



Anita
BROOKNER

Strangers

'Brilliant' *Sunday Telegraph*

'Exhilarating' *Independent*

'Uplifting' *Daily Telegraph*



www.penguin.co.uk/tasters

Strangers
by
Anita Brookner

Copyright © Anita Brookner, 2009

All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from Strangers

To find out more please visit www.penguin.co.uk

I

Sturgis had always known that it was his destiny to die among strangers. The childhood he remembered so dolefully had been darkened by fears which maturity had done nothing to alleviate. Now, in old age, his task was to arrange matters in as seemly a manner as possible in order to spare the feelings of those strangers whose pleasant faces he encountered every morning – in the supermarket, on the bus – and whom, even now, he was anxious not to offend.

He lived alone, in a flat which had once represented the pinnacle of attainment but which now depressed him beyond measure. Hence the urge to get out into the street, among those strangers who were in a way his familiars, but not, but never, his intimates. He exchanged pleasantries with these people, but had learned, painfully, never to stray outside certain limits. The weather was a safe topic: he listened carefully to weather forecasts in order to prepare himself for a greeting of sorts should the occasion arise, while recognizing the absurd anxiety that lay behind such preparations, and perhaps aware that his very assiduity counted against him, arousing irritation, even suspicion. But codes of conduct that had applied in his youth were now obsolete. Politeness was misconstrued these days, but in any event he had never learnt to accommodate indifference. Indifference if anything made him more gallant, more courteous, and the offence was thus compounded. And these were the people he relied upon to see him out of this world! Exasperation might save him, though that too must be discreetly veiled, indulged only in

private. Hence the problem of finding fault with those whose job it would be to dispose of him.

He had read somewhere that Stendhal, his one-time favourite writer, had collapsed in the street, been taken to a cousin's house, and had died. That was the way to go, the relative, whether liked or disliked, put in charge. And the point being, not that the relative was held in fond esteem, or otherwise, but that he lived two minutes away from the accident. Thus had chance favoured the great writer who had surely never seen himself as an invalid, had in fact survived the retreat from Moscow. It was therefore essential to possess not only a relative but a relative who would prove to be near at hand. Sturgis had a relative, a cousin by marriage, but she (not a capable he) lived in north London, whereas he was in South Kensington, as distant as it was possible to be. He had even considered moving, particularly on days when the smiles faded from faces after his all too valiant greeting. Surely north London would be more festive, under the Jewish influence? His relative had on several occasions impressed him with stories of how well she was regarded in the neighbourhood, how obliging her acquaintances were, how respected she seemed to be. These attentions had made her not grateful but, rather, imperious, as if the favour were hers. What confidence, he marvelled. He visited her for the entertainment value: his presence, on such occasions of display, seemed to be acceptable, although he suspected she disliked him, as being not quite a man, too given to flattery. His defence against this was his perception that she might be lonely, her local eminence a fiction behind which she took shelter, and himself a useful idiot whose job it was to subscribe to the myth. Exasperation was also present on these occasions, but he was careful to control this until he was safely on his way home. The indifferent faces of his fellow passengers on the bus consoled

him, since these were in a way familiar. His lot was ineluctably cast among them, though he trembled at the prospect, for the habit of trust had been lost many years ago, and had in any case been fugitive.

Trust also meant faith, but this he had never possessed. Throughout the obedient years of childhood he had privately observed that God was unjust, or, even worse than that, He was indifferent. To the pronouncement, I am that I am, went the unspoken addendum, Deal with it. Boasting to Job of His omnipotence, His superiority to Job's peaceable sinless life, He offered no justification for any of this, merely issued a report. And Job had acceded, perhaps because it is preferable to be inside than outside, silently making his accommodation with the idea of injustice, of disproportion. And had been rewarded for his docility with the restoration of his fortune, as if he had agreed to let bygones be bygones. Perhaps he, Sturgis, might have been so tempted, had there been any sort of manifestation. That there never had been any such thing brought a certain comfort, but also an anxiety: was he not worthy? That was the feeling that had lasted, the true legacy of any attempt at a spiritual dimension to his existence. Thus he was truly bereft.

