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Opening Extract from...

A Rural Affair

Written by Catherine Alliott

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MICHAEL JOSEPH

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If I'm being totally honest I had fantasized about Phil dying. Only in a mild, half-baked, Thursday morning in Sainsbury's sort of way. I'm not talking about lying awake at night plotting his demise, no, just idly cruising those aisles, popping in the Weetabix, or driving to pick Clemmie up from nursery, dreaming a little dream, that sort of thing. Like you do when you're bored and you've got two small children on your hands and you've been married for a while to an irritating man. Wondering what life would be like without a husband. And always the life afterwards bit, the nicer bit, not the horrid bit of the death itself.

Having the house to myself appealed. Getting rid of those ghastly leather sofas in tummy-upset brown, never having to hoover them again and get right down into the cracks, or keep the house immaculate as he liked, and as his mother had so assiduously done. No more wiping the skirting boards weekly, or turning the mattress monthly. No more meat and two veg and a lot more pasta. Or just a boiled egg. No more frantically raking up autumn leaves, I mused to myself now as one fluttered onto my windscreen, a beautiful, blood-red sycamore, spiralling down, winking at me. They could just lie where they fell, in a red and gold carpet on the grass as nature intended, instead of having to rush out like a lunatic when the first one dropped, Phil shouting, 'Quick! They're coming!', raking furiously. These sorts of thoughts – innocuous, harmless ones, that crested, then sank, only to resurface

some weeks later. Being alone with my babies, for instance; I glanced in my rear-view mirror at my toddler son as I drove along, watched as his thumb dropped wetly from his mouth and his eyes slowly closed. I reached back and deftly took the carton of juice he'd been clasping.

And OK – I straightened myself back at the wheel – just very occasionally, very fleetingly, my mind had inevitably turned to the mechanics of it. A piece of scaffolding perhaps, falling on his head from the construction site he walked under every morning, on his way from Charing Cross to Ludgate Circus: the one outside the Savoy, where they'd been at it for months. One of the workmen dropping a hammer. Clunk. But after six months, the scaffolding had come down – I'd checked. So . . . what about a mosquito bite? Turning septic? Quickly and painlessly, on one of our annual trips abroad – always Spain and always cycling. Same hotel every year, with other cycling enthusiasts. I read, mostly, and looked after the children. But the summer would slip by and Phil would remain unbitten, so, to embrace the winter months, I'd fondly imagined him slipping on ice as he went to get the paper in the village shop.

'It all happened so quickly,' Yvonne, who ran the shop, would say, her saucer eyes seeing everything before it happened anyway. 'One minute he was breezing out with the *Telegraph*, the next he was flat on his back, blood pouring from his head!'

No, not blood, that would be horrid. All internal. I turned down the lane that led to my house, so narrow in places the hedges brushed the sides of the car. And unlikely too, because since when had an icy fall actually killed anyone? So then I'd had him falling off ladders while clearing gutters, but Phil didn't do much gutter clearance so that didn't really

work; but then, it wasn't supposed to work. It was just a run-of-the-mill, quotidian fantasy most housewives surely toy with occasionally when they're married to – not a bad man, and not a complete fool, but not a terribly interesting or exciting man either.

I narrowed my eyes at the low autumn sun, pulling the visor down in defence. And since the cycling bug had bitten – he'd taken it up with messianic zeal a few years ago – he was almost permanently clad in blue Lycra, which didn't help. Even to Clemmie's first parents' evening, complete with extraordinary Lycra shoes. He'd arrived in the classroom, where Miss Hawkins and I were waiting, looking like Jacques Cousteau emerging from the depths. Miss Hawkins had dropped the register she'd been so flustered, and as he'd sat down beside me on an infant-sized chair, peering over his nylon knees like a garden gnome, I'd thought: not entirely the man I'd envisaged spending the rest of my life with. But then again he paid the bills, worked extremely hard, was faithful, didn't beat me, loved his children – despite sometimes behaving as if they were annoying relations of mine who'd come to stay: 'Your daughter thinks it's a good idea to throw her food on the floor!' Surely his daughter too? And even though he liked to be in complete control of our little household at all times – even taking the TV remote to the loo with him – I didn't really hold it against him. Didn't really want him dead.

It was a shock, therefore, to open the door to the policeman.

'Mrs Shilling? May I have a word?'

Whilst he'd been cycling along the Dunstable Downs, the ridge of hills above our house, an easyJet plane returning from Lanzarote had simultaneously prepared for its descent

at Luton. Dropping from freezing high altitude into warmer air, it had relieved itself: had fall-out. A chunk of ice, eighteen inches in diameter, had broken off from the fuselage and, five thousand feet below, found Phil, pedalling furiously. As my husband strove to render his body a temple, God, it seemed, had had other ideas.

