SHORTLISTED FOR THE BAILEYS WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION 2015

Rachel Cusk

Outline

'One of the most daringly original and entertaining pieces of fiction I've ever read' *Observer*

'Mesmerising' *New Yorker*

'Brilliant…absorbing, thought-provoking' *Evening Standard*

VINTAGE

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About the Book

A woman arrives in Athens in the height of summer to teach a writing course. Once there, she becomes the audience to a chain of narratives as the people she meets tell her one after another the stories of their lives.

Beginning with the neighbouring passenger on the flight out and his tales of fast boats and failed marriages, the storytellers talk of their loves and ambitions and pains, their anxieties, their perceptions and daily lives. In the stifling heat and noise of the city the sequence of voices begins to weave a complex human tapestry: the experience of loss, the nature of family life, the difficulty of intimacy and the mystery of creativity itself.

About the Author

Rachel Cusk was born in 1967 and is the author of seven novels: *Saving Agnes*, which won the Whitbread First Novel Award, *The Temporary*, *The Country Life*, which won a Somerset Maugham Award, *The Lucky Ones*, which was shortlisted for the Whitbread Novel Award, *In the Fold*, *Arlington Park*, which was shortlisted for the Orange Prize and *The Bradshaw Variations*. Her non-fiction books are *A Life's Work*, *The Last Supper* and *Aftermath*. In 2003 she was chosen as one of Granta's Best of Young Novelists.

ALSO BY RACHEL CUSK

Fiction

Saving Agnes
The Temporary
The Country Life
The Lucky Ones
In the Fold
Arlington Park
The Bradshaw Variations

Non-fiction

A Life's Work
The Last Supper
Aftermath

RACHEL CUSK

Outline

VINTAGE

I

Before the flight I was invited for lunch at a London club with a billionaire I'd been promised had liberal credentials. He talked in his open-necked shirt about the new software he was developing, that could help organisations identify the employees most likely to rob and betray them in the future. We were meant to be discussing a literary magazine he was thinking of starting up: unfortunately I had to leave before we arrived at that subject. He insisted on paying for a taxi to the airport, which was useful since I was late and had a heavy suitcase.

The billionaire had been keen to give me the outline of his life story, which had begun unprepossessingly and ended – obviously – with him being the relaxed, well-heeled man who sat across the table from me today. I wondered whether in fact what he wanted now was to be a writer, with the literary magazine as his entrée. A lot of people want to be writers: there was no reason to think you couldn't buy your way into it. This man had bought himself into, and out of, a great many things. He mentioned a scheme he was working on, to eradicate lawyers from people's personal lives. He was also developing a blueprint for a floating wind farm big enough to accommodate the entire community of people needed to service and run it: the gigantic platform could be located far out to sea, thus removing the unsightly turbines from the stretch of coast where he was hoping to pilot the proposal and where, incidentally, he owned a house. On Sundays he played drums in a rock band, just for fun. He was expecting his eleventh child, which wasn't as bad as it sounded when you

considered that he and his wife had once adopted quadruplets from Guatemala. I was finding it difficult to assimilate everything I was being told. The waitresses kept bringing more things, oysters, relishes, special wines. He was easily distracted, like a child with too many Christmas presents. But when he put me in the taxi he said, enjoy yourself in Athens, though I didn't remember telling him that was where I was going.

On the tarmac at Heathrow the planeful of people waited silently to be taken into the air. The air hostess stood in the aisle and mimed with her props as the recording played. We were strapped into our seats, a field of strangers, in a silence like the silence of a congregation while the liturgy is read. She showed us the life jacket with its little pipe, the emergency exits, the oxygen mask dangling from a length of clear tubing. She led us through the possibility of death and disaster, as the priest leads the congregation through the details of purgatory and hell; and no one jumped up to escape while there was still time. Instead we listened or half-listened, thinking about other things, as though some special hardness had been bestowed on us by this coupling of formality with doom. When the recorded voice came to the part about the oxygen masks, the hush remained unbroken: no one protested, or spoke up to disagree with this commandment that one should take care of others only after taking care of oneself. Yet I wasn't sure it was altogether true.

