VINTAGE

BEFORE SHE MET ME

JULIAN BARNES

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Winner of the Man Booker Prize for Fiction 2011

Graham Hendrick, an historian, has left his wife Barbara for the vivacious Ann, and is more than pleased with his new life. Until, that is, the day he discovers Ann's celluloid past as a mediocre film actress. Soon Graham is pouncing on old clues, examining her books for inscriptions from past lovers, frequenting cinemas and poring over the bad movies she appeared in. It's not that he blames Anne for having a past before they met, but history has always mattered to him …

About the Author

Julian Barnes is the author of eleven novels, including *The Sense of an Ending*, *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*; three collections of journalism, *Letters from London*, *Something to Declare*, and *The Pedant in the Kitchen*; and, most recently, *Levels of Life*.

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*). He was awarded the Austrian State Prize for European Literature in 2004, the David Cohen Prize for Literature and the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 2011. 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
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Non-fiction

Letters from London 1990–1995
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Nothing to be Frightened of
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by Alphonse Daudet

To Pat

JULIAN BARNES

Before She Met Me

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Man finds himself in the predicament that nature has endowed him essentially with three brains which, despite great differences in structure, must function together and communicate with one another. The oldest of these brains is basically reptilian. The second has been inherited from the lower mammals, and the third is a late mammalian development, which … has made man peculiarly man. Speaking allegorically of these brains within a brain, we might imagine that when the psychiatrist bids the patient to lie on the couch, he is asking him to stretch out alongside a horse and a crocodile.

Paul D. MacLean, *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases*, Vol. CXXXV, No 4, October 1962

Il vaut mieux encore être marié qu'être mort.

Molière, *Les Fourberies de Scapin*.

ONE

Three Suits and a Violin

THE FIRST TIME Graham Hendrick watched his wife commit adultery he didn't mind at all. He even found himself chuckling. It never occurred to him to reach out a shielding hand towards his daughter's eyes.

Of course, Barbara was behind it. Barbara, his first wife; as opposed to Ann, his second wife—the one who was committing the adultery. Though naturally, at the time he didn't think of it as adultery. So the response of *pas devant* wasn't appropriate. And in any case, it was still what Graham called the honey time.

The honey time had begun on April 22nd, 1977, at Repton Gardens, when Jack Lupton introduced him to a girl parachutist. He was on his third drink of the party. But alcohol never helped him relax: as soon as Jack introduced the girl, something flickered in his brain and automatically expunged her name. That was what happened at parties. A few years earlier, as an experiment, Graham had tried repeating the person's name as they shook hands. 'Hullo, Rachel,' he'd say, and 'Hullo, Lionel,' and 'Good evening, Marion.' But the men seemed to think you homosexual for it, and eyed you warily; while the women asked politely if you were Bostonian, or, perhaps, a Positive Thinker. Graham had abandoned the technique and gone back to feeling ashamed of his brain.

On that warm April night, leaning against Jack's bookshelves and away from the turmoil of warbling smokers, Graham gazed civilly across at this still

anonymous woman with neatly-shaped blondeish hair and a candy-striped shirt that was silk for all he knew.

‘It must be an interesting life.’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘You must … travel around a lot.’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Give demonstrations, I suppose.’ He imagined her cart-wheeling through the air while scarlet smoke hissed from a canister strapped to her ankle.

‘Well, that’s the other department, really.’ (What department was that?)

‘It must be dangerous, though.’

‘What—you mean … the flying?’ Surprising, Ann thought, how often men were scared of aeroplanes. They never bothered her.

‘No, not the flying bit, the other bit. The jumping.’

Ann put her head on one side by way of interrogation.

‘The jumping.’ Graham placed his glass on a shelf and flapped his arms up and down. Ann put her head further on one side. He grasped the middle button of his jacket and gave it a sharp, military downward tug.

‘Ah,’ he said finally, ‘thought you were a parachutist.’ The lower half of Ann’s face formed itself into a smile, then her eyes moved slowly from sceptical pity to amusement. ‘*Jack* said you were a parachutist,’ he repeated, as if the reiteration and the attributed authority made it more likely to be true. In fact, of course, the opposite was the case. It was doubtless another example of what Jack called ‘making the knees-up go with a swing you silly old cunt’.

‘So in that case,’ she replied, ‘you aren’t a historian and you don’t teach at London University.’

