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The Kissing Game

Aidan Chambers

About the Book

From the master storyteller, Aidan Chambers, comes a collection of Stories of Defiance - moments in life, realizations, insights and sudden revelations. Mixed with longer stories are some 'Flash Fictions' - very short but complete stories that reveal, as in a flash of light, a moment of awkward truth in the life of their characters. Prepare to be amazed, enchanted and to gasp with shock.

In 'Kangaroo', a girl loses her humanity when she takes an unusual summer job. In 'The Tower', a boy rescues a girl from a fiery death, only to have her disappear. And in the unforgettable title story, a seemingly innocent game between a boy and a girl takes a horrific turn.

Once again Chambers treats his readers to his intelligent prose, playfulness of form and incisive understanding on the wonderings of young people on the verge of adulthood.

About the Author

Aidan Chambers won the Carnegie Medal for *Postcards from No Man's Land* and the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award for the body of his work - the highest international recognition given to creators of children's books. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

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The
**KISSING
GAME**

STORIES OF DEFIANCE AND FLASH FICTIONS

AIDAN CHAMBERS

BODLEY HEAD

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Cindy's Day Out

I

Enough! she said to herself.

That's it. I've had enough.

No more 'Cindy, get me this. Cindy, get me that. Where are you, Cindy?'

No more 'Cindy' either.

Today is mine.

Today is for me.

Not Cindy.

But *me*.

Ursula Oracod.

Today other people will do this for me and that for me and everything I want for me and do it when I please.

The middle of three sisters, one nineteen, the other sixteen, 'her' seventeen and the odd one out. Not lively and clever like Imogen, the oldest. Not sexily beautiful and bursting with confidence like Beatrice, the youngest. But - so they all said, sisters, mother, father, even her grandparents - plain, simple, ordinary, entirely unmemorable Ursula. The one whose name visitors forgot - and then called 'her' Cindy because that's what 'her' sisters called her. The one whose only feature people remembered, if they remembered anything about 'her', were 'her' sticking out ears, which she tried to hide by an elaborate exercise with a curling iron.

There was of course the other reason for being the odd one out. But that was unmentionable.

Her sisters were not the only ones who used her like a servant, worse in fact, like a slave (at least servants are paid). Her mother was just as bad. Now, since her seventeenth birthday, leaving her to do the weekly supermarket shopping on her own. 'Here's the credit card, darling, and some cash for a taxi home. I wish I had the time but I don't. A client to see all day. And this week, don't forget the Tropicana fruit juice Beatrice likes.'

Her father wasn't quite as bad. Sometimes, he even stuck up for her, and told whoever was ordering her about to try doing it for themselves for once. But he always received the same reply: 'But, Dad, I'm in such a hurry and Cindy doesn't mind, do you, Cindy?' No reply was awaited. And with three women against him, her father shut up. There being the unmentionable to avoid as well.

So Ursula was the family runabout, treated as such ever since she was thirteen when the unmentionable had been revealed. She wouldn't have put up with it, if she were as funny as Imogen or as quick-thinking as Beatrice. But she'd never been able to give as good as she got in either repartee or arguments. Nor was she any match for Imogen's knowledge of just about everything. (When and how did she learn so much? She never seemed to spend any time studying.) Besides, Imogen and Beatrice were best friends. So: odd one out again.

But today she had finally had enough.

Luckily, it was the summer holidays. Imogen had gone off to visit her latest boyfriend. (Never matching up to her required standard of body and brain, her boyfriends tended to last a month at most.) Beatrice was still in bed pursuing her beauty sleep and would not put in an appearance before midday at the earliest. Her parents were at work.

There was a summer outfit of Imogen's, a red top and forest-brown jeans by Karen Millen, that Ursula really liked

but had been told by all and sundry was 'too sophisticated for you, not your style *at all*.'

She went to Imogen's room, found the outfit in Imogen's abundant wardrobe that smelt of her favourite scent, Flower by Kenzo, carried it to her own room and put it on.

There is justice in the world! It fit perfectly, touching in the right places and loose everywhere else. Till now she had thought she was too big around the hips to fit into anything of Imogen's, unless it was of the ultra sloppy fashion.

Next, the question of shoes. Neither her mother's nor Imogen's fit her. Beatrice had a pair of Geox Respiras she'd love to wear, and would fit, but they were in Beatrice's room, and asleep though Beatrice might be, going into her room would inevitably wake her. Ursula had read that when you see birds standing on one leg it means the half of the bird on the side of the raised leg was asleep, but the half on which the bird was standing was awake. She wondered if something like that might be true of Beatrice. Only half of her asleep at a time. Besides, if Beatrice was anything, she was territorial and possessive. She always knew when anybody had been in her precious room, even if you didn't touch any of her precious things. As for taking something, no matter how trivial, the result was a tsunami of recriminations it was best to avoid.

She'd have to make do with her own shoes. She chose a pair of black heels that were always comfortable and made her feel light on her feet.

She showered, dried her hair, put on a new bra and panties, did her best to spray-rigid her hair over her ears, and then put on Imogen's outfit and her own heels.

Looking at the result in the mirror, she was slightly irritated to find that the only part of her that felt comfortable was her feet. As for the rest, it wasn't Ursula. But it wasn't Cindy either, and today this was all that mattered.

II

The High Street wasn't busy.

Too early in the day.

Where should she start?

One of the department stores would offer the best range. She wasn't sure what range she wanted or what she was going to do. Except that whatever it was, someone else would be doing the doing.

