

A NOVEL

New York Times
bestselling author of
LIFE AFTER LIFE

**KATE
ATKINSON**

**SHRINES OF
GAIETY**

ALSO BY KATE ATKINSON

Behind the Scenes at the Museum

Human Croquet

Emotionally Weird

Not the End of the World

Case Histories

One Good Turn

When Will There Be Good News?

Started Early, Took My Dog

Life After Life

A God in Ruins

Transcription

Big Sky

Shrines of Gaiety

· *a novel* ·

KATE ATKINSON



DOUBLEDAY · New York

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For Peter Straus

Every morning, every evening,
Ain't we got fun?
Not much money, oh, but honey!
Ain't we got fun?

. 1926 .

Holloway

“Is it a hanging?” an eager newspaper delivery boy asked no one in particular. He was short, just thirteen years old, and was jumping up and down in an effort to obtain a better view of whatever it was that had created the vaudeville atmosphere. It wasn’t much past dawn and there was still hardly any light in the sky, but that had not deterred a party crowd of motley provenance from gathering outside the gates of Holloway prison. Half of the throng were up early, the other half seemed not to have been to bed yet.

Many of the congregation were in evening dress—the men in dinner jackets or white tie and tails, the women shivering in flimsy backless silk beneath their furs. The boy could smell the tired miasma of alcohol, perfume and tobacco that drifted around them. Toffs, he thought. He was surprised that they were happily rubbing shoulders with lamplighters and milkmen and early shift-workers, not to mention the usual riffraff and rubberneckers who were always attracted by the idea of a show, even if they had no idea what it might be. The boy did not count himself amongst the latter number. He was merely a curious bystander to the follies of the world.

“Is it? A hanging?” he persisted, tugging at the sleeve of the nearest toff—a big, flushed man with an acrid cigar plugged in his mouth and an open bottle of champagne in his hand. The boy supposed that the man must have begun the evening in pristine condition, but now the stiff white front of his waistcoat was stained with little dots and splashes of food and the shiny patent of his shoes had a smattering of vomit. A red carnation, wilted by the night’s excesses, drooped from his buttonhole.

“Not at all,” the toff said, swaying affably. “It’s a cause for festivities. Old Ma Coker is being released.”

The boy thought that Old Ma Coker sounded like someone in a nursery rhyme.

A woman in a drab gaberdine on his other side was carrying a piece of cardboard that she held in front of her like a shield. The boy had to crane his neck to read what was written on it. A furious pencil hand had scored into the cardboard, *The labour of the righteous tendeth to life: the fruit of the wicked to sin. Proverbs 10:16*. The boy mouthed the words silently as he read them, but he made no attempt to decipher the meaning. He had been press-ganged into Sunday School attendance every week for ten years and had managed to pay only cursory attention to the subject of sin.

“Your very good health, madam,” the toff said, cheerfully raising the champagne bottle towards the drab woman and taking a swig. She glowered at him and muttered something about Sodom and Gomorrah.

The boy wormed his way forward to the front of the crowd, where he had a good view of the imposing gates—wooden with iron studs, more suited to a medieval fortress than a women’s prison. If there had been three of the boy, each standing on the shoulders of the one below, like the Chinese acrobats he had seen at the Hippodrome, then the one at the peak might have just reached the arched apex of the doors. Holloway had an air of romance for the boy. He imagined beautiful, helpless girls trapped inside its thick stone walls, waiting to be saved, primarily by himself.

On hand to document the excitement was a photographer from the *Empire News*, identified by a card stuck jauntily in his hatband. The boy felt a kinship—they were both in the news business, after all. The photographer was taking a group portrait of a bevy of “beauties.” The boy knew about such young women because he was not above leafing through the *Tatlers* and *Bystanders* that he pushed through letterboxes once a week.

The beauties—unlikely in this neighbourhood—were posing in front of the prison gates. Three looked to be in their twenties and sported plush fur against the early-morning cold, the fourth—too young to be a beauty—was in a worsted school coat. All four were striking elegant poses as if for a fashion plate. None of them seemed a stranger to the admiring lens. The boy was smitten. He was easily smitten by the female form.

The photographer transcribed the beauties' names into a notebook he excavated from a pocket somewhere so that they could be identified faithfully in the paper the next day. Nellie Coker had a hold on the pictures editor. An indiscretion of some kind on his part, the photographer presumed.

"Ho there!" he shouted to someone unseen. "Ramsay, come on! Join your sisters!"