I remember struggling to comprehend this; remember gaping at the policeman as he perched opposite me on my sofa, twisting his hat in his hands.

'A piece of ice? From where exactly?'

'From the undercarriage.' He cleared his throat uncomfortably. 'From the toilet, as a matter of fact.'

'The toilet?'

'Yes. Blue Ice is how it's known. Being as how it's mixed with detergent.'

'What is?'

'The urine.'

I stared. Not in a million years could I have dreamed this up. Fantasized about this in Sainsbury's. Phil had been killed by a piece of piss. A hefty, frozen block of pee, travelling at spectacular speed and velocity – and which, it later transpired, hadn't actually claimed him as he'd been cycling but, as bad luck would have it, when he'd stopped at a stile, taken his helmet off to scratch his head and wonder how to get the bike over. A freak accident, but not the first of its kind, the coroner would later inform me sympathetically over his bifocals as I sat at the back of his court in a navy-blue suit, hands clenched. 'Thirty-five similar instances in the last year alone.'

'Although in the last *forty* years, only five fatalities,' the man from the Civil Aviation Authority had added stiffly. Six, then, with Phil.

'Right. Thank you so much. I mean – for telling me.' This, to the policeman in the here and now, in my sitting room. I stood up shakily.

The officer got to his feet, uncertain. He spread his hands helplessly.

'Do you . . . want to see him?'

My mind reeled. 'Where is he?'

'In the hospital morgue.'

I caught my breath. Oh, God. On a trolley. In a bag. 'No,' I gasped instinctively.

'No, not everyone does.' He hesitated, unwilling to leave so soon. 'Well, is there . . . anyone you'd like to contact? Have with you?'

'No, no one. I mean, there is. Are. Plenty. But – not now. I'll be fine, really.'

'Your mother, perhaps?'

'No, she's dead.'

He looked shocked. So many dead.

'Really, I'll be fine.' I was helping him, now. But he was only young.

'And the children?'

'Yes, I'll pick them up from school.'

And pick them up I had. Well, only Clemmie. Archie was asleep in his cot upstairs, and I'd taken him with me and driven very slowly, because I was pretty sure I was in shock. I was a quiet mother at the gates, but not a distraught one, so Clemmie didn't notice anything, and then I'd driven back and given them tea. Chicken nuggets, I remember, which I only serve in extremis. At the table Clemmie had told me about Miss Perkins, Mummy, who's an assassin. 'Assistant?' Yes, and got a moustache. And later I'd bathed them and put them to bed.

And then I'd walked around the house on that chilly,

blustery evening, clutching the tops of my arms, gazing out of the window at the shivering late roses, the clouds rushing through the dark blue sky, flashes of sunshine casting long shadows on the lawn, waiting, waiting for something to happen. For the sluice gate to open. For my hand to clap my mouth as I gasped, 'Oh, God!' and fell, like Phil must have fallen, I told myself looking for a trigger, in a terrible heap to the ground. I tried to imagine him lying in the bracken, his bike a tangled mess, his face broken, shattered. Nothing. So I walked round the house some more, the house we'd lived in together for several years – happy years, I told myself sternly. This lovely cottage, in this beautiful village, which we'd stretched ourselves to afford, had done up meticulously, sourcing terracotta tiles from Italy, Victorian light switches from Somerset, cast-iron door handles from Wales, and from whence Phil had commuted into London every day, toiling in on a packed train, to bring back the wherewithal to raise our children. A selfless, dedicated man. I waited. Nothing.

Shock. Definitely shock. I'd read about it.

On an impulse, I hastened to our wedding album; found it tucked away amongst the books by the CD player. My eyes flickered guiltily over Phil's Neil Diamond CDs, his Glen Campbell collection, which I'd never have to listen to again. I pulled the leather tome onto my lap. Tissue paper fluttered and a bit of confetti fell out. There I was on Dad's arm, coming up the church path in a mistake of a dress: leg-of-mutton sleeves, the real things happily hidden away under shot silk. Dad looked a bit worse for wear already, perhaps under the influence of a pre-match tincture. Then me and Phil coming out of church, but Phil had his eyes shut, so that didn't help, and neither did the grey morning coat he'd hired from Moss Bros, a totally different colour to the rest of the male

congregation's, much paler, and which he'd accessorized with a red carnation, whilst his ushers, in black, had favoured discreet white rosebuds. I flipped the page quickly. Me and Phil cutting the cake – shame about the pink icing, but then his mother had made it. And next – oh, no. I shut the book hurriedly, aware that the following shot might be of me and Phil going away. Not in a glamorous vintage car, or even a pony and trap, but, as a surprise from Phil, a tandem: a bicycle made for two. So that accompanied by shouts of 'Go on, Poppy, get your leg over!' and other hilarious quips, I had. And split the pink pencil skirt I'd bought for the occasion from top to bottom, and then had to cycle behind my new husband the half mile from the country club to here, white pants flashing, rictus grin on my face, waved off uproariously by our closest friends, and most of the village.

