

ALL THE RAGE

ALSO BY A.L KENNEDY

FICTION

Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains

Looking for the Possible Dance

Now That You're Back

So I Am Glad

Original Bliss

Everything You Need

Indelible Acts

Paradise

Day

What Becomes

The Blue Book

NON-FICTION

The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp

On Bullfighting

On Writing

ALL THE RAGE

A.L. KENNEDY



From AllThe Rage © 2014 Written by A.L. Kennedy

Published by House of Anansi Press Inc. Downloaded from www.houseofanansi.com

Copyright © 2014 A. L. Kennedy

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in Great Britain by Jonathan Cape in 2014

This edition published in 2014 by
House of Anansi Press Inc.
110 Spadina Avenue, Suite 801
Toronto, ON, M5V 2K4
Tel. 416-363-4343
Fax 416-363-1017
www.houseofanansi.com

Distributed in Canada by
HarperCollins Canada Ltd.
1995 Markham Road
Scarborough, ON, M1B 5M8
Toll free tel. 1-800-387-0117

House of Anansi Press is committed to protecting our natural environment. As part of our efforts, the interior of this book is printed on paper that contains 100% post-consumer recycled fibres, is acid-free, and is processed chlorine-free.

18 17 16 15 14 1 2 3 4 5

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Kennedy, A. L., author
All the rage / A.L. Kennedy.

Issued in print and electronic formats.
ISBN 978-1-77089-463-1 (pbk.).—ISBN 978-1-77089-464-8 (html)

I. Title.

PR6061.E5665A55 2014 823'.914 C2013-907051-6
C2013-907052-4

Typeset in Sabon MT by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

We acknowledge for their financial support of our publishing program the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund.

Printed and bound in Canada

*For
V.D.B.
As Ever*

CONTENTS

Late in Life	I
Baby Blue	15
Because It's a Wednesday	35
These Small Pieces	47
The Practice of Mercy	59
Knocked	73
All the Rage	85
Takes You Home	133
The Effects of Good Government on the City	151
Run Catch Run	171
A Thing Unheard-of	187
This Man	199
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	213

Late in Life

‘Eating figs is different for girls.’ She says this because she is being sexy for him to pass their time: standing in a queue and over-gently, over-carefully setting her lips to the fig, destroying it in an affectionate way. The round blush and kiss of the skin, the neat, small burden in her hand: she’s aware it all makes for a less subtle show than he generally likes, but he’s watching, he is now-and-then watching. And he gives her the quiet rise of what would be a smile if he allowed it. She knows this because she knows him and his habits and the way the colour in his eyes can deepen when he’s glad, can be nearly purple with feeling glad when nothing else about him shows a heat of any kind.

He’s quite frequently secretive. They have decided to like this about him. His love of hiding has nothing to do with her and should not be a worry – it dates from much earlier situations which were unpleasant. They agree that his varieties of absence are okay and usually endearing.

He nudges against her side, ‘Shush.’ This is a suggestion that she should hide, too.

She keeps on, though. ‘There’s one left, if you want.’ This morning she’ll be obvious for him and minutely brave.

All the Rage

She will undermine the calm of their nearest building-society branch with an outbreak of sex, or something not unlike it. ‘Do you want?’ What she wants is for other people to overhear her. Anyone, she feels safe to assume, can need the comfort of witnesses sometimes and to be remembered, on the record. ‘I bought two.’ At the moment, she would appreciate some comfort.

‘Of course. You would.’ His mouth flinching into happiness and then back. ‘They’re better in pairs. At least, we’d hope so.’

She bites. This doesn’t honestly feel intimate any longer, only both interesting and wrong. If she were being accurate inside her little display, then she would simply warm and hold and be very kind to the figs. They would come to no harm. She would dote upon each of them in detail.

Instead, she is biting, eating.

Which may not seem arousing at all.

Maybe, from his point of view, she’s acting out a threat. Not that he doesn’t enjoy certain types of threat and the odder edges of sweet things. She has found she enjoys them with him – it’s not that she has to pretend.

