When I Was

Miranda Miller



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Born in London in 1950, to an Anglo-Indian mother and writer father, Miranda Miller has written eight novels, stretching from the eighteenth century to outer space. As well as the life of the artist Angelica Kauffman narrated in the first person, Miranda has given us the voices of London's homeless women. A former Royal Literary Fund Fellow at London's Courtauld Institute, visual art is a key ingredient in Miranda's work, as is her ear for dialogue which stems from a love for theatre. While London is the heartland of her life and work, her writing also takes in experiences from her years living in Saudi Arabia, Libya, Japan and her much-loved Rome. Married with one daughter, she lives and writes in London.

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Memories have huge staying power, but like dreams, they thrive in the dark, surviving for decades in the deep waters of our minds like shipwrecks on the seabed.

~ J.G. Ballard

Remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were.

~ Marcel Proust

For my family, alive and dead.

One

Colleen knows this is *her* party; the new young queen on this her coronation day couldn't be feeling more triumphant than Colleen does now. She has put on weight after four children but she knows the architecture of her black satin dress contains it. The skirt's short enough to show off her slim legs and her huge dark eyes can still command a room. Her smile is radiant, far more eloquent than anything she says.

The polished walnut torso and brown wire netting stomach of the Samuells' television set presides squatly over the drawing room, an altar to the new reign they are celebrating and to the Samuells' prosperity. Some of the guests haven't seen a television before, they stare into its grey cave-like depths, trying to extract the brilliant colours of pageantry. A row of children sit cross legged in front of it, waiting to be entertained. Colleen glances over at the sofa where her old mother sits, wearing a dreary brown suit and a prim expression that is infuriating but also makes Colleen's own success more delicious. She can't be right unless miserable old Edie is proved wrong.

Colleen turns back to her best friend, Sally Wilmott, who still looks as young and lovely as she did during the war. Sally's wavy blonde hair is swept up above the harmonious lines of her face and she glows like alabaster with the sun behind it. Her pale blue silk dress, like all her clothes, moulds her slim

figure obediently. Sally's beauty would be hateful if she wasn't so sweet, and if Billy didn't have a roving eye.

'It won't catch on,' Maurice says to the group around him. 'I'm an old film man myself, nobody's going to bother watching these flickering black and white ants when they can go down the road to the cinema and see Technicolor gods and goddesses ten feet high.'

As if to confirm his shrewdness, the picture on the television leaps and disappears upwards like the eyeballs of a madman. Westminster Abbey and its congregation of medieval robes self-destruct into jagged abstract patterns. The children wander out into the garden or up to the nursery as the adults laugh and Maurice and Colleen stand helpless, waiting for someone else to fix it. Jim Bates, a photographer, finds some tools in the cellar, switches off the television and opens up the back of it. He's never seen one before, but he patiently settles down to understand it.

'What a practical chap you are, Jim,' Maurice says with admiring condescension.

Jacob Mannheim, a theatrical and film agent, has been staring at Ben as he leaves the room. 'Is that one of yours, Maurice?'

'Ben? Yes. Why?'

'We're looking for a child to play Jimmy Mason's son in that new film. He's perfect. Looks like a little Outer Mongolian Prince.'

Colleen overhears this and glares at Jacob, vowing not to invite him again. Jacob is conferring with his wife, Trish, who efficiently runs the business with him. 'Could you bring him down for a film test next week?' he asks Maurice, who is thrilled at the thought of a son in show business.

'We can have lunch now!' Colleen announces to the assembled friends and neighbours. 'Just a picnic, really.'

It's all laid out on a white lace tablecloth on the long mahogany table in the dining room at the back of the house: lobster flans, quiches, smoked salmon, pâtés, éclairs, marrons glacés and meringues from Fortnum's; chickens and ham from Henry, Colleen's pet black market butcher; salads and fruit salad made by Mrs Hunt, who Colleen thinks is a very unadventurous cook. She's planning to sack her as soon as her wages have been paid. Mrs Hunt stands beside the laden table in a white apron, waiting to help serve.

'Mummy! What do you think you're doing?' Colleen hisses at Edie who's on her knees beside the table, taking curry puffs out of a dark blue hatbox and shoving them onto pink plates which don't match the Meissen plates and all too obviously come from Epsom. Come from another world in fact, like the rich smell of cardamom, cumin, coriander, turmeric, mince, onions, and fresh puff pastry. 'Get up!'

'Just trying to help, dear.'

Edie scrambles to her feet as the stampede for food begins and her curry puffs, she notices, disappear as rapidly as the rest. She's a slim woman who never eats much but most people here are ravenous, as if rationing has ended this morning. Edie can't quite get used to the enormous woman her skinny little daughter has become. She thinks she looks like the queen of the gypsies, in her Chelsea palace with her noisy children and her smiling husband who never does a day's work.