It was getting chilly, but I didn't seem able to put a match to the fire, the one Phil, who got up at six, laid punctiliously every morning with firelighter, kindling, logs and a drop of coal, for the evening. I stared at the log on top. For me, I told myself. All for me. And my children. A caring man.

Perhaps I should tell someone? The moment you vocalized these things they became much more real. Tears would flow, it was well documented. The moment I picked up the phone and said, 'Hi, Dad, look, Phil's dead,' that would be it. Phil wasn't my father's dream son-in-law but he'd nevertheless be shocked and horrified. Drop everything – probably a horse's reins – and beetle down from Flampton in his ropy old pick-up to be at my side, still in his breeches and flat cap. But he wouldn't cry. He'd sit beside me on the goose-poo sofa and take my hand and not know what to say. And together, dry-eyed, we'd stare glumly at the carpet. I picked up the phone. Punched out a number.

'Jennie?'

'Oh, hi, Poppy. Hang on, I'll just take the sausages off. Jamie, stop it. No, you cannot have it in front of the telly, come and sit down – now!' Then back to me. 'Sorry. Nightmare day. Frankie had a party here last night and naturally one or two teenagers were sick. I cleared up most of the puke but at two a.m. I found another on the landing and just bloody hoovered it. Error. Mrs B beat me to the hoover this morning and now the entire house is giving off the most spectacular pong. Can't think why Glade haven't used it as an air freshener.'

'Um, Jennie, the thing is, Phil's dead.'

Things happened quite quickly after that. Within seconds my back door had flown open because Jennie only lived next door. Within minutes it had flown open again, because Angie, who lives up the road at the manor, had been texted by Jennie, and in the space of another few minutes a gust of wind heralded the front door flying as Peggy, who lives across the road, heard from Angie. Beads jangling, cigarette still clasped in her jaws, she'd hurtled up the path, velvet coat flapping.

Angie wept, clasping me to her expensive cashmere breast, my face pressed to her pearls, Chanel wafting up my nose. Jennie walked round and round, arms tightly folded, saying, 'I cannot believe it. I *cannot* believe it.' Peggy helped herself to my Famous Grouse, pouring one for me too, which, when I didn't drink it, she polished off as well.

One thing they were all agreed on, though, was that I was in shock.

They agreed again an hour later, when I was still sitting composed and silent and I don't think particularly white-faced, whilst they'd been bustling around boiling kettles and checking children and going into huddles and sitting and stroking my back muttering, 'Poor *poor* Poppy'.

A bit later on, they wondered, tentatively, if I'd like to be alone? Jennie's children had been heard making merry hell through the wall, which she'd banged on a few times, and now there was an ominous silence. She'd texted frantically, but no response. Angie started muttering in her cut-glass accent about a parish council meeting which, as chairman, she was *supposed* to be addressing, but of course she didn't *have* to, and Peggy had been seen glancing at her watch on account of *Corrie*. 'Although Sylvia might have recorded it,' she murmured into space when no one had moved.

'Do go,' I said, suddenly realizing; coming to. 'I'm perfectly all right.'

Angie and Peggy were already on their feet.

'Sure?' said Jennie anxiously, still stroking my back on the sofa.

'Positive.'

'You'll ring if you need me? I'll come straight round. You can call me at three in the morning if you like.'

'Thank you.' I turned to my best friend, her hazel eyes worried in her pretty heart-shaped face. If my eyes were going to fill, it would have been then. I knew she meant it.

She gave my shoulders another squeeze and then they trooped silently out, shutting the door softly behind them. The cheese sandwich Angie had made me curled in front of me on the coffee table, the dusk gathered coldly outside the windows, the fire Peggy had put a match to smouldered in the grate.

I gazed above it to Phil's cycling medals and trophies on the mantle. Got stiffly to my feet. My legs had gone to sleep beneath me. It was still early, but I wanted it to be the next day. Not the day my husband died. So I went upstairs, checked on the children, who were sleeping soundly, and went to bed.

