
Opening Extract from...

An Englishwoman in New York

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an englishwoman in new york

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For Joe, always

Above all, be the heroine of your life, not the victim.

—Nora Ephron

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PART I

They arrived in early September. No one could have guessed the weather. It was, as the forecast told them one day, as if a blowtorch had gone through the city. "This is meant to be autumn," she cried, "or, rather, fall, as the Americans call it." "Because the leaves are *falling*," laughed little Max. She looked at him and thought, *No, because of our fall from grace.*

The apartment had no air-conditioning. She sweated and was not happy.

They had visited at Christmas and the streets were quiet. She learned quickly this had been an illusion. He had brought his family to the very epicentre of cool, single, young New

York. Apart from everything else, this made her look uncool, married, and old. Opposite them was a bar so trendy the waifish clientele entered through a telephone box next to a hot-dog stand. It was called PDT. Walking down the street she would think, *PDT—Please Don't Tell anyone I am a middle-aged woman*.

When he told her what had happened, she thought he was joking. Sometimes he had a cruel sense of humour, and had once played a practical joke with a talking mirror in the guest bathroom that made his parents refuse to visit them for a year. It took two weeks of conversation and two cases of red wine for her to accept that this was not his biggest-ever whoopee cushion; they had lost everything—well, nearly everything. And he kept saying there was no point in shouting at him, for it wasn't his fault, it was the economy, stupid. In fact, they were lucky. He had one chance at a low-level management job in the New York office. No bonuses, but a salary, and they could live in the eight-hundred-square-foot East Village apartment he had bought as a hotel room years ago.

"You'll love it," he assured her.

"Really?" she replied, rolling her eyes, imagining what she would do if he uttered the words "new" and "start".

She told him he would have to commute from their white stucco four-bedroom in Ladbroke Grove. That's when he told her they had defaulted on the mortgage six months ago and the house was already on the market. It was beyond infuriating.

The Mothers at the School shrieked divorce. She listened in desperate hope. She knew that the divorcées among their number had ended up with white stucco four-bedrooms, child support, and in one case a lump-sum payment for loss of earnings. She figured this could assuage a lot of emotional pain. But when she looked at the business sections of the newspapers it appeared there had indeed been some kind of global collapse in the financial markets and, although she had indeed abandoned a dreary, ill-paid job that bored her to spend the past nine years supervising the Nanny and the Housekeeper and the Children, she had enough brain cells left to know this might not entitle her to much of what remained when nearly everything had gone.

So she cried and cried. Read articles in glossy magazines about the downturn being an opportunity to stop shopping and rediscover the Real Meaning of Life. They did not help at all. Surely they had spent twenty years being told that *greed is good*? Consumerism helps society. No more boom and bust. And then she cried some more.

Her aunt Eva arrived at ten one morning and found her sobbing over the boys' crested school uniforms. She couldn't bear to remember the scene that ensued; suffice to say that she did not consider it to have been appropriately sympathetic. She had brandished a file of yellowing articles from said glossy magazines saying how it was her right to stay at home when her children were small. And a piece from the Saturday *Guardian* about how children who go to day care from an early

age are more likely to turn into delinquents and drug addicts, setting fire to wheelie bins and inhaling the fumes.

Then she was angry. The anger fuelled a burst of activity that got them to New York in the autumn.

Every day she dragged the two boys aimlessly around the neighbourhood, always ending up in the new playground in Tompkins Square Park, ignoring the rats frolicking like rabbits and the homeless alcoholics vomiting into black plastic rubbish sacks. One morning, as they crossed a flower bed to avoid two ambulance men removing another ragged, comatose body from a bench, music erupted from a tiny storefront on Avenue A. An elderly Mexican labourer, one of a group she saw most mornings on the pavement waiting for work, simply stood up and danced. He held his body quite upright, moving to the rhythm with absolute control, and then, to her amazement, he held out an imperious hand to a beautiful young girl, from her stork-like proportions and huge eyes obviously one of the models who descended on the area like designer locusts. The girl gave a slight coy bow of her head and then put her perfect hand in his, just like Beauty when she saw the true nature of the Beast for the first time at the foot of his grand staircase. They waltzed.

