



Not the End of the World



Kate Atkinson

About the Book

Not the End of the World is Kate Atkinson's first collection of short stories. Playful and profound, they explore the world we think we know whilst offering a vision of another world which lurks just beneath the surface of our consciousness, a world where the myths we have banished from our lives are startlingly present and where imagination has the power to transform reality.

From Charlene and Trudi, obsessively making lists while bombs explode softly in the streets outside, to gormless Eddie, maniacal cataloguer of fish, and Meredith Zane who may just have discovered the secret to eternal life, each of these stories shows that when the worlds of material existence and imagination collide, anything is possible.

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Illustration Credits

Featuring Jackson Brodie

I: Charlene and Trudi Go Shopping

II: Tunnel of Fish

III: Transparent Fiction

IV: Dissonance

V: Sheer Big Waste of Love

VI: Unseen Translation

VII: Evil Doppelgängers

VIII: The Cat Lover

IX: The Bodies Vest

X: Temporal Anomaly

XI: Wedding Favours

XII: Pleasureland

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Also by Kate Atkinson

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Kate Atkinson

For Diane Pearson

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I

CHARLENE AND TRUDI GO SHOPPING



In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas corpora; di, coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illas) adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen

OVID, METAMORPHOSES BOOK OK I, 1-4

For Sally

I WANT,' CHARLENE said to Trudi, 'to buy my mother a birthday present.'

'OK,' Trudi said.

'Something I can put in the post. Something that won't break.'

Trudi thought about some of the things you could put in the post that might break:

A crystal decanter.

A fingernail.

An egg.

A heart.

A Crown Derby teapot.

A promise.

A mirrored-glass globe in which nothing but the sky is reflected.

'How about a scarf?' she suggested. 'In velvet dévoré. I love that word. Dévoré.'

Charlene and Trudi were in a food hall as vast as a small city. It smelt of chocolate and ripe cheese and raw meaty bacon but most of the food was too expensive to buy and some of it didn't look real. They wandered along an avenue of honey.

'I could buy a jar of honey,' Trudi said.

'You could,' Charlene agreed.

There was plenty of honey to choose from. There was lavender honey and rosemary honey, acacia and orange

blossom and mysterious manuka. Butter-yellow honey from Tuscan sunflowers and thick, anaemic honey from English clover. There were huge jars like ancient amphorae and neat spinster-sized pots. There were jars of cut-comb honey that looked like seeded amber. There was organic honey from lush South American rainforests and there was honey squeezed from parsimonious Scottish heather on windswept moorlands. Bees the world over had been bamboozled out of their bounty so that Trudi could have a choice, but she had already lost interest.

‘You could buy her soap,’ Trudi said. ‘Soap wouldn’t break. Expensive soap. Made from oatmeal and buttermilk or goat’s milk and vanilla pods from . . . wherever vanilla pods come from.’

‘Mauritius. Mainly,’ Charlene said.

‘If you say so. Soap for which ten thousand violet petals have been crushed and distilled to provide one drop of oil. Or soap scented with the zest of a hundred bittersweet oranges.’

‘I’m hungry. I could buy an orange,’ Charlene said.

‘You could. Seville or Moroccan?’

‘Moorish,’ Charlene said dreamily. ‘I would like to visit a Moorish palace. The Alhambra. That’s an exotic word. That’s the most exotic word I can think of, offhand. Alhambra.’

‘Xanadu,’ Trudi said. ‘That’s exotic. A pleasure dome. Imagine having your own pleasure dome. You could call it Pleasureland. Isn’t there a Pleasureland in Scarborough?’

‘Arbroath,’ Charlene said gloomily.

‘With shady walks through cool gardens,’ Trudi said, ‘where the air is perfumed with attar of roses.’

‘And fountains and courtyards,’ Charlene said. ‘Fountains that run with nectar. And courtyards full of peacocks and nightingales and larks. And swans. And gold and silver fish swimming in the fountains. And huge blue and white marbled carp.’

They were walking down a street of teas. They were lost.

‘Who would think there were so many different teas in the world?’ Trudi mused. ‘Chrysanthemum tea, White Peony, Jade Peak, Oriental Beauty Oolong, Green Gunpowder, Golden Needle, Hubei Silver Tip, Drum Mountain White Cloud, Dragon’s Breath tea – do you think it tastes of dragon’s breath? What do you think dragon’s breath tastes like?’

‘Foul, I expect,’ Charlene said. ‘And all day long,’ she continued, ‘in the pleasure dome—’

‘Pleasureland,’ Trudi corrected.