He nudges again, ‘You couldn’t have bought me an apple . . .?’

‘You didn’t ask.’

‘I like apples.’

‘I couldn’t give you an apple – *woman inflicts apple on her partner* – it would be religious. Like a moral assault.’

They don’t assault, not ever. That’s a promise.

He nods solemnly, ‘Leading me astray again.’

‘No.’

As a couple, they are purely soft – hard ideas, but tender

Late in Life

application. Hardness was before, in all the years before they met, and they have declared an end to it.

‘We should get a garden.’ He stares past her and on into where he intends they should finally be. ‘Then we’ll grow apples. Figs, if you’d like. If the weather will allow. How about that?’ With a brief touch to her neck, an enquiring contact.

It is not an impossible hope: they could soon plant a garden and shape it to be only theirs. After today – or before 5 p.m. tomorrow at the latest – she will have paid off her mortgage. Or rather, he will have paid off her mortgage, because he’s *not short of cash* and had paid off his own decades ago, both of these circumstances slightly having to do with his age. Once they have sold her flat and his, they will move in together, more together than they currently are. They will buy – to be accurate, he will probably buy – a big new bed and sheets and everything fresh. They have planned this, pondered thread-counts and headboards, and they are sure they will sleep very beautifully once their requirements have been fulfilled. And they will also be there with each other and stay attractively awake. This means that when she reaches the head of the queue, she will be, in a way, receiving money for sexual reasons from an older man.

Hence the figs.

The money-for-sex thing feels mildly electric in the soles of her feet. She grins.

‘What?’ He kisses the top of her head. ‘Why’s the girl smiling? Or shouldn’t I ask.’ But he wants it out loud, she can tell: a further demonstration for the queue – *here’s love, here’s being desired and desiring, here’s assured love*. Something else they share: a need to be as real as observers

All the Rage

make them. When she hugs his arm, she can feel it tensing with his usual interior argument – that he'd like to be the unnoticed man, the invisible boy who is shy – that he'd like to burn and be uncovered and holding and licking where they stand, outrageous evidence. 'Shouldn't I ask?'

'You should always ask.' Still, she isn't absolutely clear what she should answer. 'My boy should always ask.' This quiet and for him, no one else.

She doesn't believe that when he chooses to be overt he's making a statement against decay: bridge in his top teeth, glasses, greying hair – greyed, to be truthful – thin at the crown. He's not any more needy than she is, she completely believes that and has said so.

'Then tell me why you're happy?' Shining with the answers he expects and with being content, a young kind of content.

The truth would be complicated, so she tells him, 'I was just thinking – what if there was a hold-up, robbers, guns?' And for a moment she has made him disappointed.

But then fully, plainly, he permits himself to be delighted. 'If there were guns I would save you.' There is no way to overestimate how fond he is of saving, of the thought that he will do her good.

So, once again, she's vindicated: she doesn't ever lie to him unless it's for the best.

Under her hand, his elbow twitches with a dream of motion. 'I'd have to rush in and defend you from the bullets – stand in their way.'

'No. I'd take a bullet for you.' This is a whole, uncomplicated truth. She would be murdered for his sake, if necessary.

Late in Life

‘No, no.’ He kisses this close beside her, nuzzles against their rush to be dead for each other. ‘I’d be compelled to do the gentlemanly thing and lay down my life. It would be instinctive. Men of my generation can’t help it. I would have to be terribly harmed and then expire.’

‘In my arms?’

‘Well, that would depend. If I was flinging myself at a gunman in a hail of hot lead I might not also be able to fall back and rest my head upon your shoulder.’

‘Breast.’

‘I’d be too poorly.’ A dark and nice flicker in his look.

‘It’s traditional.’

‘All right. Breast.’ Saying this with enough focus to make himself swallow, pause. ‘And if I failed to reach you, I would fail nobly and you would be impressed and you’d . . . then you’d probably – I don’t know – you could lever me into position before I kicked off . . .’

They do this a lot: imagining dreadful scenarios. It is a kind of inoculation against the future. She makes sure she doesn’t think of blood seeping through her blouse, or of the precise shape, warm and clever shape, the kind shape of his head, and how things would be if he wasn’t breathing and his lips were still.

