impossible to be transported oneself, one can imagine how others, in earlier times, in the right weather, might have found in this place a peerless vision of English parkland.

There is one tree which particularly draws the eye, a glorious ruddy copper beech which stands alone on a small lawn by the rose garden. It was on a bench under this tree that the duty staff recently found an elderly woman sitting alone after closing hours, apparently enjoying the view. On closer inspection she was found to be serenely dead, her fingers locked around a faded love letter.

"A day tripper with a freak stroke," it was thought at first. But later, her family confirmed that the dead woman had been one of those city children evacuated to the house during the war, over sixty years ago.

Evacuation

1939–1945

Chapter 1

London, August 31st 1939

It was a sheer blue day as Anna Sands and her mother Roberta stepped off their bus into Kensington High Street. To Anna, the broad street flickered with colour as shoppers flowed past her, clutching their bags. Beyond the crowds, she could see the parade of shops tricked out with displays of every kind, tins of toffee, new-minted bowls and cups, rolls of ribbon, hats, coats and gloves from every corner of the empire.

Mother and daughter set off down the wide pavement, Anna swinging her arms, always a little ahead. But she kept criss-crossing in front of her mother, as if uncertain whether to turn and hold her hand. For tomorrow, early, she and thousands of other children were to be evacuated from London – “in case of German air raids,” her mother had told her airily, as if this was a routine familiar to all families.

“Once this crisis blows over, you can come straight home again,” she had explained. Anna was looking forward to country life – or seemed to be, when asked. There were things to buy for the journey, but Anna’s impending departure hovered between them and lit every moment with unusual intimacy.

Roberta’s nerves and Anna’s excitement meshed into a mutual spirit of giddy pleasure, as they strolled through the penny arcades, just for the fun of it, before reaching Pontings,

the famous drapers, with its fluted pillars and white iron galleries.

This was Anna's favourite shop, an Aladdin's cave of coloured cloths and trimmings, laden with rolls of silk and swathes of taffeta in green and gold. On the ground floor, beyond the hanging boas, she chose herself a white handkerchief starred with violets.

"Thank you," she said, kissing her mother.

While Roberta queued to pay, Anna glanced upwards to the bright atrium above, where sunshine streamed through the stained glass flowers in rays of coloured light. Anna's eyes swam around the shop, with its reams of ribbons and baskets of glinting buttons, brass, silver, mother-of-pearl. The sounds of the shop receded as the dream light washed through her until, for a moment, she vanished from herself.

"You can carry this, my darling." Gently her mother broke her reverie, handing over the paper package. Anna sprang to attention, like a new toy. She was the first out of the shop, planning the next purchase. At Woolworth's they bought a small cardboard case and luggage labels for Anna's journey, and then they crossed the road to look for shoes.

Shiny brown lace-ups they bought, at Barkers. Their smell was new and luxuriant. They reminded Anna of her father in his new uniform, with his big black boots. She and her mother had seen him off a month ago; he had swung her right round when she hugged him goodbye. Sometimes he sent her letters with funny drawings, describing his army drills. She wasn't really worried about him because it was common knowledge that most of Hitler's tanks were made of cardboard.

"Britain has the greatest empire in the world so if there's a war, it won't last long," she announced to the bespectacled lady who fitted her shoes.

Then mother and daughter were out on the street again. It was time for Anna's promised treat: a knickerbocker glory. She had seen the American films in which children sat at counters, with ice creams in tall glasses. That was her dream.

Roberta led the way through the art deco splendour of Derry and Tom's department store, along lavish blue carpets, whisper quiet, where well-groomed assistants stood behind counters with white telephones, until they reached a marble wall of lifts, and stepped into a cool chamber of copper and nickel.

"Fifth Floor, ladies and gentlemen, world famous Roof Gardens," chanted the liveried lift boy. The gardens had opened with much fanfare a year ago, but they had never visited; it was too dear.

But today was special and they emerged to theatrical sunshine amid the rooftops of Kensington. Before them, a profusion of flowers stretched away on every side. There was a Spanish garden, with a terracotta Moorish tower, and tumbling bougainvillea. Beyond, through a winding courtyard, they found themselves in a water garden spread with lily pads and a hint of gleaming carp. Another turn took them to an Elizabethan garden of dainty arches and climbing roses. The place outstripped all their hopes; it seemed to be endless, and abundantly laden with late summer flowers.

They found their way to the cafe, with tables set out beneath striped umbrellas, and a fountain tinkling nearby. From the tall menu Anna picked her ice cream with care: vanilla, and chocolate, topped with cream and cherries and nuts. To her mother's relief, she did not seem disappointed when the towering confection arrived.

A small palm-court band played familiar melodies, muting any sound from the streets below. Joy was with them. The

unreality of the place and the peculiar occasion of their visit only increased their lightheaded pleasure in each other.

