

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Lemon Table

Julian Barnes

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About the Book

From the salon where an old man measures out his life in haircuts, to the concert hall where a music lover carries out an obsessive campaign against those who cough during performances; from the woman reading elaborate recipes to her sick husband as a substitute for sex, to the woman 'incarcerated' in an old people's home beginning a correspondence with an author that enriches both their lives - all Barnes' characters, in their different ways, square up to death and rage against the dying light.

About the Author

Julian Barnes is the author of ten novels, including *Metroland*, *Flaubert's Parrot*, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* and *Arthur & George*; three books of short stories, *Cross Channel*, *The Lemon Table* and *Pulse*; and three collections of journalism, *Letters from London*, *Something to Declare* and *The Pedant in the Kitchen*. His most recent non-fiction book, *Nothing to be Frightened of*, was published in 2008. His work has been translated into more than thirty languages. In France he is the only writer to have won both the Prix Médicis (for *Flaubert's Parrot*) and the Prix Femina (for *Talking it Over*). In 1993 he was awarded the Shakespeare Prize by the FVS Foundation of Hamburg. He lives in London.

ALSO BY JULIAN BARNES

Fiction

Metroland

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

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

by Alphonse Daudet

to Pat

JULIAN BARNES

The Lemon Table

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

A
SHORT HISTORY
OF
HAIRDRESSING

THAT FIRST TIME, after they moved, his mother had come with him. Presumably to examine the barber. As if the phrase 'short back and sides, with a little bit off the top' might mean something different in this new suburb. He'd doubted it. Everything else seemed the same: the torture chair, the surgical smells, the strop and the folded razor - folded not in safety but in threat. Most of all, the torturer-in-chief was the same, a loony with big hands who pushed your head down till your windpipe nearly snapped, who prodded your ear with a bamboo finger. 'General inspection, madam?' he said greasily when he'd finished. His mother had shaken off the effects of her magazine and stood up. 'Very nice,' she said vaguely, leaning over him, smelling of stuff. 'I'll send him by himself next time.' Outside, she had rubbed his cheek, looked at him with idle eyes, and murmured, 'You poor shorn lamb.'

Now he was on his own. As he walked past the estate agent's, the sports shop and the half-timbered bank, he practised saying, 'Short back and sides with a little bit off the top.' He said it urgently, without the commas; you had to get the words just right, like a prayer. There was one and threepence in his pocket; he stuffed his handkerchief in tighter to keep the coins safe. He didn't like not being allowed to be afraid. It was simpler at the dentist's: your mother always came with you, the dentist always hurt you, but afterwards he gave you a boiled sweet for being a good boy, and then back in the waiting room you pretended in front of the other patients that you were made of stern stuff. Your parents were proud of you. 'Been in the wars,

old chap?' his father would ask. Pain let you into the world of grown-up phrases. The dentist would say, 'Tell your father you're fit for overseas. He'll understand.' So he'd go home and Dad would say, 'Been in the wars, old chap?' and he'd answer, 'Mr Gordon says I'm fit for overseas.'

He felt almost important going in, with the adult spring of the door against his hand. But the barber merely nodded, pointed with his comb to the line of high-backed chairs, and resumed his standing crouch over a white-haired geezer. Gregory sat down. His chair creaked. Already he wanted to pee. There was a bin of magazines next to him, which he didn't dare explore. He gazed at the hamster nests of hair on the floor.

When his turn came, the barber slipped a thick rubber cushion on to the seat. The gesture looked insulting: he'd been in long trousers now for ten and a half months. But that was typical: you were never sure of the rules, never sure if they tortured everyone the same way, or if it was just you. Like now: the barber was trying to strangle him with the sheet, pulling it tight round his neck, then shoving a cloth down inside his collar. 'And what can we do for you today, young man?' The tone implied that such an ignominious and deceitful woodlouse as he obviously was might have strayed into the premises for any number of different reasons.

