

Julian Barnes

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to Pat

1: I Remember You

Stuart Hello!

We've met before. Stuart. Stuart Hughes.

Yes, I *am* sure. Positive. About ten years ago.

It's all right – it happens. You don't have to pretend. But the point is, I remember you. *I* remember *you*. I'd hardly forget, would I? A bit over ten years, now I come to think of it.

Well, I've changed. Sure. This is all grey for a start. Can't even call it pepper-and-salt any more, can I?

Oh, and by the way, *you*'ve changed too. You probably think you're pretty much the same as you were back then. Believe me, you aren't.

Oliver What's that companionable warble from the neighbouring wankpit, that snuffle and stamp from the padded loose-box? Could it be my dear, my old – old as in the sense of former – friend Stuart?

'I remember you.' How very Stuart. He is so old-, so former-fashioned that he likes naff songs which actually predate him. I mean, it's one thing to be hung up on cheap music synchronous with the primal engorgement of your own libidinous organs, be it Randy Newman or Luigi Nono. But to be hung up on the sun-lounger singalongeries of a previous generation – that's so very, so touchingly Stuart, don't you find?

Lose that puzzled expression. Frank Ifield. 'I Remember You.' Or rather, I remember yoo-oo,/ You're the one that made my dreams come troo-oo. Yes? 1962. The Australian yodeller in the sheepskin car-coat? Indeed. Indeedy-doo-oo. And what a sociological paradox he must have represented. No disrespect to our bronzed and Bondi'd cousins, of course. In the world's fawning obeisance before every cultural sub-grouping, let it not be said that I have anything against an Australian yodeller *per se*. You might be one yourself. If I prod you, do ye not yodel? In which case, I would give you honest eye-contact and an indiscriminatory handshake. I would welcome you into the brotherhood of man. Along with the Swiss cricketer.

And if – by some happy whim – you actually are a Swiss cricketer, an off-spinner from the Bernese Oberland, then let me just say, simply: 1962 was the very year of the Beatles' first revolution at forty-five turns per minute, and Stuart sings Frank Ifield. I rest my case.

I'm Oliver, by the way. Yes, I know you know. I could tell you remembered *me*.

Gillian Gillian. You may or may not remember me. Is there some problem?

What you have to understand is that Stuart wants you to like him, needs you to like him, whereas Oliver has a certain difficulty imagining that you won't. That's a sceptical look you're giving me. But the truth is, over the years I've watched people take against Oliver and fall under his spell almost at the same time. Of course, there've been exceptions. Still, be warned.

And me? Well, I'd prefer you to like me rather than the reverse, but that's normal, isn't it? Depending on who *you* are, of course.

Stuart I wasn't actually referring to the song at all.

Gillian Look, I actually haven't the time. Sophie's got music today. But I've always thought of Stuart and Oliver as opposite poles of something . . . of growing up, perhaps. Stuart believed that growing up was about fitting in, about pleasing people, becoming a member of society. Oliver didn't have that problem, he always had more self-confidence. What's that word for plants which move in relation to the sun? Helio something. That's what Stuart was like. Whereas Oliver –

Oliver – was *le roi soleil*, right? The nicest spousal compliment I've had in some time. I've been called some things in this sublunary smidgeon which goes by the name of life, but King Sol is a new one. Phoebus. Phoe-Phi-Pho-Phumbus –

Gillian – *tropic*. Heliotropic, that's the word.

Oliver Have you noticed this change in Gillian? The way she puts people into categories? It's probably her French blood. She's half French – you remember that? 'Half French on her mother's side': that ought to mean quarter French, logically, don't you think? Yet what, as all the great moralists and philosophers have noted, has logic got to do with life?

Now, had Stuart been half French, in 1962 he would have been whistling Johnny Hallyday's Gallic version of 'Let's Twist Again'. That's a thought, isn't it? A pungent *pensée*. And here's another: Hallyday was half Belgian. On his father's side.

Stuart In 1962 I was four years old. Just for the record.

Gillian Actually, I don't think I do put people into categories. It's just that if there are two people in the world I

understand, they're Stuart and Oliver. After all, I have been married to both of them.

Stuart Logic. Did someone use the word? I'll give you logic. You go away, and people think you've stayed the same. That's the worst piece of logic I've come across in years.

Oliver Misprise me not about *les Belges*, by the way. When some jaunty little dinner-table patriot ups and demands 'Name me six famous Belgians', I'm the one with his hand in the air. Undeterred by the words 'Apart from Simenon'.