“Before today, have you ever sat in a garden in the sky?” asked Anna.

“Never,” laughed her mother, “nor would I want to, without you here too.”

“When I get home again, can we come back here?”

“Of course, my darling.”

“With Daddy too?”

“*For sure,*” said Roberta, and clasped her daughter’s hand.

Later, when the ice cream was finished, and the teacups empty, and the garden’s secrets all explored, they set off together, subdued, for home.

It was not until they reached the store’s entrance lobby that Anna admitted the one shadow lurking over her day: she had no bathing costume.

Anna had seen the newsreels about evacuation and they all showed children travelling westward, to the seaside, to Devon and Cornwall. She longed to join them but she was worried, too; with all they had spent today, she feared a bathing costume might be one item too many to ask for.

“But how will I swim?” she blurted out.

Roberta paused to hear her child’s fumbled request. For a moment, she was ready to decline, for she guessed that only a few evacuees would go anywhere near the sea. Besides, the weather would soon be turning – quite apart from the cost of a costume.

But Roberta had a canny instinct for illusions. She sensed, in that moment, that she must keep this afternoon intact, not scupper her daughter’s hopes. Back to the lifts they went, and up to the sporting department. With abandon, Roberta spent two shillings on a blue striped bathing costume, and saw her

daughter's face shine with pleasure. It was more than she meant to pay, but it perfected the afternoon. Then they set off for the underground station, united in satisfaction.

As Anna skipped ahead, Roberta rejoiced in her daughter. Knowing that she was bright and resourceful, with an uncluttered face easily lit by smiles. That tiny gap between her front teeth gave her a frank charm.

They clattered down the station steps, Anna always ahead. Suddenly, on the half-filled platform, Roberta found herself brimming over with love for her straw-haired child.

“Anna—” she said, and Anna turned, her eyes bright and clear. In that instant, Roberta sensed the spontaneous rise of her daughter's soul which had flickered to life in her eight years before. She reached out for her daughter and held her fast in her arms. For a moment, their hearts beat together.

“I love you, my darling,” said Roberta, stroking Anna's hair.

A train rolled in and opened its doors, and passengers stepped past them. Anna looked up at her mother with unblinking eyes.

In the years to come, she would remember that fragile day, its touchless light, their quiet elations.

Chapter 2

Warsaw, September 1st 1939

Inside the Warsaw Embassy, Sir Clifford Norton had been up most of the night; now he watched the dawn unveil a pale blue sky that was serenely oblivious to their troubles. Randomly, he realised that the final summer of the decade was over.

All night his staff had been working in shifts, everyone engaged in these final frantic negotiations to stave off war. Typists had been rattling away, telephones ringing, messengers coming and going, even his wife had been there with her small portable typewriter, encoding and deciphering telegrams.

Danzig, Danzig, Danzig was the word on every letter and report. The Polish port had rapidly grown from a place to a principle, Norton reflected, as Hitler demanded its release into the Reich. The Danzig deadlock was now combustible, and the embassy was on emergency alert. But at this early hour, some of the staff were still napping on camp beds, and Norton was alone in his office waiting for the next round of telegrams from London.

Suddenly craving the new day, he pushed his curtains right back until he could feel the arrival of daylight, subtle, spreading, now eclipsing his desk light. The brightening room made him feel lightheaded; there was still a time for spurious delight.

The eerie disquiet of these last summer weeks had been contagious, he realised. Warsaw was gripped by a strange *Todtanz*, the restaurants overflowing with odd gaiety and the hotels thronged with journalists firing off telegrams. Rumours abounded. The shops had run out of sugar and candles, and the Poles had been burying their silver and crystal in gardens and parks. Beyond the capital, clear sunny skies had baked the land into hard dry plains, all too auspicious for invading tanks.

The telephone on his desk rang, abruptly breaking his reverie. 5.45am. It was the Consul in Katowice.

“The Germans are in. Tanks over the border at 5am.”

The news struck Norton distantly, as if it was a piece of history which might roll past him if he stepped aside. But it was also a shock. This was the moment they had all been waiting for, yet it had never seemed inevitable.

Norton had not yet put on his shoes. The floor beneath his feet pushed upwards, hard. He felt as if he were living in the third person. He put down the telephone and spurred himself into automatic action. Cabled the news to London. Rallied his staff.

In the embassy, people came and went as if in a dream. It was only hours ago that they were considering peace at any price; they were still in the middle of negotiations, they thought, but Hitler had bypassed them all.

At 6 a.m. Norton heard an air engine and went out onto the embassy balcony. Straight ahead in the clear sky, he watched a German fighter plane swooping over the Vistula. Sirens wailed, and there was a boom of anti-aircraft guns. That was a shock too; the first air raid in Warsaw so soon. War had reached them already.

