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**Opening Extract from...**

# Seeing Other People

Written by Mike Gayle

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# SEEING OTHER PEOPLE

MIKE GAYLE



HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

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Our greatest misfortunes come to us from ourselves.

**Rousseau**

A loud noise.

Like a door slamming followed by the scent of a heavy, sweet-smelling perfume. I opened my eyes but the darkness was impenetrable. Trying to make sense of it all I reached up with my right hand to the back of my head, clenching my teeth together in readiness for the moment my neurones would signal the full extent of my injuries. But there was nothing. No matter how hard I rubbed my scalp I couldn't find so much as a spot of tenderness, let alone the blood and bruising that I was expecting. I had been hit hadn't I? I'd been hit from behind. A blunt object. A stick or a club or something similar. So where was the damage?

I went over the little that I could remember. I'd been in East London. For the Divorced Dads' Club shoot. I'd had a drink with Carl the art editor and his assistant. I'd been using my new phone. Bella had texted me. I'd texted Bella. A young kid had approached me dressed as if auditioning for a part on a gritty TV drama as 'council estate youth#1'. He'd wanted a light for his cigarette. But he'd been wearing a Zippo around his neck. And then I'd been hit. Cigarette Boy must have been some kind of decoy, distracting me while his mate came up from behind. They must have been after my phone, laughing at me as I lay on the pavement.

The pavement.

I arched my back slightly. Whatever was underneath me was clearly not regulation paving stone. It felt soft. Like a bed. I fumbled around in the darkness. I had a duvet over me. I was in a bed, not lying on the pavement where I'd fallen. Who'd found me? Who'd picked me up? Was I in hospital? Nothing was making sense. Gingerly I touched my scalp again. Still no cuts or bruises. What was going on? Ridiculous thought: I'm not dead am I? I pinched my arm hard. The pain was very real. I attempted to collect my thoughts once more. I'd been mugged but I had no cuts. I'd been mugged but I was no longer on the street. I'd been mugged but someone had put me to bed. I touched my chest. I had no shirt on. I moved my hand downwards. I had no trousers or underwear on either. I was completely naked.

Now I really was panicked. An urban myth sprang to mind: the one about students getting drunk on a night out in Sheffield and then waking up in a Chinese hospital minus one of their kidneys. It couldn't be true, could it? Disconcerted by this theory I reached across to feel the wall behind me. Maybe there was a light somewhere. My hands knocked against a glass object. I ran my fingers over it. It felt like a lamp. I traced a line down the base to the cord and then along to the switch. Click. And then there was light. The bulb was quite dim, barely bright enough to read a book by. I looked around the room. I wasn't in hospital but I wasn't at home either. It was a medium-sized bedroom. On the wall nearest to me was a chest of drawers with a star-shaped mirror on top. Draped across some of the star's points were a number of necklaces and below that, lying flat on its side, a hairdryer. Against the far wall was an open clothes rail. The clothes were feminine, dresses, blouses

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and the like. There might even have been a fur coat on the end but it was hard to tell in the feeble light. On the wall partially obscured by the clothes rail was a Rothko print in a clip frame. I knew the print because Penny and I had bought one from the Museum of Modern Art on a trip to New York. It used to hang in the hallway of the last flat we rented before we bought our current house.

As I concluded that the regular inhabitant of this room was most likely a young woman I heard a gentle sigh emanating from the opposite side of the bed. I was not alone. I picked up the lamp and lifted it in the air a little so that I could get a better look. I almost dropped the lamp in shock. It was Bella. The intern. She was the person lying in the bed next to me. I carefully set the lamp back down on the bedside table and collated this new information together with what I already knew. I was naked in bed with a woman who was not my wife. The news hit me like a punch in the stomach. How could this have happened? The last thing I remembered was getting hit across the back of the head and now I was in bed with Bella. Was I dreaming? Was this part of some elaborate ruse? Maybe I'd just got the wrong end of the stick. I gently lifted the duvet up and took a peek underneath. She was naked too. I took a moment to digest this news. I was naked in bed with a naked intern who I'd met for the first time less than a week ago. My stomach lurched uncontrollably as again I tried to recall the night before. I'd been out for a drink after the shoot and had been heading home. Bella had texted me. She'd wanted me to meet her. I'd told her I couldn't. She'd persisted and though sorely tempted I'd just about managed to say no. She'd promised me that I wouldn't regret it then . . . what exactly? I hadn't

said yes to meeting her, I was sure of that, and yet here I was. And if I had said yes to meeting her then why couldn't I remember anything – not even the taxi ride over to Soho – about my evening with Bella, let alone how we'd ended up in bed? There had to be some kind of rational explanation for what had happened. There just had to be. And whatever the explanation I was absolutely sure that it wouldn't involve me having cheated on Penny.

