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*And Other
Conversations*

I WANT TO TALK TO YOU



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BY DIANA EVANS

FICTION

26a

The Wonder

Ordinary People

A House for Alice

NON-FICTION

I Want to Talk to You: And Other Conversations

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I Want to Talk to You

And Other Conversations

DIANA EVANS

Chatto & Windus

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Introduction: I Want to Talk to You

At a guest lecture in London, a student asked me how I found my voice. She was referring to my fiction voice, which I remember finding specifically in October 2002 in a residential area of Norwich, on the floor of an upstairs room in a student house. I had been walking up and down all day, pacing. There were bits of paper strewn across the carpet, notes from a novel-in-progress that was undergoing a major reconstruction. The voice was somewhere in there, in the bits of paper, having been stuck until then in the wrong shape. All I had to do was pick it up and take it over to my desk in the corner, where through the making of clean, successive sentences it would be rebirthed. It was a long and difficult labour, but eventually it arrived, meaning that the sentences had the right feeling and sounded the same as what was in my head.

There is another voice, the journalism voice, found sometime earlier in North Kensington, near the canal, also upstairs. This one was easier to locate because the subject, or subjects, already had a shape and texture of their own and could be seen. I could put on a record and listen to some music, read a press release, do some research or have a conversation with someone. I could see what they were wearing, their gestures as we were talking, describe the exact backdrop and life story, so the sentences knew at the start which way to go, how long it would take to get there in terms of word count, the general tone and path of detachment to tread, even if the full details of the journey were unknown. This was part of the joy of it: there was room to play and discover but the parameters were pre-marked.

The journalism voice is direct, conspicuous and definite. The fiction voice is nebulous, shadowy, prefers to disappear in order to speak.

In the early days of my writing life, these two voices seemed to belong to different parts of the day, so I would write journalism in the bright alert of morning and fiction in the shady alcoves of the afternoon, when the day was diffuse and drifting towards twilight. They depended on and complemented one another, though were also in conflict. My *true* work, I felt, was fiction, and I should give it all my attention because it is a selfish voice, greedy and all-consuming as well as jealous, forever making threats to leave if I turn away from it for too long. But what the other voice was always trying to get across was that the making of fiction needs ventilation – you can't live there all the time, it's unstable, confusing, suffocating, and can drive you crazy. I think the journalism is maybe a little younger than the fiction by nature, although they both like to have fun, in different ways. They're still arguing. They still would rather I choose between them. The fiction knows it has my heart and punishes me accordingly.

Between 2002 and 2022 I wrote four novels with mostly rising levels of difficulty. Each was written in a kind of picturesque time warp, full of great faith and perseverance, held in the enclosure of the original idea while the world went on outside. I could swim as deep as I wanted in the poetics of language. I could stretch sentences into whole paragraphs and inhabit multiple souls. The difficulty, generally, was in dealing with the scaffolding of narrative structure – there was always a pattern to serve, a bigger cohesion to refer to, everything had to make sense in relation to character and plot, all of which could feel like a hindrance to expression, even an obstruction to truth. And this goes on for a very, very long time. I would yearn for the freedom of the direct address, to be able to express an idea,

image, moment or opinion briefly and succinctly without it needing to belong to a larger narrative whole. The almost monastic mode of existence required to produce the type of long-form fiction I was interested in writing ultimately proved to be unsustainable without sporadic forays into journalism, that beautiful sphere of brevity and solidity, where a piece could be complete in a week, where I knew exactly what was going to happen to it and I could say exactly what I wanted to say. Often when I was approached by an editor to write something – an interview with a musician, a review of an exhibition or a cover story – the fiction voice would cry, *Don't do it!* Then it would complain of neglect and potential ruin all the way through, causing some occupational discomfort. But I would return when it was over, refreshed and clear-eyed, ready to go back into the cave. I liked going for a walk outside, feeling the air on my skin.