On one side of me sat a swarthy boy with lolling knees, whose fat thumbs sped around the screen of a gaming console. On the other was a small man in a pale linen suit, richly tanned, with a silver plume of hair. Outside, the turgid summer afternoon lay stalled over the runway; little airport vehicles raced unconstrained across the flat distances, skating and turning and circling like toys, and further away still was the silver thread of the motorway that ran and glinted like a brook bounded by the

monotonous fields. The plane began to move, trundling forward so that the vista appeared to unfreeze into motion, flowing past the windows first slowly and then faster, until there was the feeling of effortful, half-hesitant lifting as it detached itself from the earth. There was a moment in which it seemed impossible that this could happen. But then it did.

The man to my right turned and asked me the reason for my visit to Athens. I said I was going there for work.

'I hope you are staying near water,' he said. 'Athens will be very hot.'

I said I was afraid that was not the case, and he raised his eyebrows, which were silver and grew unexpectedly coarsely and wildly from his forehead, like grasses in a rocky place. It was this eccentricity that had made me answer him. The unexpected sometimes looks like a prompting of fate.

'The heat has come early this year,' he said. 'Normally one is safe until much later. It can be very unpleasant if you aren't used to it.'

In the juddering cabin the lights flickered fitfully on; there was the sound of doors opening and slamming, and tremendous clattering noises, and people were stirring, talking, standing up. A man's voice was talking over the intercom; there was a smell of coffee and food; the air hostesses stalked purposefully up and down the narrow carpeted aisle and their nylon stockings made a rasping sound as they passed. My neighbour told me that he made this journey once or twice a month. He used to keep a flat in London, in Mayfair, 'but these days,' he said with a matter-of-fact set to his mouth, 'I prefer to stay at the Dorchester.'

He spoke a refined and formal kind of English that did not seem wholly natural, as though at some point it had been applied to him carefully with a brush, like paint. I asked him what his nationality was.

‘I was sent to an English boarding school at the age of seven,’ he replied. ‘You might say I have the mannerisms of an Englishman but the heart of a Greek. I am told,’ he added, ‘it would be much worse the other way around.’

His parents were both Greeks, he continued, but at a certain moment they had relocated the whole household – themselves, four sons, their own parents and an assortment of uncles and aunts – to London, and had begun to conduct themselves in the style of the English upper classes, sending the four boys away to school and establishing a home that became a forum for advantageous social connections, with an inexhaustible stream of aristocrats, politicians and money-makers crossing the threshold. I asked how it was that they had gained access to this foreign milieu, and he shrugged.

‘Money is a country all its own,’ he said. ‘My parents were ship-owners; the family business was an international enterprise, despite the fact that we had lived until now on the small island where both of them were born, an island you would certainly not have heard of, despite its prolixity to some well-known tourist destinations.’

Proximity, I said. I think you mean proximity.

‘I do beg your pardon,’ he said. ‘I mean, of course, proximity.’

But like all wealthy people, he continued, his parents had long outgrown their origins and moved in a borderless sphere among other people of wealth and importance. They retained, of course, a grand house on the island, and that remained their domestic establishment while their children were young; but when the time came to send their sons to school, they relocated themselves to England, where they had many contacts, including some, he said rather proudly, that brought them at least to the peripheries of Buckingham Palace.

