

DEPARTURE(S)

A Novel

JULIAN BARNES

Man Booker Prize-winning author of *The Sense of an Ending*



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JULIAN BARNES



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THE GREAT I AM¹

The other day, I discovered an alarming possibility. No, worse: an alarming fact.

I have an old friend, a consultant radiologist, who for years has been sending me clippings from the *British Medical Journal*. She knows that my interest tends towards the ghoulish and the extreme. In my memory – that place where degradation and embellishment overlap – I have filed away cases of patients who exploded when a heated scalpel ignited their bodily gases, and others from the early days of the MRI scanner when internal metal stitches were shot like shrapnel into soft flesh. These stories are sometimes accompanied by photos: for instance, of a man who grew his toenails to such a curling length – several metres, as I recall – that for years he had been unable to walk. Then there is the medical profession's everyday task of removing unexpected objects which have been swallowed – like bags of nails – or forcibly indulged up the rectum. (In the old days, popular anal self-implants were miniature busts of Napoleon, a habit which doubtless added patriotism to pleasure.) And a case I particularly remember, of a man who had been fitted with a tracheostomy tube. When he went for a check-up, doctors were baffled by yellowish stains around the hole into which the tube was fixed. It turned out that the patient was a desperate smoker who, unable to inhale through his mouth any more, discovered that if he took out his tube, the cigarette fitted perfectly in the hole; all he had to do was light up and inflate his lungs. Men (and most of these bizarre activities were undertaken by men) can be most ingenious, even – or especially – when it goes against their own best interests.

The most recent clipping sent by Dr Jacky had, appropriately enough, a literary heading: 'Proust and madeleine: Together in the thalamus'. Naturally, I read on. 'Madeleine, you will recollect, was not the love of Proust's life but a biscuit that, when dropped into tea, created an involuntary autobiographical memory (IAM).' The report's source was the journal

Neurology Clinical Practice, and its subject a forty-five-year-old man who had suffered a left posterolthalamic haemorrhagic stroke. The consequences were much more extreme and particular than the gentle jolt Proust (and his fictional narrator) received from a madeleine – which is not exactly a ‘biscuit’, rather a plump little cake moulded in the fluted shape of a pilgrim’s scallop. The patient disclosed that ‘tasting apple pie would trigger memories of all the pies he had ever tasted; they would be experienced in proper chronology and would rush into his mind like a cascade’.

As I said, my first reaction was one of alarm: imagine such high-speed assaults by forgotten memories, a historic avalanche roaring across your perception of the present, tearing up your very sense of yourself. And, as a friend pointed out, what if the triggering experience was not as life-affirming as eating an apple pie? What, he said, if you farted, however quietly, and were then presented, in chronological order, with every single fart you had ever let loose? And so on – you can provide your own examples without difficulty. Imagine the exhausting thought – or sight – of a few thousand bacon sandwiches flashing through your consciousness (and would their quality and difference, plus your reactions to them, be replayed as well?).

I am now in my mid-seventies, and like most older people am sometimes bored by myself – by which I mean my repetitious remembering of thoughts and deeds and, especially, opinions. (And those who never bore themselves, who continue to be publicly entertained by their own lives and their repeated anecdotes, are usually the worst bores on the planet. Men again, on the whole.) But the frenetic, assaulting boredom of high-speed IAMs is, for the moment anyway, unimaginable. Wouldn’t it make you want to kill yourself?

My second reaction was more considered, and more writerly. IAMs would certainly help with autobiography. You think you have remembered something ‘just so’, and the more times you have remembered it and retold it, the more times you become convinced of its truth. But what if you were pulled up and corrected by...your own brain? What if it could lay in front of you all your retellings and demonstrate how gradually yet systematically you

had diverged from your original account? Wouldn't that be weird and disorienting? Yet also helpful: you could hardly overrule your own thalamus, could you?

And what if your brain didn't just contain a chronological listing of all the pies you had eaten, but also of your moral actions and inactions? Every time you said 'I love you' whether you meant it or not. Every time you failed to say 'I love you' when you should have done, when you wanted to but failed. How would you face the record – the chronological record – of all your lies, hypocrisies, cruelties both avoidable and (seemingly) unavoidable, your harsh forgettings, your dissimulations, your broken promises, your infidelities of word and deed? Not just the actual failings but the imagined and desired ones. Remember President Jimmy Carter's celebrated interview about Lust in *Playboy* magazine, in which he boldly confessed that 'I've committed adultery in my heart many times.' We've most of us done that, while tending to retain in our conscious memories only the more charming and less guilt-inducing of our fantasies. But what about those more embarrassing, inadmissible, sluttish adulteries of the heart which we have chosen to suppress?

