



KATE
ATKINSON
Life After Life

About the Book

What if you had the chance to live your life again and again, until you finally got it right?

During a snowstorm in England in 1910, a baby is born and dies before she can take her first breath.

During a snowstorm in England in 1910, the same baby is born and lives to tell the tale.

What if there *were* second chances? And third chances? In fact an infinite number of chances to live your life? Would you eventually be able to save the world from its own inevitable destiny? And would you even want to?

Life After Life follows Ursula Todd as she lives through the turbulent events of the last century again and again. With wit and compassion, Kate Atkinson finds warmth even in life's bleakest moments, and shows an extraordinary ability to evoke the past. Here she is at her most profound and inventive, in a novel that celebrates the best and worst of ourselves.

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Life After Life

Kate Atkinson

For Elissa

What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more' ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.'

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

πάντα χωρεῖ καὶ οὐδὲν μένει

Everything changes and nothing remains still.

Plato, *Cratylus*

'What if we had a chance to do it again and again,
until we finally did get it right? Wouldn't that be wonderful?'

Edward Beresford Todd

Be Ye Men of Valour



November 1930

A FUG OF tobacco smoke and damp clammy air hit her as she entered the café. She had come in from the rain and drops of water still trembled like delicate dew on the fur coats of some of the women inside. A regiment of white-aproned waiters rushed around at tempo, serving the needs of the *Münchner* at leisure – coffee, cake and gossip.

He was at a table at the far end of the room, surrounded by the usual cohorts and toadies. There was a woman she had never seen before – a permed, platinum blonde with heavy make-up – an actress by the look of her. The blonde lit a cigarette, making a phallic performance out of it. Everyone knew that he preferred his women demure and wholesome, Bavarian preferably. All those dirndls and knee-socks, God help us.

The table was laden. *Bienenstich, Gugelhupf, Käsekuchen*. He was eating a slice of *Kirschtorte*. He loved his cakes. No wonder he looked so pasty, she was surprised he wasn't diabetic. The softly repellent body (she imagined pastry) beneath the clothes, never exposed to public view. Not a manly man. He smiled when he caught sight of her and half rose, saying, '*Guten Tag, gnädiges Fräulein,*' indicating the chair next to him. The bootlicker who was currently occupying it jumped up and moved away.

'*Unsere Englische Freundin,*' he said to the blonde, who blew cigarette smoke out slowly and examined her without any interest before eventually saying, '*Guten Tag.*' A Berliner.

She placed her handbag, heavy with its cargo, on the floor next to her chair and ordered *Schokolade*. He insisted that she try the *Pflaumen Streusel*.

'*Es regnet,*' she said by way of conversation. 'It's raining.'

'Yes, it's raining,' he said with a heavy accent. He laughed, pleased at his attempt. Everyone else at the table laughed as well. '*Bravo,*' someone said. '*Sehr gutes Englisch.*' He was in a good mood, tapping the back of his index finger against his lips with an amused smile as if he was listening to a tune in his head.

The *Streusel* was delicious.

'*Entschuldigung,*' she murmured, reaching down into her bag and delving for a handkerchief. Lace corners, monogrammed with her initials, 'UBT' – a birthday present from Pammy. She dabbed politely at the *Streusel* flakes on her lips and then bent down again to put the handkerchief back in her bag and retrieve the weighty object nesting there. Her father's old service revolver from the Great War, a Webley Mark V.

A move rehearsed a hundred times. One shot. Swiftly was all, yet there was a

moment, a bubble suspended in time after she had drawn the gun and levelled it at his heart when everything seemed to stop.

‘Führer,’ she said, breaking the spell. *‘Für Sie.’*

Around the table guns were jerked from holsters and pointed at her. One breath. One shot.

Ursula pulled the trigger.

Darkness fell.

Snow



11 February 1910

AN ICY RUSH of air, a freezing slipstream on the newly exposed skin. She is, with no warning, outside the inside and the familiar wet, tropical world has suddenly evaporated. Exposed to the elements. A prawn peeled, a nut shelled.

No breath. All the world come down to this. One breath.

Little lungs, like dragonfly wings failing to inflate in the foreign atmosphere. No wind in the strangled pipe. The buzzing of a thousand bees in the tiny curled pearl of an ear.

Panic. The drowning girl, the falling bird.



‘Dr Fellowes should have been here,’ Sylvie moaned. ‘Why isn’t he here yet? Where is he?’ Big dewdrop pearls of sweat on her skin, a horse nearing the end of a hard race. The bedroom fire stoked like a ship’s furnace. The thick brocade curtains drawn tightly against the enemy, the night. The black bat.

‘Yer man’ll be stuck in the snow, I expect, ma’am. It’s sure dreadful wild out there. The road will be closed.’

Sylvie and Bridget were alone in their ordeal. Alice, the parlour maid, was visiting her sick mother. And Hugh, of course, was chasing down Isobel, his wild goose of a sister, à *Paris*. Sylvie had no wish to involve Mrs Glover, snoring in her attic room like a truffling hog. Sylvie imagined she would conduct proceedings like a parade-ground sergeant-major. The baby was early. Sylvie was expecting it to be late like the others. The best-laid plans, and so on.