Maurice beams hospitably as he opens more wine. He really is handsome, thinks Gertrude Roxenbrist, who's meeting him for the first time. So tall in his well-cut dark suit, with wavy

black hair, clear green eyes and noble features. Rex Gubbins has finally brought her along after boasting for months about his friends the Samuells. Gertrude, a connoisseur of both good looks and money, is vetting them. Maurice looks at her directly for the first time and is struck by her elegance and power. She isn't beautiful but carries herself as if she still was, with a ruthless confidence that reminds him of his mother.

'Any connection to…'

'I was married to Armand Roxenbrist.' In more bohemian company she usually adds, *and I've got the rocks to show for it*, but she isn't sure how this will go down with Maurice. He has already noticed the massive diamond bracelet and necklace she wears with her well-tailored grey suit.

'She has a fabulous story, Maurice,' says Rex, who has agreed he will get ten percent if a deal is struck. 'You really should hear it some time.'

'I'd love to.'

'Rex has told me you're a writer. I'm looking for someone to help me write my memoirs.'

'Are you German?' Alex, Colleen and Maurice's eldest boy, has emerged from the crowd around the table, his mouth full of quiche. Gertrude, who loathes children, thinks there are far too many at this party.

'No, darling. I'm British like you. My husband was Austrian, but we lived in Geneva.'

Alex thinks she looks like a spy. Colleen thinks she looks like an old tart and makes her way anxiously across the crowded room to protect her husband.

'What did you do in the war?' Alex asks Gertrude insistently.

Maurice is proud of his clever son but worries he doesn't always know when to stop. 'Now that's enough. Go and see what the twins are doing.'

Alex, who considers himself a grown-up, is bored by his younger siblings. The twins, Ben and Will, don't even look alike, like proper twins in books. 'I know what they're doing. Martin locked them in the shed and they're crying again.' He doesn't mention that he helped Martin, Sally's son, to find the padlock.

Sally and Colleen rush off to rescue the little boys whose grey flannel suits and white shirts are full of wood shavings.

'And is the little girl yours, as well?' Gertrude asks Maurice pityingly. Viola, a fat toddler in a smocked red dress, sits on the floor between Edie and her nanny.

'Yes, four children,' he admits, with a baffled air. Maurice wants to collude with the contempt for family life he senses in this attractive woman although, really, he's proud of his dynamic wife and confident children. But Maurice always becomes the person he is expected to be and he's willing to play the family martyr for Gertrude.

People begin to trickle back into the drawing room where Jim's still mending the television, a glass of wine and a plate of lobster flan and salad beside him on the Aubusson carpet. Jim's in his mid-thirties, a small, balding, blunt-featured man who lives with his widowed mother in a small house in Ealing and is deeply impressed by the Samuells, who seem to live a charmed life. Jim's struggling to build up his own photographic company—this is the first day off he's had for months—and Maurice's benign idleness is his ideal. One day, he thinks, I'll do bugger all and live in a bloody great house with a bloody great family.

Jim turns on the television again and the young queen, even more loaded with jewellery than Gertrude, floats down the aisle to marry her country. They all cheer and gasp. There are about thirty people in the room now, including neighbours who have come to watch what is still the only television in the street. The children think of it as a pantomime without the jokes but for most of the adults in the room the coronation is moving. The war that dominated their youth, that pickled it in excitement and danger, has finally ended and now they can move on. The newness of the queen and the technology they are watching her on are thrilling glimpses of the future.

Maurice, who had a hostile meeting with his fellow trustees yesterday, isn't in any hurry for things to change. He hears his mother's witty brutal voice: If you're ever going to be successful, Maurice, you'll have to do it by the time you're forty. This invisible barrier was passed two years ago and he's still not sure what he's going to do. The jobs in journalism and films he had in the thirties wouldn't pay for the boys' school fees, the cause of the arguments at the meeting yesterday. He reaches out for Colleen, who's crying, her tears clogging her powder and mascara. Her emotional fertility still bewilders him; she seems to feel so much, so often. She turns to him with her Strength-through-Joy smile and he realises she's happy. Gertrude stares in distaste and Colleen runs off to repair her face, followed by Sally, who is also deeply moved but too poised to cry in public.

At Colleen's kidney shaped dressing table, with its triple mirror and turquoise glass bottles and jars, they feel like girls again. The dark face and the fair one stare at themselves in the mirror and then at each other. Sally allows herself to cry and

Colleen hugs her. She feels boosted, as always, by her big, sunny bedroom and sprays herself generously with *Femme*, inhaling the musky sophistication she longs for.

'Lovely house.'

'So is yours.'

'Yes, but it's miles away. Billy says he's sick to death of Sussex. No sex, he calls it.'

Colleen looks embarrassed, remembering Billy's rampant bisexuality when she first met him, during the war. 'You know you can stay here whenever you like.'

'I'd better take him back tonight so he can sober up before that audition on Friday.'

