

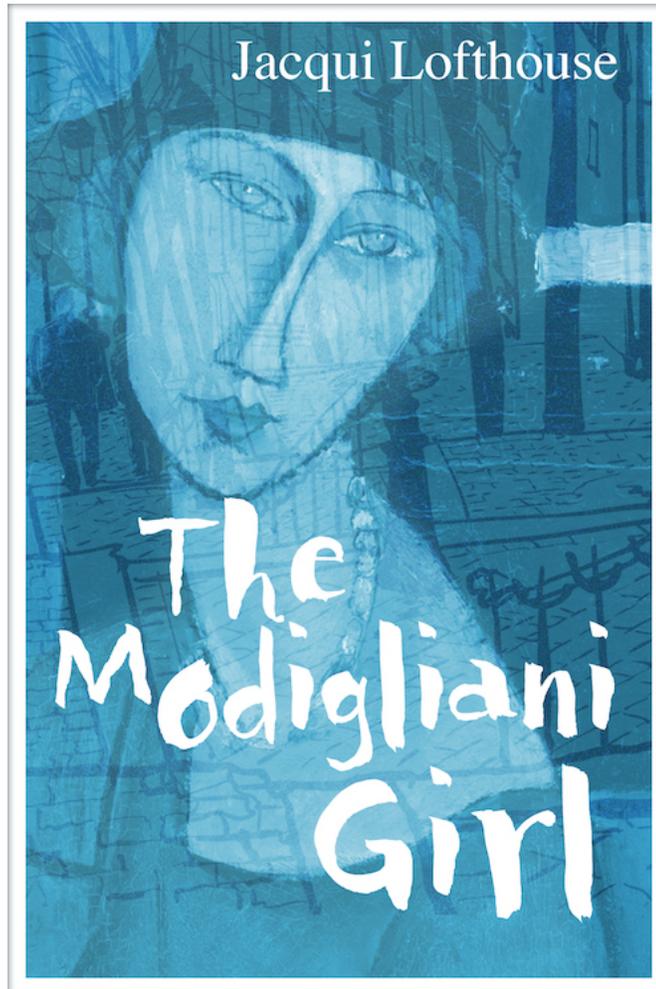


THE MODIGLIANI GIRL

by
Jacqui Lofthouse



Blackbird Digital Books



Published by Blackbird Digital Books, London

ISBN-13: 978-1503024700

ISBN-10: 1503024709

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'If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry'
– Emily Dickinson

Part One

Beginning

1

'This is what I find encouraging about the writing trades: they allow mediocre people who are patient and industrious to revise their stupidity, to edit themselves into something like intelligence. They also allow lunatics to seem saner than sane.' – Kurt Vonnegut

I have often wished that I had been born at the turn of the nineteenth century, in Paris. It seems unfair to me that those lucky enough to be born in the right place at the right time had the opportunity of living a truly bohemian lifestyle, whilst those of us brought up in the eighties in Billericay are conditioned to a life of material acquisition that is hardly compatible with the pursuit of art for art's sake.

That thought again, tormenting me. I brush it aside and focus on what I see. I'm sitting before a mirror in a white dressing gown, gazing at my face but not quite recognising it. My hair is in foam curlers and my make-up is half complete: my kohl-rimmed eyes and Barbie-doll false lashes make me an airbrushed version of myself. The rest of my face is ghost-pale; even my lips are not yet painted. The mirror is rimmed by opaque light bulbs and – yes, I admit it – there's something of the *Moulin Rouge* about the scene and I ought to appreciate it, but somehow can't. I laugh out loud only there's no hint of jollity in the sound. I am not myself and I am definitely not in Paris, though the cabaret is about to begin.

Where the hell is the make-up artist, that's what I want to know? She was telling me her name is Ruby and she can't afford a down payment on a flat in Kentish Town. It was a distraction, at least, but now she's vanished to take a call and I'm left alone, staring at this new creation in the mirror, wondering what I'm doing here. In a few hours, everything should fall into place. Everything I've ever dreamed of is about to come true. If I win, I'll have it all (all the shallow stuff that is): fame, glamour and the kind of success that I always thought I wanted. My mascara is running down my face, cutting vertical lines across the pancake, but it's OK. Really, it's OK. It's only natural to cry on an occasion like this. It's stage fright. Last-minute nerves. Panic. The whole story is spinning in my head and threatens to spill out and I'm trying to keep it inside, but it's like an out of body experience. I am at once in front of the mirror and above it, watching myself, like a player in a bad farce that has become quite frighteningly real.

