

# THE THOUGHTFUL DRESSER

The Art of Adorument, the Pleasure's of Shopping,

and Why Clothes Matter



# LINDA GRANT

Author of the MAN BOOKER Shortlisted Novel The Clothes on Their Backs

# THE THOUGHTFUL DRESSER

THE ART OF ADORNMENT,



LINDA GRANT



### SCRIBNER

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Dress has never been at all a straightforward business: so much subterranean interest and complex feeling attaches to it. As a topic, it is popular because it is dangerous—it has a flowery head but deep roots in the passions. On the subject of dress almost no one, for one or another reason, feels truly indifferent: if their own clothes do not concern them, somebody else's do.

S EUZABETH BOWEN

# IN WHICH A WOMAN BUYS A PAIR OF SHOES

Twelve years ago I saw a red high-heeled shoe from an earlier era. Glorious, scarlet, insouciant, it blazed away amid the rubber soles and strong cotton shoelaces as if to say, "Take me dancing!"

At night, when I cannot get to sleep, I sometimes distract myself by inventing its imaginary owner. I see her waking one morning in a foreign city, and as she raises the blinds on a spring day, the sun striking the copper rooftops, she realizes that she must go out this very moment and buy a pair of red shoes. A wide-awake girl in a white nightgown parting the shutters on a Paris day, drinking a cup of coffee, lighting a cigarette, thoughtfully smoking it before she quickly eats a roll, puts on her lipstick, and leaves the house.

Or I wonder, instead, if she is somewhat older—say, thirty-eight—in a gray wool coat and lines descending each side of her mouth, a small ruddy birthmark on the side of her right cheek, which she fruit-

lessly tries to cover up by curling her hair in waves below her ears, but the wind always catches it and exposes the strawberry stain. She is walking down a Prague street, a shopping basket over her arm, to the market to buy carrots, leeks, mackerel, and passes by chance a shoe shop, and there are the red shoes in the window—all by themselves on a little plinth raised above the lesser footwear, the price tag coyly peeking out from the base—and she has such a powerful urge to go in and try them on that that is what she does. Even though her husband, who is a little mean, would go mad if he saw how much they cost. He married her because of his jealousy and her birthmark: he could not stand another man to look at his wife.

The shoes fit. She empties the contents of her purse, counting out the coins and notes, and flees home with them tied up in a brown paper parcel, and hides them for several days at the back of the wardrobe. Not once does she think about her birthmark.

Or is she the Imelda Marcos of Central Europe, a rich, bored woman with countless pairs of shoes, a widow with a younger lover whom she will never allow to see her without a full face of powder, rouge, and lipstick? Or I think of a humble shopgirl or secretary who saved her wages for weeks circling past the shop, always fearing that by the time she had the money to pay for the shoes they would be gone.

I have tried to imagine the transaction in the shop in dozens of ways, and then the figure of a woman walking home (or driving, or taking a bus, a tram, a taxi), but whatever her station in life, her age, her figure, and her marital situation, the one thing I can be sure of is what she felt: that pleasurable frisson of excitement and delight when a woman makes a new purchase in the clothing department, and particularly an item as nonutilitarian as a pair of red high-heeled shoes.

Whatever her identity, I am certain she would have loved those shoes, or they would not have ended up where they did. She would have left them at home at the start of the journey if she couldn't stand in them.

The red high-heeled shoe exists. You can see it for yourself if you

travel to Poland, drive a couple of hours west from Kraków, and visit the museum which is what remains of the main camp at Auschwitz (not Auschwitz-Birkenau, an extension, which is a couple of miles away, the site of the Final Solution against the Jews). Auschwitz I was the administrative center of the death camp. It is a popular excursion for tourists and Polish schoolchildren who are taken there by their teachers to learn about history. I don't know if they do or not.

Behind one of the glass-fronted display cases lies a great mountain of footwear, found by the liberating army in a part of the camp known as Kanada, in January 1945. The goods collected from the deportees, when they arrived by train, were placed there to be sorted through and distributed to the civilian population of Germany. The pile of shoes is designed to be symbolic, representing the footwear of twenty-five thousand individuals from one day's activity at the camp, at the height of the gassings.