‘Pleasureland. We would eat melon and figs and scented white peaches and Turkish Delight and candied rose petals.’

‘And drink raspberry sherbet and tequila and Canadian ice wine,’ Trudi enthused.

‘I should go,’ Charlene said. She had failed to recover her spirits since the mention of Arbroath. ‘I’ve got an article to write.’ Charlene was a journalist with a bridal magazine. ‘Ten Things To Consider Before You Say “I Do”.’

‘Saying “I Don’t”?’ Trudi suggested.

‘Abracadabra,’ Charlene murmured to herself as she crossed against the traffic in the rain, ‘that’s an exotic word.’ Somewhere in the distance a bomb exploded softly.



It had been raining for weeks. There were no taxis outside the radio station. Charlene was worried that she was developing a crush on the man who searched her handbag in the reception at the radio station.

‘I know he’s quite short,’ she said to Trudi, ‘but he’s sort of manly.’

‘I once went out with a short man,’ Trudi said. ‘I never realized just how short he was until after I’d left him.’ There

were no taxis at the rank. There were no taxis dropping anyone off at the radio station.

Trudi frowned. 'When did you last see a taxi?'

Charlene and Trudi ran from the radio station, ran from the rain, past the sandbags lining the streets, into the warm, dispassionate space of the nearest hotel and sat in the smoky lounge and ordered tea.

'I think he's ex-military or something.'

'Who?'

'The man who searches the bags at the radio station.'

A waitress brought them weak green tea. They sipped their tea daintily – an adverb dictated by the awkward handles of the cups.

'I've always wanted to go out with a man in a uniform,' Trudi said.

'A fireman,' Charlene suggested.

'Mm,' Trudi said thoughtfully.

'Or a policeman,' Charlene said.

'But not a constable.'

'No, not a constable,' Charlene agreed. 'An inspector.'

'An army captain,' Trudi said, 'or maybe a naval helicopter pilot.'

The weak green tea was bitter.

'This could be Dragon's Breath tea, for all we know,' Trudi said. 'Do you think it is? Dragon's breath?'

There was no air in the hotel. Two large, middle-aged women were eating scones with quiet determination. A well-known journalist was seducing a girl who was too young. Two very old men were speaking in low pleasant tones to each other about music and ancient wars.

'Thermopylae,' the men murmured. 'Aegospotami, Cumae. The "Dissonant Quartet".'

'I really want a cat,' Trudi said.

'You can't keep a cat in town,' Charlene said.

'You can't keep a cat down?'

'You can't keep a cat in *town*.'

'You can.'

'You need something small like a rodent,' Charlene said.

'A capybara's a rodent, it's not small.'

'A hamster,' Charlene said, 'a gerbil, a small white mouse.'

'I don't want a rodent. Of any size. I want a cat. Kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty. If you say something five times you always get it.'

'You made that up,' Charlene said.

'True,' Trudi admitted.

'I'd like something more unusual,' Charlene said. 'A kangaroo. A reindeer or an otter. A talking bird or a singing fish.'

'A singing fish?'

'A singing fish. A fish that sings and has a magic ring in its stomach. A huge carp that is caught in a fishpond – usually at a royal court somewhere – and cooked and served at the table and when you bite into the fish you find a magic ring. And the magic ring will lead you to the man who will love you. Or the small white mouse which is the disguise of the man who will love you.'

'That would be a rodent then.'

'Failing that,' Charlene continued, ignoring Trudi, 'I would like a cat as big as a man.'

'A cat as big as a man?' Trudi frowned, trying to picture a man-sized cat.

'Yes. Imagine if men had fur.'

'I think I'd rather not.'

The waitress asked them if they wanted more of the weak green tea.

'For myself,' the waitress said, uninvited, 'I prefer dogs.' Charlene and Trudi swooned with delight at the idea of dogs.

'Oh God,' Trudi said, overcome by all the breeds of dog in the world, 'a German Shepherd, a Golden Retriever, a Great Dane, a Borzoi – what a great word – a St Bernard, a Scottie, a Westie, a Yorkie. An Austrian Pinscher, a Belgian Griffon, a

Kromfohrlanders. The Glen of Imaal Terrier, the Manchester, Norwich, English Toy, Staffordshire, Bedlington – all terriers also. The Kai, the Podengo Portugueso Medio, the Porcelaine and the Spanish Greyhound. The Bloodhound, the Lurcher, the Dunker, the Catahoula Leopard Dog, the Hungarian Vizsla, the Lancashire Heeler and the Giant German Spitz!’

