VINTAGE

NOTHING TO BE FRIGHTENED OF

JULIAN BARNES

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‘I don’t believe in God, but I miss Him.’ *Nothing to be Frightened of* is, among many things, a family memoir, an exchange with his philosopher brother, a meditation on mortality and the fear of death, a celebration of art, an argument with and about God, and a homage to the French writer Jules Renard. Though Barnes warns us that ‘this is not my autobiography’, the result is a tour of the mind of one of our most brilliant writers.

About the Author

Julian Barnes is the author of eleven novels, including *Metroland, Flaubert's Parrot, A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, *Arthur & George* and most recently, *The Sense of an Ending* which won the 2011 Man Booker Prize for Fiction. He has also written 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 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

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JULIAN BARNES

Nothing to be Frightened of

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

I DON'T BELIEVE in God, but I miss Him. That's what I say when the question is put. I asked my brother, who has taught philosophy at Oxford, Geneva and the Sorbonne, what he thought of such a statement, without revealing that it was my own. He replied with a single word: 'Soppy.'

The person to begin with is my maternal grandmother, Nellie Louisa Scoltock, née Machin. She was a teacher in Shropshire until she married my grandfather, Bert Scoltock. Not Bertram, not Albert, just Bert: so christened, so called, so cremated. He was a headmaster with a certain mechanical dash to him: a motorcycle-and-sidecar man, then owner of a Lanchester, then, in retirement, driver of a rather pompously sporty Triumph Roadster, with a three-person bench seat in front, and two bucket seats when the top was down. By the time I knew them, my grandparents had come south to be near their only child. Grandma went to the Women's Institute; she pickled and bottled; she plucked and roasted the chickens and geese that Grandpa raised. She was petite, outwardly unopinionated, and had the thickened knuckles of old age; she needed soap to get her wedding ring off. Their wardrobe was full of home-knitted cardigans, Grandpa's tending to feature more masculine cable stitch. They had regular appointments with the chiropodist, and were of that generation advised by dentists to have all their teeth out in one go. This was a normal rite of passage then: from being rickety-gnashered to fully porcelained in one leap, to all that buccal sliding and clacking, to social embarrassment and the foaming glass on the bedside table.

The change from teeth to dentures struck my brother and me as both grave and ribald. But my grandmother's life

had contained another enormous change, never alluded to in her presence. Nellie Louisa Machin, daughter of a labourer in a chemical works, had been brought up a Methodist; while the Scoltocks were Church of England. At some point in her young adulthood, my grandmother had suddenly lost her faith and, in the smooth narration of family lore, found a replacement: socialism. I have no idea how strong her religious faith had been, or what her family's politics were; all I know is that she once stood for the local council as a socialist and was defeated. By the time I knew her, in the 1950s, she had progressed to being a communist. She must have been one of the few old-age pensioners in suburban Buckinghamshire who took the *Daily Worker* and – so my brother and I insisted to one another – fiddled the housekeeping to send donations to the newspaper's Fighting Fund.

In the late 1950s, the Sino-Soviet Schism took place, and communists worldwide were obliged to choose between Moscow and Peking. For most of the European faithful, this was not a difficult decision; nor was it for the *Daily Worker*, which received funding as well as directives from Moscow. My grandmother, who had never been abroad in her life, who lived in genteel bungalowdom, decided for undisclosed reasons to throw in her lot with the Chinese. I welcomed this mysterious decision with blunt self-interest, since her *Worker* was now supplemented by *China Reconstructs*, a heretical magazine posted direct from the distant continent. Grandma would save me the stamps from the biscuity envelopes. These tended to celebrate industrial achievement – bridges, hydroelectric dams, lorries rolling off production lines – or else show various breeds of dove in peaceful flight.