‘Good God no,’ said Graham. ‘Do I look like an academic?’

‘I don’t know what they look like. Don’t they look like everybody else?’

‘No they don’t,’ said Graham, quite fiercely. ‘They wear glasses and brown tweed jackets and have humps on their backs and mean, jealous natures and they all use Old Spice.’ Ann looked at him. He had glasses and a brown corduroy jacket.

‘I’m a brain surgeon,’ he said. ‘Well, not really. I’m working my way up. You have to practise on other bits first: stands to reason. I’m on shoulders and necks at the moment.’

‘That must be interesting,’ she said, uncertain how far to disbelieve him. ‘It must be difficult,’ she added.

‘It is difficult.’ He shifted his glasses on his nose, moving them sideways before settling them back exactly where they had been before. He was tall, with an elongated, squared-off face and dark brown hair erratically touched with grey, as if someone had shaken it from a clogging pepper pot. ‘It’s also dangerous.’

‘I should think it is.’ No wonder his hair was like that.

‘The most dangerous part,’ he explained, ‘is the flying.’

She smiled; he smiled. She wasn’t just pretty; she was friendly as well.

‘I’m a buyer,’ she said, ‘I buy clothes.’

‘I’m an academic,’ he said. ‘I teach history at London University.’

‘I’m a magician,’ said Jack Lupton, loafing at the edge of their conversation and now canting a bottle into the middle of it. ‘I teach magic at the University of Life. Wine or wine?’

‘Go away, Jack,’ said Graham, firmly for him. And Jack had gone away.

Looking back, Graham could see with urgent clarity how beached his life had been at that time. Unless, of course, urgent clarity was always a deceptive function of looking back. He had been thirty-eight then: fifteen years married; ten years in the same job; halfway through an elastic mortgage. Halfway through life as well, he supposed; and he could feel the downhill slope already.

Not that Barbara would have seen it like this. And not that he could have expressed it to her like this either. Perhaps that was part of the trouble.

He was still fond of Barbara at the time; though he hadn't really loved her, hadn't felt anything like pride, or even interest, in their relationship, for at least five years. He was fond of their daughter Alice; though, somewhat to his surprise, she had never excited any very deep emotions in him. He was glad when she did well at school, but doubted if this gladness was really distinguishable from relief that she wasn't doing badly: how could you tell? He was negatively fond of his job too; though a bit less fond each year, as the students he processed became callower, more guiltlessly lazy and more politely unreachable than ever.

Throughout the fifteen years of his marriage, he'd never been unfaithful to Barbara: because he thought it was wrong, but also, he supposed, because he'd never really been tempted (when gusset-flashing girl students crossed their legs at him, he responded by giving them the more difficult essay options; they passed on the news that he was a cold fish). In the same way, he'd never thought of shifting his job, and doubted if he could find one elsewhere which he could do as easily. He read a great deal, he gardened, he did the crossword; he protected his property. At thirty-eight, it felt a bit like being retired already.

But when he met Ann—not that first moment at Repton Gardens, but later, after he'd conned himself into asking her out—he began to feel as if some long-broken line of communication to a self of twenty years ago had suddenly been restored. He felt once more capable of folly and idealism. He also felt as if his body had begun to exist again. By this he didn't just mean that he was seriously enjoying sex (though of course he did mean this too), but that he had stopped picturing himself as merely a brain lodged within a container. For at least ten years he had

found a diminishing use for his body; the location of all pleasure and emotion, which had once seemed to extend right to the edge of his skin, had retreated to the small space in the middle of his head. Everything he valued went on between his ears. Of course, he looked after his body, but with the same sort of muted, impassive interest he showed towards his car. Both objects had to be fuelled and washed at varying intervals; both went wrong occasionally, but could usually be repaired.

893–8013: how had he found the nerve to make that call? He knew how: by fooling himself. He'd sat at his desk one morning with a list of phone calls and had slipped 'her' number into the middle of them. Halfway through rancorous haggling about timetables and resigned expressions of interest from editors of learned journals he found himself confronted by 'her' ringing tone. He hadn't asked anyone (any woman, that was) out to lunch (well, a non-professional lunch) for years. It had never seemed … relevant. But all he had to do was identify himself, check that she remembered him, and ask away. She accepted; what's more, she said yes to the first day he suggested. He'd liked that; it had given him the confidence to leave his wedding ring on for the lunch. He had, for a moment, considered removing it.

