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Opening Extract from...

England Expects

A Mirabelle Bevan Mystery

Written by Sara Sheridan

Published by Polygon

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England Expects

A Mirabelle Bevan Mystery

Sara Sheridan

Polygon

First published in Great Britain in 2014
by Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd

Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

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ISBN 978 1 84697 281 2
eBook ISBN 978 0 85790 781 3

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library.

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh

A happy ending depends on where you stop your story.

ORSON WELLES

Prologue

Murder is always a mistake.

8 a.m., Monday, 22 June 1953
Brighton

Joey Gillingham got off the train and checked his watch. He had a little time before the meeting. Walking out of the station, he angled his hat to keep the sun out of his eyes. It was another scorcher. The paving stones were radiating heat already and Brighton felt summertime sleepy compared to the buzz of Fleet Street. Joey tucked his newspaper under his arm and headed towards Cooper's. It was on his way. Then he remembered the new place and changed direction. Three schoolgirls walked lazily down the road in front of him sharing an illicit Kula Fruta on their way to school and squinting into the sunshine. Sticky red liquid dripped off their fingers and left stains like blood smears on the pristine cotton of their summer blouses as they jostled to make sure the division was fair. Joey smiled. Oxford Street was quiet. A new sign glinted in the sunshine. Seymour's Barber. He'd heard this new place was good. The glare obscured the interior of the shop from easy view as Joey poked his head through the open door. Three black leather chairs with chrome trim faced three square mirrors. The only nod to the old butcher's shop that used to be there was the heavy block at the back, now displaying an array of Brylcreem advertisements. *For the clean smart look.* The air smelled of carbolic soap.

Joey shrugged his shoulders and entered. Why carry on to Cooper's when this new place looked all right? The shop was cool – a relief already. It took his eyes a moment to adjust.

'Morning, Sir.'

'A shave and a trim?' Joey enquired. 'I ain't got long.'

'Certainly, Sir.' The barber was dapper in a white jacket.

The man looked like he could land a decent right hook. He had the shoulders for it, but his eyes were too kind to make him any sort of fighter. Joey always said it was a pitiless profession.

The barber motioned him towards the first chair. 'Some tea?'

You never got that at Cooper's. It was a smart move. Not long off the ration, tea still felt like a luxury. 'All right, yeah, thanks.' Joey hung up his hat, took the newspaper from under his arm and settled down. 'Short back and sides. None of your Teddy Boy nonsense,' he instructed.

The barber grinned. 'You heard about that, then?'

'A mate told me.'

'I can do you a military cut if you'd prefer, Sir.'

'That's it.'

Joey checked his byline. When he saw his name in print it always reminded him of his English teacher at primary school. The bitch had said he'd no facility for words. 'I don't know what will become of you, Joey Gillingham. All you care about is sport,' she had sniffed disapprovingly. Joey smiled. Well, he'd done all right, thank you very much, Miss Prentice. More than all right. Joey Gillingham boasted several thousand readers, or at least the *Express* did. And he was about to up his game. In an hour he'd be onto the story of his life, and if he cracked it he'd be able to screw a bonus out of the paper.

Joey liked the money but he liked the recognition just as much. He'd been lucky to stumble across something big. Something out of his usual field. Brighton was like that – small

and friendly. A bloke with his eyes open could pick up a lot. Joey reflected that 'investigative journalist' sounded better than plain old 'journalist' or 'sports reporter'. An investigative journalist wasn't a hack.

The barber swept a spotless napkin around Joey's shoulders and fastened it in place. Then he combed Joey's hair. Every customer was important to a new business. That was why he opened early – he always caught one or two blokes on their way into work or on their way home from the nightshift. It was worth getting up sharp.

'Right. Tea,' he said and disappeared into the back room to boil the kettle.

'Milk and one, if you got it,' Joey called and turned his attention back to the paper as the sound of heels on paving stones, squabbling children and distant traffic on the main road floated through the open door.

Joey didn't see the man. He paused for only a second at the doorway, checking right and left up Oxford Street. There was nothing distinctive about him – just a regular fellow sporting a shabby demob suit like thousands of others, with a worn brown hat cocked at an angle. No one noticed as he slipped inside out of the sun. As the man walked swiftly to the chair, Joey licked his finger and turned a page. This inattention was a particular irony because Gillingham was known to be unforgiving when a boxer didn't see a knockout punch. 'You gotta be on your guard all the time. Gloves up,' he always said. 'It takes less than a second if your opponent's on his game.'