A young man appeared and was brought into the huddle. He seemed reluctant but gave a rictus grin on cue for the camera flash.

Then, with no fanfare, a small door set into the great gates of the prison was opened and a short, owlish woman emerged, blinking at the oncoming light of freedom. The crowd cheered, mainly the toffs, shouting things like, "Well done, old girl!" and "Welcome back, Nellie!" although the boy also heard the cry "Jezebel!" go up from somewhere in the middle of the crowd. He suspected the drab gaberdine.

Nellie Coker seemed lacklustre and the boy could see no likeness to what he had heard of Jezebels. She was almost dwarfed by the enormous bouquet of white lilies and pink roses that was thrust into her arms. One of the beauties was carrying a large fur coat which she threw around the released prisoner as if she were trying to smother a fire. The boy's mother had done much the same thing when his baby sister had fallen in the grate, her loose smock catching the flames. They had both survived, with only a little scarring as a reminder.

The beauties crowded around, hugging and kissing the woman—their mother, the boy surmised. The younger one clung to her in what in the boy's opinion was a rather hammy fashion. He was a connoisseur of the theatrical, his round took him to all the stage doors of the West End. At the Palace Theatre, the stage doorman, a cheerful veteran of the Somme, let him slip into the gods for free during matinée performances. The boy had seen *No, No, Nanette* five times and was quite in love with Binnie Hale, the luminous star of the show. He knew all the words to "Tea for Two" and "I Want to Be Happy" and would happily sing them, if requested. There was one scene in the show where the chorus and Binnie (the boy felt that he had seen her enough times for this familiarity) came on the stage in

bathing costumes. It was thrillingly scandalous and the boy's eyes nearly popped out of his head every time he witnessed it.

As a drawback, in order to gain free entry he had to listen to the long-winded wartime reminiscences of the doorman, as well as admiring his collection of Blighty wounds. The boy had been one when the war began and, like sin, it meant nothing to him yet.

Ramsay, Nellie's second son, was made to relieve his mother of the burden of the bouquet and was caught by the photographer holding the flowers like a blushing bride. To the annoyance of his sisters (and himself too), this would turn out to be the photograph that graced the newspaper the next morning, beneath the heading SON OF NOTORIOUS SOHO NIGHTCLUB PROPRIETOR NELLIE COKER GREETES HIS MOTHER ON HER RELEASE FROM PRISON. Ramsay hoped for fame for himself, not as an adjunct of his mother's celebrity. He started to sneeze in response to the flowers, a rapid volley of *atishoo-atishoo-atishoo*, and the newspaper delivery boy heard Nellie say, "Oh, for heaven's sake, Ramsay, pull yourself together," which was the kind of thing the boy's own mother said.

"Come along, Ma," one of the bevy said. "Let's go home."

"No," Nellie Coker said resolutely. "We shall go to the Amethyst. And celebrate." The pilot was taking the helm.

The crowd began to melt and the newspaper boy continued on his way, his spirits lifted by having been a witness to something historic. He suddenly remembered an apple, old and wrinkled, that he had squirreled away first thing that morning. He retrieved it from his pocket and chomped on it like a horse. It was wonderfully sweet.

The toff with the cigar spotted him and said, "Good show, eh?," as if he valued his opinion, and then cuffed him amiably on the side of his head and rewarded him with a sixpence. The boy danced happily away.

As he left, he heard someone in the crowd yelling, "Thief!" It was a term that could have applied to any of them really, except perhaps the man

who had been watching the proceedings from a discreet distance, in the back of an unmarked car. Detective Chief Inspector John Frobisher —“Frobisher of the Yard,” as *John Bull* magazine had styled him, although somewhat inaccurately as he was currently on loan to Bow Street station in Covent Garden, where he had been sent to “shake things up a bit.” Corruption was acknowledged to be rife there and he had been tasked with seeking out the bad apples in the barrel.

John Bull had recently asked Frobisher to write a series of articles based on his experiences in the force, with a view to making them into a book. Frobisher was not a narcissist—far from it—but he had been enlivened by the proposition. He had always been a books man and a literary challenge was something that took his fancy. Now, however, he was not so sure. He had suggested it be called *London After Dark*, but the magazine said they preferred the title *Night in the Square Mile of Vice*. He didn’t know why he had been surprised by this when every cheap rag howled with lurid tales of foreign men seducing women into venality of one kind or another, when in reality they were more at risk of having their handbags torn from their arms in broad daylight.

