

Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction 2017

THE DARK CIRCLE

ALSO BY LINDA GRANT

Fiction

The Cast Iron Shore
When I Lived in Modern Times
Still Here
The Clothes on Their Backs
We Had It So Good
Upstairs at the Party

Non-fiction

Sexing the Millennium:
A Political History of the Sexual Revolution
Remind Me Who I Am, Again
The People on the Street: A Writer's View of Israel
The Thoughtful Dresser

THE DARK CIRCLE

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GRANT



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To Sara Marsh, my oldest friend,
from the time when we both learned to read

PART ONE

Each Breath You Take

1949–51

London. Big black old place, falling down, hardly any colour apart from a woman's red hat going into the chemist with her string bag, and if you looked carefully, bottle-green leather shoes on that girl, but mostly grey and beige and black and mud-coloured people with dirty hair and unwashed shirt collars, because everything is short, soap is short, joy is short, sex is short, and no one on the street is laughing so jokes must be short too. Four years after the war and still everything is up shit creek.

Top deck of the number 19 bus with sun coming in and out and the passengers' coats steaming with earlier rain. Smell of damp gabardine and nicotine. Lenny in his new suit and his Italian shoes looking sharp and young and on his mettle and a woman's voice jabbering at him from the seat across the aisle as they lumbered down Blackstock Road.

'Doesn't London look dingy? I remember beautiful shops; they sold everything you wanted and the meat was lovely, great rosy rashers of bacon and the rind like white marble. But you won't remember any of that. You're too young.'

Blah blah blah, working her way through hams and briskets and racks of lamb. All anyone talked about these days was food, the national obsession. There was even less of it than there had been

on VE Day – how did that work, he thought. You'd need to read the newspaper to understand it, and who had time for reading?

The woman got off at the Angel and he didn't have to hear any more about meat, thank God. In a month he was supposed to be going into the army because as soon as one war ends, another starts. A future of Nissen huts and itchy uniforms. A world of Blanco, webbing, Brasso and pointlessness. Marching, saluting, scratching your arse and here, the bus turning from New Oxford Street into Charing Cross Road, were birds.

All the birds of Soho, Italians with little gold crosses round their necks and olive skin and nipples like raisins. They showed you what a cup of coffee was supposed to taste like. They gave you a meal of macaroni and sausage that was to die for. Heaven was an Italian bird in her half-slip standing by the window of a flat in Dean Street with the light on her hair and turning round to give you a big smile before she said her Hail Marys.

Give that up for a parade ground and beds full of farting men?

Cambridge Circus. Raining again, this quality of English rain to continue on and off all day so you never got a chance to dry out, your clothes steaming, your socks damp, rainwater down your neck, holding out your palm to feel for the drops and the momentary deception of dryness before the sky, having taken a breather, went at it once more. He got off and walked down to Trafalgar Square. Clouds of starving pigeons circled Nelson's Column. In the East End it was rumoured that a flock of them could carry off a small child if you took your eye off it for a minute. He was a few minutes early and stopped to watch a group of wet men in light jackets and open-neck shirts begin to file into the empty space. Some wore campaign medals across their chests. Most had flat caps. A woman built like a wartime pillbox was by their side barking directions as they crowded around the stone lions. One contingent marched in a disciplined column with placards tied across their chests, a sodden sandwich-board army.

Lenny wanted to know what was going to happen next, who they

were and why they were gathering. A microphone was set up and a man, a leader of some kind, began to speak into it.

‘I’m really just about fed up of it. I was so fed up of it—’ But the words were broken and then swallowed in a sharp gust of rain blowing in Lenny’s face.

The speaker was fed up of it and why the fuck not? It was reasonable. There was so much to be fed up about. The crowd applauded wildly. They didn’t seem to mind being wet, they were hardy, tough types. Even the few women with turbans on their heads looked like they could go a round or two with Freddie Mills.

He stood for longer than he had intended watching the speaker who had had enough and it seemed to him that he spoke the universal thoughts of everyone he knew. Fed up. Fed up with bad meat and girls with bad breath and long queues at the pictures if anything good was on. He turned away from the crowd, to his date with the army, looked up at the church clock and noted, pleased, that he was late. What were they going to do about it? He was here, wasn’t he?

He was eighteen. He had slept with three birds already, including the Italian. He had his own London drape with two pairs of trousers. In the neighbourhood he was part of a gang of boisterous Jewish lads who thought they were on top of the world. They were apprentice bakers, cabinet makers, pressers and cutters; they all had jobs and girls on their arm. They were emerging Teddy boys.

‘And if there weren’t so many Yids swarming in, demanding to jump to the head of the queue, getting houses and . . .’

The crowd was packing in now around the speaker, they were applauding and some pointing their forefingers at him, as if they were acknowledging the correctness of his point. The Yids, the Yids, the bloody Yids who come over here and are loud and flashy and were shirkers during the war . . . never lifted a finger to help their own kind . . . didn’t do their bit when everyone was doing their bit . . . running the black market stealing the food from the mouths of innocent kiddies . . . And Lenny thought, Fucked if I’m going to let him get away with that, felt in his pocket for a missile, found

the packet of sandwiches his mother had packed for him together with a slice of honey cake wrapped in paper, and in an overhand shot lobbed it at the orator.

Chopped fish on rye assaulted the speaker's cheek. The smell of the herring barrel was all over his face and collar. Minced onion fell down his neck. Cake crumbs got inside his nostrils. There was a meal all over him. His supporters rushed to help. Others thought he'd been shot by a silent gun. Find the bastard, cried the crowd, give him a good hiding, the cowardly little—

Next to him a muscular individual in a pea jacket, as if he'd stepped off the deck of a merchant vessel, was raising his arm. The arm had a fist at the end of it and something bulging beneath the fingers. *'The fucking little Jew-boy swine the kike-nosed prick let him have it.'*