Theirs had always been the pre-eminent family of the island: two strains of the local aristocracy had been united

by the parental marriage, and what's more, two shipping fortunes consolidated. But the culture of the place was unusual in that it was matriarchal. It was women, not men, who held authority; property was passed not from father to son but from mother to daughter. This, my neighbour said, created familial tensions that were the obverse to those he encountered on his arrival in England. In the world of his childhood, a son was already a disappointment; he himself, the last in a long line of such disappointments, was treated with a special ambivalence, in that his mother wished to believe he was a girl. His hair was kept in long ringlets; he was clothed in dresses and called by the girl's name his parents had chosen in expectation of being given at long last an heir. This unusual situation, my neighbour said, had ancient causes. From its earliest history, the island economy had revolved around the extraction of sponges from the sea bed, and the young men of the community had acquired the skill of deep diving out at sea. But it was a dangerous occupation and hence their life expectancy was extraordinarily low. In this situation, by the repeated death of husbands, the women had gained control of their financial affairs and what's more had passed that control on to their daughters.

'It is hard,' he said, 'to imagine the world as it was in the heyday of my parents, in some ways so pleasurable and in others so callous. For example, my parents had a fifth child, also a boy, whose brain had been damaged at birth, and when the household moved they simply left him there on the island, in the care of a succession of nurses whose credentials – in those days and from that distance – I'm afraid no one cared to investigate too closely.'

He lived there still, an ageing man with the mind of an infant, unable, of course, to give his own side of the story. Meanwhile my neighbour and his brothers entered the chilly waters of an English public school education, learning to think and speak like English boys. My

neighbour's ringlets were clipped off, much to his relief, and for the first time in his life he experienced cruelty, and along with it certain new kinds of unhappiness: loneliness, homesickness, the longing for his mother and father. He rifled around in the breast pocket of his suit and took out a soft black leather wallet, from which he extracted a creased monochrome photograph of his parents: a man of rigidly upright bearing in a fitted sort of frock coat buttoned to the throat, whose parted hair and thick straight brows and large scrolled moustache were so black as to give him an appearance of extraordinary ferocity; and beside him, a woman with an unsmiling face as round and hard and inscrutable as a coin. The photograph was taken in the late nineteen-thirties, my neighbour said, before he himself was born. The marriage was already unhappy, however, the father's ferocity and the mother's intransigence being more than cosmetic. Theirs was a tremendous battle of wills, in which no one ever succeeded in separating the combatants; except, very briefly, when they died. But that, he said with a faint smile, is a story for another time.

All this time, the air hostess had been advancing slowly along the aisle, pushing a metal trolley from which she was dispensing plastic trays of food and drink. She had now come to our row: she passed along the white plastic trays, and I offered one to the boy on my left, who silently lifted up his gaming console with both hands so that I could place it on the folded-down table in front of him. My right-hand neighbour and I lifted the lids of ours, so that tea could be poured into the white plastic cups that came with the tray. He began to ask me questions, as though he had learned to remind himself to do so, and I wondered what or who had taught him that lesson, which many people never learn. I said that I lived in London, having very recently moved from the house in the countryside where I had lived alone with my children for the past three years, and where for

the seven years before that we had lived together with their father. It had been, in other words, our family home, and I had stayed to watch it become the grave of something I could no longer definitively call either a reality or an illusion.

There was a pause in which we drank our tea, and ate the soft cake-like little biscuits that came with it. Through the windows was a purple near-darkness. The engines roared steadily. The inside of the plane had become darker too, intersected with beams from the overhead spotlights. It was difficult to study my neighbour's face from the adjacent seat but in the light-inflected darkness it had become a landscape of peaks and crevices, from the centre of which rose the extraordinary hook of his nose, casting deep ravines of shadow on either side so that I could barely see his eyes. His lips were thin and his mouth wide and slightly gaping; the part between his nose and upper lip was long and fleshy and he touched it frequently, so that even when he smiled his teeth remained hidden. It was impossible, I said in response to his question, to give the reasons why the marriage had ended: among other things a marriage is a system of belief, a story, and though it manifests itself in things that are real enough, the impulse that drives it is ultimately mysterious. What was real, in the end, was the loss of the house, which had become the geographical location for things that had gone absent and which represented, I supposed, the hope that they might one day return. To move from the house was to declare, in a way, that we had stopped waiting; we could no longer be found at the usual number, the usual address. My younger son, I told him, has the very annoying habit of immediately leaving the place where you have agreed to meet him, if you aren't there when he arrives. Instead he goes in search of you, and becomes frustrated and lost. I couldn't find you! he cries afterwards, invariably aggrieved. But the only hope of finding anything is to stay exactly where you are, at the

agreed place. It’s just a question of how long you can hold out.

