

US and UK: Transcript

Today I'm very lucky and very privileged and very excited to have a chat to my lovely friend Rachel, who is connecting with us from the Big Apple. Well, Woodstock, New York, U S of A. Rachel, thank you so much for doing this. It's lovely to see you and to hear you.

Well, I feel like the lucky one, Josiane. And because it's so nice to catch up with you. So thank you for inviting me on. It's crazy that it's taken us so long to catch up, but here we are.

Absolutely. Here we are. Let's make the most of it. So I'm gonna **grill** you a little bit about life in the States. But before we do that. So you you grew up in Scotland, correct?

That's right. Yeah. I grew up in Scotland. From the age of five, actually. I was born in England, but my parents moved to Scotland with work when I was five, and I was there ever after until I became obsessed by Spain at about the age of 14, I think. I started when I started learning it at school, and then at every opportunity from about 16 onwards, I'd convince my parents to let me go and do a language course or a school trip. And, eventually that led me to you.

Well, we met at uni, didn't we? Yeah, we did the same course, but you were like a year below me, I think.

Well, you know what happened... I was... I came to interview at Exeter and you were my connection person. They gave me to you as the experienced student.

Because it was the same course, wasn't it, that we were both going to do, Spanish and Drama.

And I think we were the only two people in living memory to do that combo at that time.

There was one other person in my year, actually, one only.

And then I remember so clearly when I was graduating and sort of thinking, I'd put to the back of my mind like, future, what am I going to do? And then Professor, what was his name, that lovely, Peter Thomson, lovely man. And he called me and he said, Rachel, I've had this letter from Josiane. Do you remember Josiane? And you were basically saying, is Rachel graduating? Does she want a job?

That's right. God I'd forgotten it worked like that. I'd forgotten how it kind of developed. But yeah, because I'd come out to Spain to work and yeah, we were looking for another actress.

So the timing could not have been better from my point of view. It was excellent. It meant that I didn't have to answer that What am I going to do with the rest of my life question. For at least another couple of years.

And then we lived together for a while when you were out in Spain. Did you experience any culture shock when you came to Spain? I mean, obviously you said, you know, you'd done courses beforehand. You'd become a bit more acclimatized. It wasn't the first time.

It wasn't the first time. It was the first time I properly had to **fend for myself**, I suppose. Is that fair? Um, no, because I'd done a year. I'd actually done a year's teaching English in Sevilla. But as part of my university course. So I'd had a bit of, quite a lot of experience by then, but honestly, I don't think there's any culture shock really, because I just loved everything about Spain at that point. I was so happy to be there. It was so different, I think, to everything I'd grown up with in terms of just the culture, you know, the eating hours, the socialising hours, the sort of happy go lucky attitude to life. And it was just so refreshing and so exactly what I needed right then. I was just really happy and embraced all of it, I think.

Yeah, we had some good times.

We did, we did. I think I definitely had some culture shock when I first went over, but I was quite a bit younger then. Maybe I was like maybe 16, I think when I did my first sort of trip and also, I barely spoke Spanish at that point. I know. I had signed up for this course, and I was staying with this older lady by myself and she, you know, rented out rooms in her flat. And, it was all... she was highly suspicious of me. I think she just thought, what kind of parent will send a 16 year old girl to live by herself in a foreign country? And so who is this child who's living by herself? And her telephone had a padlock on it, I remember that I wasn't allowed to use her telephone. And that I almost burst into tears when I saw that I was like, oh, how am I going to call home? She was the classic, you know, older lady in her housecoat and slippers with her curlers and her hair. There was a slightly telenovela thing about her which I enjoyed at the time. But so it was a steep learning curve, I think, getting used to the hours. But once I'd got got with the program was pretty **smooth sailing**.

Yeah. Take everything in your stride and just, enjoy the experience.

Absolutely.

And now you've ended up in New York. So, what happened there, Rachel? What took you there, first of all, and, you know, how did you feel about about going before you went?

So Graham, my husband and I, had been married for about a year. We were living in London. I was working as a journalist at the time. I was freelance for the BBC. So I felt, you know, like, I could pretty much pick up and do that anywhere. He was working for a big financial investment firm, and he was, we were both like, well, we're young. We don't need to just stick around and do this because it's what we're doing. What do we... where do we want to be? Well, and so we thought, let's travel the world. And we went to the Canadian embassy and the Australian Embassy to look at emigration instructions and things. What could we do? And we thought we would just **up sticks** and go for a while. And I was going to pick up... we thought we'll need skills to **fall back on** in case we can't get work. So I was going to become a masseuse. Why are you laughing?

