About the Book

Tony Webster and his clique first met Adrian Finn at school. Sex-hungry and book-hungry, they would navigate the girl-less sixth form together, trading in affectations, in-jokes, rumour and wit.

Maybe Adrian was a little more serious than the others, certainly more intelligent, but they all swore to stay friends for life.

Now Tony is retired. He's had a career and a single marriage, a calm divorce. He's certainly never tried to hurt anybody. Memory, though, is imperfect. It can always throw up surprises as a lawyer's letter is about to prove.

The Sense of an Ending is the story of one man coming to terms with the mutable past. Laced with trademark precision, dexterity and insight, it is the work of one of the world's most distinguished writers.

About the Author

Julian Barnes is the author of ten previous novels, including *Metroland*, *Flaub ert's Parrot*, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* and *Arthur & George*; three books of short stories, *Cross Channel*, *The Lemon Tab le* and *Pulse*; and also three collections of journalism, *Letters from London*, *Something to Declare* and *The Pedant in the Kitchen*.

His work has been translated into more than thirty languages. In 2011 he was awarded the David Cohen Prize for Literature. He lives in London.

Also by Julian Barnes

FICTION

Metroland

Before She Met Me

Flaubert's Parrot

Staring At The Sun

A History Of The World In 10½ Chapters

Talking It Over

The Porcupine Cross Channel

England, England

Love, Etc

The Lemon Table

Arthur & George

Pulse

NON-FICTION

Letters From London 1990–1995

Something To Declare

The Pedant

In The Kitchen

Nothing To Be Frightened Of

TRANSLATION

In The Land Of Pain *b y Alphonse Daudet*

JULIAN BARNES

THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

for **Pat**

ONE

I remember, in no particular order:

– a shiny inner wrist;

– steam rising from a wet sink as a hot frying pan is laughingly tossed into it;

– gouts of sperm circling a plughole, before being sluiced down the full length of a tall house;

– a river rushing nonsensically upstream, its wave and wash lit by half a dozen chasing torchbeams;

– another river, broad and grey, the direction of its flow disguised by a stiff wind exciting the surface;

– bathwater long gone cold behind a locked door.

This last isn't something I actually saw, but what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed.

We live in time – it holds us and moulds us – but I've never felt I understood it very well. And I'm not referring to theories about how it bends and doubles back, or may exist elsewhere in parallel versions. No, I mean ordinary, everyday time, which clocks and watches assure us passes regularly: tick-tock, click-clock. Is there anything more plausible than a second hand? And yet it takes only the smallest pleasure or pain to teach us time's malleability. Some emotions speed it up, others slow it down; occasionally, it seems to go missing – until the eventual point when it really does go missing, never to return. I'm not very interested in my schooldays, and don't feel any nostalgia for them. But school is where it all began, so I need to return briefly to a few incidents that have grown

into anecdotes, to some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty. If I can't be sure of the actual events any more, I can at least be true to the impressions those facts left. That's the best I can manage.

There were three of us, and he now made the fourth. We hadn't expected to add to our tight number: cliques and pairings had happened long before, and we were already beginning to imagine our escape from school into life. His name was Adrian Finn, a tall, shy boy who initially kept his eyes down and his mind to himself. For the first day or two, we took little notice of him: at our school there was no welcoming ceremony, let alone its opposite, the punitive induction. We just registered his presence and waited.

The masters were more interested in him than we were. They had to work out his intelligence and sense of discipline, calculate how well he'd previously been taught, and if he might prove 'scholarship material'. On the third morning of that autumn term, we had a history class with Old Joe Hunt, wryly affable in his three-piece suit, a teacher whose system of control depended on maintaining sufficient but not excessive boredom.

'Now, you'll remember that I asked you to do some preliminary reading about the reign of Henry VIII.' Colin, Alex and I squinted at one another, hoping that the question wouldn't be flicked, like an angler's fly, to land on one of our heads. 'Who might like to offer a characterisation of the age?' He drew his own conclusion from our averted eyes. 'Well, Marshall, perhaps. How would you describe Henry VIII's reign?' Our relief was greater than our curiosity, because Marshall was a cautious know-nothing who lacked the inventiveness of

true ignorance. He searched for possible hidden complexities in the question before eventually locating a response.

'There was unrest, sir.' An outbreak of barely controlled smirking; Hunt himself almost smiled.