The articles and essays in this collection are gathered from these outings, featuring familiar yet extraordinary people captured at a significant moment of new art, new life or new love, sometimes approaching death; it adds a sadness and mystery to my meeting with Edwin Starr that he would die the following year. Other ghosts appear, of Michael Jackson, of Richard Yates with his scary houses and Jean Rhys with her infectious despair. There's a loose distinction I am making between the article and the essay: the former is mostly centred around an interview or is lighter in content; the latter is deeper, attempting to express a substantial idea or experience or a major impact someone has made on others. 'The aggressiveness of the essay is the assumption of the authority to speak in one's own voice,' wrote Elizabeth Hardwick.¹ And that is the point. The voice of non-fiction is visible, it takes the lead. In the personal essay, of which there are some here, the person behind the voice is also visible: the dancing self in 'Once a Dancer', the maternal self in 'How to

Tell the Children’ or ‘Travelling with my Daughter’. Strangely, this mode feels the closest to fiction while being its opposite. All writing is in some way a voyage of disappearance, a departure from the self outwards into the world.

In wanting to create a record of the beginning and development of the two voices, and how they have changed over the years, I have resisted the urge to interfere much with the earlier pieces, including dates and timelines. They show a young writer learning how to speak and take on muscle, while the overall period covered is another, partial record of our recent history (Grenfell, George Floyd, Covid). The right voice speaks at the right time and the other learns to step aside. I no longer feel I have to choose between them, or that they require different parts of the day. I have realised, finally, that it is possible to be both.

Diana Evans
London, 2024

Portraits

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The Balcony

I am sitting in bed next to Mariah Carey. It's a sumptuous, nine-hundred-pounds-a-night king-size at the Landmark Hotel in London. Arranged supine, she flops one arm out in an exaggerated display of exhaustion at the toil involved in her 80 million record sales over seven years. 'I haven't stopped,' she says. 'I've put out more records than people who've been around twice as long as I have. Basically since right after high school I've been making records year after year after year.' She's wearing a pair of tiny boxer shorts and a belly-airing vest. I too am in my work clothes (black Miss Selfridge trousers, white Lycra top) holding at an angle a Sony voice recorder into which she will relate her recent crazy New York schedule completing her sixth album *Butterfly*, featuring Bone Thugs-n-Harmony. 'You can lie down if you want,' she says. 'I mean, it's fine, be comfortable.' So I lean further back into the pillows, feigning being comfortable.

Around six months earlier, an underemployed graduate in my mid-twenties, I had begun a two-week journalism internship at *Pride* magazine, a lifestyle glossy for women of colour containing beauty tips, news features, personality columns and coverage of arts and music. During my first week there, I'd sensed murky office tensions flying through the atmosphere, a gloominess, a pervasive, exploited disgruntlement. It was in the middle of my second week, by which time I had not yet learned the tenets of journalism, that the culture editor stormed out, and that evening I received a strange, unsettling phone call from the magazine's editor offering me the just-vacated post, which

involved flying to Nassau next Wednesday to cover a reggae festival. The salary was more than I had ever earned. I had a student loan, an inchoate CV, lots of waitressing experience and no other pending job offers. Terrified, I said yes.

The following Wednesday I was on a plane to the Bahamas surrounded by movers and shakers of the Black-British press standing in the aisles, leaning over each other's headrests, sipping the complimentary drinks and gossiping about the festival line-up or juicy industry news. I didn't know a soul except for the photographer accompanying me to take pictures for my pages. I tend to be shy in social situations. My usual strategy is to act self-sufficient and thus disinterested, which can sometimes come across as rude: such as the next morning at the swanky beach-hotel breakfast banquet when a friendly music hack came up and introduced himself to me, and I exited the conversation before it could start. I was worried about how I was going to manage to interview Shaggy, Luciano, Sizzla and Mutabaruka. Thanks to said friendly music hack, who succeeded in breaking through my veneer and went on to give me some schooling on what questions to ask, how to open strong, how to get them talking, I stumbled my way through it and gathered enough material to fill my culture pages. I spent the next two years covering music, movies, TV and books, attending a never-ending slew of album launches, film screenings and press nights, and meeting a plethora of stars in various hotel scenarios. Mariah was my first cover story.