I thought hard. Maybe I'd met up with Bella and we'd started drinking and had ended up so drunk that she'd taken me home and put me to bed. That made sense, surely? And maybe I didn't have any clothes on because . . . I don't know, maybe I'd been sick over myself and she'd put them in the machine to be ready for the morning. That sounded plausible. I never could hold my drink. Relieved to have conjured up a life-saving narrative I concluded the best thing I could do was grab my clothes and get out of there.

Easing aside the duvet I edged my legs out of the bed and stood up. The laminated floor beneath my feet felt cool but there was something rough stuck to the underside of my right heel. I reached down and plucked the offending object from my foot and studied it in the light of the lamp. It was an empty condom wrapper.

I felt sick.

I couldn't have, could I?

I looked over at Bella's sleeping form.

If I'd slept with Bella surely I'd remember it. I'd been faithful to Penny our entire relationship. Twenty whole years! If I'd cheated surely it would have made some sort of impact? This made no sense at all. I had to get out of here.



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I scanned the floor and lying at my feet as though they had been abandoned in the heat of the moment were my clothes. I put them on as quickly as I could: underwear, socks, jeans, shirt and then my jacket which felt oddly weighted as though there was something in one of the pockets. I put my hand in the inside pocket and pulled out the object. It was my phone. But how could that be? What kind of attacker mugs someone but doesn't steal a phone when there's one there? I took it out and checked the screen. It was five twenty-five. This too confused me as I knew for a fact that Jack had been waking early all week because it was too light in his bedroom. I walked over to the window and pulled back a corner of the curtain to see a blackout blind beneath. I tugged that too and sure enough it was getting light outside. At least that was one mystery solved.

I wondered if my phone might be able to shed any light on my activities the night before but after checking it I was left even more confused. The last text I remembered making was at 21.18 and read: *Really I can't* in response to Bella's promise not to keep me out too late. But then at 21.24 I'd apparently sent one saying: *I'm just looking for a taxi. I'll be there as soon as I can.* At 23.55 I'd sent a text to Penny: *Had a bit too much to drink. Will crash at Carl's place so as not to wake you+kids. Will call in morning. J xxx.* My brain throbbed under the weight of this revelation as I finally joined all the dots together. The mugging had been a dream. I'd obviously sent the texts, met up with Bella and having most likely dulled my conscience beyond all recognition had reached a point where I'd agreed to go home with Bella, covering my tracks with a text to Penny. With the exception of my lack of a hangover – how could I

have drunk so much that I'd forgotten the whole night and yet didn't have so much as a headache? – it all made sense. After the best part of twenty years of faithfulness I'd done the one thing I'd never dreamed I'd do: I'd cheated on my wife.

I started to panic. All I wanted was to go back in time and erase the last twelve hours of my life; maybe even the last twenty-four so I could undo ever meeting up with Bella. Why had I made such a fool of myself that I'd had to take her out for coffee to apologise? Why had I acknowledged her texts instead of ignoring them and going home to my wife? Penny would never forgive me if she found out. Her dad had cheated on her mum half a dozen times before he finally ran off to Canada with one of her mum's best friends when Penny was fifteen and so she knew first hand how much destruction cheating caused. 'I'd never forgive you if you did that to me,' she'd said to me on the night she told me about her dad back when we were students, 'If you ever cheated that would be it.' And even now after kids and the whole of our adult lives together I had my doubts whether her opinion had changed. As emotional as Penny was sometimes there was a steely pragmatism about her – a legacy of her teenage years – that made me seriously wonder whether in fact she might be capable of calling quits on us if she thought that there might be any chance of history repeating itself.

This was all too much. My head was spinning. I needed to get out of there, to put distance between me and the scene of the crime. I checked the room one last time to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything and realised that my watch was missing. I must have taken it off at some point but it was nowhere to be seen. It had been a thirtieth birthday present

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from Penny and losing it would take some explaining; still, I knew I'd have no choice but to mark it down as a casualty of war. Watches could be replaced; the kind of scorn I'd receive for getting caught in the process of sneaking out of Bella's bedroom would not be easily forgotten. After all other than sleeping with someone who wasn't my wife, leaving Bella like this was the worst thing I'd done to date in my career as a human being. Aside from her obvious lack of judgement when it came to men, from the little I knew of her she seemed like a decent person and certainly didn't deserve being made to feel cheap. She'd hate me forever. But given the damage I'd wreaked in less than twenty-four hours she'd be better off hating me than having anything more to do with me ever again.