'Would you, perhaps, care to elaborate?' Marshall nodded slow assent, thought a little longer, and decided it was no time for caution. 'I'd say there was great unrest, sir.' 'Finn, then. Are you up in this period?' The new boy was sitting a row ahead and to my left. He had shown no evident reaction to Marshall's idiocies.

'Not really, sir, I'm afraid. But there is one line of thought according to which all you can truly say of any historical event – even the outbreak of the First World War, for example – is that "something happened".' 'Is there, indeed? Well, that would put me out of a job, wouldn't it?' After some sycophantic laughter, Old Joe Hunt pardoned our holiday idleness and filled us in on the polygamous royal butcher.

At the next break, I sought out Finn. 'I'm Tony Webster.' He looked at me warily. 'Great line to Hunt.' He seemed not to know what I was referring to. 'About something happening.' 'Oh. Yes. I was rather disappointed he didn't take it up.' That wasn't what he was supposed to say.

Another detail I remember: the three of us, as a symbol of our bond, used to wear our watches with the face on the inside of the wrist. It was an affectation, of course, but perhaps something more. It made time feel like a personal, even a secret, thing. We expected Adrian to note the gesture, and follow suit; but he didn't.

Later that day – or perhaps another day – we had a double English period with Phil Dixon, a young master just down from Cambridge. He liked to use contemporary texts, and would throw out sudden challenges. '"Birth, and Copulation, and Death" – that's what T. S. Eliot says it's all about. Any comments?' He once compared a Shakespearean hero to Kirk Douglas in *Spartacus*. And I remember how, when we were discussing Ted Hughes's poetry, he put his head at a donnish slant and murmured, 'Of course, we're all wondering what will happen when he runs out of animals.' Sometimes, he addressed us as 'Gentlemen'. Naturally, we adored him.

That afternoon, he handed out a poem with no title, date or author's name, gave us ten minutes to study it, then asked for our responses.

'Shall we start with you, Finn? Put simply, what would you say this poem is *ab out*?' Adrian looked up from his desk. 'Eros and Thanatos, sir.' 'Hmm. Go on.' 'Sex and death,' Finn continued, as if it might not just be the thickies in the back row who didn't understand Greek. 'Or love and death, if you prefer. The erotic principle, in any case, coming into conflict with the death principle. And what ensues from that conflict. Sir.' I was probably looking more impressed than Dixon thought healthy.

'Webster, enlighten us further.' 'I just thought it was a poem about a barn owl, sir.' This was one of the differences between the three of us and our new friend. We were essentially taking the piss, except when we were serious. He was essentially serious, except when he was taking the piss. It took us a while to work this out.

Adrian allowed himself to be absorbed into our group, without acknowledging that it was something he sought. Perhaps he didn't. Nor did he alter his views to accord with ours. At morning prayers he could be heard joining in the responses while Alex and I merely mimed the words, and Colin preferred the satirical ploy of the pseudo-zealot's enthusiastic bellow. The three of us considered school sports a crypto-fascist plan for repressing our sex-drive; Adrian joined the fencing club and did the high jump. We were belligerently tone-deaf; he came to school with his clarinet. When Colin denounced the family, I mocked the political system, and Alex made philosophical objections to the perceived nature of reality, Adrian kept his counsel – at first, anyway. He gave the impression that he believed in things. We did too – it was just that we wanted to believe in our own things, rather than what had been decided for us. Hence what we thought of as our cleansing scepticism.

The school was in central London, and each day we travelled up to it from our separate boroughs, passing from one system of control to another. Back then, things were plainer: less money, no electronic devices, little fashion tyranny, no girlfriends. There was nothing to distract us from our human and filial duty which was to study, pass exams, use those qualifications to find a job, and then put together a way of life unthreateningly fuller than that of our parents, who would approve, while privately comparing it to their own earlier lives, which had been simpler, and therefore superior. None of this, of course, was ever stated: the genteel social Darwinism of the English middle classes always remained implicit.

'Fucking bastards, parents,' Colin complained one Monday lunchtime. 'You think they're OK when you're little, then you realise they're just like …' 'Henry VIII, Col?' Adrian suggested. We were beginning to get used to his sense of irony; also to the fact that it might be turned against us as well. When teasing, or calling us to seriousness, he would address me as Anthony; Alex would become Alexander, and the unlengthenable Colin shortened to Col.

'Wouldn't mind if my dad had half a dozen wives.' 'And was incredibly rich.' 'And painted by Holbein.' 'And told the Pope to sod off.' 'Any particular reason why they're FBs?' Alex asked Colin.

