

THE BOOKER-SHORTLISTED AUTHOR OF *AUTUMN*



Ali Smith

'Exuberant . . . Slender,
sweet natured and lyrical'
Guardian

'Joyful'
Jeanette Winterson, *The Times*

Girl meets boy

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• THE CANONS •

Let me tell you about when I was a girl, our grandfather says.

It is Saturday evening; we always stay at their house on Saturdays. The couch and the chairs are shoved back against the walls. The teak coffee table from the middle of the room is up under the window. The floor has been cleared for the backward and forward somersaults, the juggling with oranges and eggs, the how-to-do-a-cart-wheel, how-to-stand-on-your-head, how-to-walk-on-your-hands lessons. Our grandfather holds us upside-down by the legs until we get our balance. Our grandfather worked in a circus before he met and married our grandmother. He once did headstands on top of a whole troupe of headstanders. He once walked a tightrope across the Thames. The Thames is a river in London, which is five hundred and twenty-seven miles from here, according to the mileage chart in the RAC book in among our father's books at home. Oh, across

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the Thames, was it? our grandmother says. Not across the falls at Niagara? Ah, Niagara, our grandfather says. Now that was a whole other kittle of fish.

It is after gymnastics and it is before Blind Date. Sometimes after gymnastics it is The Generation Game instead. Back in history The Generation Game was our mother's favourite programme, way before we were born, when she was as small as us. But our mother isn't here any more, and anyway we prefer Blind Date, where every week without fail a boy chooses a girl from three girls and a girl chooses a boy from three boys, with a screen and Cilla Black in between them each time. Then the chosen boys and girls from last week's programme come back and talk about their blind date, which has usually been awful, and there is always excitement about whether there'll be a wedding, which is what it's called before people get divorced, and to which Cilla Black will get to wear a hat.

But which is Cilla Black, then, boy or girl? She doesn't seem to be either. She can look at the boys if she wants; she can go round the screen and look at the girls. She can go between the two sides of things like a magician,

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or a joke. The audience always laughs with delight when she does it.

You're being ridiculous, Anthea, Midge says shrugging her eyes at me.

Cilla Black is from the sixties, our grandmother says as if that explains everything.

It is Saturday tea-time, after supper and before our bath. It is always exciting to sit in the chairs in the places they usually aren't. Midge and I, one on each knee, are on our grandfather's lap and all three of us are wedged into the pushed-back armchair waiting for our grandmother to settle. She drags her own armchair closer to the electric fire. She puts her whole weight behind the coffee table and shoves it over so she can watch the football results. You don't need the sound up for that. Then she neatens the magazines on the under-rack of the table and then she sits down. Steam rises off teacups. We've got the taste of buttered toast in our mouths. At least, I assume we all have it, since we've all been eating the same toast, well, different bits of the same toast. Then I start to worry. Because what if we all taste things differently? What if each bit of toast tastes completely different? After all, the two bits

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I've eaten definitely tasted a bit different even from each other. I look round the room, from head to head of each of us. Then I taste the taste in my own mouth again.

So did I never tell you about the time they put me in jail for a week when I was a girl? our grandfather says.

What for? I say.

For saying you were a girl when you weren't one, Midge says.

For writing words, our grandfather says.

What words? I say.

NO VOTES NO GOLF, our grandfather says. They put us in jail because we wrote it into the golf green with acid, me and my friend. What's a young girl like you wanting acid for? the chemist asked me when I went to get it.

Grandad, stop it, Midge says.

What's a girl like you wanting with fifteen bottles of it? he said. I told him the truth, more fool me. I want to write words on the golf course with it, I told him and he sold me it, right enough, but then he went and told Harry Cathcart at the police station exactly who'd been round buying a job lot of acid. We were proud to

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go to jail, though. I was proud when they came to get me. I said to them all at the police station, I'm doing this because my mother can't write her name with words, never mind vote. Your great-grandmother wrote her name with Xs. X X X. Mary Isobel Gunn. And when we went on the Mud March, our grandfather says. Boy oh boy. It was called the Mud March because – because why?

Because of some mud, I say.

Because of the mud we got all up the hems of our skirts, our grandfather says.

Grandad, Midge says. Don't.

You should've heard the mix of accents coming out of us all, it was like a huge flock of all the different birds, all in the sky, all singing at once. Blackbirds and chaffinches and seagulls and thrushes and starlings and swifts and peewits, imagine. From all over the country we came, from Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Huddersfield, Leeds, all the girls that worked in clothing, because that's what most of us did, textiles I mean, and from Glasgow, from Fife, even from right up here we went. Soon they were so afraid of us marching that they made brand new laws against us. They said we

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could only march in groups of no more than twelve of us. And each group of twelve girls had to be fifty yards away from any other group of twelve. And what do you think they threw at us for marching, what do you think they threw at us when we spoke in front of the great hordes of listening people?