So someone arrived at Auschwitz wearing, or carrying in her luggage, red high-heeled shoes, and this shoe is all that is left of her. When I visited Auschwitz, I was transfixed by the shoe, for it reminded me that the victims were once people so lighthearted that they went into a shop and bought red high-heeled footwear, the least sensible kind of shoe you can wear. They were human, fallibly human, and like us; they took pleasure and delight in the trivial joys of fashion. This anonymous, murdered woman, who died before I was born, would surely have bought her shoes in the same spirit that I bought mine.

Apart from underwear, more fragile and temporal, shoes are the most intimate garments we wear. They are imprinted with the shape of our bodies. Looking at the shoes in the artfully arranged pile at Auschwitz, I saw not a monument, but fashion. The fashion in the late thirties for red high-heeled shoes. So you have genocide, and you have fashion, and genocide could not be more awful and serious and fashion could not be more superficial. Yet the woman who bought the shoes was not only a statistic of the Final Solution. Once upon a time, she liked to shop for stylish footwear.

Whenever I have bought expensive, painful, unnecessary shoes, I have thought about her, the now anonymous woman who arrived at the camp wearing the shoe (and its partner) or carrying it in her luggage. She was not anonymous then. She had a name, a life. Freedom, in its way, was the right to buy expensive luxuries, to own nice things. Fashion exists, whatever you think about it. It's everywhere, even in the gruesome relics of an extermination camp.

You can't have depths without surfaces. It's impossible. And sometimes surfaces are all we have to go by. In the case of the shoe in the camp, that's it, there's nothing else—not whether she was a good mother or a dutiful daughter or a medical student or a keen reader or a skilled chess player. The shoe is all there is, and it has its own eloquent language and says a great deal.

When, several months ago, I started to write about the red shoe in the pile at Auschwitz, I had a doubt about its authenticity. It was known by architectural historians that the displays at what is now the museum had been the product of tinkering by postwar Polish communist ideology, designed to illustrate the great antifascist struggle. The camp you enter as a visitor in 2009 is not the same camp that was liberated by the Soviet troops in January 1945. A lot of things have been moved about (to create a cafeteria, toilets, and gift shop), and it was always possible that the red shoe had been bought at a shop in Kraków sometime in the sixties and added by the museum's curators to create an effect.

A friend suggested that I ask the expert, Robert Jan van Pelt, who had written the definitive study of Auschwitz and its satellite camps, a book I had read several years earlier, before my own visit to Poland. Extremely nervous, I e-mailed him in Toronto, tentatively explaining that I wanted to check whether the red shoe was what it was purported to be and not a postwar fake. Expecting a dusty answer. How dare I reduce and trivialize the greatest crime of the twentieth century to a thesis on stylish footwear!

But almost at once I received a reply. Yes, he said, the shoe was

indeed kosher, so to speak. But his wife, Miriam Greenbaum, had an additional question. Was I that Linda Grant who wrote sometimes about fashion, and if I was, would I like to meet a woman who had survived Auschwitz to become the great doyenne of Canadian style, the retailer who had introduced to a conservative female market such designers as Versace, Armani, Ferre, and Missoni? Indeed had survived because of her own vanity, out of a young girl's desire to, as she says, "look pretty"? And because she knew how to take one piece of clothing and turn it into another?

I traveled to Toronto to meet Catherine Hill, a woman who understood fashion and who understood darkness. For many days I sat with her in her apartment while she, with great courage, revisited places in the past so painful to be forced to remember, but always shared with me her stupendous insight into fashion and the great designers she knows, throwing a great searchlight on the questions I had been thinking about all those years. What fashion is, its significance, and why clothes matter—what happens when even clothes have been taken away from you.

For as Catherine Hill revealed to me, it is in the pleasure that we take in clothes that we are at our most elementally human. In clothes the story of the human race begins.

In my own life, thank God, there has been no such suffering, only the usual disappointments and sadnesses we can all expect. Nothing truly terrible has ever happened to me.

