

(Winner of the
Man Booker Prize) by Julian Barnes
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In those days, we imagined ourselves as being kept in some kind of holding pen, waiting to be released into our lives. And when that moment came, our lives—and time itself—would speed up. How were we to know that our lives had in any case begun, that some advantage had already been gained, some damage already inflicted? Also, that our release would only be into a larger holding pen, whose boundaries would be at first undiscernible.

In the meantime, we were book-hungry, sex-hungry, meritocratic, anarchistic. All political and social systems appeared to us corrupt, yet we declined to consider an alternative other than hedonistic chaos. Adrian, however, pushed us to believe in the application of thought to life, in the notion that principles should guide actions. Previously, Alex had been regarded as the philosopher among us. He had read stuff the other two hadn't, and might, for instance, suddenly declare, "Whereof we cannot speak, thereof must we remain silent." Colin and I would consider this idea in silence for a while, then grin and carry on talking. But now Adrian's arrival dislodged Alex from his position—or rather, gave us another choice of philosopher. If Alex had read Russell and Wittgenstein, Adrian had read Camus and Nietzsche. I had read George Orwell and Aldous Huxley; Colin had read Baudelaire and Dostoevsky. This is only a slight caricature.

Yes, of course we were pretentious—what else is youth

for? We used terms like "Weltanschauung" and "Sturm und Drang," enjoyed saying "That's philosophically self-evident," and assured one another that the imagination's first duty was to be transgressive. Our parents saw things differently, picturing their children as innocents suddenly exposed to noxious influence. So Colin's mother referred to me as his "dark angel"; my father blamed Alex when he found me reading *The Communist Manifesto*; Colin was fingered by Alex's parents when they caught him with a hard-boiled American crime novel. And so on. It was the same with sex. Our parents thought we might be corrupted by one another into becoming whatever it was they most feared: an incorrigible masturbator, a winsome homosexual, a recklessly impregnatory libertine. On our behalf they dreaded the closeness of adolescent friendship, the predatory behaviour of strangers on trains, the lure of the wrong kind of girl. How far their anxieties outran our experience.

One afternoon Old Joe Hunt, as if picking up Adrian's earlier challenge, asked us to debate the origins of the First World War: specifically, the responsibility of Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassin for starting the whole thing off. Back then, we were most of us absolutists. We liked Yes v. No, Praise v. Blame, Guilt v. Innocence—or, in Marshall's case, Unrest v. Great Unrest. We liked a game that ended in a win and loss, not a draw. And so for some, the Serbian gunman, whose name is long gone from my memory, had one hundred per cent individual responsibility: take him out of the equation,

and the war would never have happened. Others preferred the one hundred per cent responsibility of historical forces, which had placed the antagonistic nations on an inevitable collision course: "Europe was a powder keg waiting to blow;" and so on. The more anarchic, like Colin, argued that everything was down to chance, that the world existed in a state of perpetual chaos, and only some primitive storytelling instinct, itself doubtless a hangover from religion, retrospectively imposed meaning on what might or might not have happened.

Hunt gave a brief nod to Colin's attempt to undermine everything, as if morbid disbelief was a natural by-product of adolescence, something to be grown out of. Masters and parents used to remind us irritatingly that they too had once been young, and so could speak with authority. It's just a phase, they would insist. You'll grow out of it; life will teach you reality and realism. But back then we declined to acknowledge that they had ever been anything like us, and we knew that we grasped life—and truth, and morality, and art—far more clearly than our compromised elders.

"Finn, you've been quiet. You started this ball rolling. You are, as it were, our Serbian gunman." Hunt paused to let the allusion take effect. "Would you care to give us the benefit of your thoughts?"

"I don't know, sir."

"What don't you know?"

"Well, in one sense, I can't know what it is that I don't know. That's philosophically self-evident." He left one of those slight pauses in which we again wondered if he was

engaged in subtle mockery or a high seriousness beyond the rest of us. "Indeed, isn't the whole business of ascribing responsibility a kind of cop-out? We want to blame an individual so that everyone else is exculpated. Or we blame a historical process as a way of exonerating individuals. Or it's all anarchic chaos, with the same consequence. It seems to me that there is—a chain of individual responsibilities, all of which were necessary, but not so long a chain that everybody can simply blame everyone else. But of course, my desire to ascribe responsibility might be more a reflection of my own cast of mind than a fair analysis of what happened. That's one of the central problems of history, isn't it, sir? The question of subjective versus objective interpretation, the fact that we need to know the history of the historian in order to understand the version that is being put in front of us."

There was a silence. And no, he wasn't taking the piss, not in the slightest.

Old Joe Hunt looked at his watch and smiled. "Finn, I retire in five years. And I shall be happy to give you a reference if you care to take over." And he wasn't taking the piss either.