Eggs and oranges, I say. Mud.

Tomatoes and fishheads, Midge says.

And what did we throw at the Treasury, at the Home Office, at the Houses of Parliament? he says.

Fishheads, I say.

I am finding the idea of throwing fishheads at official historic buildings very funny. Our grandfather tightens his hold round me.

No, he says. Stones, to break the windows.

Not very ladylike, Midge says from the other side of his head.

Actually, Miss Midge —, our grandfather says.

My name's not Midge, Midge says.

Actually, as it happens, we were very ladylike indeed. We threw the stones in little linen bags that we'd made ourselves with our own hands especially to put the stones in. That's how ladylike we were. But never mind

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that. Never mind that. Listen to this. Are you listening?
Are you ready?

Here we go, our grandmother says.

Did I never tell you about the time when I was a really important, couldn't-be-done-without part of the smuggling-out-of-the-country of Burning Lily herself, the famous Building-Burning-Girl of the North East?

No, I say.

No, Midge says.

Well, I will then. Will I? our grandfather says.

Yes, I say.

Okay, Midge says.

Are you sure? he says.

Yes! we say together.

Burning Lily, he says, was famous. She was famous for lots of things. She was a dancer, and she was very very beautiful.

Always the eye for the lasses, our grandmother says with her own eyes on the television.

And one day, our grandfather says, on her twenty-first birthday, the day that the beautiful (though not near as beautiful as your grandmother, obviously) the day that the beautiful Burning Lily became a fully

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fledged grown-up – which is what’s supposed to happen on the day you’re twenty-one – she looked in the mirror and said to herself, I’ve had enough of this. I’m going to change things. So she went straight out and broke a window as a birthday present to herself.

Ridiculous present, Midge says. I’m asking for a Mini Cooper for mine.

But soon she decided that breaking windows, though it was a good start, wasn’t quite enough. So she started setting fire to buildings – buildings that didn’t have any people in them. That worked. That got their attention. She was always being carted off to jail then. And in there, in jail, in her cell, you know what she did?

What? Midge says.

She just stopped eating, he says.

Why? I say and as I say it I taste the toast taste again all through the inside of me.

Because she was like anorexic, Midge says, and had seen too many pictures of herself in magazines.

Because there wasn’t anything else for her to do, our grandfather says to me over the top of Midge’s head. They all did it, to protest, then. We’d all have done it. I’d have done it too. So would you.

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Well *I* wouldn't, Midge says.

Yes you would. You'd do it too, if it was the only thing you could do. So then they made Burning Lily eat.

How? I said. You can't *make* someone eat.

By putting a tube down her throat and by putting food down the tube. Except, they put it down the wrong part of her throat, into her windpipe, by mistake, and they pumped food right into her lungs.

Why? I say.

Uch, Midge says.

Rob, our grandmother says.

They have to know, our grandfather says. It's true. It happened. And that thing with putting the tube into her windpipe had made her very very ill, so they had to let her out of the jail because she nearly died. And that would have been very bad publicity for the police and the jail and the government. But by the time Burning Lily got better they'd passed a new law which said: As soon as one of those girls has made herself better out there, and isn't going to die here in jail, on our hands, as if it was us who killed her, we can go straight back out and arrest her again.

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But you know what?

What? I say.

What? Midge says.

Burning Lily kept on slipping through their fingers. She kept on getting away with it. She kept on setting fire to the empty buildings.

She was like a lunatic, Midge says.

Only empty buildings, mind, our grandfather says. *I will never endanger any human life except my own*, she said. *I always call out when I go into the building to make sure no one is in it. But I will carry on doing it for as long as it takes to change things for the better.* That's what she said in court. She used lots of different names in court. Lilian. Ida. May. It was before they knew what everyone looked like, like they do today, so she could slip through their fingers like water does if you clench your fist round it. It was before they used film and photos like they do now, to know who everyone is.

I hold up my hand, in a fist. I open it, then close it.

And she kept on doing it, he says. And the police were always after her. And next time, we knew, she'd surely die, she would die if they got her again, because

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she was too weak to do that starving thing many more times. And one day, now, are you listening?

Yes, we say.

One day, our grandfather says, one of our friends came round to my house and told me: Tomorrow you've got to dress up as a message boy.

What's a message boy? I say.

Shh, Midge says.

I was small, our grandfather says, I was nineteen, but I could pass for twelve or thirteen. And I looked a bit like a boy.

Yeah, Midge says, cause you *were* one.

Shh, I say.

And I checked through the clothes she'd brought me in the bag, our grandfather says, they were pretty clean, they didn't smell too bad, they smelt a bit leathery, a bit of the smell of boys.