My brother did not compete for such offerings, because some years previously there had been a Stamp-Collecting Schism in our home. He had decided to specialize in the British Empire. I, to assert my difference, announced that I

would therefore specialize in a category which I named, with what seemed like logic to me, Rest of the World. It was defined solely in terms of what my brother didn't collect. I can no longer remember if this move was aggressive, defensive, or merely pragmatic. All I know is that it led to some occasionally baffling exchanges in the school stamp club among philatelists only recently out of short trousers. 'So, Barnesy, what do you collect?' 'Rest of the World.'

My grandfather was a Brylcreem man, and the antimacassar on his Parker Knoll armchair – a high-backed number with wings for him to snooze against – was not merely decorative. His hair had whitened sooner than Grandma's; he had a clipped, military moustache, a metal-stemmed pipe and a tobacco pouch which distended his cardigan pocket. He also wore a chunky hearing aid, another aspect of the adult world – or rather, the world on the farther side of adulthood – which my brother and I liked to mock. 'Beg pardon?' we would shout satirically at one another, cupping hands to ears. Both of us used to look forward to the prized moment when our grandmother's stomach would rumble loudly enough for Grandpa to be roused from his deafness into the enquiry, 'Telephone, Ma?' An embarrassed grunt later, they would go back to their newspapers. Grandpa, in his male armchair, deaf aid occasionally whistling and pipe making a hubble-bubble noise as he sucked on it, would shake his head over the *Daily Express*, which described to him a world where truth and justice were constantly imperilled by the Communist Threat. In her softer, female armchair – in the red corner – Grandma would tut-tut away over the *Daily Worker*, which described to her a world where truth and justice, in their updated versions, were constantly imperilled by Capitalism and Imperialism.

Grandpa, by this time, had reduced his religious observance to watching *Songs of Praise* on television. He did woodwork and gardened; he grew his own tobacco and

dried it in the garage loft, where he also stored dahlia tubers and old copies of the *Daily Express* bound with hairy string. He favoured my brother, taught him how to sharpen a chisel, and left him his chest of carpentry tools. I can't remember him teaching (or leaving) me anything, though I was once allowed to watch while he killed a chicken in his garden shed. He took the bird under his arm, stroked it into calmness, then laid its neck on a green metal wringing machine screwed to the door jamb. As he brought the handle down, he gripped the bird's body ever more tightly against its final convulsions.

My brother was allowed not just to watch, but also participate. Several times he got to pull the lever while Grandpa held the bird. But our memories of the slaughter in the shed diverge into incompatibility. For me, the machine merely wrung the chicken's neck; for him, it was a junior guillotine. 'I have a clear picture of a small basket underneath the blade. I have a (less clear) picture of the head dropping, some (not much) blood, Grandpa putting the headless bird on the ground, its running around for a few moments …' Is my memory sanitized, or his infected by films about the French Revolution? In either case, Grandpa introduced my brother to death – and its messiness – better than he did me. 'Do you remember how Grandpa killed the geese before Christmas?' (I do not.) 'He used to chase the destined goose round its pen, flailing at it with a crowbar. When he finally got it, he would, for good measure, lay it on the ground, put the crowbar across its neck, and tug on its head.'

My brother remembers a ritual – never witnessed by me – which he called the Reading of the Diaries. Grandma and Grandpa each kept separate diaries, and of an evening would sometimes entertain themselves by reading out loud to one another what they had recorded on that very week several years previously. The entries were apparently of considerable banality but frequent disagreement. Grandpa:

‘Friday. Worked in garden. Planted potatoes.’ Grandma: ‘Nonsense. “Rained all day. Too wet to work in garden.”’

My brother also remembers that once, when he was very small, he went into Grandpa’s garden and pulled up all the onions. Grandpa beat him until he howled, then turned uncharacteristically white, confessed everything to our mother, and swore he would never again raise his hand to a child. Actually, my brother doesn’t remember any of this – neither the onions, nor the beating. He was just told the story repeatedly by our mother. And indeed, were he to remember it, he might well be wary. As a philosopher, he believes that memories are often false, ‘so much so that, on the Cartesian principle of the rotten apple, none is to be trusted unless it has some external support’. I am more trusting, or self-deluding, so shall continue as if all my memories are true.