No, I'm not sorry. Carry on.

And I can't, I think Graham was going to become a dive master.

A dive master?

Yeah, he was really into scuba diving. I'll become a dive master. And then I can basically do that. And I'll be doing massages off the boat. And then we were looking at Canada as a... I don't think

you want to go scuba diving of Canada, so very clearly. So anyway, we had all these plans, and I think his boss **got wind of** the fact that Graham had **itchy feet** and they wanted to hold on to Graham. And so they said, we have a job opening up in New York. Any interest? And so it was sort of, it was a way of traveling and doing something different without having to, you know, sever all our ties and start over. I had never wanted, New York had never been on my list of places to visit, even, let alone live. I'm not a big shopper. And coming from the UK, that was basically all anyone seemed to go to New York to do. Take a spare suitcase and go shopping, and that just held so little interest for me. Anyway, I was up for the adventure. I was able to switch my freelance BBC work over to America. Fine. Which was great. And so we landed, mid September 2004. And honestly, **my eyes were out on stalks**. It all felt so new and exciting, glamorous and fun. And I was so surprised by New York. So I hadn't, you know, obviously we've all seen movies and you know what New York looks like. But it's only when you get there you sort of, just the vibrancy of it and the energy. It's so real. And it was just so exciting to me. You know we were in our late 20s and you know both working, carefree and just... actually I wasn't working for the first three months. I spent that time waiting for my working papers to come in just **walking the street**.

That sounds a bit bad.

I almost said and picking up odd jobs along the way. I didn't **fall on hard times**. It's all right. But it was great. And, so the differences, though. Things I hadn't **reckoned on** were, I mean, portion sizes. Oh my goodness. Because we were eating out a lot at that point because it was really cheap to eat out back then. And, you know, just two of us in the flat, and it was a small flat. It was nicer to eat out as well. But we hadn't realized that it's a **doggy bag culture**. I don't know, but so most people would, you know, eat half their plate and then take the rest home to have tomorrow. But no, Graham and Rachel just plough their way through the entire amount of... So quite funny. But it was great. We were both really excited to come.

Did you see it like, as a permanent thing, or did you see it as a temporary thing because it's different, isn't it? I mean, I came out to work here in Spain. I came out to work for a year, you know, and like 25 years later, I'm still here.

Right. Well, I think you see how it happens, right? We came over for two years. What actually happened was, the first two years flew by. Third year we really settled in. And then the fourth year we had a baby. And I really said, look, I really would like to, I don't want to have American kids. I want to be mum with a "u" not with an "o". And I just, you know, I do. I miss family, and I'd love for the grandparents to be more, you know, more involved with all of that. So anyway, Graham managed to have his work kind of, he convinced work to send him back to the London office at the end of the year. But over the course of that year, I basically changed my mind. And I was like, you know, I actually, now that I've had the baby and I've made mum friends, and I see how easy it is to have a small child in New York City and how everything works. And it's everything's **at your fingertips**. It's really easy to get around. I think I could do this. And so he started interviewing for jobs and they said, okay, just hang on. Don't, don't quit because we need to get your visa sorted before we can give you this job. And then it turned out that the visa allocations for that year had run out. There weren't any visas. So they said, we can't give you the job, so we end up going back to London for a year. So it's a really **long-winded** way of saying we then had this year back in London, which was so interesting to properly really think about: Do we want to be back in the UK, or would we rather be back in America because he had this job offer for the following year's visa cycle, and we both were adamant we wanted to go back. And I had this really honest conversation with my

mum, I remember because she obviously was delighted that we'd come back with a baby and, you know, were going to be based in the UK. And so when I told her, you know, that we were going to head back to New York and she just, you know, obviously she was sad, but she was so supportive and so understood exactly why, you know, our life was just much better in New York and, and easier somehow. And, there was just more opportunity for us here. And I think that really helped **lay a lot of my demons to rest** in terms of settling over here. I felt like, no, it's right. I can do this. The person who was not so understanding was my boss in London, who, at the BBC I was working, at Radio Four on Woman's Hour, which was a job I'd really wanted. And I'd worked for them before we'd gone out and had worked for them, and then I managed to kind of claw my way back in just by pester, pester, pester tactics and...

And then left.

Literally. I was there for about three weeks, and she let me in and, you know, and I was working really hard. And I said, okay, so here's the thing. I'm pregnant again. I was with the second child and, I'm going back to America. Basically, I was dead to her after that. I never worked for them again.

But it's okay, it's okay. Thinking of your girls. Do they have American accents or do they speak...