There was a second part to President Carter's famous admission which strikes me as even bolder. After confessing his dream-sins, he went on: 'This is something God recognises I will do – and I have done it – and God forgives me for it.' This seems, to a non-believer, more than a little smug. Not only will the Almighty forgive Jimmy Carter at the Final Judgement, but He is forgiving him *as he goes along*, each time his adulterous heart throbs. But perhaps presidents have a greater insight than the rest of us into the nature and magnanimity of the Godhead.

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So here's another question that occurs: what if there were a way of producing IAMs without the patient – you, me – having to suffer a catastrophic stroke

in the first place? Humans, after all, have been trepanning one another since Neolithic times – boring holes in the skull to let demons and evil spirits and madness out, to relieve pressure on the brain, to alleviate epilepsy and other mental disorders. In early sixteenth-century northern European painting, there was a popular sub-theme entitled ‘The Extraction of the Stone of Madness’. In its best-known example, by Hieronymus Bosch, a plump elderly peasant leans back on a wooden throne while a surgeon, wearing a tin funnel on his head, chops into his patient’s forehead. (Though the funnel apparently indicates that the surgeon is a charlatan.)

What if a precise hole could be bored in the skull and an infinitesimal amount of damage done with the aim of provoking the full release of our memories? It’s hard, admittedly, to imagine a neurosurgeon agreeing to such a procedure or being convinced of its social benefit (‘I want to remember my mother better’ or ‘It would be a great help writing my autobiography’ are reasons unlikely to convince). There is also a long, if usually undistinguished, history of self-trepanning, so perhaps some brave soul suffering a bout of amnesia or early-onset dementia might persuade himself – and again, the foolhardy candidate is likely to be a man – of the procedure’s feasibility. A dentist’s drill seems to be one popular way of self-trepanning. Crackpots do it to ‘promote brain blood flow’; also to create – almost literally – that ‘third eye’ which supposedly leads to spiritual enlightenment.

But imagine further that it became at some point both surgically feasible and also lawful: might you fancy it? Perhaps initially, volunteers could be bribed to undergo the procedure, supposing it to be no worse than selling their blood.

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IAM is just a necessary, inevitable acronym. Yet separate the first and second letters and you get I AM. Which is pertinent. Memory is identity, as we often

repeat to ourselves. If so, all the IAMs stored inside us will add up to who and what we are and have been. And beyond this lies the phrase The Great I AM, a way of referring to the Christian God. Who used to punish or reward us because He remembered every single action we had performed, and every thought and emotion which had run through us. Though many still believe that a Last Judgement awaits them after death, there is now a rival, pre-death judgement potentially available, one that has been updated and secularised. Our catalogue of sins is not inscribed in St Peter's monumental book of record, but lies within our own brain. All it would take, perhaps, is a team of neurologists to find the key.

Though who, then, would be playing God? Not the head surgeon, who would merely be a skilled facilitator. So we would be the ones left as judges. Which might lead to self-indulgence. Unless, on the contrary, it forced us to grow up.

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I found out more about the case of the man who remembered every pie he'd ever eaten. His IAMs began occurring nine months after his stroke, and their timeline covered his entire life, from his very first year (which we are supposed not to be able to remember) up until the present day. The trigger could be touch, smell, taste or sight. On one occasion, the scent of fresh dough set off a memory from childhood – that of walking barefoot in his grandmother's kitchen while holding his mother's hand. He saw again his grandmother's apron and experienced 'the round feeling of the soles of my feet'. All of which sounds very Proustian.

But a 'cascade' of memories would sometimes arrive without any specific sensory cue: one day, he remembered in full detail a family visit to the 1967 Montreal Expo, made when he was three. Further, and strangely perhaps, it turned out that his day-to-day memory improved following his stroke. He also discovered that he could voluntarily suppress his bouts of

IAMs if he chose to. Such an off-switch would presumably be a great relief to the endurer; and if you were, say, writing your autobiography, then you might be able to pause and edit the tirade of information belching from your brain as you went along. And maybe in time an on-switch might be found, and you could access the entire contents of your past, as and when you wished. A question: would you want to know absolutely everything about yourself? Is that a good idea, or a bad one?