‘What should I wear at your funeral?’

‘Velvet. Vermilion. No. Crimson. If you wouldn’t mind.’

‘That’s the same thing.’

‘Not at all. Crimson’s more blue and vermilion’s more orange. I think . . . And crimson’s spelled differently – it has a “c” in it. Like all the good things.’

‘Vermilion Velvet sounds better.’

‘Well, you’re not wrong . . . I shall leave it up to you.’

All the Rage

‘Okay.’ She holds his hand. ‘And will I jump into the grave and call your name and be devastated and inconsolable?’

‘You’d spoil your dress.’

‘I wouldn’t care.’

‘All right, then. I’ll be in my box and I’ll listen. As far as I’m able.’

‘I will beat my tiny fists on the wood.’

‘Thank you.’

They squeeze each other’s fingers.

Ahead in the queue is a mother with a toddler daughter: all curls and frills and graded shades of pink. The girl has collected a leaf at some point, perhaps in her garden – the child’s family may have a garden – or else during the walk to get here. Up until five minutes ago, the thing was a perfect little autumn in her hand, crisp-edged and tawny. The girl has loved it into splinters since then. She is currently staring at her palm and how it is dirty with veins and shreds, although she doesn’t cry. Perhaps she has a philosophical turn of mind. Either that or she doesn’t yet understand her loss.

He clears his throat, ‘I’ve chosen the music.’

‘For what?’

‘For the wake. And the service.’

These occasions are only guesses and are so far away and distant and tiny that they can seem fun. And people of all ages joke about their funerals, pick tunes.

‘You’ll have Andrew Lloyd Webber and like it. Sea shanties round the coffin and then I’ll play the spoons.’

‘I’ll come back and haunt you if you do. I’ll come back and bite you.’

‘Why else d’you think I’d do it?’

Late in Life

A student of the wandering sort shuffles past, his business concluded, and heads for the rest of the world. He seems exactly as bewildered as he did when he drifted up to make his enquiry.

Young men are easily confused, she's often thought this. They lack resources.

The building society is busy. There are nine strangers – including the toddler – straggled out between her and the end of her mortgage and then the probable garden with pre-existing, or easily purchased, trees.

Or maybe they'll change their minds and want decking with some pots – less work. Sit out of an evening and sip Martinis, daiquiris, home-made lemonade, and nobody doing their back in with mowing the lawn because there isn't one.

It doesn't do to over-prepare. She realises that it's good to let some mysteries remain.

Flower beds, or pots, or runner beans – it doesn't matter.

The woman ahead of her looks stressed and is holding a sheaf of ill-kempt papers. Whatever her problem is, it will take a while.

Monday lunchtime.

Predictably busy.

They should have known better.

There's the second fig to eat, yet – a distraction – except that it's his, intended for him. Not that she's asked if he likes figs. She made the assumption that he should because their tastes have been consistently in agreement right from their start.

It's something to give him, a fresh fig.

She doesn't want his money. She isn't truly accepting a

All the Rage

gift, she is agreeing that he has to save her and embracing that. Anything else would hurt him.

And she can't hurt him.

Without his intervention – although this isn't what it's about, or what they're about – her mortgage interest would tick and tick, asking £6.80 from her every day. Plus, her inadequate mortgage endowment is shrinking and shrinking, which loses her – by some unhappy coincidence – pretty much another £6.80 every day. In this area, and several others, it can seem that she is being punished for something unnamed: perhaps sins she is waiting to commit.

He has lately been very firm that she ought to get rid of her flat and she agrees. The place has become unreliable. There is something wrong, for example, with the roof. People move unaccountably in and out. Most mornings, when she checks the table in the hall, there is mail for entirely theoretical residents. Yesterday there was a letter addressed to 'Mr Basement'. She isn't aware of anyone using that name. Odd objects are left on the steps during the night: pieces of metal, old mops, plastic things that seem culinary, or else medical. There is a sense of illicit activities taking place. Meanwhile, and perhaps in response, the council has sent notices to say that odd objects will no longer be uplifted, or that they will not be uplifted so often as hitherto, or that they will be uplifted from other locations, as yet unclear.

