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An English Boy in New York

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Tuesday 16th April

Haven't been able to write for a while. After the excitement of the Knitting Championships, I've been spending the last few weeks trying to catch up with my studies. I've also had a number of orders for the Hoopie off the internet and been spending a lot of time with my girlfriend, Megan. Or trying to. In fact, we're currently struggling with some serious scheduling issues. A week ago I forced her to spend an hour or so sitting opposite me so that we could coordinate our movements.

'Right, let's get our diaries out,' I said.

Megan looked blank. 'Who has a diary these days?' she said. 'I just use my phone for that kind of thing.'

'But what if your phone runs out of battery?' I asked, shaking my head in disapproval.

'I'll charge it.'

'What if Lloyd Manning throws it in Hampton reservoir?'

'He only does that to *your* phone,' she pointed out.

Eventually we managed to sort out some dates to see each other. After some heavy compromise on my part, mind. I'll tell

you what, Megan's a tough negotiator. It's like the Americans and the Iranians discussing the decommissioning of chemical weapons.

And being of the female species, she reserves the right to completely ignore all arrangements and just do what the hell she likes. As I found out a couple of days later.

'I thought we were seeing each other tomorrow?' I said as she kissed me on the cheek.

'I wanted to see you today,' she replied, smiling sweetly. 'Don't you want to see me?'

'It's not that,' I said. 'I like seeing you very much. Just . . . I prefer having an arrangement in place first.'

She gives me a look at that point and I have to pretend like I'm joking. But I am deadly serious. Nothing is more unsettling to me than spontaneity.

Plus, it is playing havoc with my knitting. How am I supposed to fill my Hoopie orders when young girls are floating around my room looking pretty and opening drawers and finding magazines and accidentally breaking bits off the ziggurat?

So. It's a work in progress. The relationship, I mean. The ziggurat's finished.

In other news, Mum's in trouble with the Magic Circle. They sent her a stern letter which I said they should have sent by owl if they're serious about the whole magic thing. She's under investigation for allegedly revealing details of a magic trick on Twitter. They reprinted the offending tweet.

@dcopperfield Thanks for wonderful new show last night. Amazing spectacle all thanks to mirror.

Which, admittedly, reads like she's suggesting that @dcopperfield was using a mirror to trick people rather than using actual magic. In reality Mum just forgot to type an @. She meant to write . . . *all thanks to @mirror* because she won the tickets through a competition in the *Daily Mirror*. Clear misunderstanding but it's started a bit of a Twitter storm, at least within the stage magician community.

Dad, meanwhile, is bereft at Frank Lampard's retirement from Chelsea.

'He's still in the England squad,' I pointed out.

'He never scores for England,' Dad said miserably.

I resisted stating the obvious, because ever since since I came out as a knitter, Dad's been making a real effort to be more supportive and embrace me as his only son. This means bonding activities such as marathon DVD evenings. My fault really, I made the mistake of telling Dad I'd hadn't completely hated watching *Band of Brothers* with him. So now he's bought the first two series of *Homeland*, which quite honestly might as well be the same three episodes playing over and over again as far as I'm concerned. I tend to switch off after the fifteen-minute opening credits with extended trumpet solo.

Spies, soldiers and trumpet music leave me cold. Surprisingly, I'd rather watch programmes about gangsters with saxophones. How's that for subverting the male knitter stereotype? But Dad's just not interested. It's hard to find common ground with a man who didn't like *The Sopranos*.

Wednesday 17th April

Just had the most boring discussion about the family holiday this year. But since neither I nor my sister Molly have any say whatsoever in what we do or where we go, I don't see why my parents even bother pretending to 'discuss' it with us.

The upshot of this 'discussion' is that we can't afford a proper holiday, so we're going hiking in Snowdonia next week with Dad's friends from the Camper Van Society. Yep. That's pretty much as dire as it sounds. I don't mind group holidays when we go camping in the summer, with Mum's friends. They're all lovely and put up bunting and know how to cook and the dads are funny and patient and Mum's friend Gina's daughter Pippa is rather pretty and wears tiny bikinis.

But we're not going camping with Mum's friends in July, we're hiking with Dad's friends in April. Dad's friends smoke cigars and drink cheap Pilsner lager and his friend Pete, who works for Royal Mail, is way too shouty and tells dodgy Islamophobic jokes. But the worst thing is that they all have sons around my age who do nothing but play aggressive games of football around the campsite and knock down other people's washing lines. Not my style, but I can hardly just sit in the van and knit. Can I?

Things could be better round here.

18th April

Things are looking up.