When I look back I can detect the various periods through what I wore. I see myself at fourteen, wearing hideous clothes because I am both fashionable enough and conformist enough to have to have what everyone else is wearing whether it suits me or not. At nineteen, I'm a hippie, in maxidresses and a curtain of long hair, parted in the middle. At twenty-two, I exclusively wear clothes which are now called vintage

but were then just secondhand or even "old"—1930s crepe de chine evening gowns, puff-sleeved blouses from the war. I bought them at Kensington Antique Market in London and scorned the browns, oranges, and huge collars of the era. At twenty-seven, a feminist, I'm in dungarees. In my early thirties, I have, briefly, a real job and a suit. In my forties, I gain weight and wear far too much black. In my fifties, I have rediscovered color and am starting to buy designer labels. This potted history is a time line of how I appeared to others and how I felt about myself. For as I had been brought up to believe, clothes matter. They matter for many reasons: because as you look, so will you be judged. Anyone arriving at a job interview wearing torn jeans and flipflops should have learned that lesson when they received their letter of rejection.

But clothes are also about pleasure, as Catherine Hill so deeply understood from the word *go*.

One day last summer, at the moment of waking, I knew that I had to go out at once and buy new shoes. Shoes which fulfilled a function apart from walking. I wanted high-heeled shoes. Ridiculous, sexy, "I don't care how much they cost, I have to have them" shoes.

It is my habit always to trust the thoughts that flood my mind as I rise up out of sleep. The closer you are to the dream state, the more likely you are to receive the correct messages. The unconscious knows what it's doing and what it's talking about. If it tells you to go out and buy high-heeled shoes you can't walk in, there has to be a reason. I never pay any attention to those deceptive lightning flashes of brilliance from the lurid world of tossing-and-turning insomnia. They are worry thoughts, unlikely to enrich your existence.

As it happened, I had a hairdresser's appointment that morning. When it was over, I walked quickly down the street, full of the excitement and apprehension of the shopper who knows she is going to make a significant purchase. I was anxious because shoe shopping is no great pleasure for me, not compared with dresses and bags. I have inherited from my Eastern European immigrant ancestors wide feet, thick ankles, and heavy calves, legs developed in the womb to later hold up childbearing hips and bread-kneading arms. They are not my best feature, and no amount of exercise will ever fix the problem. A woman is born with good legs; if you don't have them, you can't get them however long you spend doing Pilates. There is no cure for dimpled knees. Growing up, finally, is about understanding that we are limited by our fate. There are unfulfillable dreams.

So shoe buying is always for me work, an ordeal. I go into the shop and see a pair of shoes I like and ask for them in my size, and of course they do not have them, or if they do, they don't quite fit, or the heels are so high I can't stand up without wobbling.

After working my way down all the shoe shops of the street with no luck, at last I came to a department store, which, like all large shops, feels to me when I enter as if I am pulling a building-sized fur coat around my shoulders, embracing and encompassing. A willowy Lithuanian salesgirl approached me and, appraising my terrible legs, silently handed me a shoe. She gazed in sorrow at my horrible ankles. Some time later, I descended the escalator carrying the shoe and its other half: high-heeled, black patent, peek-toe shoes by Dolce & Gabbana, with an oversized faux buckle. They lay swaddled in individual black cotton bags wrapped in black tissue paper, nestled in a lacquered black box.

For a whole day they sat like a pair of queens on a chair in my living room—burnished reflective leather monarchs. I couldn't take my eyes off them. Did I even deserve to wear them? They were the most expensive shoes I had ever bought, but I was prepared to measure them by a different scale of value: the amount of pleasure which I anticipated they would bring me, knowing that they were the right shoes.

Several days followed in which I waited for their first outing, when they would reveal their many secrets, such as whether they actually fit (or had I deluded myself in the shop, as I had done with a pair of Marni shoes the previous year, which cruelly cut into the instep after five minutes) and how long I could stand in them, given the height of those four-inch heels.

I would learn that the absolute maximum amount of time I can stand in my D&G shoes is about two hours, after which I have to sit down. I can only walk two or three blocks in them, but that is hardly the point, is it? I did not buy them to go walking, I have other shoes that fulfill that particular function. The D&G shoes possess a spectacular pointlessness. Aesthetically, they rise, soar, above their mundane purpose of protecting the soles of the feet from dirt and stones. They give me the self-confidence to look tall people in the eye. The black patent gleams and winks. The high heel makes a sexy arc. My back is straighter, my clothes hang better. But above all I'm making a statement, and that statement is, "Look at me."