At assembly one morning, the headmaster, in the sombre voice he kept for expulsions and catastrophic sporting defeats, announced that he was the bearer of grievous news, namely that Robson of the Science Sixth had passed away during the weekend. Over a susurrus of awed mutterings,

he told us that Robson had been cut down in the flower of youth, that his demise was a loss to the whole school, and that we would all be symbolically present at the funeral. Everything, in fact, except what we wanted to know: how, and why, and if it turned out to be murder, by whom.

"Eros and Thanatos," Adrian commented before the day's first lesson. "Thanatos wins again."

"Robson wasn't exactly Eros-and-Thanatos material," Alex told him. Colin and I nodded agreement. We knew because he'd been in our class for a couple of years: a steady, unimaginative boy, gravely uninterested in the arts, who had trundled along without offending anyone. Now he had offended us by making a name for himself with an early death. The flower of youth, indeed: the Robson we had known was vegetable matter.

There was no mention of disease, a bicycling accident or a gas explosion, and a few days later rumour (a.k.a. Brown of the Maths Sixth) supplied what the authorities couldn't, or wouldn't. Robson had got his girlfriend pregnant, hanged himself in the attic, and not been found for two days.

"I'd never have thought he knew how to hang himself."

"He was in the Science Sixth."

"But you need a special sort of slip knot."

"That's only in films. And proper executions. You can do it with an ordinary knot. Just takes longer to suffocate you."

"What do we think his girlfriend's like?"

We considered the options known to us: prim virgin, (now ex-virgin), tarty shopgirl, experienced older woman,

VD-riddled whore. We discussed this until Adrian redirected our interests.

"Camus said that suicide was the only true philosophical question."

"Apart from ethics and politics and aesthetics and the nature of reality and all the other stuff." There was an edge to Alex's riposte.

"The only *true* one. The fundamental one on which all others depend."

After a long analysis of Robson's suicide, we concluded that it could only be considered philosophical in an arithmetical sense of the term: he, being about to cause an increase of one in the human population, had decided it was his ethical duty to keep the planet's numbers constant. But in all other respects we judged that Robson had let us—and serious thinking—down. His action had been unphilosophical, self-indulgent and inartistic: in other words, wrong. As for his suicide note, which according to rumour (Brown again) read "Sorry, Mum," we felt that it had missed a powerful educative opportunity.

Perhaps we wouldn't have been so hard on Robson if it hadn't been for one central, unshiftable fact: Robson was our age, he was in our terms unexceptional, and yet he had not only conspired to find a girlfriend but also, incontestably, to have sex with her. Fucking bastard! Why him and not us? Why had none of us even had the experience of *failing* to

get a girlfriend? At least the humiliation of that would have added to our general wisdom, given us something to negatively boast about ("Actually, 'pustular berk with the charisma of a plimsole' were her exact words"). We knew from our reading of great literature that Love involved Suffering, and would happily have got in some practice at Suffering if there was an implicit, perhaps even logical, promise that Love might be on its way.

This was another of our fears: that Life wouldn't turn out to be like Literature. Look at our parents—were they the stuff of Literature? At best, they might aspire to the condition of onlookers and bystanders, part of a social backdrop against which real, true, important things could happen. Like what? The things Literature was all about: love, sex, morality, friendship, happiness, suffering, betrayal, adultery, good and evil, heroes and villains, guilt and innocence, ambition, power, justice, revolution, war, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, the individual against society, success and failure, murder, suicide, death, God. And barn owls. Of course, there were other sorts of literature—theoretical, self-referential, lachrymously autobiographical—but they were just dry wanks. Real literature was about psychological, emotional and social truth as demonstrated by the actions and reflections of its protagonists; the novel was about character developed over time. That's what Phil Dixon had told us anyway. And the only person—apart from Robson—whose life so far contained anything remotely novel-worthy was Adrian.

"Why did your mum leave your dad?"

"I'm not sure."

"Did your mum have another bloke?"

"Was your father a cuckold?"

"Did your dad have a mistress?"

"I don't know. They said I'd understand when I was older."

"That's what they always promise. How about explaining it *now*, that's what I say." Except that I never had said this. And our house, as far as I could tell, contained no mysteries, to my shame and disappointment.

"Maybe your mum has a young lover?"

"How would I know. We never meet there. She always comes up to London."

This was hopeless. In a novel, Adrian wouldn't just have accepted things as they were put to him. What was the point of having a situation worthy of fiction if the protagonist didn't behave as he would have done in a book? Adrian should have gone snooping, or saved up his pocket money and employed a private detective; perhaps all four of us should have gone off on a Quest to Discover the Truth. Or would that have been less like literature and too much like a kids' story?

In our final history lesson of the year, Old Joe Hunt, who had guided his lethargic pupils through Tudors and Stuarts, Victorians and Edwardians, the Rise of Empire and its Subsequent Decline, invited us to look back over all those centuries and attempt to draw conclusions.