Which leads to a further question. Is it correct to refer to that visual cascade of all the pies you've ever eaten as 'memories'? Because what we conventionally think of as a memory is something which has been remembered, frequently or infrequently, over the course of our lives, mutating a little with each retelling until it congeals finally into a version which we convince ourselves is the truth. But when the original subject of that clinical report experienced a 'full detailed passage' of going to the Montreal Expo, this would, presumably, be something he had not previously remembered (though his family had doubtless told him about it). So it would not be a normally degraded memory but rather a re-presentation of the original experience, a correct revival not of what the grown man remembered, but of what the boy's brain received on that forgotten day all those years ago. More than even a 'virginal memory', it would be *the event itself*, as processed by the brain back then. Might that perhaps tempt you to a spot of self-trepanning?

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Two things to mention at this stage:

1. There will be a story – or a story within the story – but not just yet;
and
2. This will be my last book.

I theorised that the constant, furious assault of unwanted – or at least unasked-for – high-speed IAMs might make you want to kill yourself. Perhaps that's an exaggeration. But unless, like Pie-man, you can find some way of switching it off, it would certainly interfere with your normal life. In his classic study *The Mind of a Mnemonist* the Soviet neuropsychologist A. R. Luria described the case of 'S', who first came into Luria's life in the 1920s. S had a formidable memory, whose functioning and techniques were examined in laboratory conditions over a period of thirty years. He was able to remember sequences of letters and numbers, phrases and stray words, with extraordinary accuracy, and could recall such tests in perfect detail more than a decade later. One method he used was ascribing eidetic images to key words:

Say I'm given the word *elephant*: I'd see a zoo. If they gave me *America*, I'd set up an image of Uncle Sam; if *Bismarck*, I'd place my image near the statue of Bismarck; and if I had the word *transcendent*, I'd see my teacher Sherbiny standing and looking at a monument.

S was also afflicted by synaesthesia, which added to his daily load. Every sound he heard would be accompanied by light and colour. Asked if he remembered a particular fence, he replied that of course he did: 'It has such a salty taste and feels so rough; furthermore, it has such a sharp, piercing sound.' When he goes to a restaurant, 'I decide what I'm going to eat according to the name of the food, the sound of the word. It's silly to say that mayonnaise tastes good. The z [as in the Russian spelling] ruins the taste – it's not an appealing sound...And if a menu is badly written, I simply can't eat – the menu seems so filthy.' It all sounds exhausting, and it was; any sudden noise or distraction when S tried to access a memory would cause 'puffs of steam' or 'splashes' which obliterated what he was trying to read. And since, inevitably, S became a music-hall turn, benign or malign attempts from the audience to help or hinder produced an incredible strain.

And what of the effect of all this on his personality and private life? Luria's initial impression of S was of 'a rather ponderous and timid person', but one whose 'memories of early childhood were incomparably richer than ours'. In his adult life, he changed jobs dozens of times before becoming a professional mnemonist, when his problem-solving and feats of memory gave him a living. But away from that, his strange gift often disabled him. For instance, he was virtually unable to read a book, because people he remembered from other books with similar characteristics kept forcing themselves into the text before him. It was almost impossible for him to read poetry, as figurative thinking and language baffled him. As he told Luria several times, 'I can only understand what I can visualise.' And he couldn't *not* remember; he couldn't disengage that part of his brain. To others, he had all the appearance of a dreamer; time passed without him noticing. His conversation involved endless digressions: he was constitutionally unable to stick to the same subject. So if you mentioned the word 'horse' to him, 'There's also its colour and taste I have to consider.'

This distractability gave him an air of helplessness, which led people to take him for 'a dull, awkward, somewhat absent-minded fellow'. Luria noted that S had a family—'a fine wife and a son who was a success' — but this too he perceived as through a haze. 'Indeed,' Luria concluded, 'one would be hard put to say which was more real for him: the world of the imagination in which he lived, or the world of reality in which he was a temporary guest.' This seems a terrifyingly unenviable condition: to be a temporary guest in one's own life.

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The famous incident of the madeleine dipped in tea and savoured by Proust's narrator Marcel isn't, as set down in the text, an involuntary autobiographical memory or IAM; rather, it is a very leisurely, semi-voluntary, semi-automatic memory or VLSVSAM, hardly a memorable

acronym. At various points in the novel Marcel is aware of some kind of essential, deeper reality which is out – or down – there, largely inaccessible to us but waiting to be captured, or recaptured. The first of these near-transcendent moments occurs early in the novel. Marcel is reflecting on Combray, the small country town where he spent childhood holidays with his grandparents, and where his daily walks followed one of two directions – *du côté de chez Swann* or *du côté de chez Guermantes*—walks which symbolically prefigure the two social classes his later life will be split between: the rich, cultured bourgeoisie, and an aristocracy which scorned the middle classes but would ultimately be consumed by them.