This Sunday, like all Sundays, was far too long. It was the prospect of the endless fading afternoon that had prompted the telephone call to Helena, his relative, the widow of a cousin on whom he had been on affectionate terms. He had felt sorry for her, knowing how difficult it is to live alone, thinking that women felt this more than men. He would have behaved towards her with all his customary, and customarily thwarted affection, had she not made it clear that his role was to be an inferior one, as a recipient rather than as an equal. So he usually resigned himself to a cool-headed appraisal of her folly (and of his), would listen to her accounts of her many

friends, among whom was one she referred to as ‘my tame professor’, and whose function in her life was unclear; there were also her partners at the bridge club – ‘the girls’ – and the neighbours who invited her to dinner (‘They make such a fuss of me I don’t like to let them down’). There was no need to reply to any of this, nor was there much possibility of doing so. He supposed that she received some reassurance from this recital. As for himself, it may have been something of a relief to spend time in her comfortable flat, to be served a cup of tea rather than to make one for himself, and even to note that this performance never varied. Yet he could see from her restless hands that she was as little at ease on these Sundays (and no doubt on other days) as he was, and that his visits served some sort of purpose. That, he supposed, was why they continued, were in fact seen as inevitable by both parties. They had respect for ancient contractual arrangements, if for nothing else.

And then he perceived the innocence behind such self-regard, the same innocence that fatally coloured his own character, his longing for reciprocity. He perceived it in Helena’s boast of her own desirability, even more in her absolute refusal to give weight to his own life and habits. His presence in her flat was her only sight of him, her only knowledge of him: beyond these apparitions he was assumed to dematerialize. He knew that any attempt to discuss matters of general interest would be thwarted; even his health was a taboo subject, since her own would naturally take priority. He could see that behind her greeting, which was genuine, was the wish that he would not stay long. He also knew that when he was safely on the threshold, his scarf wound round his neck, she would bestow the same lavish smile, clasp his hand firmly, kiss his cheek, and urge him to let her have news of him. Yet when the door closed and he could hear keys being inserted into locks he sensed gratitude for his departure.

But each was the other's only relative, and somewhere in each consciousness was the memory of a family party or a celebration of some sort, now long gone. Tolerance was now the mode: there would be no sons or daughters round their deathbeds, a subject studiously avoided and valiantly concealed. Also they were the same age, give or take a few months, and in these latter days they would not altogether forgo one another, although they had become increasingly aware that love was lacking, or even friendship. This was an organic relationship, an attachment between survivors who happened to share one or two memories. In such situations feeling, or indeed sentiment of any sort, was secondary. Should either ever be so imprudent as to express sorrow or longing, an important breach in their civility would have taken place. So the polite pretence survived, more on his side than on hers, for he scarcely burdened her with a single thought of his own, knowing that her own preoccupations would occupy the time at their disposal, and each accounting the visit a success if nothing in the way of protest were evinced.

There was regret as well as relief in their leavetaking. They both knew that they might see no one until the following day, after a solitary night into which anguish had easy access. They made a mutual pact to behave well, though good behaviour was not now much appreciated. As soon as he left her dignified apartment building he imagined the smile fading from Helena's face, as it would now fade from his own. Out in the street he made a conscious effort, always, to straighten his back, so as to appear resolute and confident should anyone be watching. But he was in the darkness of a winter evening and there was no one about. He was frugal with money and rejected the idea of a taxi: he had never been an enthusiastic driver. Besides, the bus was more companionable, more democratic; he liked to share some experiences, though not others.

And urban landscapes had always thrilled him; he had spent all his holidays in cities, content with a glimpse of other people's domesticity. A child on a skateboard, an elderly couple arm in arm, a mother and daughter deep in conversation would furnish him with material for reflection, though this was sometimes unwelcome. Such sights were somehow more picturesque when noted in Italy or France, but even in England there were plenty of lighted windows into which he was careful not to peer, though he could not always prevent himself from stealing a brief glance. His habits were ineradicably solitary, a fact he could not hide either from himself or from others. Only Helena appeared not to find him out of the ordinary.