Our mother was christened Kathleen Mabel. She hated the Mabel, and complained about it to Grandpa, whose explanation was that he ‘had once known a very nice girl called Mabel’. I have no idea about the progress or regress of her religious beliefs, though I own her prayer book, bound together with *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in soft brown suede, each volume signed in surprising green ink with her name and the date: ‘Dec: 25$^{t.h}$. 1932.’ I admire her punctuation: two full stops and a colon, with the stop beneath the ‘th’ placed exactly between the two letters. You don’t get punctuation like that nowadays.

In my childhood, the three unmentionable subjects were the traditional ones: religion, politics and sex. By the time my mother and I came to discuss these matters – the first two, that is, the third being permanently off the agenda – she was ‘true blue’ in politics, as I would guess she always had been. As for religion, she told me firmly that she didn’t want ‘any of that mumbo-jumbo’ at her funeral. So when the undertaker asked if I wanted the ‘religious symbols’

removed from the crematorium wall, I told him I thought that this is what she would have wanted.

The past conditional, by the way, is a tense of which my brother is highly suspicious. Waiting for the funeral to start, we had, not an argument – this would have been against all family tradition – but an exchange which demonstrated that if I am a rationalist by my own standards, I am a fairly feeble one by his. When our mother was first incapacitated by a stroke, she happily agreed that her granddaughter C. should have the use of her car: the last of a long sequence of Renaults, the marque to which she had maintained a francophiliac loyalty over four decades. Standing with my brother in the crematorium car park, I was looking out for the familiar French silhouette when my niece arrived at the wheel of her boyfriend R.'s car. I observed – mildly, I am sure – 'I think Ma would have wanted C. to come in *her* car.' My brother, just as mildly, took logical exception to this. He pointed out that there are the wants of the dead, i.e. things which people now dead once wanted; and there are hypothetical wants, i.e. things which people would or might have wanted. 'What Mother would have wanted' was a combination of the two: a hypothetical want of the dead, and therefore doubly questionable. 'We can only do what *we* want,' he explained; to indulge the maternal hypothetical was as irrational as if he were now to pay attention to his own past desires. I proposed in reply that we should try to do what she would have wanted, a) because we have to do *something*, and that something (unless we simply left her body to rot in the back garden) involves choices; and b) because we hope that when we die, others will do what we in our turn would have wanted.

I see my brother infrequently, and so am often startled by the way in which his mind works; but he is quite genuine in what he says. As I drove him back to London after the funeral, we had a – to me – even more peculiar exchange

about my niece and her boyfriend. They had been together a long time, though during a period of estrangement C. had taken up with another man. My brother and his wife had instantly disliked this interloper, and my sister-in-law had apparently taken a mere ten minutes to ‘sort him out’. I didn’t ask the manner of the sorting out. Instead, I asked, ‘But you approve of R.?’

‘It’s irrelevant,’ my brother replied, ‘whether or not I approve of R.’

‘No, it’s not. C. might want you to approve of him.’

‘On the contrary, she might want me *not* to approve of him.’

‘But either way, it’s not irrelevant to *her* whether or not you approve or disapprove.’

He thought this over for a moment. ‘You’re right,’ he said.

You can perhaps tell from these exchanges that he is the elder brother.

