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Opening Extract from...

Meeting the English

Written by Kate Clanchy

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KATE CLANCHY

Meeting the English

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For Matthew

1

It was March, 1989, and the weather was unseasonably warm; but no one worried about that, then.

Phillip Prys, playwright, novelist, was brushing his teeth in the en-suite bathroom of his large house in Hampstead. The incisors had yellowed over the years with nicotine – much like his study ceiling – and there was a brown crack in the left canine, but Phillip was pleased with the molars. Sound to a man. Every morning, he counted them in and rubbed them over with his noisy hard-bristle toothbrush; jaw wide as a crocodile's as he shone up the back ones.

In the mirror his head, brown and speckled as a breakfast egg, dipped, spat, rinsed. On the windowsill, the padded Roberts radio belly-ached on about Salman Rushdie and failed to mention the letter to *The Times* Phillip had put his name to, just two days ago. Not that the letter was his idea: Giles had sprung it on him: and you could hardly say you were pro-fatwa, could you, these PC days? Not even to your agent in the privacy of Simpson's.

Absurd. He'd married one now, hadn't he? A foreigner. An Iranian, no less. The ravishing, the twenty-six-year-old, the petite, the scented Shirin, slowly dressing at this very moment in the adjoining room. Some racist he was. No, what Phillip felt – and he'd said this to Giles, openly, after a few drinks, mind – was, when it came right down to it, Rushdie had stolen a bit of a march on the rest of them with the whole business. Because, look, Giles, Rushdie might be brown, but he was a posh boy at bottom, wasn't he? Went to Eton, didn't he? Oxford? And with fairy tales like *Midnight's Arses* and *One Hundred Years of Buggery* hogging the book market, people were forgetting about the class system here in Britain, weren't they? Pulling the splinter out of the brown chappie's eye and forgetting the bloody pit-prop in bloody Wales, isn't it? Phillip always became more Welsh when he drank.

Giles had said nothing. In fact, he'd had the cheek to start folding his napkin. So Phillip had asked him directly – of course Giles was a queer, that wasn't the point – he must have noticed that the real stories, stories of the men of the valleys, rugby-playing men and their sons, those stories were going out and this posh namby-pamby gossamer was coming in instead, written by women half of it. Angela bloody Carter. And Giles had said, gesturing at Phillip's latest royalties statement, open between them on the table, but Angela sells, old chap, so does Rushdie. They *sell*. And then he'd told Phillip he was going to retire.

Retire. Giles! Giles gone grey all of a sudden, all his soft sideburns, grizzled. Shocking. As if they'd thrown a bucket of talc on him between the acts, while Phillip was in the circle bar, lining up the pink gins. Giles, in the name of Heaven! You could weep for him, so you could, like poor bloody Arthur Scargill and his men and all the other victims of Thatcher, no such thing as society and other bollocks. In the other room, Shirin yawned: small visceral noise from a strong pale throat.

Phillip wiped the last foam from his lips. He breathed in. Today was, after all, a beautiful day. The new leaves on the chestnut tree were unfurling, and Shirin was sitting on his bed, putting on her lipstick with an exact, exquisite hand. Listen! The tootle of birds, the tiny firecracker of Shirin's dress being electrically tugged over Shirin's tights. Phillip laid down the flannel and picked up the TCP.

Thirty years he'd lived in the house in Yewtree Row. Twenty his MG had twinkled at him from its snug parking place across the street. Giles at the end of the phone for what – thirty-five? Longer than Shirin had been alive, clever little orchid in the greenhouse of Tehran. But the MG would stay and Giles could be replaced. One of the smart young men in the office would be honoured, honoured. Of course he would. Phillip would ring him up and say: 'Bird tootling in a tree, what's the bugger called, for chapter 2?' and get the answer, just as he always had. The thought was worth a song. Phillip liked

to carol through his TCP – 'Bread of Heaven', in Welsh, with his head thrown back – a special knack of his.

His jaw was at its very widest when the spasm hit. The TCP gurgled down his throat, and its precise burn, etching the tonsils, was Phillip's last clear memory. He fell to the ground and jerked as if he were being shaken by an invisible policeman. He made a series of bad plumbing noises, rusty groans and burps. Spittle leaked from a corner of his mouth. His legs thrashed, then his head, and this all went on for a very long time, as if Phillip were being uncharacteristically brave, as if he were refusing to give up an answer.