A car passing down the deserted street seemed to exhale a wistfulness which he was careful not to examine. This, he was aware, was not how a grown man, indeed an elderly man, should be feeling. Elderly men still had thoughts of love, even of passion, but he had loved too unwisely in his youth, and the experience had left him disheartened. As it was he no longer looked at women in the same way. His appraisal was offered not to those who were still attractive, but to those who were no longer beautiful and who had lost their assurance and their pride. His smile was invariably met with an air of scorn; he had learned that plain women are unwilling recipients of sympathy. At least with Helena there was no danger of mixed messages; they were resigned to each other, and although in many ways deploring their association managed a cordiality that might have deceived an outsider into thinking it heartfelt but which each knew privately to be short of the real thing. Indeed, waiting for his bus, as he always did on these Sunday evenings, he felt his good intentions fade, to be replaced by a sour resignation. But that he hastened to ascribe to this particular Sunday melancholy – the dark street, the

unmoving lifeless trees, the unseasonable mildness – and invariably tried to look forward to the following day, when he would resume his activities, such as they were, with his smile once more in place.

What he admired about Helena, and would have liked to emulate, was her ringing endorsement of her own worth, or perhaps self-worth. His own reflections tended in the opposite direction. He was aware that despite the passage of time his failures were all intact, as if the primitive mind persisted throughout later events and came into its own in what must be the latter part of his life. ‘We pass this way but once,’ she would remark with a fine smile, while recounting a minor act of kindness – her own – to which he took care to respond with a smile of equal complicity. ‘I keep open house,’ she always said, when he complimented her on her hospitality. And ‘I like to leave a good impression,’ she said, when he told her she was looking well. Her appearance was on the whole good, if you ignored the thickening ankles, the thinning hair. In the course of the afternoon her left eyelid would begin to flicker, signifying weariness or fatigue, yet the hair was golden, the silk scarf arranged so carefully round her throat of fine quality. He also admired the unstinting formality that was his own preferred form of behaviour. Not only would there be tiny sandwiches, but also delicate linen napkins with which to dab the corners of the mouth, and, he guessed, an abundance of thick towels in the bathroom which he had never visited. And her tone gave such weight and substance to her often banal conversation that he was almost tempted to take her at her own valuation, halfway between pillar of the community and grande dame. This, no doubt, was how she impressed her neighbours.

Their regular meetings constituted a pretence, or rather a performance, but conducted without irony, and therefore

honourable. Reality was very different, reality was solitude, a consciousness of being left out, of being uncared for. Reality for her was a matter of much vaunted popularity to which she chose to give credence, although he suspected that it was largely fictitious. Nevertheless she had stimulated her acquaintances into a guilty realization that she deserved attention of a sort, an invitation to dinner, an evening telephone call, at the very least an enquiry about her health. Reality for him was absence, colleagues with whom he had been on good terms throughout long unstinting years, friends who had moved away on their retirement and whom he no longer saw. Reality was above all his small flat which never managed to qualify as home. It had been perfectly adequate as a place to which to return after a day's work, but now that he occupied it all day it never failed to depress him. It was pleasantly situated, overlooked a wide palatial crescent of fine houses; the address was enviable, yet he had never managed to avoid a feeling of displacement from his original lacklustre home in Camberwell, though that had been far from happy, his parents tight-lipped with antagonism, and relief from their disharmony only to be sought in sleep, or in fantasies about the life he would lead when old enough to seek his freedom. Or indeed to leave home, though, strangely enough, home it had remained. Now those fantasies had been made good: he was on his own, in comfortable circumstances, yet intimately distressed by his inability to take these circumstances for granted, and uneasy, daily, until he could get out into the streets, in search of someone on whom to bestow his smile.

He had to admit that the flat had formed part of his early ambitions, his innocent snobbery. Crescent Mansions: the address had a noble ring to it, as if he were a character in Galsworthy or Conan Doyle. But, again, reality was different. Reality was above all his small silent back bedroom, which no

woman had visited for longer than he cared to remember. This bedroom was the focal point of his disaffection, the room that disclosed his condition to him most readily. It had a quietness that any rational person would envy, but it made him feel helpless. If he cried out (but he would never do such a thing) no one would hear him. If he were taken ill there would be no one at hand, this despite the existence of neighbours with whom he was on nodding and of course smiling terms. But these neighbours were mostly young and went off to work every day: when they returned they had other activities, other friends to share their thoughts. Their sleep was no doubt untroubled, while his own hovered on the edge of nightmare.

And on Sundays the quiet was particularly oppressive. This Sunday was no different from all the others. A light rain had begun to fall, and for a while he stood at the window and looked out at the pavement. In due course he would scramble a couple of eggs. Then a blessed hour with a book – *The Great Gatsby*, which he was enjoying for the second or third time – and then bed. And somehow he would reassemble himself and gather his resources for the week ahead.