'See this glitter on my nails?' she says, holding out her hands. 'I had eye make-up, like, *all* over my eyes and two sets of lashes. It was, like, a showgirl theme, so I had all these snazzy little outfits, but getting on a Concorde in daylight with gold make-up on isn't really the look you wanna be sporting.' She's telling me about the filming of the video for 'Breakdown', the Bone Thugs-n-Harmony collaboration, which she co-directed, and

which is similar in costuming to the 'Honey' video where she is depicted imprisoned in a San Juan mansion wearing a slinky black chemise and a pair of Gucci stilettos that somehow she manages to run and swim in. When she's escaped her abductors by jumping out of the window into a conveniently positioned swimming pool, there is an underwater striptease ending in a skin-coloured bikini and the Guccis. 'Honey', the first single release off *Butterfly*, went straight in at No. 1 on the US *Billboard* Hot 100, and marked an apparent change in direction for Mariah, from sweet balladeer of weepers such as 'Hero' and 'I Don't Wanna Cry' to something edgier and sexier. 'I'm not Mary Poppins,' she says. 'A lot of people who meet me are, like, *Wow, you seem so different in person!* But even back to my first demos there was always an urban influence in my music. There were songs that should've been on a record but that didn't get on because everybody felt they were too progressive or too urban for where they wanted to take me. I won't just go and make a record and think that suddenly I've morphed into Lil' Kim or Foxy Brown.'

I wasn't a heavy Mariah Carey fan, but I used to listen to two of her songs on repeat, 'Fantasy' and 'Always Be My Baby', while walking along the Havana Malecón on a recent trip to Cuba, and I thought she sang with a most beautiful and affecting passion. I was mostly a reggae head. I liked Sanchez, Maxi Priest, Sizzla, Luciano (whom I was slightly in love with since seeing him live in Nassau where he'd appeared on stage topless, holding a staff, had knelt in the drift of the building background music and said, 'Let us pray'), Anthony B, Donna Marie, Judy Mowatt, Gregory Isaacs, Beres Hammond. I had the vinyl twelve inches of Tony Hearne's cover of 'Like Sister & Brother', 'Move Your Sexy Body' by The Administrators and Don Campbell's 'See It In Your Eyes', the kind of songs they used to play at the Apollo Nightclub in Willesden and during the reggae selection of Roundwood Park all-dayers. I also had a lot of British soul,

funk and pop, such as Soul II Soul, The Brand New Heavies, The Pasadenas, Simply Red, Massive Attack and, from a teenage crush on Marti Pellow, Wet Wet Wet. Then there was the American hip-hop: A Tribe Called Quest (wasn't everyone in love with Q-Tip?), the Fugees, Public Enemy, Arrested Development, Tupac, De La Soul. Some soca, some West African highlife, jazz and Fela Kuti and Mary J. Blige, of course Prince, Earth, Wind & Fire, Madonna, Sam Cooke, Otis Redding, Tracy Chapman, Terry Callier and a little classical. Music was an accompaniment to the living of everyday life. I found it difficult to do anything without music, apart from sleeping and reading, and it was virtually impossible to get ready for a night out in silence. It was surely a dream job, then, to be sent copious amounts of CDs and be obliged to listen to them. At the time, I was living in a flat in Ladbroke Grove, having recently moved there from a shared house on the street where Bob Marley had recorded *Catch a Fire* and parts of *Exodus*. The friendly music hack had moved in with me. We took turns at a corner desk doing our transcriptions, went together to Janet Jackson's *The Velvet Rope* album launch at The Vaults in Waterloo and got the bus home afterwards.

The mid-to-late 1990s was an exciting time for black music. Hip-hop had become the biggest-selling genre on Earth, out-selling rock and topping the mainstream pop charts on a regular basis. With the heady rise and heart-wrenching, bloody demise of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, a kind of biblical and tragic aura had attached itself to rap, alongside the ascending of new hardcore stars like Jay Z, No Limit and DMX whose tunes bass-thumped across the nightclub dancefloors, inside our Walkmans and from our three-tier hi-fi systems. It was when Puffy was not yet Diddy, when digital sampling from yesterday's rhythms became commonplace and we were first acquainted with what would become Beyoncé through the global espousal

