



## THE HISTORY OF HISTORY

Ali Smith

My mother was sitting on the top stair with her arm round the neck of the dog, whose front paws were up on her knees. She was reading a Georgette Heyer book. There was no tea on. There was no sign of anything to do with tea in the kitchen. My father would be home in an hour.

I stood at the foot of the stairs for a while. The dog looked down at me, wagged her tail. My mother turned a page and yawned. I slung my schoolbag strap round the knob of the banister, opened the bag, took my books and pencil case out and went through to the living room. I had homework for tomorrow. *Write a newspaper report of the death of Mary Queen of Scots. Translate pages 31-33 of 'La Symphonie Pastorale' by Andre Gide.* I hated 'La Symphonie Pastorale.' It was a load of sentimental rubbish about a blind girl. I called my father at his work from the living room phone. I lifted the receiver carefully so the hall phone wouldn't make the little ting that would give away that someone was on the other phone.

‘You’ll need to bring chips,’ I said.

‘I can hear you,’ my mother called down the stairs. ‘If you’re telling him to bring chips, tell him I want a haddock.’

‘She wants a haddock,’ I said.

‘Couldn’t you put something in the oven?’ my father said. ‘We’ve had chips three times this week.’

‘Actually I can’t put something in the oven because there’s nothing in the house,’ I said over by the door, loud enough for her to hear me.

‘There’s people in the house, not nothing,’ my mother called down. ‘And there’s a dog. That’s not nothing, people and a dog.’

‘I can’t hear you,’ I said to my father. ‘She’s shouting stuff.’

I hung up and went back to the table and wrote up what we’d taken notes on in double history.

A hush came over the crowd as the doomed queen was led to the place of execution. She was dressed in black satin and velvet and she undressed, saying, ‘I have never put off my clothes before in front of such a company.’ Underneath her clothes she was wearing red clothes, and her handmaidens then put long red sleeves on her arms and pinned them to her underclothes. She smiled and prayed, and said goodbye to those who had served her all her life. There was much crying in the room. Her handmaidens fastened a white cloth across her eyes and she stumbled forward to lay her head on the block. In fact she also put her hands on the block, but luckily someone noticed at the last minute or these would also have been cut off as well as her head. Then the executioner tried to cut her head off, but the first time he missed and only cut her head a bit open. The execution was properly executed the second time and when the executioner held her

head up it fell out of his hands and all that was left in his hands was a wig, and the beautiful queen was revealed to everybody as an old old lady with very short grey hair. Legend has it that her lips were still moving many minutes after her head was cut off and that her little dog, which was of the breed of Skye Terrier, hid in among her skirts and then curled itself round the place between her shoulders where her head had been, and then it later died as well, of sorrow.

It was only a first draft. The idea was that we were meant to make it as much like a real newspaper report as possible. I went through it again and decided what was important and what wasn't, if it was for a newspaper, and gave it suitable headings and columns.

### **VERY FASHIONABLE**

The doomed queen was led to the place of execution. A hush came over the crowd when it saw her. She was dressed very fashionably in black satin and velvet. Many ladies nodded at her fashion taste.

### **EMBARRASSING**

The crowd held its breath while she took off nearly all her clothes. All the people there could nearly see what

she would look like with no clothes on. It was embarrassing. She was wearing bright red underwear. Goodbye! she said to everyone. She smiled a queenly smile. The crowd burst into tears. She was the People's Queen. Her handmaidens fixed a white cloth on her eyes.

### **WEARING A WIG**

When she came forward to the block, she stumbled. The crowd all went ooh! aah! After two swipes of the axe, she was unfortunately dead. The executioner picked up her head. That's when it was revealed to everyone that she had grey hair and wore a wig and was not at all as beautiful as people had thought, but much older in actuality.

### **NOBLE BREED**

Legend has it that she spoke for a long time after being dead, though nobody has reported what it was she actually said. We at the *DAILY NEWS* believe she probably said ‘I am dead. Do not grieve for me. Please make sure my dog is fed properly after my demise.’