Chapter 3

London, September 1st 1939

Anna lay on her back, calmly suspended in the stillness of sleep. Roberta sat on the bed and smoothed back her daughter's hair until she opened her eyes.

They both smiled. Then Anna reached out her hand.

There had been so many things to prepare for the evacuation. They had already picked up the new gas mask, in a box you could carry over your shoulder. Carefully, the previous evening, Roberta had packed Anna's case with three changes of clothes, some extra underwear, a second pair of shoes, her wash things, and her two best nightdresses. And her bathing costume, of course. Her mother also produced a surprise book as a special treat. Into this she had slipped a loving letter and a family photograph.

Roberta stowed the food in an extra bag because she didn't want Anna to open her case and have everything else fall out. There was a tin of evaporated milk, some corned beef, two apples and a bar of chocolate. There was also a luggage label for Anna, with her name and school on it, and her age.

"A label, round my neck?" asked Anna, surprised. It felt strange, the itchy string against her skin.

Anna had already decided not to take her teddy with her, in case anyone laughed at him. So she propped Edward carefully on her pillow and kissed him goodbye.

“I won’t be long,” she promised him, solemnly.

Roberta was so anxious as she fed her daughter that she had no chance to feel sentimental. But she was careful to be loving, not impatient, as they put on their coats and left their Fulham house. There was little time for Anna to look back at the green front door and feel sad.

But as they walked together towards the school, both mother and daughter began to feel the ache of parting. Roberta had hardly slept, pricked as she was by fears which jittered right through to her finger tips. The coming separation made her breathless as she walked – it would be several days before she could know where Anna had been sent. She thought with dread of some dismal, dirty house.

“You *must* keep your hands clean,” she said.

Walking along in the cloudy sunshine, war seemed remote and unimaginable. Roberta wondered how she could be doing this to her beloved daughter. Perhaps war would not touch them. Perhaps it would not happen. Would any German planes really fly as far as London?

After her husband joined up, her first thought had been to leave the city with Anna. But they had no family outside London, nor the means to move. So, like other reluctant mothers, she had joined the evacuation scheme; all the parents at Anna’s school had been urged to take part. At first she had thought she could go with Anna – until the directive had come through, only nursing mothers to stay with their children. I’ll find a way, thought Roberta.

Meanwhile, Anna had no such trepidation. She assumed that all the evacuees would be going to the seaside, like a holiday.

She had only ever been on a beach once before, at Margate, and she was longing to run through wet sand again. And now she had her own bathing costume, packed and ready.

She was expecting adventure; she had read so many fairy tales that she longed to set out into the world alone. Like Dick Whittington. The long road, the child with a small case, it seemed only natural.

Her shoes were polished, her socks were clean. She carried her kit with pride. She did not fear parting, her mother's face felt closer than her pulse. She could not yet imagine any rift.

Beneath the red brick gaze of the old Victorian school they joined a fractured crowd of mothers, fathers, children, all there to say farewell. Children were crying, some howling. Mothers also were weeping. A wave of sadness washed over Roberta, though she and Anna were too resolutely independent to join any public display of sentiment. But, still, Roberta's resolve wavered. She sought out a head teacher to ask where the children would be going.

“Buses will take them to St Pancras station.”

“Can we go with them there?”

“No, I'm sorry,” he said, defensively, “you must say goodbye here.”

There was a long wait in the school yard, and children sat on the ground, yawning. Roberta and Anna stood together, not saying much. They held hands. Soon they were organised into class lines, with teachers ticking names on clipboards. Roberta was proud that Anna looked so pretty, so bright and fresh.

She could always take her back home again.

Suddenly the buses arrived, coming on from another school in World's End. Before Roberta had the chance to think again, and retrieve her child, the crowd's momentum had swept

Anna's class forward. Without a backwards glance, Anna struggled to find a seat. She put down her bags and realised that, after so much waiting, she had hardly said goodbye to her mother. She pressed her face to the window.

There she was below, looking up at her – gleaming brown hair, and a smile meant for her alone, wishing her every joy and all good things, focused into that mother's look of sheer love.

“Goodbye, Mummy!” called Anna, through the glass. Suddenly, she felt a little more vulnerable, and kept her gaze on her mother as long as she could. She could feel the pull of her mother's eyes right through her – until she was going, gone, and Anna was away on her adventure.

The bus had a sour smell of stale cigarettes. She sat down and felt a little sick with all the excitement. She yawned in the heat; there wasn't much air. She felt odd, excited and suspended in a strange new world. Anything might happen. She did not miss her mother yet because she was still so firmly rooted inside her. Her face, her voice, her touch.

But for Roberta, the separation was sudden and immediate. She walked back home from the school feeling limp, like a wilting plant. The trees she passed looked parched and weary, and the pavement was cracked beneath her feet. The corrosion of late summer was all around her, and the streets seemed unnaturally deserted.

Had she made the right choice?