There's a knock at the door behind me and I stand to open it, half here and half lost in memory. Behind the door there's a young woman, pushing past me. She's holding a coat-hanger from which hangs a crumpled cream-coloured dress that looks a bit too much like a wedding frock for my liking. She's looking at me as if she wants something but I have no idea what it is that she wants.

'Well?' she says. She hangs the dress in the corner and stands back to admire it. When I don't reply, she forces the issue. 'So what do you think?'

'Of the dress?'

‘Isn’t it stunning? I’m beside myself with envy.’

‘Why?’

She rolls her eyes as if I’m having her on. ‘It’s vintage Balmain?’ The inflexion in her voice makes me wonder if she is Australian. Either that or she thinks I’m extremely stupid.

‘Is that eco-friendly or something?’

‘Sod the eco-credentials – it’s a one-off piece. You’re going to look incredible in this.’ She is Australian, but she also thinks I’m stupid.

‘It looks a bit like a doily to me.’

‘Trust me. You’ll own the stage.’

I try to pull myself back into the room, to really get this moment and make it meaningful. *This is it, Anna Bright.* Sadly I don’t believe my own PR. *It’s your time. What does it matter how you got here and what you feel inside? When you put on that dress, you can do exactly what she says: walk onto the stage and work the audience. You can become Fahy and Brown’s next big thing.*

But even as I say these words, I am thinking of a girl standing before a high window in Paris. I can’t get her out of my mind. She has lost the only thing that matters to her and she is gazing down at the pavement far beneath, wondering if she will do it, whether the act she is about to commit is one of bravery or one of cowardice. And what would she make of me, that girl?

You are a liar and a thief.

‘What the hell’s going on?’ Ruby is back. She takes me by the shoulders and sits me down on the stool. ‘What did you say to her?’ she asks the wardrobe girl.

‘Nothing. She’s just been insulting the dress. Does she have any idea what it cost us to borrow that for the evening?’

‘It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what Anna makes of the dress. What matters is that she wears it!’ She turns to me. ‘Anna – are you OK?’

‘I’m fine,’ I say, though my voice is no more than a whisper.

Ruby leans forward, puts a hand on my shoulder and picks up a sponge pad from her kit, repairing the pancake, before applying more glitter to my eyelids.

‘Don’t cry,’ she said. ‘It would be really helpful if you could do “internal” nerves rather than “external” ones. That way, you know, it won’t mess up your face.’

If I can’t cry, perhaps they will allow me to scream. I hold back, bite my lip quickly and nod. I realise it doesn’t matter really. I’m not quite here any more. I’m somewhere else, driving my car, a whole year ago now. I can hear the music, the voice of Ian Dury playing my town’s theme tune *Billericay Dickie* and Dury’s voice takes me right back to the evening when all this madness started.

*

I was stuck in a traffic jam, en route to the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith. It was a drizzling June evening, the sky was low and a summer rain threatened. The driver’s window was open and I was smoking, inhaling deeply, perhaps believing that if I inhaled quite hard enough, the nicotine rush

might take away the memory of my argument with Will. But even nicotine would not do it. I kept going over the issue in my mind, trying to understand his point of view, but failing. I could not get over the fact that he had chosen to go to the *Telegraph* party rather than coming with me to support Hilary on her big night. *Had* I been too obnoxious? Quite possibly I had. Now, as well as having fallen out with my fiancé, I was also late and likely to embarrass Hils.

That was when Dury came on the radio ... His lyrics were out of tune with my thoughts, but against my will I began to laugh. I tossed the burning cigarette stub from the window and listened. Dury's voice made me think about my sister Lois: a memory of her pogoing about the kitchen to the strains of *Hit Me With Your Rhythm Stick*, tossing her head furiously to the beat, while Mum – the original Dury fan – was busy cooking our fish fingers.