Passers-by stopped; touched by joy, they laughed and clapped in time. Max and Robbie giggled and bounced up and down, but she froze, her throat constricted, the sudden emotion so shocking she was able to observe it, exactly as if she

had cut herself with a piece of broken glass and there were a few milliseconds before blood spurted out. Tears spurting out of her eyes, she had to hurry away round a corner, where they almost collided with a woman with a live snake around her neck, and the boys giggled and bounced up and down again. Really, sometimes she thought it was impossible to walk down a street without seeing something that aroused such a primal response in her, although, even as she blamed the city, she feared that this sort of overemotionalism might be the start of menopause, a horrific condition, according to Aunt Eva, involving sagging and shrivelling and, believe it or not, *"crispiness"*, though that word had not been said, merely mouthed.

That night she couldn't sleep. It was then she realized she had swallowed her last Ambien on the flight over.

She told the story of the dancing, without the tears or the crispiness fears, at Sunday lunch in a three-bedroom duplex in a doorman building opposite the park, after which his new boss, Jerry, and Jerry's Current Wife told them how much they missed living downtown. With a meaningful glance between them, they agreed on the deficiencies of the Upper East Side; it's so *"sanitized"*, they moaned. Jerry and Jerry's Current Wife remembered a time when poets lived on Saint Marks Place and Jeff Buckley sang "Hallelujah" in Sin-é. She nodded in sympathy, but she had realized on previous trips to the city that the epithet "sanitized" used in conjunction with the location of real estate was code among a certain (invariably wealthy)

type of New Yorker to indicate their mixed feelings about "selling out". For her it was simply the effects of regular garbage collection.

Later that day, on the 6 train heading home she looked at him and remarked on this. He burst out laughing. She laughed, too. The boys looked at them strangely. Their parents laughing together was a disconcerting sight. Fortunately, things quickly reverted to normal.

Their American health insurance plan had a more stringent policy towards therapy, the taking of antidepressant medication, or even acupuncture. (It appeared you actually had to have tried to throw yourself out of a window, or chased after your children with a mezzaluna before you could be referred.) Thus, with three of her preferred daytime activities removed at a stroke, she was left to self-diagnose her symptoms on the Internet. Unfortunately, hysterical outbursts, headaches, and lethargy were not just symptoms of the perimenopause, but everything from diabetes to advanced brain tumours as well. She began to wonder if it was all the fault of the noise, the cacophony of noise that followed her wherever she went.

Back home, as she still referred to it, she had banished most real sound, except for chatting, of course, from her daytime life. She prided herself on her meditative colour scheme, her candles and small piles of perfectly shaped stones, her panpipe ambient background music ordered from Santa Fe. She had even bought the Housekeeper a special vacuum with a "silent" option on the controls. Now, as she spent hours lying on the

bed, mourning the curtains she had left behind, her ears were assaulted by the three couples sharing upstairs stomping around, running their showers, and nursing their lame greyhound. Below there was the neurotic poodle and the teenager's violin practice. It took about a month for it to occur to her that, in turn, the neighbours were treated to the growls of the boys playing something like Transformers tigers and the ensuing shrieking from her about their homework or their dirty clothes or their general selfishness like a strange hybrid of fishwife and robot.

And all this before you considered what was going on outside. One evening, disco rabbis came down the street. This was not something she had ever seen or heard on Portland Road.

She held out a faint hope that she would find a kindred spirit at the school gates. So much of the texture of her "before" life had been provided by her relationships with the Mothers: the coffees, the exercise classes, the helpful tips (*"I put Post-it notes on places I want Irela to clean"*), the discussion of important educational developments, like the affair between Venetia's mother and the dirty (and dirty) young groundsman who was the son of the headmaster. But it was not to be. For a start, there were several *men* doing their paternal duty. Kidult men with short grey hair, wearing tight T-shirts and cargo pants with flip-flops. And she was intimidated by the most vocal group of women, who were always hugging one

another before running off to their yoga or their fund-raising bake sales or their suitably part-time creative jobs with their not-in-the-least-grey hair, miniskirts, and Birkenstocks (their slim, tanned legs marred only by the occasional varicose vein or its less knobbly cousin the spiderweb thread vein).