My mother had expressed no views about the music she wanted at her funeral. I chose the first movement of Mozart’s piano sonata in E flat major K282 – one of those long, stately unwindings and rewindings, grave even when turning sprightly. It seemed to last about fifteen minutes instead of the sleeve-noted seven, and I found myself wondering at times if this was another Mozartian repeat or the crematorium’s CD player skipping backwards. The previous year I had appeared on *Desert Island Discs*, where the Mozart I had chosen was the *Requiem*. Afterwards, my mother telephoned and picked up on the fact that I had described myself as an agnostic. She told me that this was how Dad used to describe himself – whereas she was an atheist. She made it sound as if being an agnostic was a

wishy-washy liberal position, as opposed to the truth-and-market-forces reality of atheism. ‘What’s all this about death, by the way?’ she continued. I explained that I didn’t like the idea of it. ‘You’re just like your father,’ she replied. ‘Maybe it’s your age. When you get to my age you won’t mind so much. I’ve seen the best of life anyway. And think about the Middle Ages – then their life expectancy was really short. Nowadays we live seventy, eighty, ninety years … People only believe in religion because they’re afraid of death.’ This was a typical statement from my mother: lucid, opinionated, explicitly impatient of opposing views. Her dominance of the family, and her certainties about the world, made things usefully clear in childhood, restrictive in adolescence, and grindingly repetitive in adulthood.

After her cremation, I retrieved my Mozart CD from the ‘organist’ who, I found myself reflecting, must nowadays get his full fee for putting on and taking off a single CD track. My father had been despatched, five years earlier, at a different crematorium, by a working organist earning his money honestly from Bach. Was this ‘what he would have wanted’? I don’t think he would have objected; he was a gentle, liberal-minded man who wasn’t much interested in music. In this, as in most things, he deferred – though not without many a quietly ironical aside – to his wife. His clothes, the house they lived in, the car they drove: such decisions were hers. When I was an unforgiving adolescent, I judged him weak. Later, I thought him compliant. Later still, autonomous in his views but disinclined to argue for them.

The first time I went to church with my family – for a cousin’s wedding – I watched in amazement as Dad dropped to his knees in the pew, then covered his forehead and eyes with one hand. Where did *that* come from, I asked myself, before making some half-heartedly imitative gesture of piety, attended by furtive squinting through the fingers. It was one of those moments when your parents

surprise you – not because you've learnt something new about them, but because you've discovered a further area of ignorance. Was my father merely being polite? Did he think that if he simply plonked himself down he would be taken for a Shelleyan atheist? I have no idea.

He died a modern death, in hospital, without his family, attended in his final minutes by a nurse, months – indeed, years – after medical science had prolonged his life to a point where the terms on which it was being offered were unimpressive. My mother had seen him a few days previously, but then suffered an attack of shingles. On that final visit, he had been very confused. She had asked him, characteristically, 'Do you know who I am? Because the last time I was here, you didn't know *what* I was.' My father had replied, just as characteristically, 'I think you're my wife.'

I drove my mother to the hospital, where we were given a black plastic bag and a creamy holdall. She sorted through both very quickly, knowing exactly what she wanted and what was to be left for – or at least with – the hospital. It was a shame, she said, that he never got to wear the big brown slippers with the easy Velcro fastenings that she'd bought him a few weeks earlier; unaccountably, to me, she took these home with her. She expressed a horror of being asked if she wanted to see Dad's body. She told me that when Grandpa died, Grandma had been 'useless' and had left her to do everything. Except that at the hospital, some wifely or atavistic need had kicked in, and Grandma had insisted on seeing her husband's body. My mother tried to dissuade her, but she was unbudgeable. They were taken to some mortuary viewing space, and Grandpa's corpse was displayed to them. Grandma turned to her daughter and said, 'Doesn't he look awful?'

When my mother died, the undertaker from a nearby village asked if the family wanted to see the body. I said yes; my brother no. Actually, his reply – when I telephoned

through the question – was, ‘Good God, no. I agree with Plato on that one.’ I didn’t have the text he was referring to immediately in mind. ‘What did Plato say?’ I asked. ‘That he didn’t believe in seeing dead bodies.’ When I turned up alone at the undertaker’s – which was merely the rear extension to a local haulage business – the funeral director said apologetically, ‘I’m afraid she’s only in the back room at the moment.’ I looked at him questioningly, and he elaborated: ‘She’s on a trolley.’ I found myself replying, ‘Oh, she didn’t stand on ceremony,’ though couldn’t claim to guess what she would, or wouldn’t, have wanted in the circumstances.