Because when you are my age, born in the 1950s, there is nothing that people would like better than to pretend you are invisible.

And perhaps this is what my subconscious was trying to tell me when I woke that morning and knew that I had to have a pair of high-heeled, difficult, indeed impossible shoes. That the message was: Be seen. Be a presence in the world. For there is nothing worse than being a beige person, leading a beige sort of life. I mean, nothing worse for me. Others do not mind blending into the background; they crave anonymity. It suits them down to the ground. I have another point of view.

My unconscious did not warn me that it was reckless to spend so much money on a pair of shoes with the coming recession. It did not advise me to pay off my debts. It did not lecture me about making do, and mending. Although I don't follow the financial pages of the newspapers, and mentally switch off when I hear the words *Dow Jones* or *FTSE*, my unconscious pays close attention. It must be listening to the news on the sly because it knew that if there were dark times to come, at least I would have one pair of beautiful shoes to cheer myself up. For

if you are poor, it's always best to give the appearance of the opposite, to inspire confidence—in one's self and others.

If we were heading into the Great Depression, I wanted to arrive there well dressed.

For a long time I have been trying to get to the bottom of this relationship we have with our clothes and why we love or hate them and what they mean to us and how we are linked to them in all their intimacy with our own bodies. I have been thinking these thoughts not as a fashion historian or as someone capable of making pronouncements about style, or who can explain how Alexander McQueen cuts a jacket or how to put together a look. I once went to the Paris collections and gazed in incomprehension at the Dior show, the models lifting their feet like hooves, galloping along the runway at top speed like racehorses, and had to wait until the next day to buy the International Herald Tribune and have it all explained to me by fashion journalist Suzy Menkes. The pleasure of the Dior show-my own name in beautiful copperplate inscribed on a card actually glued to my numbered seat, the massed photographers with their lenses glittering under the lights, the intense beauty of the clothes-all suffused me with profound wonder, like a man who has been looking at the stars in his background through a pair of binoculars and is suddenly allowed to gaze at the universe through the Hubble telescope. But I didn't actually understand anything. I am not a fashion writer, just an amateur enthusiast.

I think about clothes and fashion in two ways. With the attention of the average person who simply wants to know what to wear next (no! not high-waisted pegged trousers!) and also with the interest of a writer who is curious about all our human dimensions, our comedy and our tragedy, our modest weaknesses and our occasional unexpected heroisms.

Writing and thinking about clothes is generally relegated to the fashion pages of newspapers and magazines or to the scholarly works of the costume historians. You only have to say the words fashion pages and you can see the mouth form a contemptuous expression. Fashion is lightweight, trivial, and obsession with appearance the sign of a second-rate mind.

So you might think that clothes are optional—marginal and irrelevant to the lives of most of us, something we can easily live without, as I can pass through my entire existence untroubled by the desire to go rock climbing, watching films starring the late Bruce Lee, making my own jam, or playing whiz-bang kill-the-baddies games on a console. Or reading a book by Terry Pratchett.

I consider it to be absolutely normal to care deeply about what we wear, and detest the puritan moralists who affect to despise fashion and those who love it. Who shrilly proclaim that only vain, foolish Barbie dolls, their brains addled by consumerism, would wear anything but sensible clothes made to last. As if appearances don't matter when, most of the time, they are all we have to go on. Or sometimes all that is left in the ruins of a life.

So I no longer take seriously those derisory accusations leveled against those who are interested in clothes. You might as well level them at Proust, Virginia Woolf, George Eliot—all of whom wrote about clothes and thought about clothes. I certainly won't take it from those men who judge and condemn women for the various failures of our appearance while simultaneously barking that only feeble shallow creatures such as women would pay any attention to how they look.

That is the great misogynist trick.

There are no known societies who do not adorn the human body, whether with clothing, jewelry, or tattoos. It's a given about the human race. You can even read the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, as an exercise in decoding the styles prevalent among Bronze Age men and women, the use of gold ornamentation, and the frequent futile demands by the prophets of women to spend less time think-