of Destiny's Child and hip-hop R&B. In reggae, the slump brought on by lyrical homophobia from the likes of Shabba Ranks and Buju Banton had given way to popular dancehall tracks from a new roster featuring Beenie Man and Sean Paul, plus Sizzla had arrived, with conscious yet militant love tracks like 'Black Woman & Child' and 'Dry Cry'. Meanwhile the UK was experiencing the homegrown explosion of garage, Craig David was on the horizon, the MOBO (Music of Black Origin) Awards was founded in 1996, while major labels were falling over themselves to sign Black-British talent like Glamma Kid, Mark Morrison and Shola Ama. Black music was now pop music – and Mariah Carey, who had been dubbed in some quarters the 'white Whitney' (she is half Venezuelan/African American and half Irish), was thought by some to be 'blackening up' her act with the *Butterfly* album in order to cash in on the shift in perspective on what was commercial. Actually, she was eager to highlight, she had already collaborated with the Wu Tang Clan's Ol' Dirty Bastard on *Fantasy*, so the presence of Puffy, Jermaine Dupri, Walter Afanasieff, The Ummah, Mase, The Trackmasters, Stevie J and Bone Thugs on the new album was not such a departure as people might think. 'Journalists say to me, All the black artists you've collaborated with on this album – how do you know them? Why do you only work with black artists? People will say stuff like that to me, and I'll then have to say, Well, first of all, my father is black, my mother is white, and therefore it's not such a big deal, and it's not like you should even be asking me this question!' One American journalist went so far as to complain, 'I hate it when people have a spit of black in them and they try to act like they're from the ghetto.' She splutters, 'If you want to critique my music or my clothes or my hair, that's fine, but don't try to tell me what my heritage is or how much black I have in me!'"

We are interrupted by Mariah's personal assistant who places

a cup of honey and lemon next to her on the bedside table. Every so often, she lets out a delicate cough. She tells me that she used to smoke but gave it up because she kept losing her voice. 'One time I was really afraid it wasn't gonna come back. And I prayed and I said if I get my voice back I'll never ever smoke again. Got it back, never smoked again.' I get the feeling, as Mariah Carey and I are talking – this is a common sensation when meeting celebrities – that I am a faceless being stripped of my particularities and personality and that she could be talking to anyone. But there is a contrasting notion that she wanted to be interviewed by this magazine specifically, to reach its readers, perhaps gain their sympathy, to adorn its cover as she would the coming February, wearing a black velvet fedora and a halter neck revealing a butterfly tattoo on her back. She talks a little about her pending divorce from Sony mogul Tommy Mottola. 'I didn't ever understand marriage – my parents got divorced when I was so young and I didn't have an example of a happy family.' She talks about her difficult childhood. 'Ever since then, I've had this mechanism of turning things off when they're unpleasant because that's how I got through everything.' Now, though, 'I feel like I'm in a good place. I feel like I'm getting back in touch with myself. I'm an emotional person, and music is like the emotional thread that I'm bound together by.' It's around then that the PA gives another, final reminder – 'Time's up!' – and we say goodbye. Mariah stretches luxuriantly, I get the Tube back to the office in Battersea.

Transcribing took hours. Every 'ah' and 'you know'. There was no digital dictation, hardly even an internet. We are talking battery-operated plastic tape recorders and fax machines. To do a telephone interview you would have to put a bulky plug in the wall and attach the tape recorder to your handset. We were using cassettes made of spools and that shiny brown magnetic

tape wrapped around them. Sometimes the equipment malfunctioned and you might have to summarise memories of conversations. I knew of one journalist who reconstructed a whole article from recollections of entertaining gesticulation, which made up for the lack of quotes. It was a wild west of journalism where people stumbled into jobs because they happened to be in the right place at the right time, had late-night telephone conversations with members of the Fugees, flirty penthouse chats with Sisqo from Dru Hill. The stars were more accessible then, less gated and curated by their press teams and entourages, less media-trained, fan-thanking and ingratiating, which made for interesting copy and fewer manufactured quotes.