The man was a professional. He moved silently, pulling a flick knife from his pocket and smoothly slicing the journalist's jugular without hesitation. There was no time for Joey to call out as his blood spurted onto the mirror. His body stayed upright in the chair. It always went too quickly, the assassin thought, as he calmly took off his jacket – a crimson spot had marked the sleeve. Coolly he folded it over his arm, dipped the

knife into a glass of blue fluid on the old butcher's block to clean it and, checking the corpse's inside pockets, took what he wanted. Then, glancing in the mirror to alter the angle of his hat, he sauntered into the sunshine towards the station as if nothing untoward had taken place.

Chapter 1

It takes an unusual mind to analyse the normal.

Mirabelle Bevan swept into the office of McGuigan & McGuigan Debt Collection at nine on the dot. She removed her jacket and popped the gold aviator sunglasses she'd been wearing into her handbag, which she closed with a decisive click. The musky scent of expensive perfume spiced the air – the kind that only a sleek middle-aged woman could hope to carry off.

Bill Turpin arrived in her wake. Like Mirabelle, Bill was always punctual. He was a sandy-haired, reliable kind of fellow. At his heel was the black spaniel the office had acquired the year before. Panther nuzzled Mirabelle's knees, his tail wagging. Mirabelle patted him absentmindedly.

'Glorious day, isn't it?' she said. 'Who'd have thought it after all the rain? It feels like a proper summer now.'

'Nasty business on Oxford Street,' Bill commented, picking up a list of the day's calls from his in-tray and casting an eye down the addresses. 'That new barber's.'

'Tea, Bill?' Mirabelle offered without looking up.

'Nah. Always puts me off, does a murder.' His voice was matter-of-fact. An ex-copper, he was used to dealing with crime of all stripes. As a result, Bill Turpin never panicked handling the ticklish situations that he encountered at McGuigan & McGuigan. Debt collection was a tricky business but it wasn't as bad as policing Brighton.

'A murder?' Mirabelle glanced at Bill.

'Yeah. A slasher. First thing – just after eight. The fellow went in for a trim and got more than he bargained for. Poor blighter had his throat cut. I met the beat bobby on my way in. A murder right on the edge of Kemp Town. It's five minutes from Wellington Road nick and a spit from Bartholomew Square. There were coppers everywhere. They think the victim's from London – some hack.'

'Did the barber do it?'

'Nah. Poor fella was in the back. Just about had a fit when he found his customer dead in the chair. Must've only taken seconds. In and out while the bloke was reading his newspaper. They reckon it's got to be a professional job.'

'Did they find the weapon?' Mirabelle enquired out of habit.

'Well, it was a barber's shop, wasn't it? There were razors everywhere, though the murderer might have brought his own. Bit early to say. Where's the girl?' Bill looked around as if he'd only just realised that the third member of the office staff was not at her desk.

Mirabelle leaned over to peer out of the window. There was no sign of Vesta Churchill on the street below. 'Oh, she'll be on her way,' she said indulgently. Vesta was habitually late but she was a hard worker. Efficient to a fault, especially with paperwork, what was ten minutes here or there?

'Well, I suppose it's nothing to do with us,' Bill said, his mind still on the murder.

Over the last two years several murders had been personal to the employees of McGuigan & McGuigan. The day-to-day business of the firm was humdrum, but now and again Mirabelle had found herself embroiled in what Bill referred to as 'police business'. It was the upshot of being curious, she thought, and all three of them were certainly that. Bill was the most recently recruited to the firm and he had fitted in so well precisely because he was nosey. Nosey in a nice way, but still it

was true – they were all curious about the world. More than that. McGuigan & McGuigan's little team was a tremendous minder of other people's business. Bill still acted like a policeman a lot of the time. He was slower to make assumptions than Vesta, and that, Mirabelle told herself, provided balance.

'They reckon the fella was down to see the boxing,' Bill said as he slid the day's paperwork into his inside pocket. 'Poor sod wrote a sports column for one of the red tops.' He shrugged and then whistled for Panther. 'Sounds like he got on the wrong side of someone serious, doesn't it? Well, see you later.' He tipped his hat and sauntered out.

Mirabelle looked at the kettle. There was no point in making tea for one. When Vesta arrived they'd brew a nice pot and chat about the weather. She lifted the first paper off the pile in front of her, sighed, and wondered what kind of person followed a man into a barber's shop to slit his throat.