At the front door I caught my reflection in the mirror. I looked old, drawn and haggard. Just as I was about to look away out of the corner of my eye I could have sworn for a moment that I saw Fiona Briggs standing behind me. Not the adult Fiona whose photo had been displayed in the church vestibule on the day of her funeral but rather the eighteen-year-old one complete with the spiral perm she thought made her look like eighties teen pop sensation Debbie Gibson. She was wearing a snow-washed denim jacket covered in pin badges, white T-shirt featuring the cover of The Cure's *Boys Don't Cry* album, black leggings and brown monkey boots, the exact outfit that she'd been wearing on the day in the student union when I'd told her I was with Penny. I rubbed my temples and blinked hard. The image was gone. All I could see was my own reflection. I hurried out of the door, closing it quietly behind me. This was ridiculous. I was so tired and my mind was

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undergoing so much turmoil that now on top of everything else I was seeing images of my dead ex-girlfriend. I needed sleep. Preferably in my own bed in my own home so that I could forget that this day had ever happened. I couldn't do that of course, not without Penny wondering why I was coming home at six in the morning and taking the day off work just because of a hangover. No, if I wasn't going to raise alarm bells unnecessarily there was only one option: I'd have to find out where I was, wait for the tube to start up again and then wander the streets until it was late enough for me to roll into work for the day. My heart sank. I had meetings to attend, features to write and a working lunch with a high-profile PR. How would I manage to get through any of that when I'd be thinking about what I'd done to Penny and the kids? I'd blown my life into smithereens for something that I couldn't even remember doing and I hadn't a clue how I was ever going to begin to put it back together. How on earth had I got here?

**One week earlier**

# 1

I suppose in a way it all started with the news of Fiona Briggs's death.

My wife Penny, a senior social worker, had just arrived home from work. A problem had come up at the last minute which was why, once again, she was late.

'Bad day?' I asked as she came into the living room and slumped down into the armchair without taking off her coat.

'The worst,' she replied, kicking off her shoes. 'Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. I got shouted at by Martin, learned that I have got half a dozen staff reviews to do before the end of the month, and then a case that I thought would need an hour to close ended up taking all afternoon. To top it all the new junior had a meltdown and it took me two hours to calm her down and persuade her not to leave.' She rubbed her feet. 'Everything OK here?'

I thought about filling her in on my day as that had been no walk in the park. I worked as deputy editor of *The Weekend*, the Saturday magazine supplement of the *Correspondent*, a mix of culture, fashion, celebrity interviews and lifestyle features, and today it had been announced that due to budget cuts we'd all have to reapply for our own jobs.

‘Everything’s good, nothing to report. Haven’t heard a thing out of the kids since they went up at eight. Do you want me to heat up your tea in the microwave? I made my signature rice and chilli.’

‘Thanks, that sounds lovely, but do you mind if I give it a miss? It was Mary’s last day at work today and I’ve done nothing but pick at cake all afternoon. I think I’ll just get off to bed if that’s OK.’

‘Yeah that’s fine,’ I replied even though it wasn’t. Since she’d gone back to work after a seven-year career break to bring up our kids Rosie, aged ten, and Jack, aged six, things had been tough. It was the need for money that had forced her back to work rather than a desire to fulfil herself through her career. The truth was we’d eaten through every last bit of our savings making sure she could be there for the kids when they were very young and now the money had run out.

Back when it had been just the two of us we could easily cope with the stresses and strains of a household where two people worked but now with two primary-school-aged kids added into the mix it was a struggle to keep all the balls in the air. Every day required military-style planning: who was dropping off at school, who was picking up, who was cooking tea, who was helping with homework, and it only took one thing – like Penny being called into an impromptu meeting five minutes before she was due to collect the kids – for all of our lives to be thrown into disarray. And as much as I tried to pick up the slack, with a sprawling seemingly never-ending job like mine it was virtually impossible. The truth was that the pressure was all on Penny, and while she never forgot anything to do with the kids – the lunches, the homework, the parties and

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playdates – she occasionally forgot us as a couple. And while I understood everything, from her missing specially prepared meals because of late-running meetings through to the evenings I spent alone on the sofa while she caught up with paperwork at the kitchen table, it was hard not to feel just a little bit neglected. I couldn't say anything though because it wasn't her fault. She was working really hard for all of us and I was a big boy, I could handle it, besides which I had a plan. A month earlier I'd applied for the editorship of *Sunday*, the *Correspondent on Sunday's* magazine supplement, and in terms of pay and prestige it was about as good it could possibly get for someone like me. If I got the job it would be the answer to all my and Penny's problems: I'd get a rise and we could afford for her to go part-time or even give up work altogether.