Her concerns about the dramatic change in the boys' educational environment was not helped by the regular spelling and punctuation mistakes on the PTA board outside the school. Apparently *the season for pumkin's* was approaching. When she mentioned this to a more friendly-looking plump woman, the woman had seemed offended. Clearly, her views were going to be an obstacle to her smooth entry into the community. When she insisted Max and Robbie say "please" and "thank you" to the beleaguered teachers she caught a couple of other parents glancing at her judgmentally. She was *"so English"*, she imagined them saying to one another; concerned about petty politeness and grammar at the expense of her children's self-esteem, creativity, and interest in saving the planet. Of course, there were a few actually poor children whose mothers were running off to cook and clean for her neighbours. They didn't look like they cared at all about recycling, but they wouldn't provide recreational activities for her. She gave up on the school at this point. (Later she would realize that she had projected such an air of unhappiness from behind her sunglasses that people had moved away from her in case it was contagious, like an emotional Ebola virus.) Anyway, it didn't

matter, because these days he frequently volunteered to do the morning run.

He had made a Father Friend, in fact, a man called Kristian with a *K*, and sometimes, he told her, they grabbed a quick coffee and chatted. Kristian was separated from his wife, Julia, and their two children lived with him. Julia was a successful screenwriter, a "show runner" on a prime-time TV series (whatever that meant), but had the "chip of ice" all creative people need, a coldness in their nature that allows them to use anything and anyone as material. *It's "splinter" of ice*, she muttered. *Graham Greene called it the "splinter"*, but he was on a roll.

"Have you ever seen her?" he asked. "Kristian says Julia's about six foot tall, always wears a hat, and talks to herself."

Before she could decide whether this was factual or disloyal, she remembered that last Friday she had seen such an apparition marching up and down a corridor, shouting, "How long is it since we butchered a pregnant woman with a meat cleaver?" into her phone, oblivious to a clustered group of mothers swapping vegetarian curry recipes as their children hit one another with macramé snakes.

"That must have been her," he said. "Did you speak?"

"No."

She had watched as the person she now knew was Julia switched the phone off but kept muttering, long, bony arms twitching, endless legs vibrating until inevitably the bulging bag on her shoulder seemed to spin off with a force of its own,

spilling a red leather-bound notebook, glasses, pens, scraps of paper with one or two words scribbled on them, and a raggedy paperback onto the tiles at the feet of the women discussing broad beans and kimchi.

The book was called *Why Mothers Kill*.

"Workaholism has driven Julia crazy," he concluded.

"According to Kristian with a *K*," she pointed out, but he ignored her. He was trying to make some meaningful point about how relationships are destroyed, but she was distracted, intrigued by this Julia and her *splinter of ice*, which she knew was an inability to play nice like all the other girls.

This was a quality she recognized in herself.

He loved the school like he loved New York, immoderately, passionately. Not only was it free, it was great for what he kept calling his sons' "life education", and even she had to admit that while the prep school in Notting Hill did do an annual charity auction for different countries in the sub-Saharan continent, its idea of diversity among its pupils was white South Africans and the children of the Japanese ambassador. But she gathered herself with her usual rallying cry.

"How will they get into Cambridge if they never do Latin?"

One night he retaliated. "What's the point of a degree from Cambridge if you don't do anything with it?"

This was hurtful, it hit home, but she was glad. She prepared herself to sulk mightily and searched for the magazine

articles about child development again, but he simply walked into the bathroom and locked the door. She stood outside.

"I'm like Bathsheba Everdene in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. 'The stuff of which great men's mothers are made.' "

There was a loud chortle from the toilet that could be interpreted only as a diminution of her maternal skills. Max and Robbie joined in. She was horrified. For if she was not a Good Mother, what on earth had she been doing all this time? She accused him of encouraging a male conspiracy against her. He told her to lighten up. No argument ensued. *What was happening to him?*

He was convinced that their new circumstances were good for them as a family. He expressed pleasure at the smallness of their living quarters, delighted at how she had cleaned the tiles round the shower with an old toothbrush and industrial bleach, and described her previous interior design style as "soulless". They were mucking in together, getting to know each other. When she had stopped trying to decide which of these things was the strangest to say, she wondered whether he was writing articles in glossy magazines about the "Gift of Time" under a pseudonym.