All the while, and evenly as a flag in a steady breeze, the radio talked about the fatwa and moved on to the weather, and then to news just coming in about an oil spill, a very large one.

Of course, it was all a terrible shock for Shirin. They kept telling her so in Intensive Care, after she had revived Phillip, carried him downstairs in a fireman's lift, and delivered him to Casualty at speed in the MG which she was not, in fact, licensed to drive. Phillip was stable now, and Shirin should have a cup of tea, one with sugar, said the handsome young consultant. She should place her narrow hips on a plastic chair and smooth back her

heavy shining bob of hair, and he would draw up his matching chair and explain everything in his best, grown-up, low voice.

You see, probably, the blood clot had been around for ages, bobbing around in Phillip's bloodstream. Phillip was sixty-two? A vulnerable age. Did Phillip smoke? Untipped? And drink? Pink gin was a strong choice. The young consultant looked like a jogger. His eyes were preternaturally bright, blue as glass. He explained that Phillip's arteries might, because of the smoking, be furred and narrower than average. It must all be hard for Shirin to understand, especially just now, but—

'He is suffering a revolution?' asked Shirin, in her tremendously posh voice with its just perceptible Iranian 'r', fixing the consultant the while with her famously lucent amber eyes.

'Well,' said the consultant, 'you could say that. Are you familiar with the circulatory system, Mrs Prys?'

'Yes,' said Shirin, looking at the ceiling, 'terrifically.' And so the consultant started on about Phillip's clot, how it would have started as something barely tangible—

'All revolutions start like that,' said Shirin, 'do they not? Just a few people? A few, did you call them, platelets? We need a strong tyrant, perhaps, to put them down?' There was a pause.

'Was Mr Prys recommended,' asked the consultant, 'aspirin? At any point?'

'Possibly. He would never take such a thing,' said Shirin. The consultant shook his head.

'It's not always easy to make that generation see that drink is not a friend,' he said.

'His ally,' said Shirin, brightly, 'his comrade. From the days of the Long March!'

'You know,' said the consultant, 'you should consider putting your feet up for a minute.'

'I think,' said Shirin, 'that after all, this is not a revolution, so much as a coup? We have a roadblock, do we not? This clot it is blocking the circulation? And now . . .'

'I think I'm losing your thread,' said the glassy-eyed consultant, who had grown up in Harrogate. And so he went off to fill in forms, and Shirin, who was a painter, sat looking at Phillip's liver-spotted hands with the tubes stuck in them, laid out by his sides, like a pietà. She knew about all this.

After the roadblocks comes the random firing. Rapidly, the streets fill with the injured and the lost, with backfiring ambulances, with gunfire and the reports of gunfire; in moments, the storm troopers arrive and the fires start. Then, the black government vehicles, the ones you'd hoped were rumours, cruise the streets in their sleek silence. Now, the city puts up its shutters, and gets behind them. Now, the new order, the months and years of damage. Last time, she had got away.

She picked up one of Phillip's hands, carefully. It was

only slightly cooler than normal, but it felt hard, like the cast of a hand.

'Darling,' said Shirin, 'you'll be in for months.' And, as if in reply, Phillip's catheter bag filled with pee.

1989: at that time, hardly anyone carried phones, and the phones that were carried were ridiculous, and their bearers objects of fun. There were still messages, then: phone boxes, faxes, answer-machines, pagers, telegrams, Filofaxes, bike couriers, notes. There were pigeonholes in all sorts of places and out-of-the way organizations, and billets-doux and death threats were put in them.

Of course, things often went wrong. You could hang a movie or a novel on a missed message, then; Phillip in his weary later years had done so several times. Conversely, *getting through* to people was a full-time job for legions of loaf-haired ladies – women who should have been sent to university instead of typing school; who, if they had, would have been running the company instead of the sweaty oafs in pinstripe behind them. Shirin was particularly good at *getting through*, though she operated on an entirely autodidactic, freelance basis. If she hadn't been, as she pointed out to Phillip the first time she opened her little green Filofax containing the home numbers of the American ambassador, Douglas Hogg, Salman Rushdie and Charles Saatchi, she would be dead by now, or barefoot and nameless in a prison in Tehran.