‘Or a mongrel called Buster or Spike,’ Charlene said.

The waitress cleared away their tea things. ‘Money, money, money, money, money,’ she whispered to herself as she bumped open the door to the kitchen with her hip. The electricity failed and everyone was suddenly very quiet. No one had realized how dark the rain had made the afternoon.



In the reception at the television station there was a tank of fish so big that it covered a whole wall. Trudi noted that they were mostly African freshwater fish. She wondered if they had flown here in a plane and if that had felt strange for them. No one else was taking any notice of the wall of fish. The receptionist had strawberry-blond hair, coiffed extravagantly. She appeared to have a Heckler and Koch MP5A3 9mm sub-machine gun under her desk. Trudi felt a wave of jealousy.

Trudi was a publicist for a small imprint in a large publishing house. She had a twin sister called Heidi and neither Trudi nor Heidi liked their names. They were the names (in the opinion of Heidi and Trudi) of goat-herding girls and American hookers, of girls who wore their hair in plaits and drank milk or had sex dressed as French maids and nurses. Of girls who never grew up. Trudi and Heidi had no idea why they were so called. Their parents had died in a bizarre accident not long after they were born and the kind strangers who stood in for them, Mr and Mrs Marshall, had no insight into their dead parents’ thoughts.



Charlene and Trudi ordered gin slings and picked at a small dish of black olives that tasted more bitter than weak green tea.

There were boisterous men in suits perched at the bar. They were wondering how drunk they could get in the pre-curfew swill.

‘I need a new haircut,’ Charlene said.

‘I need new hair,’ Trudi said.

‘And thinner ankles,’ Charlene said.

‘And bigger breasts,’ Trudi said. ‘Or maybe I want smaller breasts.’

‘Your breasts are perfect.’

‘Thank you.’

They could smell the perfume of the women sitting at the adjacent table, peppery and spicy with a top note of deodorant. The women were dressed in very fashionable, very ugly clothes. People stared at them because their clothes were so fashionable and so ugly. They smoked incessantly and drank Martinis. There was an oily film on top of their drinks. They looked like high-class whores but they were rock stars’ ex-wives.

A waiter dropped a tray of glasses. The boisterous men in suits dangled their cigarettes from their mouths while they applauded.

‘And,’ Trudi said, ‘I would like to ride on a horse-drawn sleigh through forests in the snow with dogs – Borzois – running alongside and I want to be wearing silks and velvets and a cloak lined with the fur of Arctic foxes and bears and wolfkins—’

‘You mean wolf skins?’

‘No, wolfkins – they’re very rare – but only ones that have died of natural causes, not ones that have been killed for their fur.’

‘Of course not.’

‘And diamonds, old rose-cut diamonds like dark, melting ice, at my throat and ears, and on my fingers, rubies and opals like larks’ eggs, and on my feet red leather seven-league boots—’

‘Flat or with a heel?’

‘A modest heel. And I want to drink a liqueur made from ripe purple plums from a silver hip flask and—’ One of the boisterous men in suits fell off his bar stool. The barman pronounced his time of death as 9.42 p.m.

‘Time to go home, ladies and gentlemen,’ he said, ‘time to go home.’

Later, Charlene wished she had asked Trudi what a wolfkin was.



Charlene worried that she would never have a baby. A baby would love her. A baby would exactly fit the round hollow space inside her. That might be a problem when it grew, of course. ‘Baby, baby, baby, baby, baby,’ she said to the mirror before she went to bed.

First, of course, she had to get someone to father the baby and after the humiliating ordeal with the dead solicitor last year she couldn’t imagine ever having sex again. This worried her less than she would have imagined. Before. And Charlene would call the baby Smiler. A boy. As fat as a porker, as big as a bomb.

In the hours between curfew and dawn Charlene listened to the sirens wailing through the night and planned an article on ‘Great Tips For Spring Weddings’. She fell asleep with her hand on the Sig Sauer semi-automatic she kept under her pillow and didn’t wake until Eosphorus, the morning star, rose and heralded the coming of his mother, Eos, the dawn.



Trudi was looking for black trousers. Something simple by Joseph or perhaps Nicole Farhi. Charlene took trousers from the racks in the department store and displayed them with a sales assistant's flourish for Trudi to view. All the genuine sales assistants seemed to have disappeared. Trudi didn't like any of the trousers Charlene showed her.