After a pause, Gregory said, 'I'd like a haircut, please.'

'Well, I'd say you'd come to the right place, wouldn't you?' The barber tapped him on the crown with his comb; not painfully, but not lightly either.

'Short-back-and-sides-with-a-little-bit-off-the-top-please.'

'Now we're motoring,' said the barber.

They would only do boys at certain times of the week. There was a notice saying No Boys On Saturday Mornings. Saturday afternoons they were closed anyway, so it might

just as well read No Boys On Saturdays. Boys had to go when men didn't want to. At least, not men with jobs. He went at times when the other customers were pensioners. There were three barbers, all of middle age, in white coats, dividing their time between the young and the old. They greased up to these throat-clearing old geezers, made mysterious conversation with them, put on a show of being keen on their trade. The old geezers wore coats and scarves even in summer, and gave tips as they left. Gregory would watch the transaction out of the corner of his eye. One man giving another man money, a secret half-handshake with both pretending the exchange wasn't being made.

Boys didn't tip. Perhaps that was why barbers hated boys. They paid less and they didn't tip. They also didn't keep still. Or at least, their mothers told them to keep still, they kept still, but this didn't stop the barber bashing their heads with a palm as solid as the flat of a hatchet and muttering, 'Keep *still*.' There were stories of boys who'd had the tops of their ears sliced off because they hadn't kept still. Razors were called cut-throats. All barbers were loonies.

'Wolf cub, are we?' It took Gregory a while to realize that he was being addressed. Then he didn't know whether to keep his head down or look up in the mirror at the barber. Eventually he kept his head down and said, 'No.'

'Boy scout already?'

'No.'

'Crusader?'

Gregory didn't know what that meant. He started to lift his head, but the barber rapped his crown with the comb. 'Keep *still*, I said.' Gregory was so scared of the loony that he was unable to answer, which the barber took as a

negative. 'Very fine organization, the Crusaders. You give it a thought.'

Gregory thought of being chopped up by curved Saracen swords, of being staked out in the desert and eaten alive by ants and vultures. Meanwhile, he submitted to the cold smoothness of the scissors - always cold even when they weren't. Eyes tight shut, he endured the tickly torment of hair falling on his face. He sat there, still not looking, convinced that the barber should have stopped cutting ages ago, except that he was such a loony he would probably carry on cutting and cutting until Gregory was bald. Still to come was the stropping of the razor, which meant that your throat was going to be cut; the dry, scrappy feel of the blade next to your ears and on the back of your neck; the fly-whisk shoved into your eyes and nose to get the hair out.

Those were the bits that made you wince every time. But there was also something creepier about the place. He suspected it was rude. Things you didn't know about, or weren't meant to know about, usually turned out to be rude. Like the barber's pole. That was obviously rude. The previous place just had an old bit of painted wood with colours twirling round it. The one here worked by electricity, and moved in whirly circles all the time. That was ruder, he thought. Then there was the binful of magazines. He was sure some of them were rude. Everything was rude if you wanted it to be. This was the great truth about life which he'd only just discovered. Not that he minded. Gregory liked rude things.

Without moving his head, he looked in the next-door mirror at a pensioner two seats away. He'd been yakking on in the sort of loud voice old geezers always had. Now the barber was bent over him with a small pair of round-headed scissors, cutting hairs out of his eyebrows. Then he did the same with his nostrils; then his ears. Snipping great twigs out of his lugholes. Absolutely disgusting. Finally, the

barber started brushing powder into the back of the geezer's neck. What was that for?

Now the torturer-in-chief had the clippers out. That was another bit Gregory didn't like. Sometimes they used hand-clippers, like tin-openers, squeak grind squeak grind round the top of his skull till his brains were opened up. But these were the buzzer-clippers, which were even worse, because you could get electrocuted from them. He'd imagined it hundreds of times. The barber buzzes away, doesn't notice what he's doing, hates you anyway because you're a boy, cuts a wodge off your ear, the blood pours all over the clippers, they get a short-circuit and you're electrocuted on the spot. Must have happened millions of times. And the barber always survived because he wore rubber-soled shoes.