To write up my articles, I was using an essay-writing process left over from university, involving a plan and a quote-numbering system. There were some pieces where I got stuck because of boredom, which slowly turned into mental and spiritual pain as I struggled to finish. I was not used to writing in this very public way, around a communal desk, with other people clattering at their keyboards. My first instinct towards any kind of literary form was in the solipsistic direction of poetry, and I found journalism creatively stifling. My sentences weren't allowed to be long enough. I liked more decoration and wordplay, to meander into unpredicted waters and hover in solitude. The reality of the situation, though, was that my hitherto literary hovering had not produced much in terms of concrete matter, only a horde of earnest, disconnected scribbles and terrible poems. At least here I was producing complete segments of prose, which were being published. There were even some days when I would walk out of the *Pride* offices or out of an interview with someone mesmeric and transporting like Cassandra Wilson and feel that I was exactly where I wanted to be in the world. **Copyrighted Material**

The Black-British press was likewise thriving at that time, comprising a host of magazines and newspapers that had come into being as a response to the mainstream media routinely ignoring or misrepresenting black life and culture. The long-standing *The Voice* newspaper was rivalled by the *New Nation*; *Pride* had competitors in *Black Beauty & Hair* and *Woman II Woman* (a *Voice* supplement); on the music scene were *Touch* magazine, *Blues & Soul*, *Echoes*, *Mix Mag*, *Trace* and *True*, a kind of black equivalent to *Dazed & Confused*. These publications spawned an array of talented writers such as Darren Crosdale (who wrote the definitive Mark Morrison feature for *Touch*), Kevin le Gendre (one of the finest non-fiction writers this country has ever produced), Derek A. Bardowell, Jacqueline Springer, Afua Hirsh and Gemma Weekes. We were writing about the things that interested us in a way that was true, accurate, most of all *vital*, and undistorted by trope and stereotype. We were writing against invisibility, against white-centrism and mainstream negation, and many of us were there on that June summer's day at the Africa Centre in Covent Garden when Lauryn Hill was in town to promote her debut solo album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, one of the most anticipated albums and solo career launches in hip-hop history. The press conference was full to the brim. She was eloquent, elegant and calm, in silver bangles, a powerful matte lipstick and a leather coat, her glossy black dreadlocks framing her face. Lauryn Hill was my second cover story.

'Listen, child,' she told me later that week in her dressing room. 'I'm one of those old young people – I feel forty and I'm only twenty-three.' Her eyes were twinkling slits. She was in her first year of motherhood. A national TV star by the age of fifteen, as lead vocalist of the Fugees Hill had already seen multi-platinum album success with *The Score*. Chuck D had dubbed

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her 'the Bob Marley of the twenty-first century', the world was bopping to 'Doo Wop', and this time she was on her own – no Wyclef, no Pras. 'If you don't deliver or produce, it's all your fault,' she said. 'You can't blame anyone else.'

We were sitting on high stools. Today she was wearing a sweatshirt with faded jeans and a pair of platforms. That morning on my way to work I had collided with a bicycle while running for my bus and was still a little headspun, but I didn't feel I could tell Lauryn Hill this unless it came up in a conversation, which it didn't. The basic dynamic of the journalistic interview is that the interviewer reveals nothing about themselves while the interviewee is encouraged to reveal everything. If it had a comparable object, it would be a funnel.

By now I'd drawn up a list of questions to ask celebrities: What is your first memory? Describe the house you grew up in. What is your favourite possession? What is the most important thing to remember in moments of uncertainty? What animal were you in your past life?, to which Lionel Richie answered, over the phone, that he was a bird, which seemed somehow accurate. I'd also learned that flattery is useful. Somewhere near the beginning of the interview, I would deliver some flattery of the album, book or movie that had enabled me to meet this person, and with Lauryn it was a privilege to offer my personal appreciation of *Miseducation*, the rawness of its guitar chords, the brilliance of the beats on 'Lost Ones', the massage to the heart and ear of her rich, muscled and mellow voice.

'Stuff just sort of spilled out,' she said. 'I was able to be in my own head for a moment. I'm not embarrassed to show that I'm vulnerable on a record, because that's the tradition of music that I was raised in. I make music less for perfection and more for emotion.' It showed. Entirely self-produced, she revealed that there were raised eyebrows at her decision to make the album

alone, even though she had by this time produced songs for Aretha Franklin and CeCe Winans. 'We live in a sexist world. People never ask men questions when they choose to self-produce or write anything. But when a woman decides to take charge of her project, people get a little sceptical.' She was similarly miffed about the tendency in the music industry to prioritise making lucrative hits over artistic substance. 'You have performers out there who spend more time marketing themselves than making music, so of course the music is gonna suffer.'