At precisely three in the morning, having stared, dry-eyed, into the darkness for six hours, I sat bolt upright and seized the phone. Jennie answered immediately. Drowsily, but immediately.

'The children!' I wailed. 'My children won't have a father!' Tears fled down my cheeks. 'They'll be fatherless – orphans, practically!'

She was there in the time it took to throw a coat over her nightie, fish in her fruit bowl for my spare key, run down her path, up mine, and leg it upstairs. She hugged and rocked me as I sobbed and grieved for my children, gasping and spluttering into her shoulder, choking out incoherent snatches about how their lives would be wrecked, asking her to imagine distorted futures, scarred psychological profiles, looming criminal tendencies, broken homes of their own and dysfunctional children. Eventually, when my body had stopped its painful wracking and my hyperbolic ranting had subsided, Jennie sat back and held me at arm's length.

'Except he wasn't exactly a huge presence in their lives, was he?' she said quietly. 'Wasn't around a lot.'

'No,' I admitted with a shaky sob, a corner of my mind rather shocked. 'But he did love them, Jennie. There'll still be a vacuum.'

'Oh, sure, he *loved* them. He loved Leila too.'

Leila was Jennie's dog. A crazy Irish terrier who liked nothing more than to accompany Phil on his bike rides, lolloping along for miles beside him.

'Yes, he loved Leila,' I conceded, wiping my eyes on the duvet.

'Spent a lot of time with her.'

I knew where this was going. 'More than he did with the children?'

She made a non-committal not-for-me-to-say face: cheeks sucked, eyebrows raised.

'Not everyone embraces fatherhood,' I reminded her. 'Particularly when the children are little.'

She looked me in the eye. 'No, but he almost resented it. Remember when you used to bundle Clemmie in the back of the car in the middle of the night and head for the M25 to stop her crying? So Phil could get some sleep?'

'He worked so hard. Needed his sleep.'

'True. But at the weekends, did he ever change a nappy? Push a pram?'

'Once or twice,' I said, wishing I could remember him doing any of those things. But Phil was dedicated to his work, his bike and his body in three equal parts; he didn't like other distractions. We didn't really see him. It was just me and the children. Which was how it was going to be now. No change. I shut my eyes. Prayed for courage. Wondered if I could tell her. Eventually I opened them and took a deep breath.

'The thing is, Jennie,' I said in a low voice, 'I'd fantasized about it.'

'About what?'

'About Phil dying.'

'Yes.'

'What d'you mean, yes?'

'Quite normal.'

'Is it?' I was shocked.

'Oh, yes. How did you do it?'

'I didn't!' I gasped.

'No, but in your dreams.'

'Oh. Well. I – I had him being hit by falling masonry, at building sites.'

'Ah, the old scaffolding ruse. A rogue hammer?'

'Yes,' I admitted. 'And I had him bitten by a mosquito in Spain.'

'Nice,' she said admiringly. 'I've only ever got to dodgy prawns on holiday.'

'And then I had him poisoned by bleach when I was getting stains off teacups.'

'I've left the bleach *in* the teacups. Poured it out later, naturally.'

'Really?' I peered anxiously at her in the gloom. 'You've thought about it too?'

'Of course! Life would be so much simpler without Toad.' This, her husband of many years, whom I adored and thought the funniest man alive – fall-off-your-bar-stool funny – but of whom she despaired.

'But, Jennie, I'm lying here thinking: perhaps I thought it so much, I made it happen. You know? Maybe . . . maybe whatever it is that causes bad luck – a glitch in the solar system, tectonic plates shifting, an elephant stepping on an ant in the Delta – everything that makes stuff happen, did so because I willed it to. Maybe I actually killed him? I mean, how bizarre was his death? It was like one of my very own fantasies – could have been my next one!'

'Don't be silly, you haven't got the imagination. Of course it wasn't you. Did you beetle off to the airport and strap a lump of piss to a 747?'

'No, but –'

'Well, then.' She paused. 'Did you pray?'

'Pray?'

'Yes, did you get down on your knees and pray to God? Plead for his demise?'

'Of course not.' I was startled. I felt my eyes widen in the darkness. 'Why, have you?'

'Oh, yes.' Jennie sniffed. She sat up straight and shook back her dark curls defiantly. 'At the foot of the bed like Christopher Robin. Eyes tightly shut. Doesn't mean I'd *do* it, Poppy. But that time he wrote off two cars in one week, let the bath overflow through the ceiling into the new kitchen, came back pissed from the office party and told Brian Cunningham on the train that his wife was having it off with our builder, then used Jamie's tracing paper from his geography project, on which he'd laboriously traced the Great Lakes, to wipe his bum, that night I got down on my knees and asked God for deliverance. I did have a nervous moment when he crashed the quad bike a few weeks later, remembering my crash-and-burn plea, but we're only human, Poppy. We can't make these things happen. Did you imagine the funeral?'