Marcel finds that when he tries to remember Combray, only the frustrating norms of memory apply: he sees it as no more than ‘a luminous panel, sharply defined against a vague and shadowy background’. And he sees the same scenes again and again. This, he realises, is because they are prompted by ‘voluntary memory, the memory of the intellect’, and since ‘the pictures which that kind of memory shows us preserve nothing of the past itself’, he no longer has any interest in trying to ‘ponder over this residue of Combray. To me it was in reality all dead.’

But then a wonderful thing happens. One day, many years later, low in spirits, he returns home, and his adored mother, seeing that he is cold, offers him some tea, ‘a thing I did not ordinarily take’. Further, she sends out for a *petite madeleine*. He dips a morsel of cake into the tea and raises it to his lips in a spoon; as he tastes it, an exquisite pleasure runs through him. It is beyond gustatory; it is soul-changing. His daily mood—‘mediocre, contingent, mortal’ – vanishes, and he accesses, with an ‘all-powerful joy’, some essence of himself.

And Combray? Not so fast. He takes a second mouthful, in which he finds nothing more than with the first; then a third, in which he finds less. ‘It is time to stop: the potion is losing its magic.’ He considers this for a while, then makes a final attempt to force himself back into that joyful moment when he had taken his first morsel of tea-soaked cake. Whereupon something rises up inside of him, dragged from the depths of his self,

‘mounting slowly’ with ‘the echo of great spaces traversed’. Something seems about to appear, then slips back into the abyss. He tries *ten times* to pull whatever it is from wherever it was.

‘And suddenly the memory revealed itself.’ This is not ‘the voluntary memory, the memory of the intellect’, but something deeper and more distant. It is not the sight of the madeleine that has triggered it – he has seen thousands of such cakes in the intervening years – but something more primitive and essential: ‘taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring’. And so he finds himself back once again in Combray, visiting his Aunt Léonie on a Sunday morning, when she would dip a little piece of madeleine in her lime tea and feed it to him. Memories now unfold before him just as, in the traditional Japanese pastime, torn pieces of paper placed in water unfold into flowers. Combray and all its forgotten parts are restored to him in their original colours and forms. He remembers how ‘the good folk of the village and its surroundings, taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, towns and gardens alike, from my cup of tea’.

A few notes on this. First, Proust distinguishes ‘voluntary memory, the memory of the intellect’ from involuntary memory, which allows access to something deeper and more essential. Yet as he describes it, the process most definitely involves the will – Marcel tries ten times to drag those deep-sunk memories out of himself. It may be involuntary to begin with (the unexpected tea/madeleine combination) but it seems to involve a large measure of the voluntary – choosing to follow that smell and taste, straining on the hawser of memory. Secondly, when he succeeds in recovering his fullest memories of Combray, it turns out that, as described, they don’t seem qualitatively different from those achieved by the banal and limited voluntary memory: ‘the good folk of the village and their little dwellings’, and so on. What Marcel tells us he now sees, or re-sees, is more comprehensive than what his voluntary memory has previously revealed. But is there more ‘essence’ and ‘reality’ to it? Not to this reader.

Perhaps my scepticism comes from the fact that I’ve never had such a transcendental memory; I’ve subsisted on the hard rusks of voluntary

memory. I asked a few close friends, and they hadn't had a Proustian unfolding either. I suspect that nowadays those keen to access what has been long forgotten might try either psychotherapy or some mind-altering drug like LSD to open the doors of memory and perception. Would I do that myself? Probably not. But then I have never found myself, as Marcel was, frustrated by the limits of the intellect's memory; and I doubt that if I could reaccess Acton W3 in the late 1940s and early 50s, all would open like a Japanese flower in water, reminding me of forgotten things and forgotten happiness. Nor can I guess what sudden olfactory key might work on me: certainly not a fortuitous morsel of soggy cake. More likely the smell of the glue and varnish I used when constructing model aircraft, or the aroma of frying bacon, or that of a damp golden retriever.

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In her essay 'Sketch of the Past', Virginia Woolf (who both admired Proust and envied him) linked Combray to the possible future world of IAMs with a strange brilliance:

I suppose, that my memory supplies what I have forgotten, so that it seems as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen. In certain favourable moods, memories – what one has forgotten – come to the top. Now if this is so, is it not possible – I often wonder – that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? And if so, will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them? I see it – the past – as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. There at the end of the avenue still, are the garden and the nursery. Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen to the past. I shall turn up August 1890. I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start.