At school they swam naked. Mr Lofthouse wore a pouch-thing so they couldn't see his whanger. The boys took off all their clothes, had a shower for lice or verrucas or something, or being smelly in the case of Wood, then jumped into the pool. You leaped up high and landed with the water hitting your balls. That was rude, so you didn't let the master see you doing it. The water made your balls all tight, which made your willy stick out more, and afterwards they towelled themselves dry and looked at one another without looking, sort of sideways, like in the mirror at the barber's. Everyone in the class was the same age, but some were still bald down there; some, like Gregory, had a sort of bar of hair across the top but nothing on their balls; and some, like Hopkinson and Shapiro, were as hairy as men already, and a darker colour, brownish, like Dad's when he'd peeped round the side of a stand-up. At least he had *some* hair, not like Baldy Bristowe and Hall and Wood. But how did Hopkinson and Shapiro get like that? Everyone else had willies; Hopkinson and Shapiro already had whangers.

He wanted to pee. He couldn't. He mustn't think about peeing. He could hold out till he got home. The Crusaders fought the Saracens and delivered the Holy Land from the Infidel. Like Infidel Castro, sir? That was one of Wood's jokes. They wore crosses on their surcoats. Chainmail must have been hot in Israel. He must stop thinking that he could win a gold medal in a peeing-high-against-a-wall competition.

'Local?' said the barber suddenly. Gregory looked at him in the mirror for the first proper time. Red face, little moustache, glasses, yellowy hair the colour of a school ruler. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*, they'd been taught. So who barbers barbers? You could tell this one was a perve as well as a loony. Everyone knew there were millions of perves out there. The swimming master was a perve. After the lesson, when they were shivering in their towels with their balls all tight and their willies plus two whangers sticking out, Mr Lofthouse would walk the length of the poolside, climb on to the springboard, pause till he had their full attention, with his huge muscles and tattoo and arms out and pouch with strings round his buttocks, then take a deep breath, dive in and glide underwater the length of the pool. Twenty-five yards underwater. Then he'd touch and surface and they'd all applaud - not that they really meant it - but he'd ignore them and practise different strokes. He was a perve. Most of the masters were probably perves. There was one who wore a wedding-ring. That proved he was.

And so was this one. 'Do you live locally?' he was saying again. Gregory wasn't falling for that. He'd be coming round to sign him up for the Scouts or the Crusaders. Then he'd be asking Mum if he could take Gregory camping in the woods - except there'd only be one tent, and he'd tell Gregory stories about bears, and even though they'd done geography and he knew bears died out in Britain at about

the time of the Crusades, he'd half-believe it if the perve told him there was a bear.

'Not for long,' Gregory replied. That wasn't too clever, he knew at once. They'd only just moved here. The barber would say sneery things to him when he kept on coming in, for years and years and years. Gregory flicked a glance up at the mirror, but the perve wasn't giving anything away. He was doing an absent-minded last snip. Then he dug into Gregory's collar and shook it to make sure as much hair as possible fell down inside his shirt. 'Think about the Crusaders,' he said, as he started pulling out the sheet. 'It might suit you.'

Gregory saw himself reborn from beneath the shroud, unchanged except that his ears now stuck out more. He started to slide forward on the rubber cushion. The comb snapped against his crown, harder now that he had less hair.

'Not so fast, young fellow-me-lad.' The barber ambled down the length of the narrow shop and came back with an oval mirror like a tray. He dipped it to show the back of Gregory's head. Gregory looked into the first mirror, into the second mirror, and out the other side. That wasn't the back of his head. It didn't look like that. He felt himself blush. He wanted to pee. The perve was showing him the back of someone else's head. Black magic. Gregory stared and stared, his colour getting brighter, staring at the back of someone else's head, all shaved and sculpted, until he realized that the only way to get home was to play the perve's game, so he took a final glance at the alien skull, looked boldly higher up the mirror at the barber's indifferent spectacles, and said, quietly, 'Yes.'