"We could start, perhaps, with the seemingly simple question. What is History? Any thoughts, Webster?"

"History is the lies of the victors." I replied, a little too quickly.

"Yes, I was rather afraid you'd say that. Well, as long as you remember that it is also the self-delusions of the defeated. Simpson?"

Colin was more prepared than me. "History is a raw onion sandwich, sir."

"For what reason?"

"It just repeats, sir. It burps. We've seen it again and again this year. Same old story, same old oscillation between tyranny and rebellion, war and peace, prosperity and impoverishment."

"Rather a lot for a sandwich to contain, wouldn't you say?"

We laughed far more than was required, with an end-of-term hysteria.

"Finn?"

"History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation."

"Is it, indeed? Where did you find that?"

"Lagrange, sir. Patrick Lagrange. He's French."

"So one might have guessed. Would you care to give us an example?"

"Robson's suicide, sir."

There was a perceptible intake of breath and some reckless head-turning. But Hunt, like the other masters, allowed

Adrian special status. When the rest of us tried provocation, it was dismissed as puerile cynicism—something else we would grow out of. Adrian's provocations were somehow welcomed as awkward searchings after truth.

"What has that to do with the matter?"

"It's a historical event, sir, if a minor one. But recent. So it ought to be easily understood as history. We know that he's dead, we know that he had a girlfriend, we know that she's pregnant—or was. What else do we have? A single piece of documentation, a suicide note reading 'Sorry, Mum'—at least, according to Brown. Does that note still exist? Was it destroyed? Did Robson have any other motives or reasons beyond the obvious ones? What was his state of mind? Can we be sure the child was his? We can't know, sir, not even this soon afterwards. So how might anyone write Robson's story in fifty years' time, when his parents are dead and his girlfriend has disappeared and doesn't want to remember him anyway? You see the problem, sir?"

We all looked at Hunt, wondering if Adrian had pushed it too far this time. That single word "pregnant" seemed to hover like chalk dust. And as for the audacious suggestion of alternative paternity, of Robson the Schoolboy Cuckold . . . After a while, the master replied.

"I see the problem, Finn. But I think you underestimate history. And for that matter historians. Let us assume for the sake of argument that poor Robson were to prove of historical interest. Historians have always been faced with the lack of direct evidence for things. That's what they're used to. And don't forget that in the present case there would have

been an inquest, and therefore a coroner's report. Robson may well have kept a diary, or written letters, made phone calls whose contents are remembered. His parents would have replied to the letters of condolence they received. And fifty years from now, given the current life expectancy, quite a few of his schoolfellows would still be available for interview. The problem might be less daunting than you imagine."

"But nothing can make up for the absence of Robson's testimony, sir."

"In one way, no. But equally, historians need to treat a participant's own explanation of events with a certain scepticism. It is often the statement made with an eye to the future that is the most suspect."

"If you say so, sir."

"And mental states may often be inferred from actions. The tyrant rarely sends a handwritten note requesting the elimination of an enemy."

"If you say so, sir."

"Well, I do."

Was this their exact exchange? Almost certainly not. Still, it is my best memory of their exchange.

We finished school, promised lifelong friendship, and went our separate ways. Adrian, to nobody's surprise, won a scholarship to Cambridge. I read history at Bristol; Colin went to Sussex, and Alex into his father's business. We wrote letters to one another, as people—even the young—did in those

days. But we had little experience of the form, so an arch self-consciousness often preceded any urgency of content. To start a letter, "Being in receipt of your epistle of the 17th inst" seemed, for some while, quite witty.

We swore to meet every time the three of us at university came home for the vacation; yet it didn't always work out. And writing to one another seemed to have recalibrated the dynamics of our relationship. The original three wrote less often and less enthusiastically to one another than we did to Adrian. We wanted his attention, his approval; we courted him, and told him our best stories first; we each thought we were—and deserved to be—closest to him. And though we were making new friends ourselves, we were somehow persuaded that Adrian wasn't; that we three were still his nearest intimates, that he depended on us. Was this just to disguise the fact that we were dependent on him?

And then life took over, and time speeded up. In other words, I found a girlfriend. Of course, I'd met a few girls before, but either their self-assurance made me feel gauche, or their nervousness compounded my own. There was, apparently, some secret masculine code, handed down from suave twenty-year-olds to tremulous eighteen-year-olds, which, once mastered, enabled you to "pick up" girls and, in certain circumstances, "get off" with them. But I never learnt or understood it, and probably still don't. My "technique" consisted in not having a technique; others, no doubt rightly, considered it ineptitude. Even the supposedly simple trail of like-a-drink-fancy-a-dance-walk-you-home-how-about-a-coffee? involved a bravado I was incapable of. I just