Certainly they were seeing more of him. He invented strange ball games and had learned that a washing machine does the clothes and is different from the one that does dishes. He made funny jokes that didn't upset anyone. And although the Mothers at the School in London had predicted he would miss the "buzz" of his brilliant career, he didn't seem to miss

the eighteen-hour workdays at all. Sometimes she felt she was going to bed every night with an inspirational speaker of the kind found on DVDs in the lobbies of health spas. And as she had always found *certainty* enormously erotic (she had had a secret two-week crush on George W. Bush in his leather Air Force jacket), she had to admit that their sex life had been transformed. In a good way. She still hated him, of course, but couldn't wait for the weekends. *What was happening to her?*

Now that she had no help, she immediately jettisoned her previous sanctimonious rules about children, food, and television. She used to dread the hours between five and seven, but now she would pour herself a glass of wine, microwave a Whole Foods ready meal, and let the boys gobble it down in front of a PBS show set in California involving adaptations of classic novels narrated by and starring a dog. Struck by their rapt absorption one day, she came out of the bedroom, removed her earplugs, and sat between her sons, their warm heads leaning against her, and watched. The story was *Pride and Prejudice*, and once she got past the actress playing Elizabeth Bennet flirting with a terrier called Mr Darcy and wondering what could be done with that in the adult section of the cable menu, she was hooked. The lessons of Miss Austen were learned during a beach-party social. She had no idea children's programming could be such fun.

In fact, she had entirely forgotten the pleasure of watching television, and now that she had no friends she could see

loads of it: daytime drama, documentaries, dinosaur-versus-shark specials. And then she started reading newspapers, taking books out of the library, spotting posters of obscure bands and listening to their music on YouTube. In the evenings they talked to each other. Everything from US economic policy to why Heart were fantastic and how difficult it is for women to rock.

He told her it was good to remember how much she used to love music. How glad he was that she had let it back into her life again, and before she could say anything, he reminded her of the first time they met, aged twenty-seven, at someone's party in a dark basement near Trafalgar Square, and how she had teased him about his record collection. He loved Queen. And Kool & the Gang. Had the twelve-inch disco version of "Rock the Boat" by Forrest (and had never heard of the Hues Corporation). When he finally admitted he couldn't see the point of The Smiths, she insisted he come back to her flat to listen to "Girlfriend in a Coma". He was excited. He had spotted her several years before, at university, where she wore homemade goth outfits with a Groucho Marx badge pinned to her academic gown, but he had never spoken to her, although he wanted to. It had something to do with the rowing team making fun of her, but they were estate agents now, and he could go out with the pale, clever girl who didn't fit in if he could persuade her to have him.

He laughed and laughed at the memory, started singing and waving two wilted roses from the five-dollar bunch on the

table as if they were gladioli. Suddenly, she felt the constriction in her throat again, the tears spurting, and announced that she wanted a Snickers bar desperately and would have to get it. Immediately. Once outside, she fought her way through the throng of pierced young people, and by the Australian Tuck Shop she sat down and wept.

For it was as if she had seen them together that first time. Yes. Really. As if it were that very moment. The two of them on her awful futon in Earls Court, snogging, for that was the only word for it, with her black-and-white collage on the wall. (Actually, wasn't that in her room at college? Maybe it was the poster for the experimental multimedia play she had written?) They had even brought an obligatory traffic cone up with them—her idea, of course. The song had brought it all back to her, but there was more to it than that, it was more than a historical record of an event that a date could tell you, it was a sensation, a feeling that wanted to be felt.

It was *love*.

Love for him, for her children, for this wonderful/terrible/boiling hot/freezing cold city that was going to save her. It had stalked her since her arrival, and now it had her, but she wasn't afraid any more. She realized that New York, the enchanted island, with its tragedies and its comedies, its endings and its beginnings, will make you part of it whether you want it to or not.

Her throat relaxed, her tears stopped, and through her damp fingers she watched as life walked past her: in Uggs, in

Jimmy Choos, barefoot. Then she looked down at her green sneakers and thought, *Maybe I'm not that old? Maybe I will go to the Bowery Ballroom and see Iron & Wine?* And the exhilaration of this idea caused her whole body to tremble. She closed her eyes and felt as if the street were shaking, glasses on tables rattling, and the wings of dirty pigeons flapping as they rose into the sky.

She went back upstairs without chocolate. He was peering at the laptop, amazed.

"Did you feel that?" he said. "There was an earthquake. Just a small one. Magnitude three-point-something, but it went on for twenty seconds."

Oh, she thought, *it wasn't me discovering the Real Meaning of Life.*

"I didn't notice."

He tried to smile, but he looked sad.

"You can say it," she said. "I don't notice anything, do I?"

"Not really, no."

She walked over and put her arms around him.

"Why didn't you leave me, Richard?"

"I was planning to, Lucy. But then we lost everything."

There was a long pause. It was certainly dramatic. Then Lucy grinned.

"*Nearly everything*, you mean."