And things had carried on as straightforwardly as that. He, or she, would say, 'Why don't we …'; she, or he, would reply, 'Yes' or 'No'; and the decision was made. None of that speculation about motives which marriage to Barbara constantly involved. You didn't really mean that, Graham, did you? When you said *x* you really meant *y*, didn't you, Graham? Living with you is like playing chess against someone with two ranks of knights, Graham. One evening in the seventh year of their marriage, after a dinner almost without tension, when Alice had gone to bed and he felt as soothed and happy as had seemed then to be possible, he had said to Barbara, exaggerating only a little,

‘I feel very happy.’

And Barbara, who was scouring the final crumbs from the dinner-table, had wheeled round, pink rubber gloves wetly aloft, as if she were a poised surgeon, and answered,

‘What are you trying to get out of?’

There had been similar exchanges, before and after, but this one stuck in his mind. Maybe because he really hadn’t been trying to get out of anything. And afterwards, he found himself pausing before he told her he loved her, or was happy, or that things were going well, weren’t they, and he’d first ponder the question: is there anything Barbara might think I’m trying to evade or diminish if I go ahead and tell her what I’m feeling? And if there wasn’t, he’d go ahead and tell her. But it did take the spontaneity out of things.

Spontaneity, directness, the mending of communication lines to his body: Ann had introduced him not just to Pleasure (many might have done that) but to its intricate approaches, its mazy enjoyment; she even managed to freshen for him the memories of pleasure. The pattern of this introduction never varied: first, a thrust of recognition as he saw how Ann did something (ate, made love, talked, even just stood or walked); then, a period of mimetic catching-up, until he felt at ease in the presence of that particular pleasure; finally, a state of thankfulness edged (he didn’t understand how it could be, at first, but it was) with queasy resentment. Grateful as he was to her for teaching him, approving as he did of her having found out first (without that, how could he ever have learnt?), he sometimes ran up against a residual, nervous vexation that Ann had got there before him. After all, he was seven years older than her. In bed, for instance, her confident easiness often seemed to him to be showing up (criticizing, mocking almost) his own cautious, stiff-jointed awkwardness. ‘Hey, stop, wait for me,’ he thought; and at other times, with more resentment, ‘Why didn’t you learn this with *me*?’

Ann was aware of this—she made Graham make her aware of it, as soon as she sensed it—but it didn't seem a threat. Talking would surely make it go away. Besides, there were many areas where Graham knew far more than she did. History was a library of closed books to her. The news was uninteresting because it was inevitable, uninfluenceable. Politics bored her, except for the brief gambler's thrill she felt at Budget time, and the slightly more protracted thrill during general elections. She could just about name the important members of the Cabinet; except that she was normally one Cabinet behind.

She liked travelling, which Graham had almost given up (it was another activity which took place mainly between his ears). She liked modern art and old music; she hated sport and shopping; she loved food and reading. Graham found most of these tastes congenial, and all understandable. She used to like the cinema—she had, after all, had small parts in a number of films—but didn't want to go any more; which was fine by Graham.

When Ann met him she wasn't on the lookout. 'I'm thirty-one,' she had recently replied to an overconcerned uncle who stared pryingly at the third finger of her left hand, 'I'm not on the shelf, and I'm not on the lookout.' She no longer expected each party, each dinner to disclose a perfect partner—or even an adequate one. Besides, she had already grasped the baffling, comic disparity between intentions and results. You wanted a brief, almost contactless affair, and you got fond of his mother; you thought he was good but not wet, and discovered an adamantine selfishness behind his modest, drink-fetching appearance. Ann didn't consider herself disillusioned or (as some of her friends thought her) unlucky; she merely judged herself wiser than when she had started. So far, she thought, as she considered the uneasy *ménages à trois*, the tear-drenched abortions, and the niggling, low-grade

relationships some of her friends let themselves in for, she'd got through pretty unscathed.

It was in Graham's favour that he wasn't particularly good-looking; Ann told herself it made him more authentic. Whether or not he was married was a neutral factor. Ann's girlfriends decreed that once you reached thirty, the men you met (unless you turned cradle-snatcher) tended to be either homosexual, married or psychotic, and that of the three, the married men were obviously the best. Sheila, Ann's closest friend, maintained that in any case married men were preferable to single men because they smelt nicer: their wives were always having their clothes dry-cleaned. Whereas the bachelor's jacket, she declared, was all cigarette smoke and armpits.