Penny stood up and kissed me goodnight and was about to leave the room when the phone rang. We exchanged wary glances. Good news never comes via a late-night phone call.

'It's your mum,' said Penny, handing me the receiver.

'Hey Mum, everything OK?'

'I've got some bad news,' she replied. 'I've just had a call from the uncle of that girl you used to go out with when you were young, you know the one, Fiona Briggs. Well, she died apparently, some sort of accident while playing tennis.'

'Tennis? What kind of accident can you have playing tennis that can kill you?'

According to my mother Fiona had been playing tennis at her local club and was struck on her temple by a ball which briefly knocked her unconscious. She insisted that she was all right and



determined to play on and eventually won the game but fainted an hour later in the tennis club showers hitting her head on the corner of a tiled bench. She was in a coma for a week but never regained consciousness. They couldn't make any funeral arrangements until after the coroner's verdict but that came in yesterday – death by misadventure – and the funeral was at St Thomas's next Tuesday. According to Fiona's uncle my name was down on a list of people she wanted to be there. My mother paused. 'Is that something people do these days? Make lists of who they want at their funeral like it's a birthday party?'

'No, Mum,' I replied, 'but it is a very Fiona thing to do. She was a control freak of the highest order.'

My mum sighed, as though I was speaking gibberish. 'Well, I don't know about that but he said that if you wanted to pay your respects you'd be more than welcome.'

Fiona Briggs.

Dead.

By tennis ball.

There should be a name for it when the first person you ever slept with dies. There should be a word that communicates the fact that a little part of your history is gone forever. That she was a complete and utter nightmare of a girlfriend and that my buttocks clenched at the very thought of her was neither here nor there. She might have been one of the most obnoxious and controlling human beings I had ever had the misfortune to encounter but she was my first, and I was hers, and as such we would always be inextricably linked.

I was never quite sure how I started going out with Fiona. Looking back it was almost as if one moment I was a

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carefree sixteen year old enjoying a lazy summer of messing around in the park with my mates and then out of nowhere Fiona appeared with her big hair and fashionable clothes reeking of the designer perfume Poison by Dior. In no time at all I was coupled with Fiona with no means of escape. Nothing I did was good enough for her, she hated my friends and wasn't all that keen on my family either. During the eighteen months we were together – in which time I endured daily bullying, belittling and deriding at her hands – I attempted to split up with her on at least a dozen separate occasions but it never seemed to stick. Every time I raised the topic of ending the relationship Fiona would invariably dangle the prospect of my gaining access to her underwear to dissolve my resolve and because I was seventeen and shallow it worked every time. Finally however, a fortnight before we were due to go to university at opposite ends of the country I received a handwritten note pushed through my parents' letter box:

Dear Joe,

This is the most difficult thing I have ever had to do but I do it all the same because deep down I know you will understand. Of late I have been giving great consideration to my future. Although I care for you deeply I feel we have been growing apart for some time now, and therefore think it's best that we end our relationship sooner rather than later. Please always think fondly of me.

Yours faithfully,

Fiona xxx

PS. Please do not try to change my mind.

It was all lies of course. Two days later my friend Tony saw her in WHSmith in Swindon town centre hanging off the arm of Ian Mallander, who was five years older than her and worked at the local B&Q. By rights, I should have been hurt by the deceit she'd employed to get rid of me but I was too busy celebrating to give it a second thought. Finally I was a free man, one who was about to go to university to study English Literature with hundreds if not thousands of members of the opposite sex some of whom I was pretty sure would have sufficiently low standards to actually consider sleeping with me. And I wasn't going to be satisfied with sleeping with one girl with no standards: no, I was going to sleep with as many girls with no standards as would allow me into their beds and only when I had reached double figures would I even contemplate becoming embroiled in another relationship.

At least that was the plan. Two days into my university career I was attempting to inveigle my way into a group of female modern language students at the freshers' night disco when I'd felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to see Fiona's best friend, Sara, accompanied by a pretty, dark-haired girl wearing a vintage floral tea dress and lace-up ankle boots. I couldn't tear my eyes from this girl. Something about her was so warm, inviting and strangely familiar that all I wanted to do was get to know her.