'Terence Rattigan! Oh, my dear! Wouldn't it be wonderful if he gets it?'

'Yes, but he won't. It's the boozing, it makes his face all puffy and then he drinks even more because he can't get the parts.'

'But he used to be so successful. I thought he was brilliant in that musical about sailors and Wrens.' Colleen wants Sally to be happy again, like her. She hums tunelessly, thinking of all the dancing the four of them used to do together at the Gargoyle, dancing the Blitz away. She wants to go back to the party where she can keep an eye on Maurice, who hardly drinks at all and whose devotion to her is as solid as this house—but that Gertrude woman is obviously after him.

On the landing they hear screams and roars coming from the nursery, up the next flight of wide red carpeted stairs. Colleen and Sally were both obedient only daughters and are pleased that their children are so rowdy. As Colleen comes into the drawing room, she sees Edie sitting alone on a sofa, maddeningly erect and prissy. My children will be free to do

as they like, she thinks ferociously, and then forgets all about them as she throws herself into her party.

Maurice is standing with Billy (who really is very squiffy), Gertrude and Rex, who is determined to leave with her at the end of the party. Rex always wears spectacular clothes to make it clear he's an artist and today he's wearing a red and yellow spotted bow tie, a yellow and black check waistcoat, green jacket, and yellow corduroy trousers. Short, tubby, and quick witted, he knows his place as jester to his richer friends.

'Are you still being an angel, Maurice?'

'Awfully risky, backing plays.'

'Did you lose some money?' Rex can't keep the glee out of his voice.

'It wasn't his fault,' Colleen says defensively, coming up and putting her arm through Maurice's. '*Murder at the Vicarage* was much better than *The Mousetrap*, yet that's still running.'

'I thought Agatha Christie was gilt-edged,' Maurice admits. 'How about you, Rex? Still doing the clinches?'

Rex clutches his head in mock despair. 'Don't remind me! The deadline's tomorrow. He ripped her flimsy frock and cried: I cannot let you go like this. Full colour. Part three of *The Doctor's Daydream*, a passionate drama about hospital life.'

They all laugh. Encouraged, Rex wonders if he should tell them about the pornographic drawings that pay so much better than the women's magazines. Collectors' pieces. No, he'll wait until he's got Gertrude on her own.

Billy's smiling, but Sally's watching for the moment when the whisky hits his self-pity and he lashes out, either verbally or physically. Her mother, who lives with them, says she must

stop Billy drinking but Sally has no idea how. Billy stares back at his wife, dreading the moment when he's packed into the car and driven back to captivity. He's so envious of Colleen and Maurice that he can hardly look them in the eye and was secretly pleased when his son Martin locked their spoilt brats in the garden shed. Sally's niceness, her refusal to get blotto with him or complain, bring out the worst in him, which is much worse than he ever suspected. On the way here they had another row about Marie, Sally's widowed mother, who looks after Martin and has paid the household expenses since Billy's acting career dried up. At Gatwick Billy announced dramatically that Sally would have to choose between them and by Roehampton he realised, from the quiet determination of her profile behind the driving wheel, who she would choose. Sally knows the row will continue all the way home and Martin will hear lots of words she doesn't want him to know. She would willingly bribe a producer to give Billy a part, just to coax him back into the gentle, playful mood he always seemed to be in a few years ago. His face is bloated, his fair hair is receding but she can still see the big pink handsome charmer she fell in love with. His smile hasn't changed, he shouldn't smile like that. Then she realises she's smiling too. It's what you do at parties.

Colleen and Maurice are tired now and the food and drink are running out. Richard Dimbleby has rumbled his last blessing on the new age, the chart has appeared on the screen, neighbours and fractious children are trickling home. It's a funny time for a party to end but most of them are parents now and nannies aren't what they used to be. They expect time off and walk out after a few months and children are all

too audible and visible. Edie's still on the sofa, where Viola has fallen asleep in her lap, her fat little body crushing her grandmother's delicate knees. Colleen's ayah spirited her away so that you would hardly have known there was a child in the bungalow. Then Edie remembers she isn't allowed to talk about India, she purses her lips in case her thoughts burst out and disgrace her. When Sally politely asks if she's enjoyed the party Edie replies with irreproachable dullness that it was very nice. She looks forward to tomorrow morning when she can get the train back to Epsom, to her dear little house, Quetta, and her uncensored memories.

Rex has manoeuvred Gertrude into accepting a lift in his vintage Rolls Royce. Maurice can't resist a few jokes about Mr Toad, but Rex is happy as he sets off with her: a woman of the world, a gay divorcee. Billy's too drunk to drive and Sally wants to get home before darkness makes the unlit Sussex roads dangerous. They're going to give Jim a lift to Ealing.

Arm in arm at their front door, Maurice and Colleen watch their friends leave. Glancing at her face Maurice sees that she's still happy and kisses her, shamelessly washing his clean linen in public.