Yeah, they are properly American. They, you know, it's definitely mom, with an "o". And, it's funny, though, because they have both said friends say that they sound British when they're angry. I don't know whether that's because I'm angry. It's the language of anger or something, I don't know what it is. But they both, when they, I suppose when they want to make a point, perhaps they just go British for emphasis, I don't know. But I had a funny moment recently where my eldest was working abroad in Europe, and, I went to visit and she, and all her friends were sort of a mix of British and Irish and, I went and introduced myself. And they were all so surprised that I had a British accent. They just assumed that I was American.

It's fake. It's fake. She's faking it. She's trying to be like us.

She just wants to fit in.

Yeah. You haven't picked up a **twang** at all, actually. My sister, who lives in New Zealand. You can hear the twang. Well, both of my sisters, you can hear they've picked up some of the New Zealand sound. I mean, not full, full on Kiwi, but...

I think there's something to do with those Antipodean accents. They're easier to slide into. I think because I remember I've noticed it before with British friends who've moved or even just spent, you know, a summer in Australia or New Zealand would pick up a twang, which just doesn't happen so quickly in America. It could also be something to do with, you know, wanting to hold on to a British accent in America in a way that you don't want to... in the former colonies. You know, when we arrived... this has changed a bit, actually, but when we arrived, the British accent still kind of earned you a bit of, kind of, you know, status, but doesn't at all anymore.

Right. Because it's that kind of stereotype, isn't it, that American people love the British accent?

Yeah.

But you're saying it's not the case now?

Not on the coasts.

Unless you're a famous actor.

Yeah, exactly. Every now and then, I'll be on the telephone to a call centre or something, which would be in the South. And it's happened to me a few times where somebody with this kind of treacly southern accent, which I love, and I'm there kind of smiling away, listening to it, and they'll suddenly say, oh, gee, I love your accent, and go really big on it. And it reminds me that I haven't heard it for a long time. So I think just people who maybe aren't exposed to it as much still find it exotic.

Hold on to that.

Exactly.

It's really interesting. It's so much fun talking to you, but it's actually really interesting what you're saying. You know, you said it's very kind of easy to...your life is easier. Your life is, is better kind of in New York than maybe it would have been in London. Is that just to do with, you know, that it's easy to get around like public transport, those types of things? But is there anything kind of particular about that? The difference?

Well, I think New York versus London. For starters, you know, Manhattan is this island, and everything's so vertical famously. You know, there's a lot... it's very dense, whereas London is so much more spread out. And I used to, that year that we went back and I had, you know, small baby in New York and then small baby in London. It was a really good compare and contrast. For example, like when you have a small child, you're always trying, oh, how am I going to spend the day? How am I going to fill these endless hours? And not go crazy. And in New York, I could easily plan three different things for sort of, you know, morning, afternoon or evening, whatever. I plan to be in three different parts of town during the day just because everything's so much closer and more accessible, whereas in London I'd plan one thing. It just seems much easier and it's, you know, again not so true now, but New York was much more affordable than central London back then. That certainly was part of the appeal that it was just, you know, you didn't think twice about eating out if you had a job, you know, it was just really nice.

Okay. So what about, I have a little question, which I've always wondered about. Can you see the influence of Spanish on American English? Because you know the spelling, for example. They don't spell things like color. The word color is spelt without the U in American English. Correct? And I've always thought that must be from like, the Spanish influence. But I don't know if that's true. I mean, do you notice anything like that where you are?

I never thought about that spelling issue as being anything to do with Spanish. I don't know where that comes from. To be honest with you, Spanish is spoken everywhere, so I don't feel like the English language has been changed because you're either speaking English or you're speaking Spanish. Now I may be missing... So there hasn't had to be a sort of blending. No, I mean you get sort of the bodega for example, which is you know, in different parts of town a deli is a deli. Or if you go to a more Hispanic neighborhood it'll be a bodega. You know people do still find it hard to

hear what I'm saying sometimes because of my accent. The one that people struggle with always is water. If I ask for some water I have to really say, please, may I have some water? Yeah. I can't say water. That does not compute.

Are there other words like that or phrases where maybe, I don't know, maybe you use a really... we don't necessarily know this, but you use an expression which is actually really only a British expression.

Bits and bobs or, you know, silly little things like that'll slip into conversation. Don't think bits and bobs is one, but it's, you know, I'll say something that might make everyone stop and stare. And what still **tickles me**, actually, after all this time, I can do that.

But does it work the other way around? Are there expressions that I mean, you've been there for many years now, but are there expressions that you hear and you go, hey, what? What are you trying to say? Maybe at the beginning.