THE HAIRDRESSER LOOKED down with polite contempt and ran a speculative comb through Gregory's hair: as if, deep down in the undergrowth, there might be some long-lost parting, like a medieval pilgrim trail. A dismissive flip of the comb made the bulk of his hair flap forward over his eyes and down to his chin. From behind the sudden curtain, he thought, Fuck you, Jim. He was only here because Allie wasn't cutting his hair any more. Well, for the moment, anyway. He thought of her now with passionate memory: him in the bath, her washing his hair, then cutting it while he sat there. He'd pull out the plug and she'd hose the bits of cut hair off him with the shower attachment, flirting with the spray, and when he stood up as often as not she'd suck his cock, there and then, just like that, picking off the last bits of cut hair as she did so. Yeah.

'Any particular ... place ... sir?' The guy was feigning defeat in his search for a parting.

'Just take it straight back.' Gregory jerked his head revengefully, so that his hair flew back over the top of his head and back where it belonged. He reached out of the wanky nylon robe-thing and finger-combed his hair back into place, then gave it a fluff. Just like it had been when he walked in.

'Any particular ... length ... sir?'

'Three inches below the collar. Take the sides up to the bone, just there.' Gregory tapped the line with his middle fingers.

'And would you be requiring a shave while we're about it?'

Fucking cheek. *This* is what a shave looks like nowadays. Only lawyers and engineers and foresters delved into their little sponge bags every morning and hacked away at the stubble like Calvinists. Gregory turned sideways-on to the mirror and squinted back at himself. 'That's the way she likes it,' he said lightly.

'Married, are we, then?'

Watch it, fucker. Don't mess with me. Don't try that complicity stuff. Unless it's just that you're queer. Not that I've got anything against the condition. I'm pro-choice.

'Or are you saving up for that particular torment?'

Gregory didn't bother to reply.

'Twenty-seven years myself,' said the guy as he made his first snips. 'Has its ups and downs like everything else.'

Gregory grunted in an approximately expressive way, like you did at the dentist's when your mouth was full of hardware and the mechanic insisted on telling you a joke.

'Two kids. Well, one's grown up now. The girl's still at home. She'll be up and away before you can turn round. They all fly the coop in the end.'

Gregory looked in the mirror but the fellow wasn't making eye contact, just head down and snipping away. Maybe he wasn't so bad. Apart from being a bore. And, of course, terminally malformed in his psychology by decades of complicity in the exploitative master-servant nexus.

'But perhaps you're not the marrying kind, sir.'

Now hang *on*. Who's accusing who of being queer? He'd always loathed hairdressers, and this one was no exception. Fucking provincial mister two-point-four children, pay the mortgage, wash the car and put it back in the garage. Nice little allotment down by the railway, pug-faced wife hanging out the washing on one of those metal carousel-things, yeah, yeah, see it all. Probably does a bit of refereeing on

Saturday afternoons in some crap league. No, not even a referee, just a *linesman*.

Gregory became aware that the fellow was pausing, as if he expected an answer. He expected an answer? What rights did he have in the matter? OK, let's get this guy sorted out.

'Marriage is the only adventure open to the cowardly.'

'Yes, well, I'm sure you're a cleverer man than me, sir,' replied the hairdresser, in a tone that wasn't obviously deferential. 'What with being at the university.'

Gregory merely grunted again.

'Of course, I'm no judge, but it always seems to me that universities teach the students to despise more things than they have a right to. It's our money they're using, after all. I'm just glad my boy went to the tech. Hasn't done him any harm. He's earning good money now.'