The traffic ground to a halt.

It was odd to think that Hilary was about to join the ranks of the Essex glitterati. Hilary – the same girl I met at the Mayflower School. It didn't seem real or even right that she was appearing on stage that night with the much-lauded Meryl Wainwright, *Grande Dame* of British Letters. In typical Hils fashion, she had tried to play it down. *'It's just in the studio theatre, Anna. It's not such a huge deal.'* But it was impossible to miss her excitement. This was a fund-raising event for The Reading Trust and Hilary would be reading an extract from her recently published novel, alongside five other authors, including Wainwright, the notorious Harish Devan and the man that I considered the wildcard, the latest bestselling guru, James Loftus.

It had taken a while for me to adjust to Hilary's success. If I said I wasn't envious, I'd be a liar. Who wouldn't be envious of a school friend who'd just secured a six-figure publishing deal? If it had been anybody else, I'd say it was enough to make you vomit. But Hilary is my oldest friend and I was beginning to see there was some price to pay for this break. Every insecurity that ever haunted her before she signed that contract was now magnified tenfold. If she was a perfectionist before, now she was bordering on OCD. I had never known anyone more hardworking than Hilary but these days I hardly saw her; until very recently, she'd been working all hours on the sequel to her novel in a desperate bid to meet an impossible deadline. Tonight, at least, was her chance to enjoy what she'd achieved and I was furious at myself for being late.

But I was even more furious at Will. Because if Will had come along that night, I would not have been late in the first place. Will is never late. The word isn't in his vocabulary. He was certainly not going to be late for the *Telegraph* party. Having decided it was more important to network in his own little circle than in mine, he was in his dinner suit and favourite Fornasetti tie before I even got home from work.

But I had to put my bitterness behind me. It wasn't often that I fell out with Will and I vowed we'd make it up later that evening. It was likely I was being selfish. Will had been a freelance cartoonist for a couple of years now, but he got a lot of work from *The Telegraph* and if he didn't suck up to the editors at these events then somebody else would suck up in his place. In any case, I should possibly have thanked Will for his absence because being late was what caused me to bump into Meryl in the first place.

When I arrived at the Lyric, the foyer and bar were deserted. The audience had already gone into the theatre. I tried to sneak in quietly but as I stepped into the darkness of the auditorium, an usher followed me.

‘You have to wait at the side,’ she said. ‘It’s started.’

Keeping close to her, I shuffled forwards in the darkness. As I approached the stage however, I realised that Hilary was standing immediately in front of me. Harish Devan was on the podium and had just begun his reading.

‘What are you doing here?’ I whispered. ‘Aren’t you meant to be up there?’

‘They screwed up,’ Hilary said. ‘They were meant to put out six chairs on stage but they forgot. The stage manager’s in a right strop, so we’ve got to take it in turns.’

‘Where are the other writers?’

‘They managed to find a couple of reserved seats in the front row. But the others were all taken. It’s full up, so I have to wait here until it’s my turn to read.’

‘Fabulous,’ I said. ‘Star treatment.’

As I spoke, I sensed that somebody was now standing behind me. I turned around and the person seemed so familiar that I greeted her.

‘Oh – hello!’

She laughed and I immediately realised my error. I recognised her now, even in the gloom. It was impossible to mistake her trademark craggy features. I had seen that face in Sunday supplements, on book jackets and on TV. Yet Meryl Wainwright was smaller in the flesh.

‘I’ve lost my damn umbrella,’ she whispered. At first I thought she couldn’t be talking to me, but Hilary’s attention was focussed on Devan and the usher had returned to the foyer. It seemed incongruous to hear a literary legend talking about something so banal. I had only ever heard her pontificating on cultural artefacts. The umbrella clearly mattered to her. ‘I put it down in the caff and now it’s gone. Do you think I’ve got time to find it before I go on?’

‘Um. I don’t know,’ I said. ‘Do you want me to have a look?’

‘Would you? Oh sod it. We’ve probably got hours yet. Harish is always so up himself. I’m gasping for a fag.’

‘Me too,’ I said. My forwardness took me by surprise. If it hadn’t been so dark I might have been more circumspect. ‘I couldn’t cadge one, could I?’