‘My first marriage,’ my neighbour replied, after a pause, ‘often seems to me to have ended for the silliest of reasons. When I was a boy I used to watch the hay-carts coming back from the fields, so overloaded it seemed a miracle they didn’t tip. They would jolt up and down and sway alarmingly from side to side, but amazingly they never went over. And then one day I saw it, the cart on its side, the hay spilled all over the place, people running around shouting. I asked what had happened and the man told me they had hit a bump in the road. I always remembered that,’ he said, ‘how inevitable it seemed and yet how silly. And it was the same with my first wife and me,’ he said. ‘We hit a bump in the road, and over we went.’

It had, he now realised, been a happy relationship, the most harmonious of his life. He and his wife had met and got engaged as teenagers; they had never argued, until the argument in which everything between them was broken. They had two children, and had amassed considerable wealth: they had a large house outside Athens, a London flat, a place in Geneva; they had horses and skiing holidays and a forty-foot yacht moored in the waters of the Aegean. They were both still young enough to believe that this principle of growth was exponential; that life was only expansive, and broke the successive vessels in which you tried to contain it in its need to expand more. After the argument, reluctant to move definitively out of the house, my neighbour went to live on the yacht in its mooring. It was summer and the yacht was luxurious; he could swim, and fish, and entertain friends. For a few weeks he lived in a state of pure illusion which was really numbness, like the numbness that follows an injury, before pain starts to make its way through it, slowly but relentlessly finding a path through the dense analgesic fog. The weather broke; the yacht became cold and uncomfortable. His wife’s father

summoned him to a meeting at which he was asked to relinquish any claim on their shared assets, and he agreed. He believed he could afford to be generous, that he would make it all back again. He was thirty-six years old and still felt the force of exponential growth in his veins, of life straining to burst the vessel in which it had been contained. He could have it all again, with the difference that this time he would want what he had.

'Though I have discovered,' he said, touching his fleshy upper lip, 'that that is harder than it sounds.'

All this did not, of course, come to pass as he had imagined it. The bump in the road hadn't only upset his marriage; it caused him to veer off on to a different road altogether, a road that was but a long, directionless detour, a road he had no real business being on and that sometimes he still felt himself to be travelling even to this day. Like the loose stitch that causes the whole garment to unravel, it was hard to piece back this chain of events to its original flaw. Yet these events had constituted the majority of his adult life. It was nearly thirty years since his first marriage ended, and the further he got from that life, the more real it became to him. Or not real exactly, he said – what had happened since had been real enough. The word he was looking for was authentic: his first marriage had been authentic in a way that nothing ever had again. The older he got, the more it represented to him a kind of home, a place to which he yearned to return. Though when he remembered it honestly, and even more so when he actually spoke to his first wife – which these days was rarely – the old feelings of constriction would return. All the same, it seemed to him now that that life had been lived almost unconsciously, that he had been lost in it, absorbed in it, as you can be absorbed in a book, believing in its events and living entirely through and with its characters. Never again since had he been able to absorb himself; never again had he been able to believe in that way.

Perhaps it was that – the loss of belief – that constituted his yearning for the old life. Whatever it was, he and his wife had built things that had flourished, had together expanded the sum of what they were and what they had; life had responded willingly to them, had treated them abundantly, and this – he now saw – was what had given him the confidence to break it all, break it with what now seemed to him to be an extraordinary casualness, because he thought there would be more.

More what? I asked.

'More – life,' he said, opening his hands in a gesture of receipt. 'And more affection,' he added, after a pause. 'I wanted more affection.'