A huge parcel arrived today from KnitFair USA, which is

only the biggest and best knitting fair on the PLANET. And with it, a letter from someone named Brandi.

Dear Ben,

Congratulations on winning the English Knitting Competition. We're so excited to be welcoming you to this year's KnitFair USA.

My name is Brandi DeLacourt and I am a PR executive for the Knitting Guild Association of America. We're handling the PR for this year's KnitFair USA and I'm thrilled that you'll be one of my clients. There's already a lot of interest in you because it's quite unusual for young men to be involved in knitting. I've seen the articles in the UK press about your amazing success. If it's OK with you, I'll be arranging some interviews with interested media here in NYC. Please sign the release form and send it back if you're happy about doing a few interviews and events.

Please find enclosed two Executive Club class tickets to New York. You'll be landing at JFK Airport. JFK are the initials of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, one of our famous presidents from history. I've arranged hotel accommodation for you for a week. Please email to let me know whether you want a twin, double or two singles for you and your companion. The fair itself runs

from Friday 17th May to Sun 19th May so you and your friend have a few days beforehand for sightseeing and hopefully some interviews.

New York can be an intimidating place for visitors but don't worry, I will meet you at the airport and take you to your hotel. I've enclosed a programme guide for the fair so you can plan which demonstrations, lectures, forums and so on you'd like to attend. We're proud to be unveiling the new KnitMaster 3000 knitting machine on the 19th, so that demonstration should definitely be in your schedule!

Please find enclosed tickets for you and your companion as well as four extra tickets you can give away on your blog.

I'm really looking forward to meeting you, Ben. Please do email me at the address below if you have any questions.

Yours,

Brandi DeLacourt
Knitting Guild Association of America
4th Floor
1276 5th Avenue
New York, NY
delacourtb@knitfair.com

Oh no. What a *disaster*! I won't be able to go hiking with Dad's friends, after all! No charred sausages. No stand-up rows between Mum and Pete, the Islamophobic postman. No bruised shins from pretending to enjoy playing football. No having to hide knitting in my sleeping bag.

Instead, I'll have to fly Executive Club class to New York with Megan Hooper, be forced to shop for wool in Bloomingdale's, be press-ganged into romantic walks through Central Park, and get force-fed Philly cheesesteak sandwiches and veal Parmesan. What a terrible, terrible blow.

6.34pm

'But we've had this trip booked for months!' Dad said, looking so desolate I nearly felt bad.

'It's SUCH terrible timing,' I agreed, shaking my head sadly.

'I'm really pleased for you,' Mum said. 'You'll have a great time. I'm a bit gutted you're going to leave me to face Islamophobic Pete on my own . . .'

'Shouty Pete, you mean,' Dad said. 'He's not Islamophobic. Not since the post office made him go on that awareness course.'

'Whatever,' Mum said. 'Frankly, I'm not sure I want to go hiking at all now. I was relying on Ben as my one source of intelligent company.'

'Thanks very much,' said Dad.

'Are you taking Megan with you?' Mum went on, regardless.

I nodded. 'That's the idea.'

She raised an eyebrow.

'You two haven't been . . . alone together . . . much,' she said slowly.

'We've been alone together,' I said.

'Not . . . *properly* alone, is what I mean,' she said. 'Have you?'

Oh. My. God.

'We've been alone together plenty, thank you very much,' I said quickly. 'I haven't had any complaints about our alone-time frequency. Or length.'

'OK. But you've never . . . flown all the way across the Atlantic with a girl before, have you?'

'No.'

'I thought not,' she said, nodding.

'Hang on,' I said. 'What do you mean?'

'I just want you to know, that if you have any questions about anything . . . in that area, then you can come to me any time.'

I was so horrified I forgot how to speak. I just shook my head vigorously.

'Or you could talk to your father, if you'd be more comfortable doing that?'

'No,' I said, finding a small voice. 'I don't think I would. I'll handle it on my own. Thanks.'

'Pleased to hear it,' she said. 'Just, take things easy, won't you? It takes a while to get the hang of . . . long-haul flights.'

I smiled weakly and fled. She is so embarrassing.

Friday 19th April

10.00am

I just got off the phone with Joz. The electricity in his house

keeps going off for no reason, which means he keeps missing the end of programmes. He missed the last ten minutes of the new series of *Homeland* last night which he knows I am obliged to watch with Dad. Joz had phoned to see if I could fill him in. I don't think I was much help. I knitted through the last episode and may have missed some crucial plot twists. Also, I can never remember the names of the characters, or the names of the actors for that matter, just the films they used to be in.

'So the guy from *The Princess Bride* . . .' I began.

'Who?'

'The guy with the beard.'

'Saul?'