Chapter 2

Most men's greatest achievement is
persuading their wife to marry them.

Vesta Churchill walked down Lewes Road hand in hand with Charlie. She tried not to speak. People stared enough as it was without the pair of them arguing in public. Still, she hadn't finished what she wanted to get out and now her dark eyes flashed dangerously.

Charlie lifted his free hand and flicked a flake of pastry from his collar. He'd made croissants for breakfast in an attempt to seduce her. Unexpectedly Vesta was not to be won over by pastry – not in this matter. Initially he'd tried chocolate éclairs brought home from the kitchens of the hotel where he worked. After that there had been a Victoria sponge. Vesta, after all, was English. But no dice. She'd turned him down flat. Not only that but she seemed furious.

'Don't you see?' she hissed. 'We can't get married, Charlie. Think what would happen.'

Charlie had been thinking about exactly that. He'd looked at houses all over Brighton's suburbs and calculated that with the savings he'd put by, they'd have enough for a good deposit somewhere really nice or, if Vesta insisted, they could keep living in the bedsit and save up till they could buy a place outright. The acquisition of a mortgage, after all, might be too American.

'I want to make it official, baby,' he said. 'I love you.'

'It's a big change,' Vesta started. 'If we get married, everyone will expect things.'

'It doesn't have to be different,' Charlie cajoled her. 'We live together as it is. You'd just be Mrs Charles Lewis, is all. Your mama would be happy if we got married, wouldn't she? And so would mine. We're living in sin, baby.'

'But I like living in sin.' Vesta kissed him on the cheek. 'Can't we leave it at that?'

It turned out Charlie couldn't. He'd done his best to move things on as far as possible. He'd relocated from London to Brighton, leaving his well-paid job at the Dorchester for a worse paid one at the Grand, and he'd found a bar where he could play now and then – a dive in the Lanes that had jazz nights on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They weren't a bad bunch of guys. At first he'd taken a room near Queen's Park but then a bedsit had come up on the same floor as Vesta's in the lodging house where she stayed on Lewes Road. It was closer to town and there was a connecting door that they could unlock to double their space and effectively live together.

He still hadn't got over having to negotiate his tenancy. Vesta, uncharacteristically, had let him do the talking though she'd stood beside him while he made the arrangements with her recently widowed landlady, Mrs Agora. He railed against asking the old lady for permission but there was no other way. Vesta hadn't been prepared to lie.

'Is this how you people do things?' Mrs Agora had grumbled.Her hair was set in such a permanent wave that it appeared to be made of sheet steel riveted to her head.

'Do you mean Americans?' Charlie enquired.

Mrs Agora didn't flinch. 'You coloureds, is this how you do it? Because it ain't entirely respectable. Not here.'

Charlie swallowed the words that initially sprang to his lips. 'Well, ma'am,' he drawled, affecting his most charming accent, 'I've asked Vesta to tie the knot and she won't have me. So I guess living together will have to do. If you'll let me move in.'

Mrs Agora sucked furiously on a Capstan with her Revlon-red lips, all the while regarding the young couple as if they were a fairground curiosity. 'You sure about this, dearie?'

Charlie held his breath and felt a wave of relief as Vesta nodded curtly. He couldn't be entirely sure of her when it came to this – something was going on with Vesta and he couldn't figure out what it was.

Mrs Agora stubbed out her cigarette. She folded her arms. Vesta was a regular payer and never any trouble. This fellow had been hanging around for months. He'd fixed the wiring at Christmas when it had gone on the fritz. 'You'll do odd jobs now and then?'

'With pleasure,' Charlie grinned. 'And, lady, if we're still here next Christmas I'll bake you a cake.'

'I suppose you can't say fairer than that.' The old girl felt herself relenting. Lewes Road wasn't that respectable, after all, and the fellow was certainly handy. 'Any trouble and you're out, mind. I can't stand a ding-dong. Not since Mr Agora passed.'

Charlie gave the widow his solemn word and only later enquired of Vesta what on earth a ding-dong was. It was ironic, he realised now, that the only argument they ever had was about this. It made no sense. Women were supposed to want to get married.

He decided to sit on the pebble beach and soak up some sun once he'd seen Vesta into work. He was on the late shift. As they passed Union Road an ambulance pulled out, coming from Oxford Street. It was followed by a police car.

'It could be worse, baby.' Charlie nodded at the ambulance. 'The poor dope in there ain't even worth putting on the siren. He's a complete goner.'