'I wanted us to go to the funfair. They said they had to spend the weekend gardening.' Right: fucking bastards. Except to Adrian, who listened to our denunciations, but rarely joined in. And yet, it seemed to us, he had more cause than most. His mother had walked out years before, leaving his dad to cope with Adrian and his sister. This was long before the term 'single-parent family' came into use; back then it was 'a broken home', and Adrian was the only person we knew who came from one. This ought to have given him a whole storetank of existential rage, but somehow it didn't; he said he loved his mother and respected his father. Privately, the three of us examined his case and came up with a theory: that the key to a happy family life was for there not to be a family – or at least, not one living together. Having made this analysis, we envied Adrian the more.

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 – was – 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 (aka 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 had 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, lachrymosely 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 hung around and tried to make interesting remarks while expecting to mess things up. I remember feeling sad through drink at a party in my first term, and when a passing girl asked sympathetically if I was OK, I found myself replying, 'I think I'm a manic depressive,' because at the time it felt more characterful than 'I'm feeling a bit sad.' When she replied, 'Not another,' and moved swiftly on, I realised that, far from making myself stand out from the cheery crowd, I had attempted the world's worst pick-up line.

My girlfriend was called Veronica Mary Elizabeth Ford, information (by which I mean her middle names) it took me two months to extract. She was reading Spanish, she liked poetry, and her father was a civil servant. About five foot two with rounded, muscular calves, mid-brown hair to her shoulders, blue-grey eyes behind blue-framed spectacles, and a quick yet withholding smile. I thought she was nice. Well, I probably would have found any girl who didn't shy away from me nice. I didn't try telling her I felt sad because I didn't. She owned a Black Box record player to my Dansette, and had better musical taste: that's to say, she despised Dvo řák and Tchaikovsky, whom I adored, and owned some choral and lieder LPs. She looked through my record collection with an occasional flickering smile and a more frequent frown. The fact that I'd hidden both the 1812 Overture and the soundtrack to *Un Homme et Une Femme* didn't spare me. There was

enough dubious material even before she reached my extensive pop section: Elvis, the Beatles, the Stones (not that anyone could object to them, surely), but also the Hollies, the Animals, the Moody Blues and a two-disc boxed set of Donovan called (in lower case) *a gift from a flower to a garden*.

'You like this stuff?' she asked neutrally.

'Good to dance to,' I replied, a little defensively.

'Do you dance to it? Here? In your room? By yourself?' 'No, not really.' Though of course I did.

'I don't dance,' she said, part anthropologist, part layer-down of rules for any relationship we might have, were we to go out together.

I'd better explain what the concept of 'going out' with someone meant back then, because time has changed it. I was talking recently to a woman friend whose daughter had come to her in a state of distress. She was in her second term at university, and had been sleeping with a boy who had – openly, and to her knowledge – been sleeping with several other girls at the same time. What he was doing was auditioning them all before deciding which to 'go out' with. The daughter was upset, not so much by the system – though she half-perceived its injustice – as by the fact that she hadn't been the one finally chosen.

This made me feel like a survivor from some antique, bypassed culture whose members were still using carved turnips as a form of monetary exchange. Back in 'my day' – though I didn't claim ownership of it at the time, still less do I now – this is what used to happen: you met a

girl, you were attracted to her, you tried to ingratiate yourself, you would invite her to a couple of social events – for instance, the pub – then ask her out on her own, then again, and after a goodnight kiss of variable heat, you were somehow, officially, 'going out' with her. Only when you were semipublicly committed did you discover what her sexual policy might be. And sometimes this meant her body would be as tightly guarded as a fisheries exclusion zone.

Veronica wasn't very different from other girls of the time. They were physically comfortable with you, took your arm in public, kissed you until the colour rose, and might consciously press their breasts against you as long as there were about five layers of clothing between flesh and flesh. They would be perfectly aware of what was going on in your trousers without ever mentioning it. And that was all, for quite a while. Some girls allowed more: you heard of those who went in for mutual masturbation, others who permitted 'full sex', as it was known. You couldn't appreciate the gravity of that 'full' unless you'd had a lot of the half-empty kind. And then, as the relationship continued, there were certain implicit trade-offs, some based on whim, others on promise and commitment – up to what the poet called 'a wrangle for a ring'.

