

Most of us have only one story to tell. I don't mean that only one thing happens to us in our lives: there are countless events, which we turn into countless stories. But there's only one that matters, only one finally worth telling. This is mine.

But here's the first problem. If this is your only story, then it's the one you have most often told and retold, even if — as is the case here — mainly to yourself. The question then is: do all these retellings bring you closer to the truth of what happened, or move you further away? I'm not sure. One test might be whether, as the years pass, you come out better from your own story, or worse. To come out worse might indicate that you are being more truthful. On the other hand, there is the danger of being retrospectively anti-heroic: making yourself out to have behaved worse than you actually did can be a form of self-praise. So I shall have to be careful. Well, I have learned to become careful over the years. As careful now as I was careless then. Or do I mean carefree? Can a word have two opposites?

The time, the place, the social milieu? I'm not sure how important they are in stories about love. Perhaps in the old days, in the classics, where there are battles between love and duty, love and religion, love and family, love and the state. This isn't one of those stories. But still, if you insist. The time: more than fifty years ago. The place: about fifteen miles south of London. The milieu: stockbroker belt, as they called it — not that I ever met a stockbroker in all my years there. Detached houses, some half-timbered, some tile-hung. Hedges of privet, laurel and beech. Roads with gutters as yet unencumbered by yellow lines and residents' parking bays. This was a time when you could drive up to London and park almost anywhere. Our particular zone of suburban sprawl was cutely known as 'The Village', and decades previously it might possibly have counted as one. Now it contained a station from which suited men went up to London Monday to Friday, and some for an extra half-day on Saturday. There was a Green Line bus-stop; a zebra crossing with Belisha beacons; a post office; a church unoriginally named after St Michael; a pub, a general store, chemist, hairdresser; a petrol station which did elementary car repairs. In the mornings, you heard the electric whine of milk floats — choose between Express and United Dairies; in the evenings, and at weekends (though never on a Sunday morning) the chug of petrol-driven lawnmowers.

Vocal, incompetent cricket was played on the Village green; there was a golf course and a tennis club. The soil was sandy enough to please gardeners; London clay didn't reach this far out. Recently, a delicatessen had opened, which some thought subversive in its offerings of European goods: smoked cheeses, and knobbly sausages hanging like donkey cocks in their string webbing. But the Village's younger wives were beginning to cook more adventurously, and their husbands mainly approved. Of the two available TV channels, BBC was watched more than ITV, while alcohol was generally drunk only at weekends. The chemist would sell verruca plasters and dry shampoo in little puffer bottles, but not contraceptives; the general store sold the narcoleptic local *Advertiser & Gazette*, but not even the mildest girlie mag. For sexual items, you had to travel up to London. None of this bothered me for most of my time there.

Julian Barnes, *The only Story*, 2018