'Perhaps you could take the trousers from an Armani suit and leave the jacket?' Charlene suggested. 'Or MaxMara - they have a lot of black suits this season. Well cut. I think I'm quite good at this, don't you? Perhaps I could do this for a living.'

All the black clothes were sprinkled with plaster dust like dandruff.

'From the earthquake, probably,' Charlene said. 'They really should be on sale, not full price.'

Trudi tried on a Moschino dress and a Prada jacket and a Kenzo cardigan and a Gucci skirt but all the clothes were made for tiny, whippet-thin Japanese girls.

'I'll never go to the ball,' Trudi said sadly.

'The balls were all cancelled long ago, as you well know,' Charlene said briskly. 'Try this Betty Jackson wrap.'

In the end, Trudi decided to buy a rhinestone belt but there were no sales assistants to buy it from and unlike nearly everyone else in the city she wasn't a thief.

'We should make clothes,' Charlene said as they passed through the haberdashery floor of the department store.

'What a wonderful word,' Trudi said.

'What a wonderful world?' Charlene said doubtfully.

'No. *Word*. Haberdashery.'

'We could buy a sewing machine and share it,' Charlene said. 'We could buy cloth and spools of thread and paper patterns and spend pleasant winter evenings dressmaking

together. Perhaps by the soft light from beautiful glass oil-lamps. We could sit in a pool of golden light from the beautiful glass oil-lamps and our silver needles would glimmer and flash as we bowed our heads to the simple yet honest work.'

But Trudi was looking at the bolts of cloth, shelf after shelf of every different kind of fabric. 'Goodness,' she said, 'this is very impressive. Broadcloth and butter muslin, brocade, brocatelle, buckram, bunting and Botany wool. Bombazine and bouclé, burlap and Bedford cord, barège, bobbinet, balbriggan and barathea! And that's just the Bs. Then, there's cambric and calico and cavalry twill—'

The tannoy started up with a sudden howl of feedback and a disembodied voice announced that it was looking for Mr Scarlet. 'Would Mr Scarlet please come to haberdashery, Mr Scarlet to haberdashery, please.'

Charlene started to panic. 'You know what that means, don't you?' she said to Trudi.

'No. What does it mean?'

'It's the code for a fire. It means there's a fire in haberdashery.'

'I don't see any fire,' Trudi said. 'Wouldn't we see smoke? No fire without smoke, isn't that what they say?'

'No, they don't say that.'

Sales assistants suddenly appeared from wherever they had been lurking, driven out like rats by the invisible fire. Even if she couldn't see it, Trudi could imagine the fire. She could see the apocalyptic television images of ash and soot, the blobs of grease and molten steel raining down on their heads, she could smell the excessively combustible materials in haberdashery catching and flaming, she could feel the black smoke choking them. Perhaps they could wrap themselves in the bolts of cloth, like the poor Bangkok sweatshop girls Trudi had read about – hoping that their fall would be cushioned as they threw themselves from the building, as they threw themselves away. Trudi wondered if

they would unravel as they fell, like bobbins unwinding, like Egyptian mummies unravelling through the air.

‘Or we could lead an even simpler life,’ Charlene said hurriedly, ‘a life where there are no machines and where we would live on a green hillside and sleep under the stars and gather kindling in the woods. And we would keep animals—’

‘What kind of animals?’ Trudi asked, as everything from taffeta to winceyette suddenly went up in flames.

‘Goats,’ Charlene said decisively. ‘We’ll keep goats. We’ll tend goats on the green hillside and milk them and make goats’ cheese and at night we’ll light bonfires and guard the goats against the wolves. And we’ll buy a spinning wheel and spin the goats’ wool and knit jumpers and every week we’ll take our goats’ jumpers and our goats’ cheeses to market and people will buy them and that’s how we’ll live.’

There was a flash-over in Ladies’ Fashions.

‘I knew I should have taken that rhinestone belt,’ Trudi said regretfully.



The radio station was off air. The television station had been destroyed a long time ago. The city ran out of diesel and gin. People burnt musty old paperbacks on bonfires and drank rum. There was a festive atmosphere generated by communal terror.

There was no food for the animals in the zoo. The animal freedom militia unlocked their cages so that now there were bears rooting in dustbins and penguins swimming in the river and at night the tigers roaming the streets roared so loudly that no one could sleep. Trudi lay awake listening to the tigers roaring and the bears growling and the wolves howling and the dragons breathing fire over the blacked-out, rain-sodden streets of the city. A family of small green lizards took up residence in her apartment.

