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## ***From Bizarre Rage Against James Joyce to MI5 Phone-Bugging: Why I Collect Snippets of Strangers' Conversations***

For many years I have collected snippets of conversation accidentally overheard or one side of a phone call that sounded comic, menacing or just plain mysterious. My collection is small because most of what is garnered through unintentional eavesdropping is dull and long-winded, but I occasionally hear something which is rivetingly interesting or bizarre.

I was travelling on a train between St Pancras and Canterbury West just before Christmas a year ago, when I became conscious of a middle-aged man making a phone call a few seats away who was raising his voice in irritation. As he kept repeating himself, the reason for this soon became clear, as did the identity of the person to whom he was speaking.

He was complaining vigorously and at length to his mother about the behaviour of his sister whom he said had invited herself to stay for Christmas, though that was not the main reason why he was so upset. She was not only staying in his house, but she was demanding that he put a Christmas stocking at the end of her bed on Christmas morning. "I'll do that for my nine-year-daughter but not for a 40-year-old-woman," the man kept telling his mother, who was presumably trying to calm him down, in tones of increasing outrage.

My father Claud Cockburn, from whom I got the habit, would collect chunks of conversation that he found particularly intriguing. Once in New York he had heard one person saying to another as they walked past the open window of his apartment: "Yes, I

can understand that, but why did he want to put the chestnuts down her back?" He speculated about could have been the context for this strange query.

The prize of his collection was one half of a phone conversation being conducted by his solicitor in Dublin as Claud entered his office. The solicitor waved him to a chair but went on listening intently but with mounting signs of impatience to what a caller was telling him at great length. Eventually, it was the solicitor's turn to speak and, by my father's account, he said quietly but with great deliberation, "I have three things to say to you: f\*\*\* you, f\*\*\* your mother, and f\*\*\* James Joyce too!" He then slammed the phone down.

My father did his business but then said that, such was his fascination with what he had just heard, he really could not leave the room without hearing some explanation for what it was all about. The solicitor replied that, weird and aggressive though his words might have sounded, they had a rational explanation.

"I have a client who is in deep trouble and I have advised him to leave the jurisdiction of the state," he said. "He keeps refusing to go abroad and, just now, he was telling me that he couldn't leave Ireland because he loved Dublin. I said that that might well be so but he should still get out before he saw the inside of a prison cell." The client had then gone to say that he could not go because Dublin was the home of his mother and, after receiving the same legal advice as before, had added that his attachment to Dublin was all the greater because it was the city of James Joyce. It was at this point, the solicitor admitted, that his patience had finally given out and he had uttered the explosive words that Claud had just heard.

Most phone conversations that one is compelled to listen to on trains and elsewhere seem inordinately long, boring and repetitive. I have always felt a sympathy for those who have to listen for hours to the product of bugged phone calls. I did once read the published transcription of the calls of some much-feared mafia boss in New York or Boston who turned out to have spent much of his time on the phone trying to persuade the owner of a local restaurant to give him and his friends a better table when they came to dinner. Presumably, he had the sense not to talk on the phone about his more culpable plots and plans.

As a radical journalist, my father's phone was bugged by MI5 in the 1930s and 40s, though few transcripts are preserved in the National Archives at Kew. Presumably, those discarded revealed nothing useful about his sources of information. Such texts that do survive appear to have done so because MI5 found them amusing rather than for any other purpose.

In June 1948, for instance, the listening officer writes that during a call between Claud and my mother Patricia, “Claud’s small son [my brother Alexander aged seven] then came to the phone and particularly requested his father to get home early because he wanted him to read a new book nurse had bought him about Christopher Robin.” This was touching but hardly of much value to the security services.

Snatches of talk are occasionally intriguing enough to inspire authors to develop a context into which they might fit. Rudyard Kipling wrote a cryptic story called Mrs Bathurst after hearing one seaman in New Zealand talking to another about a woman who would “never scruple to help a lame duck or to set her foot on a scorpion.”

Deliberate invention generally outdoes chance thoughts or snippets of dialogue. I particularly like the remark of Peter Cook: “Cricket is nothing if it is not one man pitted against a fish.” Few real proverbs are as good as this remark, though one Chinese proverb – “Of nine bald men, eight are deceitful and the ninth is dumb” – comes close.

On occasion, chance overheard remarks have all too understandable an explanation. Earlier this month we went for a drink and a meal to the wonderful Shipwright’s Arms, one of Kent’s most attractive pubs, which is located in the Ham marshes between Oare and Faversham, just below a dyke which protects it from the waters of the Swale estuary. We sat down in front of a blazing fire, got a glass of mulled wine, and only gradually became aware of the conversation around the bar which was particularly intense and of a practical nature.

I heard somebody say: “It all depends on whether or not the high tide and the surge come together.” Only gradually did it occur to us that this was not a general reflection about menacing developments in the Thames Estuary or the effect of climate change on us all, but referred to some more immediate threat to those present in the pub. These all appeared stoic and unruffled but, on inquiry, confirmed that a storm surge and an extra-high tide might well coincide, leading to water pouring over the dykes, as had happened in the recent past.

We darted up onto the dyke where we saw that the water was six inches below the top. The lights went out, adding to the sense of drama and we rapidly finished our drinks and left – though on this occasion the water receded before inundating the pub and the surrounding marsh.