It may not be to do with her being French at all. It could be middle-age. A process that happens to some, if not necessarily all of us. With Gill the train is coming into the station roughly on time, steam activating its beloved whistle and the boiler a tad hot and bothered. But ask yourself when Stuart became middle-aged and the only area for debate is whether it was before or after his testicles descended. Have you seen that photo of him in his pram wearing a little three-piece suit and pinstripe nappies?

Whereas Oliver? Oliver long ago decided – no, knew instinctively – that middle-age was *infra dig*, *déclassé* and generally below the salt as a condition. Oliver is planning to compress middle-age into a single afternoon of lying down with a migraine. He believes in youth, and he believes in wisdom, and plans to pass from wise youth to young

wisdom with the help of a palmful of paracetamol and an eye mask from some exotic airline.

Stuart Someone once pointed out that you can recognise a complete egomaniac by the way they refer to themselves in the third person. Even royalty doesn't use the royal plural any more. But there are sportsmen and rock stars who talk about themselves like that, as if it was normal. Have you noticed? Bobby So-and-So's accused of cheating, to win a penalty or something, and he replies, 'No, that's not the sort of thing Bobby So-and-So would do.' As if there's some separate figure out there, under the same name, taking the flak, or shouldering the responsibility.

Which is hardly the case with Oliver. You couldn't exactly call him famous, could you? Yet he refers to himself as 'Oliver', as if he was an Olympic gold medallist. Or a schizophrenic, I suppose.

Oliver What do you think of North-South debt restructuring? The future prospects of the euro? The smile on the face of the tiger economies? Have metal traders exorcised the ghost of the meltdown scare? I'm sure Stuart has robust and portly opinions on all such matters. He will be not so much grave as positively gravid. I'll bet you six famous Belgians he doesn't know the difference between the two words. He's the sort of person who expects the word *gravid* to be followed by *lax*, silly old fishface that he is. A

billboard for probity, and all that. But a little, shall we say, lacking in irony?

Gillian Look, stop it, you two. Just stop it. This isn't working.

What sort of impression do you think you're giving?

Oliver What did I tell you? The train is coming into the station, puff puff, huff huff . . .

Gillian If we're getting into this again, we have to play by the rules. No talking amongst ourselves. Anyway, who's going to take Sophie to music?

Oliver Gillian, in case you're wondering, is an honorary representative of The Men Who Guess.

Stuart Are you interested in pork? Real pork, with real taste? Where do you stand on GM?

Oliver Six, apart from Simenon? Easy-peasy. Magritte, César Franck, Maeterlinck, Jacques Brel, Delvaux and Hergé, creator of Tintin. Plus fifty per cent of Johnny Hallyday, I add as a *pourboire*.

Gillian Stop it! You're as bad as one another. No-one knows what you're talking about. Look, I just think we ought to *explain* things.

Stuart As bad as one another. That's open to question, I think. In the present circumstances.

All right, I'd like to explain something. Frank Ifield actually wasn't an Australian. He may have lived there, but he was born in England. Coventry, if you must know. Also, while we're on the subject, 'I Remember You' was in point of fact a Johnny Mercer song written twenty years previously. Why do culture snobs always sneer about things they're completely ignorant of?

Oliver *Explain* things? Can't we leave that until we reach the Dies Irae, until some hydra-cocked Pandaemonian prods us with his dipstick and a bat-headed lizard unwinds our guts on a windlass? Explain things? You really think we ought? This isn't daytime TV, let alone the Roman Senate. Oh, very well, then. I'll go first.

Stuart I don't see why he should. That's absolutely typical Oliver. Besides, everyone in marketing knows it's always the first story that sticks in the mind.

Oliver Baggies I first. Baggies baggies *baggies*.

Gillian Oliver, you're forty-two. You can't say baggies.

Oliver Then don't smile at me like that. Baggies. Baggy baggy baggy and another baggy. Go on, give us a laugh. You know you want to. Please. Pretty please.

Stuart If this is the alternative, I'd rather be middle-aged. Officially or unofficially.

Oliver Ah, marketing! Always my Achilles heel. Very well, Stuart can be our lead-off man if he wishes, pattering round the first bend bearing the baton of truth. Don't drop it, Stu-baby! And don't run out of your lane. You wouldn't want to get the lot of us disqualified. Not this early.

I don't care if he goes first. I merely have one request, made on grounds not of egomania, self-interest or marketing, but of decorum, art and a general horror of the banal. Please don't call this next bit 'The Story So Far'. Please don't. Please. Pretty please?

2: The Story So Far

Stuart I'm not sure I'm going to be very good at this. I might get things in the wrong order. You're going to have to bear with me. But I think it's best you hear my story first.