He replaced the photograph of his parents in his wallet. There was now blackness at the windows. In the cabin people were reading, sleeping, talking. A man in long baggy shorts walked up and down the aisle jiggling a baby on his shoulder. The plane seemed stilled, almost motionless; there was so little interface between inside and outside, so little friction, that it was hard to believe we were moving forward. The electric light, with the absolute darkness outside, made people look very fleshly and real, their detail so unmediated, so impersonal, so infinite. Each time the man with the baby passed I saw the network of creases in his shorts, his freckled arms covered in coarse reddish fur, the pale, mounded skin of his midriff where his T-shirt had ridden up, and the tender wrinkled feet of the baby on his shoulder, the little hunched back, the soft head with its primitive whorl of hair.

My neighbour turned to me again, and asked me what work it was that was taking me to Athens. For the second time I felt the conscious effort of his enquiry, as though he had trained himself in the recovery of objects that were falling from his grasp. I remembered the way, when each of my sons was a baby, they would deliberately drop things from their high chair in order to watch them fall to the

floor, an activity as delightful to them as its consequences were appalling. They would stare down at the fallen thing – a half-eaten rusk, or a plastic ball – and become increasingly agitated by its failure to return. Eventually they would begin to cry, and usually found that the fallen object came back to them by that route. It always surprised me that their response to this chain of events was to repeat it: as soon as the object was in their hands they would drop it again, leaning over to watch it fall. Their delight never lessened, and nor did their distress. I always expected that at some point they would realise the distress was unnecessary and would choose to avoid it, but they never did. The memory of suffering had no effect whatever on what they elected to do: on the contrary, it compelled them to repeat it, for the suffering was the magic that caused the object to come back and allowed the delight in dropping it to become possible again. Had I refused to return it the very first time they dropped it, I suppose they would have learned something very different, though what that might have been I wasn't sure.

I told him I was a writer, and was going to Athens for a couple of days to teach a course at a summer school there. The course was entitled 'How to Write': a number of different writers were teaching on it, and since there is no one way to write I supposed we would give the students contradictory advice. They were mostly Greeks, I had been told, though for the purposes of this course they were expected to write in English. Other people were sceptical about that idea but I didn't see what was wrong with it. They could write in whatever language they wanted: it made no difference to me. Sometimes, I said, the loss of transition became the gain of simplicity. Teaching was just a way of making a living, I continued. But I had one or two friends in Athens I might see while I was there.

A writer, my neighbour said, inclining his head in a gesture that could have conveyed either respect for the

profession or a total ignorance of it. I had noticed, when I first sat down beside him, that he was reading a well-thumbed Wilbur Smith: this, he now said, was not entirely representative of his reading tastes, though it was true he lacked discrimination where fiction was concerned. His interest was in books of information, of facts and the interpretation of facts, and he was confident that he was not unsophisticated here in his preferences. He could recognise a fine prose style; one of his favourite writers, for example, was John Julius Norwich. But in fiction, admittedly, he was uneducated. He removed the Wilbur Smith from the seat pocket, where it still remained, and plunged it into the briefcase at his feet so that it was out of sight, as though wishing to disown it, or perhaps thinking that I might forget I had seen it. As it happened I was no longer interested in literature as a form of snobbery or even of self-definition – I had no desire to prove that one book was better than another: in fact, if I read something I admired I found myself increasingly disinclined to mention it at all. What I knew personally to be true had come to seem unrelated to the process of persuading others. I did not, any longer, want to persuade anyone of anything.

'My second wife,' my neighbour said presently, 'had never read a book in her life.'

She was absolutely ignorant, he continued, even of basic history and geography, and would say the most embarrassing things in company without any sense of shame at all. On the contrary, it angered her when people spoke of things she had no knowledge of: when a Venezuelan friend came to visit, for instance, she refused to believe that such a country existed because she had never heard of it. She herself was English, and so exquisitely beautiful it was hard not to credit her with some inner refinement; but though her nature did contain some surprises, they were not of a particularly pleasant kind. He often invited her parents to stay, as though by studying