'Sara,' I said, forcing myself to sound pleased to see her even though I loathed her as much as she had patently loathed me. 'How funny to see you here.'

'It's not that funny,' she said sharply. 'You knew I was coming to Sheffield because I told you and where else would a first-year student be on freshers' night?'

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‘Good point,’ I replied, hoping that Sara’s friend hadn’t taken me for a complete idiot. I flashed a hesitant smile in her direction and got an equally hesitant one back. ‘Hi, I’m Joe, I didn’t quite catch your name.’

‘That’s because I didn’t introduce you,’ Sara butted in. ‘I only came over to tell you that Fiona has changed her mind. She wants to go back out with you. She’ll be up the weekend after next to stay with me so if you know what’s good for you, you’ll meet her outside my halls first thing on the Saturday morning.’

This was all too much. I wanted to cry. To shed actual man tears that would express the level of desperation I felt. Fiona was like the serial killer in a horror film who just wouldn’t die and stay dead.

‘But I—’

‘But you what?’ demanded Sara. ‘You want me to pass on some message to Fiona that we *both* know will make her angry? No, if you have something to say to Fiona, say it to her face when she gets here.’

Fizzing with frustration at the thought of falling into my ex’s clutches once more I nursed bottle after bottle of Newcastle Brown in an effort to build up a head of steam sufficient to propel me to call Fiona’s parents in the hope of obtaining her number in Southampton. I was going to stop this madness – which I was pretty sure it would be – before it started if it was the last thing I did, but as I reached the wall of payphones that lined the lobby of the union I noticed Sara’s friend standing next to one. She seemed upset.

‘Hi, you’re Sara’s friend aren’t you? Are you OK? Anything I can do?’

*Mike Gayle*

'I'm fine,' she said. 'Just leave me alone.'

The tears. The telephone. It could only be one thing.

'Boyfriend trouble?'

She nodded. 'Am I that obviously pathetic?'

'Not at all, it's just . . . look, are you really OK?'

'It's silly, really. We were finishing the call and I told him that I missed him and he didn't say it back, and when he finally did say it I knew he'd only said it because I'd made him say it.'

I winced. 'The insincere "miss you" is the worst kind. What you really want is someone saying: "All days are nights till I see thee, And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me."''

The girl looked at me in awe like I'd just grown a foot in height right in front of her. 'That's beautiful,' she said. 'What's it from?'

'One of the sonnets, I forget which,' I lied. 'For some reason those lines always stuck in my head.'

The girl grinned. 'I'm Penny, Penny Morrison.'

'Nice to meet you, Penny Morrison, I'm Joe.'

We stayed up all night, Penny and I, listening to music in her room and talking about what we hoped to do with our lives. Penny told me that she wanted to change the world and work for a campaigner like Greenpeace while in turn I told her that I wanted to be a writer and move people with my words. When we finally kissed at dawn watching the sun rise over the self-catering accommodation block and I told her that even if I lived to be a hundred I would never forget this moment she smiled and told me she felt the same.

By the time Fiona arrived on campus a fortnight later Penny and I were practically living together. Although Fiona's friend Sara was well aware of this fact she clearly hadn't wanted to be

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the bearer of bad news and I'd been so wrapped up in Penny that I hadn't given Fiona a second thought, which was why I was so surprised when I came face to face with her in the union bar while waiting for Penny to come back from the toilet.

'Fiona, what are you doing here?' There was genuine fear in my voice at the thought of how this whole situation might play out.

'Looking for you,' she replied tersely as she coolly played with the zip of her snow-washed denim jacket. 'Didn't you get my message? You were meant to meet me this morning. Why didn't you call me instead of making me track you down round this dump? I don't know what gets into you sometimes. You obviously need me to organise you. Anyway, we're out of here, so get your things. Sara knows a good place in town that's doing cheap shots until ten.'

'No,' I said firmly and Fiona stepped back in surprise. I'd never used that word to her before.

Her eyes widened. 'What do you mean, no?'

'I mean, I'm not going out with you tonight, I'm not going out with you at all. I've moved on. I've got a new girlfriend.'

Fiona took a menacing step forward and jabbed me in the chest with her index finger. 'You don't get to dump me. I'll be the one who does the dumping around here so consider yourself dumped. But just remember this, Joe Clarke: I was the best thing that ever happened to you and one day you're going to look back at this moment and regret how you've treated me.' With that she was gone and it was the last I ever saw of her.