Nothing had yet been published, but every time he submitted something to *John Bull* they asked him to make it racier, more “sensational.” Racy and sensational were not part of Frobisher’s character. He was sober-minded, although not without depth or humour, neither of which was often called on by the Metropolitan Police.

He was idly following the progress of a couple of women who were stealthily working their way through the crowd, skilfully picking pockets. Frobisher recognized them as subalterns in the female Forty Thieves gang, but they were comparatively small fry and of no interest to him at the moment.

A pair of cream-and-black Bentleys—one owned, one rented for effect—drew up and the Coker clan divided themselves between them and drove away, waving as if they were royalty. Crime paid, fighting it didn’t. Frobisher felt his law-abiding bile rising while he had to quash a pang of envy for the Bentleys. He was in the process of purchasing his own modest motor, an unshowy Austin Seven, the Everyman of cars.

The delinquent Coker empire was a house of cards that Frobisher aimed to topple. The filthy, glittering underbelly of London was concentrated in its nightclubs, and particularly the Amethyst, the gaudy jewel at the heart of Soho's nightlife. It was not the moral delinquency—the dancing, the drinking, not even the drugs—that dismayed Frobisher. It was the girls. Girls were disappearing in London. At least five he knew about had vanished over the last few weeks. Where did they go? He suspected that they went in through the doors of the Soho clubs and never came out again.

He turned to the woman sitting next to him on the back seat of the unmarked car and said, “Have you had a good look at them, Miss Kelling? And do you think that you can do what I'm asking of you?”

“Absolutely, Chief Inspector,” Gwendolen said.

The Queen of Clubs

At the Amethyst, Freddie Bassett, the head barman, presented another oversized floral offering to Nellie. “Welcome home, Mrs. Coker,” he said. No “Nellie” for him, he never cheapened himself by being anything less than formal with the family. He had his standards. He had trained at the Ritz before losing his post there due to an unfortunate incident involving two chambermaids and a linen cupboard. “You can imagine the rest,” he said to Nellie when he applied for the job at the Amethyst. “I’d rather not,” she said.

Nellie disliked flowers, considering them to be too needy. They should be reserved for weddings and funerals in her opinion, and not her own, thank you very much. Nellie wished to leave the world unadorned, as she had entered it, with not so much as a daisy.

Instead of flowers, she would rather be given a box of cakes from Maison Bertaux around the corner in Greek Street—chocolate éclairs or rum babas, preferably both. She had a terrific sweet tooth, acquired from the soor plooms and Hawick balls of her Scottish childhood. The food had been the worst thing about prison. Her daughters had brought boiled sweets for her on visiting days in Holloway. Nellie had acquired many thoughts on prison reform during the course of her sentence and top of the list would be a tuppence’ worth weekly allowance of sweets—marshmallows and coconut ice, for preference.

When she entered Holloway six months ago, the staff of the Amethyst had sent her a cornucopia befitting a harvest festival—a large bouquet of flowers and a basket of fancy fruits that had been composed by a Covent Garden trader who was a regular patron of the club. The staff had badged it with the words *Good Luck*, the letters cut out from fancy embossed silver card that had been rummaged from the obscure cupboard that housed the club’s New Year decorations.

This extravagance had been removed by a wardress as soon as Nellie stepped inside the forbidding walls, and the exotica of pineapple, peaches and figs had been divvied out between the staff while Nellie dined on meagre prison fare—a regular round of pea soup, suet pudding and beef stew, a rancid dish that had never met the cow it claimed to be acquainted with.

Before Nellie went to sleep that first night, a flower—a rose, a red one plucked from the bouquet—was poked through the hatch in her cell door. It was unclear to Nellie what spirit it had been given in—contemptuous or consoling. Her cellmate, a Belgian woman who had shot her lover, was less confused. She snatched the rose and stamped it beneath her boots until the petals stained the cold stones of their cell floor.

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The club had only just closed and most of the staff had stayed on to pipe their captain back on board, although the band had packed up and gone (they clung stubbornly to their autonomy). They had played “God Save the King” over an hour ago, the final heroic survivors of the night swaying to attention. Nellie was strict (her rules were adhered to even more strictly when she was *in absentia*)—no one sat for the King, not even the most inebriated. Now only a couple of regulars lingered, amiably dipsomaniac boulevardiers, adding to the chorus of pages, porters, waiters and the breakfast chef, who all echoed Freddie: “Welcome back, Mrs. Coker.”