Now she was standing, her arms supporting her on the stool as if she had a bad back, or maybe her shoes were hurting. Every so often she would clomp around a bit, still talking: 'hip-hop. It's like that. It's kinda like a folk music that's for young people and common people who keep it alive, you know. And every time the establishment thinks it's created something different and got its hands around it, it changes, and it changes so quickly.'

Meanwhile her son Zion was waiting at home in South Orange, New Jersey, for his mother's loving arms. There had been some anxiety in naming him thus. Was it too heavy a name to place on a baby? Would it become a burden to him in the future? But no other name quite fit. 'When I think of Zion, I think of the saviour, the salvation, a heavenly place. And he's definitely been my safe place, my salvation from humbler times. My relationships outside of the music industry are so precious to me now. I never want to neglect my family.'

Rohan Marley, Zion's father and son of Bob, was waiting for her in South Orange as well, and whatever happened over the following years and four more kids, she smiled when she spoke of him, of how he'd won her heart. 'For the first time, I didn't have to carry someone. Nor was I made to feel bad for who I was. He took care of me. "Lauryn, how are you? Hey, are you eating? What did you have for breakfast?" He was one of those

phone calls, one of those people who was genuinely concerned about my well-being.'

There were other cover stories, other conversations. I met girl bands and boy bands, neo soul singers and what felt like a hundred rappers. Despite my love of music, despite the supposed privilege of receiving sacks of free CDs, I eventually began to see that there is only so long you can go on listening to R&B singers talking very similarly about the inspiration behind their love songs, or the break-out rhymer's arrival at their beats. After two years, the mental and spiritual pain of those difficult articles was deepening and it was taking longer to get past the blocks. I knew it was time to move on when my telephone interview with Luther Vandross was cut short by his perception of my boredom and my perception of his reluctance to be interviewed. Neither of us could pretend anymore. The funnel collapsed. I followed my predecessor out the door, and drifted into the freelance pool of photographers, would-be poets, aspiring writers and underpaid journalists, observing and rendering the culture as we saw it. I do believe on some profound level that my natural place as a scribe is on the balcony overlooking the spectacle with my fellow observers, the glow of the night lights giving a special kind of access, the distance from the ground expanding our perception of what's at the centre. I belong in that shadowy outer room, set away from the thoroughfare, so that I can see everything clearly. There is community there, one of excitement, intellect and warmth: the outer side of solipsism.

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Earth Calling Wilson

A limp, copper light wafts over a darkened auditorium. The musicians are perched quietly at their instruments, fingers laid lightly on piano keys, sticks for beats in hand, waiting. Even before the feathery entrance of their tranquil, modest 'leader', there is an atmosphere of serenity. Then, when the silence itself has become a kind of overture, Cassandra Wilson treads slowly on stage in a deceptively transparent pink nightie, looking something like a nostalgic flower-power hippie from Mississippi. She could've just that minute before fallen out of bed. Heavy lids and sleepy leans every which way, there's nevertheless a confident nonchalance, reassuring the already mesmerised audience that she will eventually sing. When she opens her mouth, there it is. The pitch-black, deep and haunting voice commanding folk- and blues-flecked jazz accompaniments to walk with its spirit. This voice and transgressive sensibility have confirmed Cassandra Wilson as one of the greatest female jazz vocalists and composers of her time.

'I can go into a zone anywhere, anyplace, anytime.' Wilson speaks like she sings. Long pauses of premeditation, words and syllables dancing randomly down like balloons to the tip of her Southern tongue. Her 'zones' can be difficult places to get to, especially for spectators used to the more conventional features of live performance, such as immediate connection with the audience and a domineering leadership presence. This rustic figure, copper-crowned with thick, heavy locks, often seems so self-absorbed, almost sloppy on stage, there's sometimes a worry that the whole thing might fall apart. In fact, it's as clammy and