'It isn't that I don't love you, Charlie . . .'

'I don't understand,' he said, his voice rising with exasperation.

'Jeez, Charlie.' Vesta dropped his hand and picked up her pace. 'I like the way we live. I don't want to change and I don't care what anyone else thinks.'

Charlie looked round. There weren't many people. It was quiet, or quiet enough. He'd wanted to say this for days. 'We don't have to have kids yet,' he promised in a whisper. 'Not straight away. If that's what you're worried about, honey. I'll wait a year or two. I don't mind.'

Vesta looked distressed. A bus passed spewing oily fumes into the warm air. From the interior a little boy in school uniform jumped up and down, pointing at her through the window. He was saying something to his mother about the colour of her skin. Vesta didn't need to be able to hear the words to know what was going on. The bus's engine roared and her eyes fell to the ground in shame.

'Can't we leave it?' she pleaded, picking up her pace. 'Let's not discuss this in the street – wherever there's a quarrel there's a crowd. That or a body.'

'Vesta, sometimes you are weird, girl.' Charlie laughed, but seeing her eyes steady and serious he decided not to push the point. 'Let's leave it for now.' He grasped her hand again and squeezed it firmly.

It wasn't often that Vesta practically broke into a run as she approached Brills Lane. After pecking Charlie on the cheek she took the stairs at a lick, her red summer coat disappearing into the building like a magic trick. She hammered up to the office and threw her coat onto its peg.

'Morning,' she gasped.

Mirabelle looked up. The girl was chewing her lip as she skimmed the morning's mail at such speed that Mirabelle doubted she could possibly be taking it in. Mirabelle reached over and flicked on the kettle. 'Everything all right?' she said quietly.

Vesta dropped the papers and sat down with a bump. 'Mirabelle, if I get married, I don't have to give up work, do I?'

Mirabelle's lips parted in a delighted smile. 'Married! But that's wonderful news, Vesta. Congratulations!' Her eyes fell to the fourth finger of the girl's left hand.

'He bought a ring but I can't . . . He says he wants to be a family. A family!' Vesta let the tears trickle down her cheeks and she began to sob, unable to look Mirabelle in the eye. 'I . . . I don't want to spend all day keeping house. Every day. Even if it's a nice house. And kids! He wants kids – not straight away, but still. If you're married and you don't have kids everyone gets sniffy. It's not that I don't like children, but I'm enjoying things the way they are. It's nice that Charlie wants to look after me, but I don't want to be a housewife with no money of my own. I couldn't bear to be stuck indoors all the time, just cleaning and cooking. Oh God. You understand, don't you, Mirabelle? Marriage is just so . . . boring.'

Mirabelle sighed. 'Gosh,' she said, passing Vesta a clean handkerchief from her handbag. The truth was, she didn't understand. Vesta had been lucky enough to find love and here she was rejecting it. Mirabelle cast her mind back. All she had wanted, years ago when she had the chance, was to live with Jack. She gave up her job in a heartbeat to be with him when she moved to Brighton after the war. She hadn't been very good at keeping house but she'd done it. Her cooking was so terrible that Jack had come to an arrangement with the grocer's wife who, for a few shillings a week and the coupons, delivered a whole week's worth of home cooking straight into the refrigerator at the smart flat Jack bought for Mirabelle on the front at The Lawns.

'We can't starve,' he had exclaimed, 'and, darling, you heat things up perfectly. The main thing is that you pour my whisky just as I like it.'

A finger of Scotch and the same of water was not a taxing requirement, Mirabelle had joked. 'I should've gone to finishing school instead of Oxford.' She didn't mean it, not entirely. And neither did he, when he said, 'Well, thank God you've got other talents,' and pushed her onto the bed.

Now Mirabelle laid a comforting hand on Vesta's shoulder but she found it difficult to speak. McGuigan & McGuigan had

been her last choice of occupation. The truth was she was here by default. If Jack was alive she'd never have taken the job. Not in a million years. She'd have been with him – every minute. Or at least she'd have been waiting for him to come home. The idea of being a family was heartbreakingly, tantalisingly marvellous.

'Vesta, do you love Charlie?' she enquired tentatively.

Vesta's eyes opened wide. She stopped crying. 'I adore him. It's not Charlie. It's all this other stuff.'

'You want to have your cake and eat it, you mean?'

Vesta nodded. 'Why not?' She sounded cross. 'Why can't I keep my job? My nice life? He gets to. Why's it always the woman who has to give up everything? It's not fair.'