Getting through wasn't just about contacts, you see, it was also about focus, delegation, and intuition. For instance, reaching Phillip's children from his second marriage would have taken Shirin several hours from the call box at the Royal Free Hospital, so, despite the names that Myfanwy, Phillip's second wife, had called her at their previous meeting, Shirin phoned her directly, and, when she found her not at home, succeeded, in a single brilliant swoop, in having her paged in Waitrose on the Finchley Road.

In fact, this was the kind of thing Waitrose liked to manage particularly well. Whisked to the Manager's teak-lined office, Myfanwy was kindly sat down in the Manager's own leather chair with lean-back feature. She used this to the full as she listened to Shirin saying *en suite* and *crisis*. And when she replaced the receiver and murmured, 'My husband. Stroke,' and closed her eyes, the Manager did not hurry her, but slipped discreetly forward with a glass of water.

Myfanwy was in a *reverie*. She was seeing a *tableau*. She would have said both these words with a pronounced French accent which would have enormously irritated her daughter, Juliet. She'd learned it at RADA, in the late fifties. There, she'd also learned to celebrate, even indulge, her visual imagination. 'Picture it!' said the curious Polish movement teacher, Myfanwy's second or was it third lover, in his heavy accent. 'Picture it, Myfanwy, and let your body act the picture!'

On her vast bosom, Myfanwy's be-ringed hand executed a dying fall for the long-lost Zbigniew. Myfanwy's mind was picturing Phillip dead in his study (though Shirin had said *stable*, and *en suite*, several times): dead, yes, quite dead. Yellow, slumped on his vast desk like Marat in his bath, his horn-rimmed specs in his outstretched hand, harmless at last.

And then, into the *reverie*, entering stage left, gently removing the specs, and folding their legs, came her very good friend and colleague, the young estate agent from Hamptons. He was talking about Yewtree Row; he was saying, 'More than a million, Mrs Prys, with renovations.' And with that, the agent opened his hands to show the details of a pair of railway cottages in Cricklewood, property of Myfanwy Prys, that were unaccountably failing to sell, and folded into the brochures, the interest statements from the bank. The agent threw them in the air, like doves, all the bothersome papers, and they flew—

'Madam?' said the Waitrose Manager, for Myfanwy had involuntarily described an arc in the air with both hands. Myfanwy kept her eyes shut, raised one hand flat in a Popish gesture.

Now in her vision she saw, under Phillip's bent yellow fingers, her deed of the divorce, and beside it, the agreement she had providentially pushed through with her lawyer: *that in the event of the death of Phillip Prys before the majority of both his children, the estate should pass*

in trust to Myfanwy Shirley Davies Prys. Majority was twenty-five. Jake was twenty. Juliet was just sixteen. Myfanwy opened her eyes and smiled dazzlingly at the Manager.

'Not fatal, I trust?' he said.

'Stable,' said Myfanwy, 'but critical.' She blew her nose. 'So no change there,' she added, shocking the poor man to the core.

Myfanwy's eye fell on the Manager's phone. State of the art, push-button, black, and not her bill. Myfanwy adored Directory Enquiries. 'May I make a few calls?' she said.

And so it was that shortly, in a girls' private school in Baker Street, an excited sixth-former went in search of the form mistress of that hopeless skiver, Juliet Prys: and, in a college in Oxford, a porter in a bowler beckoned a random undergraduate across the quad. The form mistress consulted a timetable, and set off for the gym: the porter simply handed over a note, confident that such a conspicuous young man as Jake Prys, one equipped with the quiff of the year, the open shirt of the month, and, the porter strongly suspected, the *lipstick* of the day would be easily located.

Juliet was found in the gym changing room with her best friend, Celia. Celia was crouched on the slatted bench wearing two coats and clutching a book. Celia was

anorexic: her hand on the book was yellow and light as a leaf. Juliet was used to this. Juliet hardly cared. Juliet was standing in her knickers: Aertex on and school skirt off; a small, round, pink girl with a dark pony fringe, aggrieved, up-tilted eyebrows, a loose glossy lower lip and an out-thrust tummy like a toddler.

'Kirwan,' said Celia. 'Heading for you.'

'I'm in my pants,' said Juliet, pouting.

'It's OK,' hissed Celia, 'she's looking really sympathetic. Whatever it is, I'm coming with you, yeah? I'll die if I have to pick up a hockey stick.' Celia might, actually: you could see the double bones of her forearm, clear as a biology diagram. Juliet turned to her teacher, and held out the silly pie-frill skirt.