In the end, we found the umbrella behind a sofa and I suspected its loss had been nothing more than a ploy for nicotine. We nipped out the back via a fire door and stood outside, huddling beneath a small canopy. There was a light drizzle but not enough to distract Meryl from important business. She sheltered the flame beneath her coat and ensured that mine was lit before her own. I found myself trying not to count her wrinkles; it was simply a nervous reaction, a distraction from the fear of not knowing what to say. I was determined not to sound pathetic but the sycophantic stuff must have been on the tip of my tied-up tongue because without quite knowing how it happened, I found myself praising her latest novel.

‘I thought the characterisation of Ethan was so accomplished...’ I said. ‘Your prose is so tight.

And there's something... elastic about it.' *Elastic? How can it be tight and also elastic? What was that supposed to mean?* My inarticulacy was killing me. Meryl must have thought I was a total prat but she was very nice about it.

'Thank you, my dear. That was a terrible nuisance about the umbrella. And how kind. Do you write?'

I hesitated. I had been considering the idea of writing seriously for some time. I had written fragments in notebooks, then torn them out and thrown them away. Sometimes I would scribble ideas on scraps of paper and I occasionally gathered images and kept them in an attractive polka-dotted box folder marked 'Novel', but it was not something that I ever spoke about. It had been years since I had admitted such an ambition. In our early twenties, when Hilary was at Cambridge and I at Warwick, we would write long letters to each other, professing our love of Hardy and the Brontës and our desire to write great works, but Hilary had made that desire concrete and I was still at the back-of-an-envelope stage. My answer to Meryl's question must surely be a resounding 'No'.

'Not yet,' I said.

I suppose it just slipped out.

'Fool's game, of course,' she said. 'But you could do worse than listening to this Loftus fellow.'

She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow as she spoke, as if to say 'don't underestimate the chap'. She was looking directly at me, as if issuing a challenge. I had expected her to be patronising or dismissive or abrupt but she was none of these. Meryl appeared entirely serious. The look might even have been called *encouraging*. And something about this made me feel uncomfortable. It reminded me of a look my father used to give me, a look he gave me on the day Hilary and I went up for interview at Cambridge. I did not want to remember it.

It's possible that Meryl noticed the impact of her expression. If she did, she passed no comment. I attempted to laugh it off and to continue the conversation without crying.

'You think he has a serious message?' I said.

I'd read all about the silver-haired guru in *The Observer* at the weekend (Will called my newspaper habit treason). Loftus was not such big news then as he is now, but his work was already a hit in the States and he was beginning to cause noticeable ripples here in the UK. His book, *How to Be a Literary Genius* was, as far as I could make out, an invitation to would-be writers everywhere to abandon self-doubt and to believe that they had a book inside them. I could not think of anything more depressing. The man appeared to be on a single-minded mission to convince us that "everyone is creative". It was nothing that had not been said by a thousand other gurus before him, but no one could deny the power of his marketing machine. Loftus's holiday company *Genius Vacations* had just expanded to take over half the Greek Island of Ouranos.

Yet here was Meryl Wainwright giving him a plug and challenging my cynicism. Was it possible I was missing something? According to the article, Loftus had a strong fan-base. Tens of thousands of people had used his methods to overcome chronic writer's block but that didn't give him any intellectual credibility. I had pretty much dismissed him out of hand. The last thing the

world needed right now was more unblocked writers. The net result of that would surely be more bad literature. Hadn't Meryl thought of that?

'There's only one serious message in the end,' Meryl said. She stubbed out her fag on a railing. 'What's that?'

'Get black on white,' she said. Then, after a brief silence added, 'Guy de Maupassant. No one ever became a writer by thinking about it.' She shivered then, and pulled her raincoat closer across her chest. 'Come on. Devan's probably still droning on, but we'd better not miss the rest.'

We arrived back in time to see Hilary walking onto the stage. She glanced in my direction and I wasn't sure if her expression was one of relief or reprimand. I smiled back, as if to say 'of course, I never would have missed you' but I don't know if she believed me. Beneath the brilliant light, Hilary appeared at once brittle and vulnerable. She wore a black Ghost dress, just on the decent side of transparency, the kind of dress that I could never carry off. Her hair was newly cropped and bleached. If you didn't know her, you might think her composure unnerving. Though she fixed her eyes on the audience and raised her chin and did not allow her jaw to quiver even a fraction, the small fluttering movements of her hands to her face revealed her fear to me.