Oliver and I were at school together. We were best friends. Then I worked for a clearing bank. He was teaching English as a foreign language. Gillian and I met. She was a picture restorer. Well, she still is. We met, we fell in love, we married. I made the mistake of thinking that was the end of the story, when it was only the beginning. I suppose it's a mistake lots of people make. We've seen too many films, read too many books, believed our parents too much. All this was about ten years ago, when we were in our early thirties. Now we're . . . no, I can see you can work that out for yourself.

Oliver stole her off me. He wanted my life so he took it. He made Gill fall in love with him. How? I don't want to

know. I don't think I ever want to know that. For a time, when I suspected something was up, I was obsessed with whether or not they were fucking. I asked you to tell me: remember? I pleaded with you: they are fucking, aren't they? I remember asking. You never answered, and I'm grateful for that now.

I did go a bit crazy at the time. Well, that's quite reasonable, quite understandable, isn't it? I head-butted Oliver and practically broke his nose. And when they got married I gatecrashed the reception and made a bit of a scene. Then I went away to the States. I got myself transferred by the firm. To Washington. Funnily enough, the person I stayed in touch with was Mme Wyatt. That's Gillian's mum. She was the only person on my side. We used to correspond.

After a while I went to see them in France. Or rather, I saw them but they didn't see me. They had this stand-up fight in the middle of the village, Oliver hitting her across the face with everyone pretending not to be looking out of their windows. Me included. I was in a little hotel opposite.

Then I went back to the States. I don't know what I'd expected to find when I went to see them – I don't know what I did find – but it didn't help. Did it make matters worse? It certainly didn't make them any better. I think it was the baby that did me in. Without the baby I might have got something out of it.

I don't remember if I told you at the time, but after my marriage broke up I started paying for sex. I'm not ashamed of it particularly. Other people should be ashamed for treating me the way they did. Prostitutes call their work

'business'. 'Doing business?' the query used to go. I don't know if they still say that. I'm out of that world now.

But my point is this. I used to do business for work and then do business for pleasure. And I knew those two worlds pretty well. People who don't know either of them think it's all dog eat dog. That the man in the grey suit is out to chisel you, and that the tart with too much scent will turn out to be a Brazilian transsexual as soon as you lay down your credit card. Well, I can tell you this. Mostly, you get what you pay for. Mostly, people do what they say they will. Mostly, a deal's a deal. Mostly, you can trust people. I don't mean you leave your wallet open on the table. I don't mean you hand out blank cheques and turn your back at the wrong moment. But you know where you are. Mostly.

No, real betrayal occurs among friends, among those you love. Friendship and love are meant to make people behave better, aren't they? But that's not been my experience. Trust leads to betrayal. You could even say that trust invites betrayal. That's what I saw, what I learnt, then. That's my story so far.

Oliver I was dozing, I confess. *Et tu?* O narcoleptic and steatopygous Stuart, he of the crepuscular understanding and the *Weltanschauung* built of Lego. Look, can we please take the longer view? Chou-en-lai, my hero. Or Zhou-en-lai, as he later became. What do you consider to have been the effect on world history of the French Revolution? To which the wise man replied, 'It is too early to tell.'

Or if not quite so Olympian or Confucian a view, then at least let's have some perspective, some shading, some audacious juxtapositions of pigment, OK? Do we not, each of us, write the novel of our life as we go along? But how few, alas, are publishable. Behold the towering slush pile! Don't call us, we'll call you – no, on second thoughts, we won't call you either.

Now, don't rush to judgement on Oliver – I've cautioned you about that before. Oliver is not a snob. At least, not in the straightforward sense. It is not the subject-matter of these novels, or the social location of their protagonists, that is the problem. 'The story of a louse may be as fine as the history of Alexander the Great – everything depends upon the execution.' An adamant formula, don't you agree? What is needed is a sense of form, control, discrimination, selection, omission, arrangement, emphasis . . . that dirty, three-letter word, art. The story of our life is never an autobiography, always a novel – that's the first mistake people make. Our memories are just another artifice: go on, admit it. And the second mistake is to assume that a plodding commemoration of previously fêted detail, enlivening though it might be in a taproom, constitutes a narrative likely to entice the at times necessarily hard-hearted reader. On whose lips rightly lies the perpetual question: why are you telling me this? If for authorial therapy, then don't expect the reader to pick up the psychiatrist's bill. Which is a polite way of saying that the novel of Stuart's life is, frankly, unpublishable. I gave it the first-chapter test, which is normally enough. Sometimes I'll snigger at the last page as well, just to confirm, but in the