Ann's first affair with a married man had troubled her; she felt, if not exactly a thief, at least a white-collar criminal. But this didn't last long; and nowadays she argued that if marriages went stale, that was hardly her fault, was it? If men strayed, it was because they wanted to; if you took a principled stand, shoulder to shoulder with your fellow-woman, that wouldn't change anything. You wouldn't get any thanks for your negative virtue; the husband would soon move on to some tramp; and the wife would never know about your silent support. So, as she sat over lunch with Graham for the first time and noticed his wedding-ring, she only thought, Well, that gets me out of *that* question. It was always difficult when you had to ask. Sometimes they assumed you were wanting them to lie, and so they did, and then you were tempted into needlessly sarcastic comments like, 'You're terribly good at ironing.'

At the end of what was largely a dossier meal, Graham leaned towards her and in his nervousness failed to punctuate his two sentences:

'Will you have lunch with me again I'm married by the way.' She smiled and answered simply,

'Yes I will. Thank you for telling me.'

After the second lunch, with a little more to drink, he helped her into her coat more zealously, smoothing the material down over one shoulder blade as if the cloth had suddenly thrown up a ruckle. When Ann reported this to Sheila as being the full extent of their physical contact after three whole meetings, her friend commented,

'Maybe he's queer as well as married.' Whereupon Ann surprised herself by replying,

'It doesn't matter.'

It didn't. Or rather, it wouldn't have, she thought. But she duly found out, after an old-fashioned length of time (and after putting out enough signals to make a battle fleet alter course) that Graham wasn't homosexual. At first, they seemed to make love a bit as if it were socially expected; but gradually, they began to do so with what felt like the normal frequency, and with what felt like the normal motives. After three months Graham faked a conference in Nottingham, and they spent the weekend driving through smoke-blackened spa towns and sudden moorlands edged with drystone walls. Separately, they worried what might happen if Barbara phoned the hotel and discovered that she, Mrs Graham Hendrick, had already booked in. Separately, they decided that next time it would have to be two rooms and their own names.

Ann found herself surprised by the creeping realization that she was in love with Graham. He hadn't seemed at all an obvious candidate: he was eager and unco-ordinated, and kicked the legs of restaurant tables when he stood up to leave; whereas the men she had hitherto come closest to loving had been leisurely and relaxed. Graham was also what she supposed to be an intellectual; though she quickly discovered that he disliked talking about his work and seemed much more interested in hers. At first, the sight of him resettling his glasses on his nose as he bent over the special *prêt-à-porter* edition of French *Vogue* struck her as comical and vaguely threatening; but since, in reply, he

showed no desire at all for her to accompany him to Colindale newspaper library and help collate the varying accounts of interwar strikes and demonstrations, she began to stop worrying.

She felt, at the same time, both older and younger than him. Sometimes she pitied him for the narrowness of his previous life; at others she felt daunted by the thought that she would never know as many things as Graham, would never be able to argue with the directness and logic which she perceived in him. On occasions, lying in bed, she found herself thinking about his brain. Beneath that covering of patchily grey hair, how were the contents distinguishable from what lay beneath her own trimmed and sculpted (and lightly dyed) covering of blonde? Could you cut his head open and immediately notice a different structure? If he really *had* been a brain surgeon, perhaps he might have been able to tell her.

After their affair had lasted six months, it became necessary to tell Barbara. Necessary not for her but for them: they were taking too many risks; it would be better if they told her when *they* wanted to, rather than be forced to confess after a period of suspicion which would be painful for her and guilt-inducing for them. It would also be cleaner, easier for Barbara. That's what they told themselves. In addition, Graham hated having to go to the lavatory whenever he wanted to look at Ann's photograph.

Twice he funked it. The first time because Barbara was in one of her nicer moods and he couldn't bear to hurt her; the second because she was cheerfully hostile and he didn't want her to think he was merely telling her about Ann in revenge. He wanted the announcement to be unequivocal.

In the end, he could only do it the cowardly way: he stayed a whole night with Ann. It wasn't planned, but they fell asleep after making love, and when Ann roused him with a panicky slap he suddenly thought, Why should I? Why should I drive back through the cold just to lie next to