Yeah, yeah, enough to support the next two-point-four children and have a slightly bigger washing machine and a slightly less puggy wife. Well, that was for some. Bloody England. Still, all that was going to be swept away. And this kind of place would be the first to go, stuffy old master-and-servant establishments, all stilted conversation, class-consciousness and tipping. Gregory didn't believe in tipping. He thought it a reinforcement of the deferential society, equally demeaning for tipper and tippee. It degraded social relations. Anyway, he couldn't afford it. And on top of that, he was fucked if he was going to tip a topiarist who accused him of being a shirt-lifter.

These blokes were on the way out. There were places in London designed by architects, where they played the latest hits on a funky sound system, while some groover layered your hair and matched it to your personality. Cost a fortune, apparently, but it was better than *this*. No wonder the place was empty. A cracked Bakelite radio on a high

shelf was playing tea-dance stuff. They ought to sell trusses and surgical corsets and support hose. Corner the market in prostheses. Wooden legs, steel hooks for severed hands. Wigs, of course. Why didn't hairdressers sell wigs as well? After all, dentists sold false teeth.

How old was this guy? Gregory looked at him: bony, with haunted eyes, hair cut absurdly short and Brylcreemed flat. Hundred and forty? Gregory tried to work it out. Married twenty-seven years. So: fifty? Forty-five if he got her in the club as soon as he whipped it out. If he'd ever been that adventurous. Hair grey already. Probably his pubic hair was grey as well. Did pubic hair go grey?

The hairdresser finished the hedge-trimming stage, dropped the scissors insultingly into a glass of disinfectant, and took out another, stubbier pair. Snip, snip. Hair, skin, flesh, blood, all so fucking close. Barber-surgeons, that's what they'd been in the old days, when surgery had meant butchery. The red stripe round the traditional barber's pole denoted the strip of cloth wound round your arm when the barber bled you. His shop-sign featured a bowl as well, the bowl which caught the blood. Now they'd dropped all that, and declined into hairdressers. Tenders of allotments, stabbing the earth instead of the extended forearm.

He still couldn't work out why Allie had broken it up. Said he was too possessive, said she couldn't breathe, being with him was like being married. That was a laugh, he'd replied: being with her was like being with someone who was going out with half a dozen other blokes at the same time. That's just what I mean, she said. I love you, he'd said, with sudden desperation. It was the first time he'd said it to anyone, and he knew he'd got it wrong. You were meant to say it when you felt strong, not weak. If you loved me, you'd understand me, she replied. Well, fuck off and breathe, then, he'd said. It was just a row, just a stupid

sodding row, that was all. Didn't mean anything. Except it meant they'd broken up.

'Anything on the hair, sir?'

'What?'

'Anything on the hair?'

'No. Never mess with nature.'

The hairdresser sighed, as if messing with nature was what he'd spent the last twenty minutes doing, and that in Gregory's case this all too necessary piece of interference had ended in defeat.

The weekend ahead. New haircut, clean shirt. Two parties. Communal purchase of a pipkin of beer tonight. Get stonking drunk and see what happens: that's my idea of not messing with nature. Ouch. No. Allie. Allie, Allie, Allie. Bind my arm. I hold out my wrists to you, Allie. Wherever you please. Non-medical purposes, but plunge it in. Go on, if you need to. Loose my blood.

'What was that you said just now about marriage?'

'Eh? Oh, the only adventure open to the cowardly.'

'Well, if you don't mind my making a point, sir, marriage has always been very good to me. But I'm sure you're a cleverer man than me, what with being at the university.'

'I was quoting,' said Gregory. 'But I can reassure you that the authority in question was a cleverer man than either of us.'

'So clever he didn't believe in God, I expect?'

Yes, *that* clever, Gregory wanted to say, just *exactly that* clever. But something held him back. He was only brave enough to deny God when among fellow sceptics.

'And, if I may ask, sir, was he the marrying kind?'

Huh. Gregory thought about it. There hadn't been a Madame, had there? Strictly mistresses, he was sure.