'Miss Kirwan,' she said, priggishly, 'I'm changing.' Unnecessary. A nearly dead father *on its own*, it soon transpired, was top dollar for skivers. Not only good enough to miss PE but also double French, and Celia was warmly urged to take Juliet all the way home. And within minutes the girls stood smoking in Baker Street, just outside the Tube. Though:

'I should go to French, actually,' said Celia. 'I need to revise.'

'Celia,' said Juliet, inhaling importantly, 'you're a monomaniac. My dad's had a stroke.'

'I need all As,' said Celia, 'I need to go to Oxford. You know that. And besides, you haven't even cried yet.'

'I know,' said Juliet, grinding her fag out beneath her

pixie boot, 'mad, isn't it?' She wandered into the station, trying to remember what her father looked like. She had his yellowy eyes in mind, and his reddish shining head, and his wide cross mouth, and his knees in tweed beneath his keyhole desk, but she couldn't picture his middle. 'He must have a middle,' she said, aloud. 'What sort of jumpers does he wear?'

'You're in shock,' said Celia, maternally. 'Sugar. Shall I buy you some sweets?' Every day, in this their sixteenth year, Celia had bought a family pack of Minstrels and fed them to Juliet: it was behaviour neither seemed able to stop. And now, she did it again.

'Do you know what I thought when Mrs Kirwan said it?' said Juliet, on the platform, munching. 'About my dad? I mean, what I thought at that exact minute?'

'No,' said Celia, sourly.

'Well,' said Juliet, 'first I thought, can I still go to Italy?' (For Juliet was supposed to be going to Tuscany –then, a reasonably recherché destination – that summer with Celia and her family, and she was concerned that Celia was losing enthusiasm for the project. Or was getting too thin.) Celia raised a contemptuous eyebrow.

'Then,' said Juliet, 'I wondered if it would make me thin. You know, grief.'

Celia's dark pupils flickered in the stretched mask of her face, and her hand came up to cover her mouth, and then she howled with laughter, and Juliet saw in the harsh light of the platform that Celia was the wrong

colour, now, the waxy yellow of preserved flesh, and the possibility of death, both for her father and her friend, occupied her mind for its necessarily brief space, like the train for Swiss Cottage rattling just then into the station, so very aluminium, so utilitarian and so large.

In Oxford, the note from the porter travelled out of the quad to the King's Arms, and thence to a room in Merton where a pretty, smudged girl was still in a rumpled bed, and thence again to the Playhouse where Jake was sitting on the edge of the stage, a script on his knee, his quiff in his hand. The messenger, a chemistry student in Jake's year who had never previously spoken to him, waited respectfully by his side as he read it. Jake refolded the paper, and handed it back. He looked at the chemist for a moment, then pushed back his quiff and sighed. 'Just gotta channel it,' said Jake, looking at his handsome, ringed hands. 'Death, life, it's all the same, isn't it?' Then, seeing the young man was still there: 'Hey, man. Thanks.' And the chemistry student went out to study the buses in George Street and be thankful he had never been drawn to the Arts.

Later, though, Jake did ring Myfanwy's flat, and got Celia. Myfanwy was up at Phillip's house, tidying it or something. Fighting with Shirin, probably. Juliet was chain-smoking on the sofa, making 'v' signs at the phone.

Jake said: 'Look, how is he?'

And Celia, modest and calm, said, 'Critical but stable.'

Jake said: 'See, I'm on stage tonight. You know. A new piece. I know Dad would want it this way.'

'Oh yes,' said Celia.

Jake said, 'But I'll ring, you see. I'll need someone to be in, to tell me how it's going, even if it's late.'

'Well,' said Celia, 'that could be me. I'm staying tonight.'

'First I've heard of it,' said Juliet, in the background.

'Might be midnight, might be two,' said Jake. 'You be there, Celia, hmm? And I'll see you soon.'

Juliet looked up from her cigarette. 'Has he fucked off?' she said.

'It's terrible about the oil,' said Celia, putting on the television. '*Exxon Valdez*.'

'Seal,' said Juliet, 'Jake really is a shit, honestly, he is, he doesn't care about anyone else. Don't get a pash on him, Seal, honestly. Listen. I'm giving you advice.'

'Look,' said Celia, pointing at the telly, her fluffy head trembling like a dandelion on its stalk. 'Gulls.'

'Poor sods,' said Juliet. 'Turn it over, Seal. You know I can't concentrate on the news. There's too much of it.'