She lay in a small, clean room with a cross on the wall; she was indeed on a trolley, with the back of her head towards me as I went in, thus avoiding an instant face-to-face. She seemed, well, very dead: eyes closed, mouth slightly open, and more so on the left side than the right, which was just like her – she used to hang a cigarette from the right corner of her mouth and talk out of the opposite side until the ash grew precarious. I tried to imagine her awareness, such as it might have been, at the moment of extinction. This had occurred a couple of weeks after she was moved from hospital into a residential home. She was quite demented by this time, a dementia of alternating kinds: one in which she still believed herself in charge of things, constantly ticking off the nurses for imaginary mistakes; the other, acknowledging that she had lost control, in which she became a child again, with all her dead relatives still alive, and what her mother or grandmother had just said of pressing importance. Before her dementia, I frequently found myself switching off during her solipsistic monologues; suddenly, she had become painfully interesting. I kept wondering where all this stuff was coming from, and how the brain was manufacturing this counterfeit reality. Nor could I now feel any resentment that she only wanted to talk about herself.

I was told that two nurses had been with her at the moment of death, and were engaged in turning her over, when she had just ‘slipped away’. I like to imagine – because it would have been characteristic, and people should die as they have lived – that her last thought was addressed to herself and was something like, Oh, get on with it then. But this is sentimentalism – what she would have wanted (or rather, what I would have wanted for her) – and perhaps, if she was thinking anything, she was imagining herself a child again, being turned in a fretful fever by a pair of long-dead relatives.

At the undertaker’s, I touched her cheek several times, then kissed her at the hairline. Was she that cold because she’d been in the freezer, or because the dead are naturally so cold? And no, she didn’t look awful. There was nothing overpainted about her, and she would have been pleased to know that her hair was plausibly arranged (‘Of course I never dye it,’ she once boasted to my brother’s wife, ‘It’s all natural’). Wanting to see her dead came more, I admit, from writerly curiosity than filial feeling; but there was a bidding farewell to be done, for all my long exasperation with her. ‘Well done, Ma,’ I told her quietly. She had, indeed, done the dying ‘better’ than my father. He had endured a series of strokes, his decline stretching over years; she had gone from first attack to death altogether more efficiently and speedily. When I picked up her bag of clothes from the residential home (a phrase which used to make me wonder what an ‘unresidential home’ might be), it felt heavier than I expected. First I discovered a full bottle of Harvey’s Bristol Cream, and then, in a square cardboard box, an untouched birthday cake, shop-bought by village friends who had visited her on her final, eighty-second birthday.

My father had died at the same age. I had always imagined that his would be the harder death, because I had loved him the more, whereas at best I could only be

irritatedly fond of my mother. But it worked the other way round: what I had expected to be the lesser death proved more complicated, more hazardous. His death was just his death; her death was their death. And the subsequent house-clearing turned into an exhumation of what we had been as a family – not that we really were one after the first thirteen or fourteen years of my life. Now, for the first time, I went through my mother's handbag. Apart from the usual stuff, it contained a cutting from the *Guardian* listing the twenty-five greatest post-war English batsmen (though she never read the *Guardian*); and a photo of our childhood dog Max, a golden retriever. This was inscribed on the back in an unfamiliar hand '*Maxim: le chien*', and must have been taken, or at least annotated, in the early 1950s by P., one of my father's French *assistants*.

P. was from Corsica, an easy-going fellow with what seemed to my parents the typically Gallic trait of blowing his month's salary as soon as it arrived. He came to us for a few nights until he could find lodgings, and ended up staying the whole year. My brother went into the bathroom one morning and discovered this strange man in front of the shaving mirror. 'If you go away,' the foam-clad face informed him, 'I will tell you a story about Mr Beezy-Weezy.' My brother went away, and P. turned out to know a whole series of adventures that had befallen Mr Beezy-Weezy, none of which I can remember. He also had an artistic streak: he used to make railway stations out of cornflakes packets, and once gave my parents – perhaps in lieu of rent – two small landscapes he had painted. They hung on the wall throughout my childhood, and struck me as unimaginably skilful; but then, anything remotely representational would have done so.