'The council are turning off the street lights.' He does this occasionally: follows her thinking while it runs inside. 'This winter.'

'Really?' It's generally a thing to love: the way he is mixed in her thinking.

'Said so in the paper. To save money.'

Late in Life

‘Can they do that?’

‘Apparently.’ He lifts her hand, which means he intends to kiss it and – *here* – does so, as if she were delicate fruit, the touch light as a breath and elongating. ‘We needn’t go out any more in the nights.’ This hot between her knuckles, before he raises up his head and stares. ‘We could stop in and have lanterns and a fire.’ A blue and inquisitive stare. ‘Do you think we’d enjoy that?’

‘I’ve never seen you in firelight.’ As if she has a list of ways in which she would like to see him: in dappled sunshine, or a CT scan, perhaps in evening dress, or else a movie of the 1930s with a railway platform underneath him and leather luggage and a hat. In school, at his first job, with his first love – so much she has missed.

‘We’ll make sure we have a fireplace. Garden and a fireplace. And then we’ll get ourselves in firelight.’

‘On a rug.’

‘On a big rug.’

She can’t deny this curiosity, this ache to have felt his earliest kiss, his potentially scared or possibly reckless activity when no one had ever been with him, or left him. Imagination is inadequate.

Asking him – *show me your past, let me have it* – could be misunderstood. She doesn’t want him to be the man she’s seen in photographs: Polaroid Christmases, dated clothes; that isn’t who she loves, or who makes her undoubtedly satisfied. At night and on their daytime occasions – celebratory occasions, in his study with the paperwork jolted and spilling occasions – then he is always new, as smooth and new as teenage nonsense and summer running, as the best kinds of games. His pacing has maybe changed from what

All the Rage

it was – he rolls up in waves and then back, has pauses – but his truth is only young and in the present tense. It is important that she keeps him absolutely sure of this.

If he doubts, she convinces him. That's how it is and will be.

And each time he's reassured, he draws in slightly closer.

'How are you surviving?'

'Okay. How about you?'

They are solicitous in balanced but not identical situations. She asks how he is during illnesses, if political news has upset him, if they have quarrelled. He asks after love-making, if she's tired, if they have quarrelled. They quarrel mainly at great speed, so they can move on to enquiries and holding and being held and can have nothing wrong any more. They lean on the rise and fall of their ribs when the shouting's done, old trouble in the press of breath. As a rule, they don't like being scared without each other, not even if each other is what scared them.

This morning hasn't been frightening, not quite. They spent it with each other in a lawyer's office, going through unspilled paperwork so that their lives will be coordinated and tidy from hereon in.

She called it *the document* instead of *the will*. This made matters slightly confusing and so she changed to *my document* and *your document* and eventually everyone – all three of them – was *documenting*.

Afterwards, business over, he kissed her in the street – a grey building at his back with a grubby doorway, and so she closed her eyes while they hugged and therefore spared herself the ugliness. He kisses very well. On that occasion, he was particularly fine.

Late in Life

Such an uncomfortable day, though. She would prefer if it were done.

But no need for worry.

No sense in making assumptions, or being bleak in advance.

There's no way to be certain of when anybody will leave.

After you.

In every doorway, without fail, he tells her.

That's what she wants.

After you.

Then at least she'd keep the whole rest of him and miss nothing else.

But he has to be the gentleman, can't help it.

No. After you.

Which wouldn't be right.

But neither is right.

Someone else having their apple trees, lighting unwatched fires.

And she isn't sure she'll manage, not in the end, doesn't see how she could, and she wishes she wasn't carrying this silly paper bag with the fig in it that she won't eat, can't eat. She wants to fold her arms, or put her hands in her pockets, she isn't clear which.

He settles his hand at the small of her back and then lets her swing and face him and see how he is weary and gently and sadly himself. 'Are you okay, though? Really?'

She doesn't ever lie to him unless it's for the best.