Hilary need not have been afraid however. Her novel was a deeply serious one, an apocalyptic vision, rooted in science and conveyed in crisp, elegant prose. I had read a previous draft and the opening moved me now as much as it did the first time. As Hilary read, I watched Meryl leaning forward, her hand resting on her cheek, frowning and absorbed. Afterwards, Hilary told me, when she came off the stage, Meryl had whispered 'Bravo, my dear' in her ear. I had seen that moment, as Meryl placed her hand on Hilary's shoulder, her mouth to her ear and I experienced that closeness as a small stab of pain beneath my ribs.

When Meryl read, the Meryl I had always imagined reappeared. The distracted woman who had lost her umbrella receded and once again she was the literary diva, reading her work aloud in her trademark gravelly tone. Meryl spoke with authority and her talent for combining intricate research with a gripping narrative astonished me. It did not seem possible that I had just shared a cigarette with this woman. She was a legend and my friend had been on stage beside her. I remember her words in a fragmented way; perhaps I was distracted by the memory of our encounter beneath the canopy and the apparent encouragement she had given me. I was waiting for Loftus to come on; I began to anticipate his appearance as something significant. Whilst I attempted to remain calm, some small, neglected part of me would not be still; a buried voice that was now yelling out, like a spoilt brat sporting ringlets.

But I did not anticipate what happened next. The host walked to the centre of the stage, kissed Meryl on both cheeks and waited until she was seated again. He approached the microphone.

'Ladies and Gentlemen,' he said. 'My thanks to Meryl Wainwright for what I'm sure you'll agree was a remarkable reading. We are honoured to have you here and deeply appreciative.' He paused for more applause, cleared his throat. 'I'm afraid, however, that I've just learned that due to unforeseen circumstances, our fourth reader, James Loftus, is unable to attend this evening's event. He sends his sincere apologies, but he has been waylaid by – a family emergency.'

My disappointment took me by surprise. There was something unconvincing about this absence. The brat inside my head wanted something and threatened to yell if she did not get it. I shook her off. I didn't really understand this feeling, nor where it came from but I knew I did not like this part of myself. I would send the brat to her room and lock the door until she came to her senses.

Afterwards, the foyer was packed. Hilary was on the other side of the room, at a table with Meryl, Devan and the others, signing books. I did not want to be disloyal, but the idea of queuing up to have my best friend sign a book was not remotely appealing. In any case, Hilary had already inscribed a copy of the novel for me. "*For Anna*" – she wrote – "*Your turn next! With love and thanks for all your support, H x*"

Hilary knew that I wanted to write. I denied it sometimes but she had known me long enough to see beyond my protests. Now as I looked about the room, I recognised a few familiar faces. These were exactly the faces I did not wish to see, the people that Hilary wanted me to meet, though I had no inclination to know them. There was the novelist Julia Claiborne, standing at the bar and laughing like a horse, surrounded by her acolytes, the small clique of women Hilary now belonged to: "the Martini Girls" they called themselves, all published novelists with varying degrees of success; their group seemed impenetrable and alien to me.

It would have been easier if Will were there. We could have found a quiet corner and had a glass of wine together. He would have made me laugh and put everything into perspective. Without Will however, I was like an uninvited guest, wondering how I might make myself inconspicuous.

In the end, I was rescued by a small display of books. There was a separate table where one could purchase the books prior to having them signed and as it was fairly crowded it was easy to browse and remain unnoticed. Though James Loftus had failed to show this evening, the display included his work. The bold lettering drew me: *How To Be A Literary Genius*. It was a crazy promise yet one which had made the man a small fortune. Will had laughed out loud when he first heard that title. 'I'm sure it must be ironic,' I said. 'If it was ironic, nobody would buy it,' he replied.