As for Max, he had either run away or – since we could not imagine him wishing to abandon us – been stolen, shortly after the photo was taken; and wherever he had gone, must have been dead himself for more than forty

years. Though my father would have liked it, my mother would never have another dog after that.

Given my family background of attenuated belief combined with brisk irreligion, I might, as part of adolescent rebelliousness, have become devout. But neither my father's agnosticism nor my mother's atheism were ever fully expressed, let alone presented as exemplary attitudes, so perhaps they didn't justify revolt. I might, I suppose, if it had been possible, have become Jewish. I went to a school where, out of 900 boys, about 150 were Jewish. On the whole, they seemed both socially and sartorially more advanced; they had better shoes – one contemporary even had a pair of elastic-sided Chelsea boots – and they knew about girls. They also got extra holidays, an obvious advantage. And it would have usefully shocked my parents, who had the low-level anti-Semitism of their age and class. (As the credits rolled at the end of a TV play and a name like Aaronson occurred, one or other of them might observe wryly, 'Another Welshman.') Not that they behaved any differently towards my Jewish friends, one of whom was named, rightly it seemed, Alex Brilliant. The son of a tobacconist, Alex was reading Wittgenstein at sixteen, and writing poetry which pulsed with ambiguities – double, triple, quadruple, like heart bypasses. He was better than me at English, and took a scholarship to Cambridge, after which I lost sight of him. Down the years I would occasionally imagine his presumed success in one of the liberal professions. I was over fifty when I learnt that such biography-giving was an idle fantasy. Alex had killed himself – with pills, over a woman – in his late twenties, half my life ago.

So I had no faith to lose, only a resistance, which felt more heroic than it was, to the mild regime of God-referring that an English education entailed: scripture lessons, morning prayers and hymns, the annual Thanksgiving service in St Paul's Cathedral. And that was it, apart from the role of Second Shepherd in a nativity play at my primary school. I was never baptised, never sent to Sunday school. I have never been to a normal church service in my life. I do baptisms, weddings, funerals. I am constantly going into churches, but for architectural reasons; and, more widely, to get a sense of what Englishness once was.

My brother had marginally more liturgical experience than I did. As a Wolf Cub, he went to a couple of regular church services. 'I seem to recall being mystified, an infantile anthropologist among the anthropophagi.' When I ask how he lost his faith, he replies, 'I never lost it since I never had it to lose. But I realized it was all a load of balls on 7 Feb 1952, at 9.00. Mr Ebbets, headmaster of Derwentwater Primary School, announced that the King had died, that he had gone to eternal glory and happiness in Heaven with God, and that in consequence we were all going to wear black armbands for a month. I thought that there was something fishy there, and How Right I Was. No scales fell from my eyes, there was no sense of loss, of a gap in my life, etc. etc. I hope,' he adds, 'that this story is true. It is certainly a very clear and lasting memory; but you know what memory is.'

My brother would have been just nine at the time of George VI's death (I was six, and at the same school, but have no memory of Mr Ebbets' speech, or of black armbands). My own final letting go of the remnant, or possibility, of religion, happened at a later age. As an adolescent, hunched over some book or magazine in the family bathroom, I used to tell myself that God couldn't possibly exist because the notion that He might be

watching me while I masturbated was absurd; even more absurd was the notion that all my dead ancestors might be lined up and watching too. I had other, more rational arguments, but what did for Him was this powerfully persuasive feeling – a self-interested one, too, of course. The thought of Grandma and Grandpa observing what I was up to would have seriously put me off my stroke.