‘Oh, ma’am,’ Bridget cried suddenly, ‘she’s all blue, so she is.’

‘A girl?’

‘The cord’s wrapped around her neck. Oh, Mary, Mother of God. She’s been strangled, the poor wee thing.’

‘Not breathing? Let me see her. We must do something. What can we do?’

‘Oh, Mrs Todd, ma’am, she’s gone. Dead before she had a chance to live. I’m awful, awful sorry. She’ll be a little cherub in heaven now, for sure. Oh, I wish Mr Todd was here. I’m awful sorry. Shall I wake Mrs Glover?’

The little heart. A helpless little heart beating wildly. Stopped suddenly like a bird dropped from the sky. A single shot.

Darkness fell.

Snow



11 February 1910

‘FOR GOD’S SAKE, girl, stop running around like a headless chicken and fetch some hot water and towels. Do you know nothing? Were you raised in a field?’

‘Sorry, sir.’ Bridget dipped an apologetic curtsy as if Dr Fellowes were minor royalty.

‘A girl, Dr Fellowes? May I see her?’

‘Yes, Mrs Todd, a bonny, bouncing baby girl.’ Sylvie thought Dr Fellowes might be over-egging the pudding with his alliteration. He was not one for bonhomie at the best of times. The health of his patients, particularly their exits and entrances, seemed designed to annoy him.

‘She would have died from the cord around her neck. I arrived at Fox Corner in the nick of time. Literally.’ Dr Fellowes held up his surgical scissors for Sylvie’s admiration. They were small and neat and their sharp points curved upwards at the end. ‘Snip, snip,’ he said. Sylvie made a mental note, a small, vague one, given her exhaustion and the circumstances of it, to buy just such a pair of scissors, in case of similar emergency. (Unlikely, it was true.) Or a knife, a good sharp knife to be carried on one’s person at all times, like the robber-girl in *The Snow Queen*.

‘You were lucky I got here in time,’ Dr Fellowes said. ‘Before the snow closed the roads. I called for Mrs Haddock, the midwife, but I believe she is stuck somewhere outside Chalfont St Peter.’

‘Mrs *Haddock*?’ Sylvie said and frowned. Bridget laughed out loud and then quickly mumbled, ‘Sorry, sorry, sir.’ Sylvie supposed that she and Bridget were both on the edge of hysteria. Hardly surprising.

‘Bog Irish,’ Dr Fellowes muttered.

‘Bridget’s only a scullery maid, a child herself. I am very grateful to her. It all happened so quickly.’ Sylvie thought how much she wanted to be alone, how she was never alone. ‘You must stay until morning, I suppose, doctor,’ she said reluctantly.

‘Well, yes, I suppose I must,’ Dr Fellowes said, equally reluctantly.

Sylvie sighed and suggested that he help himself to a glass of brandy in the kitchen. And perhaps some ham and pickles. ‘Bridget will see to you.’ She wanted rid of him. He had delivered all three (three!) of her children and she did not like him one bit. Only a husband should see what he saw. Pawing and poking with his instruments in her most delicate and secretive places. (But would she rather have a midwife called Mrs Haddock deliver her child?) Doctors for women should all be women themselves. Little chance of that.

Dr Fellowes lingered, humming and hawing, overseeing the washing and wrapping of the new arrival by a hot-faced Bridget. Bridget was the eldest of seven so she knew how to swaddle an infant. She was fourteen years old, ten years younger than Sylvie. When Sylvie was fourteen she was still in short skirts, in love with her pony, Tiffin. Had no idea where babies came from, even on her wedding night she remained baffled. Her mother, Lottie, had hinted but had fallen shy of anatomical exactitude. Conjugal relations between man and wife seemed, mysteriously, to involve larks soaring at daybreak. Lottie was a reserved woman. Some might have said narcoleptic. Her husband, Sylvie's father, Llewellyn Beresford, was a famous society artist but not at all Bohemian. No nudity or louche behaviour in his household. He had painted Queen Alexandra, when she was still a princess. Said she was very pleasant.

They lived in a good house in Mayfair, while Tiffin was stabled in a mews near Hyde Park. In darker moments, Sylvie was wont to cheer herself up by imagining that she was back there in the sunny past, sitting neatly in her side-saddle on Tiffin's broad little back, trotting along Rotten Row on a clean spring morning, the blossom bright on the trees.

'How about some hot tea and a nice bit of buttered toast, Mrs Todd?' Bridget said.

'That would be lovely, Bridget.'

The baby, bandaged like a Pharaonic mummy, was finally passed to Sylvie. Softly, she stroked the peachy cheek and said, 'Hello, little one,' and Dr Fellowes turned away so as not to be a witness to such syrupy demonstrations of affection. He would have all children brought up in a new Sparta if it were up to him.