There was a rumour that the rare wolfskin had been sighted in the botanical gardens in the west of the city. All the trees in the botanical gardens were now officially dead. And all the panes of glass in the hothouses were broken so that the rain came in and drenched the plants in the desert house causing them to bloom extravagantly and then die, even more extravagantly. An unseasonal microclimate in the palm house resulted in a typhoon snapping the great palms that had been alive longer than anyone on the planet. A polar bear made its home on the island in the middle of the lake in the botanical gardens and a flock of parrots flitted in and out of the pagoda.

The museums were no longer policed and people wandered in and took the artefacts and used them to improve their interior décor.

Charlene came to dinner and brought Trudi the golden death mask of a long dead king and also a large Sèvres bowl that had taken her fancy. 'Thief,' Trudi said, but hoarsely, as they were both still suffering from the after-effects of smoke inhalation during the department-store fire.

All Trudi had in the house to eat was roasted buckwheat and celery. They served the buckwheat and the celery in the Sèvres bowl.

'Presentation is everything,' Charlene said. Afterwards, they drank the only thing they could find, which was a bottle of emerald-green Midori, and listened to a Mozart string quartet on a foreign radio station. Charlene stayed the night, lying on the sofa, watching the lizards run across the ceiling. In the skylight above her head she could see a few drops of the Milky Way, which she knew was the milk from Hera's breasts splashed across the heavens.

Charlene was pinned down by sniper fire in the north of the city on her way back from visiting a wedding fair. She still had a selection of wedding samples in her coat pocket – metallic confetti in the form of the names 'Mark' and

'Rachel', a placecard in the shape of a top hat, a little silver favour basket of red jelly hearts and a bonbonnière containing sugared almonds in pastel colours. She took shelter in the doorway of a bank and phoned Trudi on her Samsung A400.

'A bonbonnière?' Trudi said doubtfully.

'Or bomboniere if you prefer the Italian. In pink shadow crystal net with red roses.'

'Why?'

'A bonbonnière makes a wonderful way of saying "Thank you" for sharing the joy of your day. Each bonbonnière contains five top quality sugared almonds, five being a prime number which cannot be divided, just like the bride and groom—'

'OK.'

'They signify happiness, health, wealth, fertility and long life—'

'Enough.'

'When I get married,' Charlene said, 'I want white satin wedding shoes, silver horseshoes with white heather, lucky black cats and a bouquet of lilacs dripping with rain. Oh, and a sprung wooden floor to dance on and a father to give me away and a mother to cry and a sister to be bridesmaid - but I have none of these, neither father nor mother nor sister.'

'Nor bridegroom,' Trudi reminded her.

'Thank you.'

'I'll give you away,' Trudi offered, 'and I'll cry and I'll be your bridesmaid.'

'Thank you.'

The ATM in the wall exploded and banknotes fluttered like distressed birds into the dirty sky. Charlene tried to remember the tenets of Pythagorean philosophy to keep her mind off the rain and the sniper and the flying money.

'When you rise from the bedclothes, roll them together and smooth out the impress of the body.'

'The visible world is false and illusive.

'Abstain from beans.'

'Beans?'

'In case they contain the soul of an ancestor.'

'Of course.'

'Men and women are equal and property held in common.

'All things are numbers.

'Everything is infinitely divisible and even the smallest portion of matter contains some of each element.'

'And the transmigration of the soul,' Trudi whispered, 'don't forget that. When you get home, call me.' A cashier ran out of the bank waving a Colt Defender and was freeze-framed. Charlene wondered about Mark and Rachel. Did they exist or had the people who made the wedding favours (for which occupation there seemed to be no word) invented them, as an ideal couple?

Lying awake in the dark, Charlene wished she had a lamp to wish on.

'See the moon? See Selene's silver beams?' she whispered to Trudi although she knew Trudi couldn't hear her because the telephone exchange was burning and melting and the mobile-phone masts were toppled and anyway Trudi was asleep on the other side of town behind the barricades of wires and running shoes and dead dogs, mostly mongrels.

'I would like to be on the moon,' Charlene murmured, 'but with oxygen, or better still an atmosphere. And food. Or perhaps I would like a planet all of my own. But you could live there too, Trudi. We could call it Pleasureland. And we would be gods. We would be the gods of Pleasureland. And live there for ever.

'Or perhaps there's another world - except it's just like this one - where we buy French wine and sour-dough bread and Moroccan oranges and spools of thread and packets of Drum Mountain White Cloud tea and sleep in our beds at