Her dog, a Skye Terrier, which is a noble breed, would not leave her side even when she was dead. Then it would not leave the place where her head once was. Then it died too. And that was the sad end of the noble breed herself, the Scottish queen of Scots, and also of her dog.

I heard something clattering on the stairs.

‘Christ almighty I hate these fucking books,’ my mother was shouting. ‘They’re full of shit. I’m never going to read a single one of these again in my life.’

She must have thrown the book down the stairs. That must have been what had made the clattering noise. Either that or she’d thrown the dog.

I had never heard her use language like that before. I very much disapproved.

‘My mother’s gone mad,’ I told my friend Sandra next day at school.

‘Mine too,’ Sandra said. ‘All she does is make things and put them in tupperware boxes in the freezer. It’s because the people next door got a freezer and then my dad got us one, a really huge one in the garage and it’s like she can’t bear to think of it having any space left in it so she’s busy freezing things.’

‘No, I mean really mad,’ I said, ‘not just normal mad. She won’t cook anything. She says I’m to call her by her real name.’

‘What’s she mean, real name?’ Sandra said.

‘Margaret,’ I said. ‘She keeps saying that’s the name she was born with. She won’t answer to anything other than that anymore. I mean, I can’t call her, like, Margaret. I can’t say, I’ll be back at ten, Margaret, I’m going out with Roddy. I can’t say, I’m home, Margaret, when I get home after school. It sounds stupid.’

‘Yeah,’ Sandra said. ‘Right.’

She laughed a laugh that wasn’t really a laugh, like I’d told her a joke she didn’t understand.

‘It started last month,’ I said. ‘She began to say things like, I’m a person, and all that kind of thing. Then she was just, like, watching tv a couple of weeks ago, that programme The Good Life, from when she was young, you know? It was something about the posh one singing in a choir. And she stood up and said, I am no longer your wife, to my dad, and I am no longer your mother, to me. Then she went out in the car and we didn’t know where she’d gone, and when she came back it was two in the morning and we thought it would be okay, but the next

day she was still saying the stuff.'

'Oh,' Sandra said.

Sandra was my best friend, but she was walking a little further away from me. She was listening but she was looking not at me but at the ground, as though something baffling was walking two feet ahead of her.

'Worst fucking thing is, she's started swearing now,' I said. But it was as if I'd told my best friend I was gay, or something astonishing like that, and made her feel embarrassed because of me.

'Oh yeah, by the way,' she said. 'I can't walk home at four o'clock today. I've got to go to town with my mum.'

'If it was me, imagine, I'd be having to go to town with someone called Margaret,' I said. 'I'd be saying, I can't walk home with you because I've got to go to town with Margaret. And you'd be like, who's Margaret?'

'Yeah,' she said. 'Ha ha.'

'What's your mum's real name, anyway?' I said.

'Eh, it's Shona,' she said. 'Bye.'

'Imagine that,' I called after her. 'Imagine you're going into town with Shona, not your mother at all.'

She went round the corner out of earshot without looking back. We went our separate ways to our separate classes; I'd taken languages and history, she'd taken geography and science.

When I got home my mother had cut down the hedge at the end of the garden, which meant there was nothing between our garden and the trainline. There was no fence at the end of the garden at all any more. There was no sign of the dog.

'Look,' my mother said. 'Now we can see so much further.'

‘Now the people on the platform can see right into our house,’ I said. ‘The train people won’t be pleased with you doing that.’

She sat down on the grass among the cut strands of hedge.

‘You used to be so much more of an independent thinker,’ she said to me.

‘I’m running out of clean clothes,’ I said. ‘I’ve almost nothing left to wear that doesn’t need washed. I don’t know how to work the machine. Neither does dad.’

‘You’ll manage,’ she said.

She sighed. She looked up. She said, ‘look at that!’

I looked, but it was only a blackbird in a tree. I sighed too.

‘What’s for tea?’ I said.

‘You’re like me,’ she said. ‘You’re tenacious.’

‘I’m nothing like you,’ I said.

I turned and went back towards the house to phone my father.

‘You’ll be all right,’ she called after me.

‘No I won’t,’ I shouted back over my own shoulder.

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