As I record this now, however, I wonder why I didn't think through more of the possibilities. Why did I assume that God, if He *was* watching, necessarily disapproved of how I was spilling my seed? Why did it not occur to me that if the sky did not fall in as it witnessed my zealous and unflagging self-abuse, this might be because the sky did not judge it a sin? Nor did I have the imagination to conceive of my dead ancestors equally smiling on my actions: go on, my son, enjoy it while you've got it, there won't be much more of that once you're a disembodied spirit, so have another one for us. Perhaps Grandpa would have taken his celestial pipe out of his mouth and whispered complicitly, 'I once knew a very nice girl called Mabel.'

At primary school, we had our voices tested. One by one, we went up to the front of the class and tried to sing an easy tune to the teacher's accompaniment. Then we were placed into one of two groups: The High Voices or The Low Voices (a musical Rest of the World). These labels were kindly euphemisms, given that our voices were years away from breaking; and I remember my parents' indulgence when I reported, as if it were an achievement, the group into which I had been put. My brother was also a Low Voice; though he had a greater humiliation in store. At our next school, we were tested again, and divided – my brother reminds me – into groups A, B and C by 'a repulsive

man called Walsh or Welsh'. The reason for my brother's continuing animus more than half a century on? 'He created group D especially for me. It took me some years to stop hating music.'

At this school, music came every morning attached to a thunderous organ and nonsensical hymns. 'There is a green hill far away / Without a city wall / Where the dear Lord was crucified / Who died to save us all.' The tune was less dreary than most; but why would anyone want a city wall built around a green hill anyway? Later, when I understood that 'without' meant 'outside', I switched my puzzlement to the 'green'. There is a *green* hill? In Palestine? We didn't do much geography now that we were in long trousers (if you were clever you gave it up), but even I knew it was all sand and stones out there. I didn't feel an anthropologist among the anthropophagi – I was now part of a quorum of scepticism – but I certainly sensed a distance between words familiar to me and meanings attached to them.

Once a year, on Lord Mayor's Prize Day, we would sing 'Jerusalem', which had been adopted as the school song. It was a tradition among the rowdier boys – a posse of unreformed Low Voices – to launch at a given moment into an unmarked and frowned-upon fortissimo: 'Bring me my arrows [*slight pause*] OF-DEE-SIRE.' Did I know the words were by Blake? I doubt it. Nor was there any attempt to promote religion through the beauty of its language (perhaps this was regarded as self-evident). We had an elderly Latin master who liked to stray from the script into what posed as private musings but which were, I now realize, a calculated technique. He came on like a prim and sober clergyman, but would then mutter, as if it had just occurred to him, something like, 'She was only an Arab's daughter, but you should have seen Gaza strip,' a joke far too risqué to retail to my own school-teaching parents. On another occasion, he grew satirical about the absurd title of a book called *The Bible Designed to be Read as Literature*.

We chuckled along with him, but from a contrary angle: the Bible (boring) was obviously *not* designed to be read as literature (exciting), QED.

Among us nominal Christians, there were a few boys who were devout, but they were regarded as slightly weird, as rare – and as weird – as the master who wore a wedding ring and could be made to blush (he was devout too). In late adolescence, I had an out-of-body experience once, possibly twice: the sense of being up near the ceiling looking down at my untenanted flesh. I mentioned this to the schoolfriend with the elastic-sided boots – but not to my family; and while I found it a matter for mild pride (something's happening!), I didn't deduce anything significant, let alone religious.

It was probably Alex Brilliant who passed on Nietzsche's news that God was officially dead, which meant we could all wank away the merrier for it. You made your own life, didn't you – that was what Existentialism was all about. And our zestful young English master was implicitly against religion. At least, he quoted the Blake that sounded like the opposite of 'Jerusalem': 'For Old Nobodaddy aloft / Farted & Belch'd & cough'd.' God farted! God belched! That proved He didn't exist! (Again, I never thought to take these human traits as arguments for the existence, indeed the sympathetic nature, of the deity.) He also quoted to us Eliot's bleak summary of human life: birth, and copulation, and death. Half-way into his own natural span, this English master, like Alex Brilliant, was to kill himself, in a pills-and-drink suicide pact with his wife.