Subsequent generations might be inclined to put all this down to religion or prudery. But the girls – or women – with whom I had what might be called infra-sex (yes, it wasn't only Veronica) were at ease with their bodies. And, if certain criteria obtained, with mine. I don't mean to suggest, by the way, that infra-sex was unexciting, or even, except in the obvious way, frustrating.

Besides, these girls were allowing far more than their mothers had, and I was getting far more than my father had done. At least, so I presumed. And anything was better than nothing. Except that, in the meantime, Colin and Alex had fixed themselves up with girlfriends who didn't have any exclusion-zone policies – or so their hints implied. But then, no one told the whole truth about sex. And in that respect, nothing has changed.

I wasn't exactly a virgin, just in case you were wondering. Between school and university I had a couple of instructive episodes, whose excitements were greater than the mark they left. So what happened subsequently made me feel all the odder: the more you liked a girl, and the better matched you were, the less your chance of sex, it seemed. Unless, of course – and this is a thought I didn't articulate until later – something in me was attracted to women who said no. But can such a perverse instinct exist? 'Why not?' you would ask, as a restraining hand was clamped to your wrist.

'It doesn't feel right.' This was an exchange heard in front of many a breathy gas fire, counterpointed by many a whistling kettle. And there was no arguing against 'feelings', because women were experts in them, men coarse beginners. So 'It doesn't feel right' had far more persuasive force and irrefutability than any appeal to church doctrine or a mother's advice. You may say, But wasn't this the Sixties? Yes, but only for some people, only in certain parts of the country.

My bookshelves were more successful with Veronica than my record collection. In those days, paperbacks came in their traditional liveries: orange Penguins for fiction, blue Pelicans for nonfiction.

To have more blue than orange on your shelf was proof of seriousness. And overall, I had enough of the right titles: Richard Hoggart, Steven Runciman, Huizinga, Eysenck, Empson … plus Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God* next to my Larry cartoon books. Veronica paid me the compliment of assuming I'd read them all, and didn't suspect that the most worn titles had been bought second-hand.

Her own shelves held a lot of poetry, in volume and pamphlet form: Eliot, Auden, MacNeice, Stevie Smith, Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes. There were Left Book Club editions of Orwell and Koestler, some calf-bound nineteenth-century novels, a couple of childhood Arthur Rackhams, and her comfort book, *I Capture the Castle*. I didn't for a moment doubt that she had read them all, or that they were the right books to own. Further, they seemed to be an organic continuation of her mind and personality, whereas mine struck me as functionally separate, straining to describe a character I hoped to grow into. This disparity threw me into a slight panic, and as I looked along her poetry shelf I fell back on a line of Phil Dixon's.

'Of course, everyone's wondering what Ted Hughes will do when he runs out of animals.' 'Are they?' 'So I've been told,' I said feebly. In Dixon's mouth, the line had seemed witty and sophisticated; in mine, merely facetious.

'Poets don't run out of material the way novelists do,' she instructed me. 'Because they don't depend on material in the same way. And you're treating him like a sort of zoologist, aren't you? But even zoologists don't tire of animals, do they?' She was looking at me with one eyebrow raised above the frame of her glasses. She was

five months older than me and sometimes made it feel like five years.

'It was just something my English master said.' 'Well, now you're at university we must get you to think for yourself, mustn't we?' There was something about the 'we' that made me suspect I hadn't got everything wrong. She was just trying to improve me – and who was I to object to that? One of the first things she asked me was why I wore my watch on the inside of my wrist. I couldn't justify it, so I turned the face round, and put time on the outside, as normal, grown-up people did.

I settled into a contented routine of working, spending my free time with Veronica and, back in my student room, wanking explosively to fantasies of her splayed beneath me or arched above me. Daily intimacy made me proud of knowing about make-up, clothes policy, the feminine razor, and the mystery and consequences of a woman's periods. I found myself envying this regular reminder of something so wholly female and defining, so connected to the great cycle of nature. I may have put it as badly as this when I tried to explain the feeling.

'You're just romanticising what you haven't got. The only point of it is to tell you you're not pregnant.' Given our relationship, this struck me as a bit cheeky.

'Well, I hope we're not living in Nazareth.' There followed one of those pauses when couples tacitly agree not to discuss something. And what was there to discuss? Only, perhaps, the unwritten terms of the trade-off. From my point of view, the fact that we weren't having sex exonerated me from thinking about the relationship other than as a close complicity with a woman who, as her part