In Camden House she wandered past the jewellery section (she wasn't in the mood for that just yet), and then the sections for Armani and Gucci and Prada, all tempting to poke about in, but kept for later when there'd be more people and she wouldn't feel so conspicuous. At the moment every assistant she went by looked beady and ready to pounce on her.

Now the cosmetics section. Makeup wasn't her thing. She never bothered with it. Mainly because Imogen and Beatrice bothered so much with it. But maybe she ought to?

She paused to look at the range on the first counter. She liked the little round cakes ranked in neat black boxes like lozenges of paint in a painting box. They appealed because she'd always liked painting, even though she wasn't much good at it. For the same reason, she liked the brushes you were meant to use to apply the makeup.

An assistant came up to her, a middle-aged woman in a tight black dress and white scarf, precisely made up and with hair that looked as if it wouldn't move even in a gale. A soldier in the battle for sales.

'Can I help you?' she asked with a smile.

'I was wondering,' Ursula said, summoning all her determination to be the one in charge, 'I was wondering which foundation would be the best for me. Maybe the sort that has an illuminating factor in it?'

She surprised herself. She had never uttered the words 'illuminating factor' before. She'd read them in one of Imogen's fashion magazines, and the words popped out of her mouth as if said many times.

'Let's see,' the assistant said, peering closely at Ursula's face. 'Lancôme do a good range.'

She took a sample from a cupboard and laid it on the glass of the counter.

Ursula stared at it, not now as confident as a moment ago and not sure what to do or say next.

'You can try it, if you like,' the assistant said. 'The testers are here.'

Ursula hesitated. What she wanted was someone else to try it for her.

'Is it your day off?' the assistant asked.

'Yes,' Ursula said.

'The sort of job you need to look your best, I expect?'

'I . . . help out with a family.'

'An au pair?'

'That sort of thing.'

'I was an au pair once,' the assistant said, 'when I was about your age. It was hard work. I really needed my day off, when I didn't have to think about doing anything for anybody but myself.'

'Yes,' Ursula said. 'That's right.'

The assistant waited a moment before saying, 'Why not consult our Lancôme representative, if you aren't sure? She's here this morning and I think she has a bit of time before her first client. I'm sure she'd be happy to help.'

Ursula hesitated, wondering about the cost.

The assistant leaned towards her, and giving her a complicit smile said quietly, 'There'd be no charge, of course. And no obligation to buy. It's one of our services.'

Ursula smiled back.

'All right then. Thanks.'

'Follow me,' the assistant said, and led her to an area where there were a couple of high chairs and mirrors lit like the mirrors in theatre dressing rooms. She introduced her to an older woman, also in the uniform black dress with white scarf, who asked her to sit down.

The light was so bright and the mirrors so sharp they showed every pore and fleck in Ursula's face, and seemed to exaggerate the fright of her hair, a sight from which she turned her eyes in embarrassment.

The Lancôme lady spoke with a strong accent, rasping her rrrrs, which Ursula decided was French.

'*Je parle français aussi,*' Ursula said, in a showing-off sort of voice which she used when feeling defensive, and always regretted afterwards.

'*Très bien. Donc,* what mademoiselle rrequires is a good cleansing.'

Ursula was about to say 'I had a shower before I came out,' but this time she held her tongue.

And so the makeup makeover began.

At first, Ursula was on edge, never having been the object of minute close inspection before, except by her dentist, and that wasn't the same thing at all.

Soon, she settled back into comfort, enjoying the business of being pampered, 'cleansed', 'prepared' and applied with foundation by finger, and eyeliner by pencil, and blush by brush, and then it came to the lipstick.

'Which would mademoiselle prefer? Lancôme L'Absolu Rrrouge Rrrendez-Vous, verrry nu-tritious, or the Colour Fever Daring Rrrose, verrry rred? L'Absolu Rrrouge I think would be nice, does mademoiselle agree, *hein?* The Colour Fever is too too rred for mademoiselle. L'Absolu Rrrouge is subtle. And will bring out the colour of her pretty eyes.'

Her eyes had never before been called pretty.

She was so pleased she heard herself say, 'I'll trust your choice. You're the expert.'

'*Merci*, mademoiselle. L'Absolu Rrouge, then. *Bon.*'

* * *

Her face finished, the assistant who had helped her first was called over. There was clucking and compliments and exclamations of '*La différence!*' from the Lancôme lady, and 'Beautiful!' from the other one.

But then the first assistant turned to the Lancôme lady, 'The hair?'

'I am *not* a hairstylist,' said the Lancôme lady rather sharply.

'Still,' the other one said. 'Maybe something could be done to help. A pity not to . . .'

The Lancôme lady studied Ursula in the mirror and began fluffing and flicking about.

'Oui, yes, well, *peut-être* . . .'

'You could manage something,' the other said.

'Something better than *this* anyway,' the makeup expert said with Gallic scorn. 'Mademoiselle's style is certainly dérrrangé.'

The other assistant went off to attend to a customer and the Lancôme lady began flumming with Ursula's hair.

An hour and a half had gone by when all was done.

Ursula stood up and considered herself in the mirror, turning this way and that, the Lancôme lady standing back, hands clasped in the manner of a nun.

She was amazed.

Was this herself?

Was this *her*?

Was this Ursula Oracod?

The question blurred her mind and her vision.

She liked it and she didn't like it.

It was her and it wasn't her.