Uch, Midge says.

What's the smell of boys? I say.

And it looked likely that they'd fit me. And lo and behold, they did. So I put them on the next morning, and I got into the grocer's van that stopped for me outside the door. And the girl driving the truck got

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out, and a boy took over the wheel, and she gave the boy a kiss as she got out. And before she got into the back of the van in under the canvas the girl gave me a rolled-up comic and an apple, and a basket of things, tea, sugar, a cabbage, some carrots. And she said, pull your cap down low and put your head inside the comic now, and start eating at that apple when you get out of the van. So I did those things, I did what she said, I opened the comic at random and held it up in front of me, and the pictures juggled up and down in front of my eyes all the way there, and when we got to the right house the boy driving stopped the van, and the front door of the house opened, and a woman shouted, All right! It's here! And I went round the back, that's where message boys were supposed to go, I was down behind the comic, and I took two bites out of the apple, which was a big one, apples were a lot bigger then, back in the days when I was a girl.

This time Midge doesn't say anything. She is completely listening, like I am.

And in the corridor of the big old house I saw myself in a mirror, except it wasn't a mirror, and it wasn't me. It was someone else dressed exactly the same, it was a

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fine-looking boy wearing the exact same clothes. But he was very very handsome, and that was how I knew he wasn't me and I wasn't him.

Rob, our grandmother says.

He was handsome, though he was very thin and pale, and he gave me a great big smile. And the woman who'd taken me through the house, she upended the basket so the groceries fell out all over her floor, like she couldn't care less about groceries, and then she handed the empty basket to the handsome boy and she told me to give him the comic and the apple. He slung the basket lightly on his arm and let the comic fall open in his hand, then he took a bite himself out of the apple in his other hand, and as he went out the door he turned and winked at me. And I saw. It wasn't a boy at all. It was a beautiful girl. It was beautiful Burning Lily herself, dressed just like I was, who'd turned and winked at me then.

Our grandfather winks over at our grandmother. Eh, Helen? he says.

Way back in the Celtic tribes, our grandmother says, women had the franchise. You always have to fight to get the thing you've lost. Even though you maybe don't

know you ever had it in the first place. She turns back to the television. Christ. Six nil, she says. She shakes her head.

I want the French eyes, I say.

You've got all the eyes you need, our grandfather says, thanks to girls like Burning Lily. And you know what, you know what? She got as far as the coast that day, miles and miles all the way to a waiting boat, without the police who were watching the house even knowing she'd been and she'd gone.

Grandad, you're like insane, Midge says. Because if you work it out, even if you *were* a girl, that story would make you born right at the beginning of the century, and yeah, I mean, you're old and everything, but you're not that old.

Midge, my sweet fierce cynical heart, our grandfather says. You're going to have to learn the kind of hope that makes things history. Otherwise there'll be no good hope for your own grand truths and no good truths for your own grandchildren.

My name's Imogen, Midge says and gets down off his knee.

Our grandmother stands up.

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Your grandfather likes to think that all the stories in the world are his to tell, she says.

Just the important ones, our grandfather says. Just the ones that need the telling. Some stories always need telling more than others. Right, Anthea?

Right, Grandad, I say.

Yeah, right, Midge had said. And then you went straight outside and threw a stone at the kitchen window, do you remember that?

She pointed at the window, the one right there in front of us now, with its vase of daffodils and its curtains that she'd gone all the way to Aberdeen to get.

No, I said. I don't remember that at all. I don't remember any of it. All I remember is something about Blind Date and there always being toast.

We both stared at the window. It was the same window, but different, obviously, nearly fifteen years different. It didn't look like it could ever have been broken, or ever have been any different to how it was right now.

Did it break? I said.

Yeah, it broke, she said. Of course it broke. That's

the kind of girl you were. I should have told them to put it into your Pure psychology report. Highly suggestible. Blindly rebellious.

Ha, I said. Hardly. I'm not the suggestible one. I nodded my head towards the front of the house. I mean, who went and bought a motorbike for thousands of pounds because it's got the word REBEL painted on it? I said.

That's not why I bought it, Midge said and her neck up to her ears went as red as the bike. It was the right price and the right shape, she said. I didn't buy it because of any stupid word on it.

I began to feel bad about what I'd said. I felt bad as soon as it came out of my mouth. Words. Look what they can do. Because now maybe she wouldn't be able to get on that bike in the same innocent way ever again and it would be my fault. I'd maybe ruined her bike for her. I'd definitely annoyed her, I knew by the way she pulled rank on me with such calm, told me I'd better not be late, and told me not to call her Midge at work, especially not in front of Keith. Then she clicked the front door shut behind her with a quietness that was an affront.