They had just endured an unusually heated midweek evening when every second person seemed fresh from a rugger match or a Varsity drinking club. A clutch of weary dance hostesses fussed around Nellie. Close up they smelt stale, a cheap infusion of face powder, perfume and sweat, but nonetheless it was a welcome, familiar scent after the noxious air of Holloway and Nellie let them embrace her before shoosing them on their way to their beds. The Amethyst deflated with the dawn. It needed the night to come alive, its open maw demanding to be fed with an endless parade of people.

The chef put the burners back on in the kitchen to make breakfast for Nellie. The hens of Norfolk were kept busy supplying the Amethyst with eggs, which came up by the dozen on the milk train overnight. The chef

was eager to know about the prison breakfast. “A lump of bread and margarine and a mug of cocoa,” Nellie informed him. “I’ll add a couple of sausages to your plate, I expect you need feeding up,” he said solicitously. “I expect I do,” Nellie said.

The family retired to one of the private rooms, where a waiter set a table with fresh linen and silver cutlery and Freddie opened a bottle of champagne for them. Dom Perignon for the family, a lesser brand for the club, bought for seven shillings and sixpence and sold for three guineas. Eight for a magnum. Was there a happier sound, Nellie said, than the pop of a champagne cork?

“As long as it doesn’t come out of the profits,” Edith said, in whose veins Coker blood ran in a fast and furious torrent.

—

Nellie Coker’s progeny in the order in which they entered onto the world’s stage. First of all, Niven—unsurprisingly absent from Holloway this morning—followed soon after by Edith. There had followed a hiatus while Nellie attempted to refute further motherhood and then, having failed, she produced in quick succession Betty, Shirley and Ramsay, and bringing up the rear, the runt of the litter, eleven-year-old Kitty, or *le bébé* as Nellie sometimes referred to her, when searching and failing to find the right name amongst so many. Nellie had received a French education, something which could be interpreted in several ways.

There was a father on Kitty’s birth certificate, although Edith said she knew for a fact that it was the name of a major who had died at the first battle of the Marne a year before Kitty was born. (“A miracle,” Nellie said, unruffled.)

The three eldest girls were the crack troops of the family. Betty and Shirley had both gone to Cambridge. “Wear their learning lightly,” Nellie said proudly to prospective suitors. (“Hardly wear it at all,” Niven said.) Sometimes, Nellie was more like a theatrical promoter than a mother.

Edith had eschewed both university and marriage in favour of a course in bookkeeping and accounting. While Nellie was *hors de combat* in Holloway, the Coker ship had been steered by Edith. The Amethyst had been closed down, although Edith reopened it, of course, the day after

Nellie was sentenced, under another name—"the Deck of Cards"—but to everyone it was still, and always would be, the Amethyst.

Edith was Nellie's second in command, her *chef d'affaires*, and made of the same stern stuff as her mother. She understood business and had the Borgia stomach necessary for it. Money was the thing. They had all known what it was like to have some and then to have none and now to have a lot, and none of them wanted to fall off the precipice into penury again. Perhaps not Ramsay, so much. He wanted to be a writer. "I despair," Nellie said.

Ramsay, at just twenty-one, was continually beset by the feeling that he had just missed something. "As if," he struggled to explain to Shirley, his usual confidante, "I've walked into a room but everyone else has just left it." Niven had gone to war, Betty and Shirley to Cambridge, but Ramsay had been too young for the war and didn't last more than a term at Oxford before being condemned to an Alpine sanatorium for lungs that resembled "a pair of squeezeboxes," according to his consultant at Bart's. It had been a relief, if he was honest. He was cowed by his fellow students. There were still men at Merton finishing degrees that had been interrupted by the war. They had been through the fire. They were older than the date on their birth certificates suggested, while Ramsay knew that he was younger.

Ramsay seemed transparent to his family; Niven, on the other hand, was an enigma to them all. He had a share in a car dealership in Piccadilly, was a partner in a wine-importing firm, raced a dog at White City, and owned a half-share in a horse that popped up occasionally at a racetrack, unfancied by everyone, before stealing first place. ("Funny that," Nellie said.) He knew criminals, he knew dukes. ("No difference," Nellie said.) He hardly drank at all, yet he went to a lot of parties. He had no time for people who went to parties. He had no time for people in general and didn't suffer fools at all. He never indulged in drugs, as far as they knew, but he used to be in with all the Chinese who sold them and was known to visit Limehouse and could have been found sitting in the notorious Brilliant Chang's restaurant in Regent Street, sharing a pot of chrysanthemum tea with him before he was deported. He would have made a good Wesleyan but he had no time for the church.