'Well, perhaps a little cold collation wouldn't go amiss,' he said. 'Is there, by chance, any of Mrs Glover's excellent piccalilli?'

Four Seasons Fill the Measure of the Year



11 February 1910

SYLVIE WAS WOKEN by a dazzling sliver of sunlight piercing the curtains like a shining silver sword. She lay languidly in lace and cashmere as Mrs Glover came into the room, proudly bearing a huge breakfast tray. Only an occasion of some importance seemed capable of drawing Mrs Glover this far out of her lair. A single, half-frozen snowdrop drooped in the bud vase on the tray. 'Oh, a snowdrop!' Sylvie said. 'The first flower to raise its poor head above the ground. How brave it is!'

Mrs Glover, who did not believe that flowers were capable of courage, or indeed any other character trait, laudable or otherwise, was a widow who had only been with them at Fox Corner a few weeks. Before her advent there had been a woman called Mary who slouched a great deal and burnt the roasts. Mrs Glover tended, if anything, to undercook food. In the prosperous household of Sylvie's childhood, Cook was called 'Cook' but Mrs Glover preferred 'Mrs Glover'. It made her irreplaceable. Sylvie still stubbornly thought of her as Cook.

'Thank you, Cook.' Mrs Glover blinked slowly like a lizard. 'Mrs Glover,' Sylvie corrected herself.

Mrs Glover set the tray down on the bed and opened the curtains. The light was extraordinary, the black bat vanquished.

'So bright,' Sylvie said, shielding her eyes.

'So much snow,' Mrs Glover said, shaking her head in what could have been wonder or aversion. It was not always easy to tell with Mrs Glover.

'Where is Dr Fellowes?' Sylvie asked.

'There was an emergency. A farmer trampled by a bull.'

'How dreadful.'

'Some men came from the village and tried to dig his automobile out but in the end my George came and gave him a ride.'

'Ah,' Sylvie said, as if suddenly understanding something that had puzzled her.

'And they call it horsepower,' Mrs Glover snorted, bull-like herself. 'That's what comes of relying on new-fangled machines.'

'Mm,' Sylvie said, reluctant to argue with such strongly held views. She was surprised that Dr Fellowes had left without examining either herself or the baby.

'He looked in on you. You were asleep,' Mrs Glover said. Sylvie sometimes

wondered if Mrs Glover was a mind-reader. A perfectly horrible thought.

‘He ate his breakfast first,’ Mrs Glover said, displaying both approval and disapproval in the same breath. ‘The man has an appetite, that’s for sure.’

‘I could eat a horse,’ Sylvie laughed. She couldn’t, of course. Tiffin popped briefly into her mind. She picked up the silver cutlery, heavy like weapons, ready to tackle Mrs Glover’s devilled kidneys. ‘Lovely,’ she said (were they?) but Mrs Glover was already busy inspecting the baby in the cradle. (‘Plump as a suckling pig.’) Sylvie idly wondered if Mrs Haddock was still stuck somewhere outside Chalfont St Peter.

‘I hear the baby nearly died,’ Mrs Glover said.

‘Well ...’ Sylvie said. Such a fine line between living and dying. Her own father, the society portraitist, slipped on an Isfahan rug on a first-floor landing after some fine cognac one evening. The next morning he was discovered dead at the foot of the stairs. No one had heard him fall or cry out. He had just begun a portrait of the Earl of Balfour. Never finished. Obviously.

Afterwards it turned out that he had been more profligate with his money than mother and daughter realized. A secret gambler, markers all over town. He had made no provision at all for unexpected death and soon there were creditors crawling over the nice house in Mayfair. A house of cards as it turned out. Tiffin had to go. Broke Sylvie’s heart, the grief greater than any she felt for her father.

‘I thought his only vice was women,’ her mother said, roosting temporarily on a packing case as if modelling for a pietà.

They sank into genteel and well-mannered poverty. Sylvie’s mother grew pale and uninteresting, larks soared no more for her as she faded, consumed by consumption. Seventeen-year-old Sylvie was rescued from becoming an artist’s model by a man she met at the post-office counter. Hugh. A rising star in the prosperous world of banking. The epitome of bourgeois respectability. What more could a beautiful but penniless girl hope for?

Lottie died with less fuss than was expected and Hugh and Sylvie married quietly on Sylvie’s eighteenth birthday. (‘There,’ Hugh said, ‘now you will never forget the anniversary of our marriage.’) They spent their honeymoon in France, a delightful *quinzaine* in Deauville, before settling in semi-rural bliss near Beaconsfield in a house that was vaguely Lutyens in style. It had everything one could ask for – a large kitchen, a drawing room with French windows on to the lawn, a pretty morning room and several bedrooms waiting to be filled with children. There was even a little room at the back of the house for Hugh to use as a study. ‘Ah, my growlery,’ he laughed.

It was surrounded at a discreet distance by similar houses. There was a meadow and a copse and a bluebell wood beyond with a stream running through it. The train station, no more than a halt, would allow Hugh to be at his banker’s desk in less than