Certainly nobody about this table now seemed concerned at the stigma of the title. All around, people were handing over their cash and debit cards, as if the very fact that the book occupied the same table as novels by Wainwright and Devan made this purchase quite respectable. Yet it did not seem respectable to me. The brat inside me craved a copy but I was not about to be controlled by my alter ego. I told the brat that if she wanted one of those absurd books, she had better wait until I ordered it online, because I sure as hell wasn't going to be seen dead buying one.

I glanced in Hilary's direction. I tried to catch her eye but she didn't see me. She was speaking to a woman whose book she was signing; her eyes were shining and her cheeks lightly flushed. Then she laughed, handed over the signed book and turned her attention to the next person in the queue.

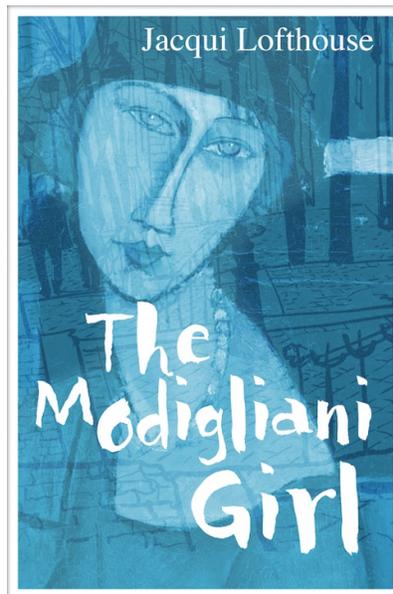
It occurred to me that if I bought a copy of this book nobody would even notice. If I took a copy of the Wainwright too, the cashier would see that I was a serious reader; she might think I

had bought the Loftus as a gift – for a deluded friend perhaps. Before I could change my mind, I picked both up and paid for them. I did not look the cashier in the eye. I stuffed them in my bag and walked quickly away from the table.

As I turned, I could see Hilary still, leaning towards Devan who touched his hand to her shoulder, smiling. I felt like a bulimic who had just stuffed an entire chocolate cake into her mouth and now must find the lavatory and be sick.

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The Modigliani Girl

A deceptively light satire on the modern writing and publishing world.

Blackbird 2015 (Paperback and Kindle)

Anna Bright never wanted to write a novel. At least, that's what she tells herself. But a chance encounter with a famous novelist and a surprise gift of an art book cut a chink in Anna's resolve. The short, tragic life of Modigliani's mistress, Jeanne Hébuterne, becomes an obsession and before she knows it, she has enrolled on a creative writing course, is writing about a fictional Jeanne and mixing with the literati.

As her novel grows and takes on a life of its own, Anna feels her own life becoming increasingly irrelevant. She is absorbed by the story of Jeanne, who committed suicide aged 19 following the artist's death, jumping from a high window in Paris, pregnant with his child.

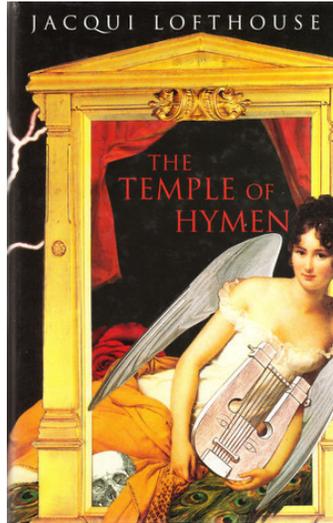
When Anna is invited to take part in a televised literary competition, hosted by an unscrupulous writing guru, she agrees, but later regrets her choice. Under the gaze of the camera, she has become part of a TV circus; unlike the Bohemian Jeanne, she has sold out. Will she manage to save her sanity and her relationship, before she becomes a by-product of the literary world?

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The Temple of Hymen



Penguin 1996

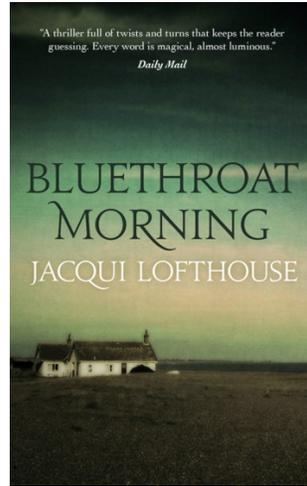
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Bluethroat Morning



***Bloomsbury 2000
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