No, not anymore. I mean, there's still things where I think, what on earth are you eating? Why would anyone in their right mind put marshmallows on sweet potatoes and call that a side dish? But that's not really a linguistic quirk. No. Honestly, my own ear has, has sort of fused now so that it comes in as American and kind of comes out as English without me noticing.

It might also be to do with the fact that maybe the influence of like American TV shows or films, you know, we've been immersed in that all our lives. And maybe the opposite is not as true. So like, Americans may not have seen as many British, let's say, shows, as we have of American shows. And so there are expressions that maybe you don't really know, but you know you've heard it and you can put it in context because you've just assimilated it from watching so much American TV.

I think that's right. But there are a lot of people who have... Do you have BritBox in Spain? A TV thing. I don't actually have it, but a lot of people, you know, subscribe to BritBox where you can watch Bergerac and Miss Marple and all these things

You don't kind of hear the colloquialisms there, do you?

No, but it does mean people are possibly more aware of what British sounds like, British English sounds like.

What about, dialects or slang or those types of things or accents? Have you had any, like, difficulties or are there any anecdotes where, you know, where there's been that kind of breakdown in communication?

Honestly, the only one that really has stayed with me for a long time was actually from when we moved to Scotland when I was five and I spoke a five-year-old version of how I speak now, which is not very Scottish at all. And, I came back from ballet class and my mother said, and what did you do today? And I said, well, today we did our Aram exercises, and this has just stayed in my family kind of stories ever since. And mum was like, Aram, what are Aram exercises? Is Aram a place, is Aram a person? And no, it was my arams, my arms, my arms, my arm exercises. But I haven't had anything like that for a while.

But you understand your kids, though

I do, I do. Definitely **dial it down**. Dial down the American for me at home. And then I think it's, you know, they have a bit of code-switching ability so they can, when we go back to the UK and see family, they become more and more British. And then they revert back to their American selves.

Yeah. That happens a lot. Doesn't it? It's funny. No. It's interesting. Just thinking of, you know, it's a whole new life, you know? And obviously they know, your kids, you know, know your family, but, they've only ever lived where you are now. They've only ever lived in New York. So it's like, completely different from your upbringing.

Completely different. And we've had some awkward moments when they were little, you know, because if you live in a big high rise tower in New York, there's usually, you know, there's an elevator and you go up to the fourth floor...

A what?

I did it, didn't I? Without even thinking

You did. For those of you who don't know, Rachel was talking about a lift.

Quite a sweet moment with one of my kids when they were little. And she used to call it the alligator. Like, not even realizing. So we didn't correct her on that.

And it's become known as that ever since.

Yeah, exactly. But, you know, and you get used to having... there'll be a team in the building who fix stuff. You know, there's a superintendent. And there's people who do stuff. So if, you know, a light bulb breaks and it runs out, you need a new one, you just call downstairs and they bring you a light bulb. It's a very convenient way to live. But, you know, it doesn't translate so well when you go back home to Granny in Scotland and the light bulb goes out and your entitled, little six-year-old says, why has she gone to get a light bulb? Where's she going to get...? Why doesn't she just call for the man to come.

Oh, bless. So, what about some some words? I've got some words here which are words which exist in American English and in British English, but they are understood differently. They mean something different. Okay. So I'm going to tell you the word and you can tell me what the two different meanings are. It's very easy.

Okay. Let's see if I get this right.

It's very easy, I'm sure. I'll cut saying it's very easy if you get it wrong, by the way.
Vest.

Vest. So this would be, so a little undershirt. Undergarments. In America it would be known as a wife beater. Did you know that?

Oh, yes, I have heard that.

Yeah. Charming. In America... So a vest to Americans is what Marty McFly was wearing in Back to the Future.

It does have a name, doesn't it?

Yeah. The life preserver. What are they called? Don't know why I got onto Back to the Future on this.

Are you thinking of a life jacket? They call that a life vest, don't they?

A life vest. And what's it called? Like a waistcoat. Like an armless... Waistcoat. Oh my gosh!

A waistcoat. Not an armless coat. This might be harder than we expected. Do you want another one?

No. Go on. See if I can humiliate myself.

Purse.

Purse. In America, a purse is a handbag. And in the UK, a purse is a wallet for ladies. Have I got it wrong again?

It's the way you said wallet.

I've got my Irish grandma in my head who basically had an English accent. By the time she was in her 80s. But the one word that had stayed Irish was waistcoat. So I think that was in my head when I said wallet.

Well, I would say a wallet is something for keeping your notes in, and a purse would be for keeping your coins in British English.