I went up to Oxford. I was asked to call on the college chaplain, who explained that as a scholar I had the right to read the lesson in chapel. Newly freed from the compulsions of hypocritical worship, I replied, 'I'm afraid I'm a happy atheist.' Nothing ensued – no clap of thunder, loss of scholar's gown, or rictus of disapproval; I finished my sherry and left. A day or two later, the captain of boats

knocked on my door and asked if I wanted to try out for the river. I replied – with perhaps greater boldness, having faced down the chaplain – 'I'm afraid I'm an aesthete.' I wince now for my reply (and rather wish I'd rowed); but again, nothing happened. No gang of hearties broke into my room looking to smash the blue china I did not possess, or to thrust my bookish head down a lavatory bowl.

I was able to state my position, but too shy to argue it. Had I been articulate – or crass – I might have explained to both cleric and oarsman that being an atheist and being an aesthete went together: just as being Muscular and being Christian once had for them. (Although sport might still provide a useful analogy: hadn't Camus said that the proper response to life's meaninglessness was to invent rules for the game, as we had done with football?) I might have gone on – in my fantasy rebuttal – to quote them Gautier's lines: '*Les dieux eux-mêmes meurent*. / *Mais les vers souverains* / *Demeurent* / *Plus forts que les airains*.' [The Gods themselves die out, but Poetry, stronger even than bronze, survives everything.] I might have explained how religious rapture had long ago given way to aesthetic rapture, and perhaps topped it off with a cheesy sneer about St Teresa manifestly not seeing God in that famous ecstatic sculpture but enjoying something altogether more corporeal.

When I said that I was a happy atheist, the adjective should be taken as applying to that noun and no further. I was happy not to believe in God; I was happy to have been academically successful so far; and that was about it. I was consumed with anxieties I tried to hide. If I was intellectually capable (while suspecting myself of being merely a trained exam-passer), I was socially, emotionally and sexually immature. And if I was happy to be free of Old Nobodaddy, I wasn't blithe about the consequences. No God, no Heaven, no afterlife; so death, however distant, was on the agenda in quite a different way.

While I was at university, I spent a year in France, teaching at a Catholic school in Brittany. The priests I lived among surprised me by being as humanly various as civilians. One kept bees, another was a Druid; one bet on horses, another was anti-Semitic; this young one talked to his pupils about masturbation; that old one was addicted to films on television, even if he liked to dismiss them afterwards with the lofty phrase ‘lacking both interest and morality’. Some of the priests were intelligent and sophisticated, others stupid and credulous; some evidently pious, others sceptical to the point of blasphemy. I remember the shock around the refectory table when the subversive Père Marais started baiting the Druidical Père Calvard about which of their home villages got a better quality of Holy Ghost coming down at Pentecost. It was also here that I saw my first dead body: that of Père Roussel, a young teaching priest. His corpse was laid out in an anteroom by the school’s front entrance; boys and staff were encouraged to visit him. I did no more than gaze through the glass of the double doors, telling myself that this was tact; whereas in all probability it was only fear.

The priests treated me in a kindly way, a little teasing, a little incomprehending. ‘Ah,’ they would say, stopping me in the corridor, touching my arm and offering a shy smile, ‘*La perfide Albion*.’ Among their number was a certain Père Hubert de Goësbriand, a dim if good-hearted fellow who might have acquired his grand, aristocratic Breton name in a raffle, so little did it fit him. He was in his early fifties, plump, slow, hairless and deaf. His main pleasure in life was to play practical jokes at mealtimes on the timid school secretary, M. Lhomer: surreptitiously stuffing cutlery into his pocket, blowing cigarette smoke in his face, tickling his neck, shoving the mustard pot unexpectedly under his