I stared at her, horrified. 'Yes,' I whispered finally.

'I do that too.' She drew her knees up chummily. Hugged them to her chest. 'What did you think you'd wear?'

'That Whistles skirt with the kick pleat and my good wool jacket from Hobbs.'

'Over your grey silk shirt?'

'I thought a cami.'

She made a face. 'Bit louche.'

'With the jacket done up?'

'Oh, OK.' She nodded; looked thoughtful. 'I'm going to wear my Country Casuals dog-tooth number to Toad's. Elegant, yet restrained. Did you flirt?'

'What, at Phil's fantasy funeral? No! Did you?'

'A bit. Only on the way out. Just a few vulnerable glances through tear-stained lashes, and only with Passion-fuelled Pete.' This, the local farrier, who shod Angie's horses and was tall, blond and gorgeous. He caused quite a stir whenever his mobile forge rumbled through the village.

'Why would Passion-fuelled Pete come to Toad's funeral?'

'Oh, I don't know. I haven't worked out the logistics, Poppy.' She passed a weary hand through her hair, looking tired. 'Perhaps he had a horse-drawn hearse?'

'What, like they do in the East End? Like the Kray brothers?'

'It's only a fantasy, for heaven's sake.'

We sat companionably in silent contemplation for a moment, the only light shining through from the hall, where she'd belted up the stairs.

'You'll have it in the village church, I presume,' she said at length. 'I mean, the real one?'

'I suppose so. Yes. Definitely.'

'Everyone will come,' she warned. 'You know what they're like round here. Any excuse.'

'I know.'

'Sunglasses?'

'I think so.'

To hide the dry eyes, we both thought.

'And actually,' she said slowly, 'it will be quite ghastly. You will need those glasses. Trust me, you'll sob.'

'Really?' I looked at her anxiously, hoping for grief.

'Really.' She regarded me steadily. 'A human life has been taken here, Poppy. A young man cut down in his prime. And that's very sad. You'll cry. But don't you go feeling guilty about not feeling or weeping enough. You never wanted to marry that man, you just slid into it. You made a decent fist of your marriage because he was the father of your children, but let's not get carried away here. A few years down the line, you wouldn't have been with him.'

'You don't think so?'

'I know so. You'd have flown, Poppy. This way, you'll just fly a little sooner.'

As she said it, I felt some faint metaphorical itch between my shoulder blades where, one day, I might sprout wings. It was instantly followed by a lorry load of guilt tumbling on them like rubble, which had me cringing on the bed. We sat there side by side, Jennie hunched in her old camel coat and hugging her knees, me in my baggy Gap T-shirt, crouched under the duvet. Through the wall, we could hear Toad, or Dan as I preferred to call him, gently snoring. Not so gently, in fact; he was gaining momentum. She turned to me, appalled.

'I didn't know you could hear him!'

'Only occasionally.'

'I'll put a pillow over his head!'

'Do not. I don't mind. Quite like it, actually. Sounds . . . masculine.' And automatically I thought how Phil had been quite feminine. Fastidious. Clean. Two showers a day. Nail brushes. And slept like a mouse.

'Well, at least there's no danger of you hearing anything else,' she remarked darkly.

I didn't reply. Jennie's increasing lack of interest in the physical side of her marriage could wait for another night. And anyway, this wasn't entirely true. On the odd occasion I had employed ear plugs.

'Go, Jennie,' I said quietly, at length.

'Sure?'

'Sure.'

'I'll be back tomorrow.'

I nodded; gave her a weak smile. Then she hugged me and slipped away. I listened to her footsteps going down the stairs, the door closing behind her. I knew she would be back,

first thing. Knew I was blessed with friends like this; knew that moving to this village was the best thing I'd ever done. That it had been a huge compensation for my marriage, and would now stand me in very good stead. And although my heart was heavy as I went to the loo and then crawled back to bed – I dreaded my next hurdle, which was telling Clemmie in the morning – as I lay down and shut my eyes, a part of me was already thinking about how I'd clear the medals from the mantle above the fire, take down the Tour de France pictures in the loo, sell the rowing machine on e-Bay. Not have to wake up to him doing press-ups by the bed in the morning. Not have to go downstairs and find a note in the kitchen headed 'Poppy – Things to Do'. And part of me was also thinking: no longer, Poppy Shilling. No longer can you say nothing ever happens to you. Finally, something has gone on in your life.