Yes. But sometimes isn't it a giant thing that just has everything in it? Your purse. It has your coins and your paper money and your cards.

I don't know, I would call the one with your cards and your... I would call that a wallet. I would only call a purse one for, you know, coins.

With the little snap.

Yes, I was just thinking of that! Yeah, yeah. I don't know. Neither of us know. Okay. All right. What about another one? Oh, gosh. This is going to confuse the heck out of us.

Chips.

Chips. TV show from the early 80s.

True.

Okay. Chips. Oh, right. There are potatoes involved on both sides of the pond. Or potatoes as we might like to say.

Who would like to say that?

No one. No. I'm sorry. British chips are American French fries. And British crisps are American potato chips. Oh, God, that was hard.

That one is confusing. But they're all crispy. OK. This one... I mean, I may be a bit off on this next one, but I think I can tell the difference. Athlete.

Athlete. Oh, okay. In America athlete is a general term, for any sports person. And in the UK an athlete is track and field as Americans would say.

Yeah that's how I understand it.

Oh you almost had me, a blank, there.

Yeah. That's right, isn't it? Yeah. Okay. And one more. Pissed.

Okay. Angry or drunk. Angry in America. Drunk in the UK.

But curiously, angry in the UK...

Pissed off? That is curious, isn't it? I don't... I mean, how that great division of...

Well, the drunk one, I think comes from urination. But I don't know where the angry one comes from.

How does... it's like a really back to front way of... Like you need a piss. Therefore you are pissed. No. You either have pissed or are pissing. But how did it come to? I don't know.

I don't know either.

And I think American pissed is just truncated pissed off

Well, probably.

Maybe.

Don't know. We're totally ignorant.

Yeah. I'm sorry I haven't been able to **shed any useful light** on it.

No no, no. That's good, it's good. So just to finish off, I'm asking everybody for, like, a recommendation of, a book or a film or a series or something related to what we're talking about. And, I found it quite difficult to come up with something, so I've cheated a little bit. I don't know if you have one.

I did, I used to have somebody who I thought was great at this. You know, and I'm talking maybe 15 years ago, I think, because when I last actually read a Bill Bryson book. I really enjoyed his American take on life in Britain. And he was just kind of an amusing writer. But when I went back to listen to him this week, I just, the book was of its time and the time's not now. I didn't find it quite such a strong recommendation.

What did you find?

Well, it's not really a recommendation. It's not really about the kind of the take of the British and American English. The only thing I could think of was The Office.

Oh, right. That is such a good comparison.

So it's not one thing talking about British and American cultures. It's an American version and a British version.

Which very clearly highlights the different sense of humor. Yeah I think you've **nailed it** with that. America does the sort of cosy chuckle really well. Really well. And The Office, the American Office is really funny but Ricky Gervais' Office, Oh my goodness.

It's, the American office... I mean, I enjoyed both but there's... I'm not entirely sure what you mean by the cosy chuckle, but if I'm interpreting you correctly, the British Office is much more uncomfortable to watch.

Oh it's excruciating. It's really bleak. And you know you sort of feel both... you know, you feel sorry for him but also horrified and just absolutely outraged. Whereas, you know Michael Scott at Dunder Mifflin is just a tragic character, but hilarious and sort of, you know, just very different, isn't it? And I think what I mean by cosy chuckle, there's very little darkness. Whereas I feel the depths of darkness in British humour is pretty deep. Quite a core part of British humour, actually, is that ability to go dark really quickly and kind of bounce back and be like...

Would you, **throw your cap into the ring** and say which you preferred or would you rather not?

I didn't want to like the American version when it came out, but it was so different, honestly, it was...

Yeah. I mean, the first episode was pretty much word for word, wasn't it? I think.

Right. But as the series progressed, I mean, it went on and on, for one thing, and all the characters kind of became such a part of daily conversations over here. I don't know... I think the British one was so groundbreaking and so different. I like them both in different ways.

It's hard isn't it? I think I would probably still go with, Gervais.

Yeah. I mean I don't want to take that title of Best Office away from him because it was his idea.

Yeah. But I thoroughly enjoyed the American version as well, it has to be said.

Well thank you so much Rachel. It's been fantastic. I've laughed so much. It's been wonderful to see you and chat to you and all of the stuff that you've told us about, about life in the Big Apple is just eye-opening. So thank you so much. It's been great.

I've loved chatting. Really, really fun to catch up.

Great. Well, hopefully see you soon. And you're welcome back on the podcast anytime. Thanks so much. Bye.

Thank you. Bye.