Mirabelle considered this. It had never occurred to her. Vesta was certainly very modern. Perhaps that was what the war had done for young women.

'If you marry Charlie and you don't want to leave, I won't make you resign,' she said. 'It's custom and practice. It's not the law. I can't see how anyone would be able to take your place. I'd hate it if you went.'

'Really?' Vesta's eyes were bright. She flung her arms joyously around Mirabelle's frame, hugging her tightly. 'Oh, thank you, Mirabelle. Thank you. This girl I know was a teacher at Whitehawk Primary and they told her she had to go as soon as she got hitched, and one of her friends was a librarian and she got engaged at the same time and they chucked her out, too. But after the wedding the librarian was miserable and in the end she turned up to work every day voluntarily. She helped run the library till she popped her first baby. I don't know what happened after that. Women just disappear once they've had a baby. Missing persons – that's what it's like. And Charlie's in such a rush. He thinks he's being patient, but it's all so quick.'

Mirabelle held up a hand. Sometimes talking to Vesta was like directing traffic. It was extraordinarily easy to end up on a side road, miles from where you started. 'Well, if you want to

stay at work, you'll be paid, of course. But I urge you to think about it.' Mirabelle realised her tone was that of an old spinster. I sound about ninety, she cursed inwardly. 'Look, Vesta, if you don't want children and Charlie does, it's bound to cause trouble. If you have reservations, you must be careful. Love is about making sacrifices. It's about changing your life for someone. At least a little.'

Vesta nodded. She dabbed her cheeks, blew her nose and solemnly returned Mirabelle's hankie. 'I know. It's such a big change. It's not that I don't want kids but maybe we could get a nanny? Can you imagine how that would go down?' She hooted with laughter. 'A black woman with a nanny!'

Mirabelle had a sudden and incongruous vision of a pale-faced woman in a Norland uniform taking orders from Vesta. Not that a Norland nanny would dream of taking on a black infant. They had a code, Mirabelle seemed to recall. There were rules, unwritten and otherwise. And Norland was a costly exercise. There must be other kinds of nanny, she thought.

'If I were you I'd speak to Charlie about it soon,' she said. 'It's the sort of thing you have to agree on.'

Vesta looked out of the window. A slice of sunshine was working its way up East Street. 'I wonder where he went. He's not working until lunchtime and he walked me into town. On a nice day like this perhaps he's sitting on the front. He likes it by the Aquarium. Charlie's a sucker for fish.'

Mirabelle smiled. Maybe Vesta loved the boy, after all. 'Why don't you look for him?' she suggested. 'You could see if he still has that ring.'

Vesta grabbed her handbag and pulled on her coat. 'I can't talk to him about it. I just can't. Thanks, though,' she said, her dark eyes shining. 'I hate parting on bad terms. I won't be long. I'll just give him a cuddle and then I'll come back.'

Mirabelle kept an eye on the street, watching from a height as Vesta hurried to the front. A wave of sadness washed over

her as she stood by the window. She'd trade in everything for one more kiss, never mind the chance to get married.

Everyday things were reminders. Each time she drew the curtains at home she pictured how they'd sat in the window in the dark staring at the stars with only a bedsheet wrapped round them. Or last Christmas there was a snow scene in the window of the art gallery on North Street and day after December day she had thought how much Jack would have loved it. If only he hadn't died.

As Mirabelle sank into her chair she spotted the morning paper on Bill's desk. Without thinking she flipped it over and examined the sports pages. Sure enough there was a boxing match that evening – the reason the man who died had been in town. Brighton had a crack junior squad that had won every one of its bouts this year. The boys were being touted as boxing stars of the future. There was a picture of eight stocky teenagers, their hands swaddled in bandages, gloves hanging round their necks. They clustered around their coach – a fellow in a white vest, dark hair slicked back and a towel slung carelessly over one shoulder.

'My boys are unbeatable,' he was quoted. 'Individually or as a team, no one'll ever match them. What we have in Brighton this year is unique.'

Mirabelle smiled. Now that was confidence. Tonight's bout, which would feature two of these unbeatable Brighton youngsters, was set for 7 p.m. at the Crown and Anchor on Preston Road. If that's where the murdered man had been heading he'd certainly arrived in Brighton in good time.

It's not that far to Preston Road, Mirabelle thought, her curiosity stirring. She could nip up this evening and take a look.