

Darling,¹

Such a wonderful night. Thank you for risking it. It's not enough, of course – it's never enough – but it will keep me going.

I got here later yesterday evening – too late to write. Too cold, too; you could tell the place had been standing empty. I piled all the blankets on the bed, the rug too, got Nin on there for warmth though she snored half the night. This morning I chopped some wood and got the fire going, and then I walked to the village for supplies. I have enough ribbons and paper to last the winter, and I have the Laphroaig – thank you, thank you, thank you. I may go raving mad before spring, but I shall at least enjoy it.

Nin misses you terribly, of course. Do you remember when you were here and she brought back that cock pheasant in, and we had to take it back to the woods in the dead of night? Thank goodness it didn't make that ghastly screeching noise, or we'd have been done for. And thank goodness for Nin's soft mouth. She's too old for poaching now, of course.

The gamekeeper has gone and one can walk anywhere now, though I don't think the villagers dare to yet. Really, it's a surprise they kept up the shooting for so long after the manor was sold. Perhaps it was the only part of the estate to make money; perhaps the settlement required it. I suppose there will have been rather a lot of creditors. But it's the same the country over, or so I hear.

The woman in the shop told me they evicted the last of the labourers from the tied cottages a few months ago; they are all quite derelict now. There was a curious scene when the bailiffs came to turn the poor old boy out, she told me; the villagers, all holding boughs of greenery, lined the road in silence as he was put on a cart, with his few sticks of furniture, and driven away. He died within a month, she said; hardly surprising, as he'd lived on the estate all his life. She didn't know what the reason was for the greenery – or if she did she wouldn't say. The bailiffs and parish councillors blanched when they saw it, apparently.

I miss you already, my sweet. Come if you can, and in the mean-time I'll write – if you really think it's

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safe. Send me word by return of post, so I know that this has reached you. If I don't hear, I shan't write again, but I'll telephone you when I'm back, in Spring, and I'll take you out for supper and we'll talk about the future. Don't let him frighten you, darling goose. It will be all right.

Love, love, love...

Clive

X

¹This letter, typed on faded cream typing paper using what looks to have been an Olivetti typewriter – possibly even the renowned Lettera 22 which was in widespread use in the postwar period – was received accompanied only by a note reading as follows: 'Mark – found this among Dad's papers when I cleared the house. It was addressed to Mum – but the envelope had been slit open. Might explain the will...?'

Melissa Harrison's debut novel, *Clay*, was published by Bloomsbury in January 2013. It was chosen as an Amazon Rising Star for 2013, won the Portsmouth First Fiction award and was named by Ali Smith as one of her books of the year. A freelance writer and occasional photographer, she is a monthly contributor to *The Times's* weekly *Nature Notebook* column. Her second novel, *At Hawthorn Time*, will be published by Bloomsbury in April 2015, as will her non-fiction book about rain, for Dorset publisher Little Toller.