'Yeah, I think so. Anyway, he's talking to the girl from *Romeo and Juliet*.'

'What? Who?'

'You know. Her from *My So-Called Life*. Except now she's really old.'

'You mean Carrie?'

'Yeah. That's it, Carrie. So she's talking to the guy from *The Princess Bride*, when the bloke from *Band of Brothers* comes in.'

'Eh?'

'You know, Major Thingie, the ginger bloke.'

'Brodie?'

'Is that his name? Except now he's bald. The guy who was blown up by an IUD.'

'You mean an IED?'

'Is there a difference?' I asked impatiently.

'One's a bomb,' he said. 'And the other is a contraceptive

device.'

'Sorry, I get confused by military terms. And contraceptive terms, for that matter.'

'Quite an important difference though.'

'Yeah.'

'Oh, look, forget it,' he said. 'I'll just look it up online.'

'But what if the power goes off again?'

'Dammit!' he said.

'Maybe you should get an electrician around,' I suggested.

'Southerly Electricity have been around three times but can't find anything wrong,' he said. 'I reckon they think we're making it up.'

'Why would you make up something like that?'

'I know! Anyway, whenever they come around everything's working fine. But this morning it went off again and we couldn't make toast and the power shower wouldn't work, and Dad couldn't iron his shirt. We've got an electric loo upstairs and that wouldn't flush.'

'What about keeping a log?' I said.

'It was the log I needed to flush, he replied. 'Why would I want to keep it?'

'I mean keep a diary, you knobber, detailing what times it goes off. Then you can compare it to your electricity usage and prove there's a problem.'

'You're a genius, Ben,' he said.

'It's been said before,' I admitted.

Saturday 20th April

12.54pm

So I prepared it all so carefully. I wore a fedora and Dad's braces over a white singlet. I stuck a toothpick in my mouth and waited for Megan to arrive.

'Hey, doll,' I said when she finally turned up, late. She was looking hot in her green Waitrose uniform. I offered her an opened pack of Oreos.

'Hello,' she replied, eyeing me and the Oreos suspiciously.

'You and me, doll,' I said. 'Walking by the Hudson. Taking in a Broadway show. Drinking a highball at Joe's Bar, riding the B train home afterwards, handing a greenback to a kindly bum. How about it?'

'What on earth are you talking about?' she asked, sitting down at the kitchen table. She looked a bit dark under the eyes.

I slapped the tickets down on the table. 'We're going to New York, baby. That's what I'm talking about.'

Megan opened the ticket and stared at it. She didn't look quite as excited as I'd expected.

'Executive Club class,' I pointed out. 'Extra leg room. Real metal cutlery. Attentive flight attendants.'

'Wow, Ben,' she said. 'This is amazing.'

'And of course there's free entry to the KnitFair for all three days,' I pointed out eagerly.

'Mmmm,' she said. 'Brilliant.'

'You don't sound as enthusiastic as I'd hoped,' I said.

She paused for a moment.

'It's just that things are tough at the moment. At home,' she

said. 'Gran's really not well and Mum needs me . . .'

'It's only a week,' I said gently. 'Your mum would understand that, wouldn't she?'

Megan looked up at me and forced a smile. 'It's not that simple, but thank you for asking me, Ben. It's amazingly generous.'

'But . . .'

She shrugged. 'I'm not sure I'd be very good company anyway. I'd be worrying about Gran, and Mum.'

My heart sank. Was she saying no? How could she say no to this?

'Look, don't say no just now,' I said quickly. 'See how things go over the next few days. Talk to your mum about it. Think things over. Please?'

I must have sounded a bit desperate, because she nodded and said she'd think about it. I've felt a bit flat since then. I'm torn between sympathising with Megan about her gran, but at the same time I can't help wondering if she's using this as an excuse. Maybe she just doesn't want to go away with me?

Sunday 21st April

Megan texted me this morning and said she won't be coming to New York. I'm too bummed to write about it just now. I'm focusing on possible replacements instead. Here's the list so far, in order of preference.

Jessica Swallow
Joz

Freddie
Mum
Mrs Frensham
Joe Boyle
Natasha
Gex

Feel a bit bad about Gex but can you imagine him being let loose in New York? Guns are practically compulsory there. Gex is obsessed with guns. He's taken to carrying around a replica Browning 45mm (which is actually a water pistol. He has loads of water pistols). I had a bad dream last night, in which I was driving over the Brooklyn Bridge pursued by a thousand cop cars, sirens ablaze, with Gex in the passenger seat, hanging out of the window and firing at the cop convoy with his Super-Sopper Aqua Blaster.

So, all things considered, Gex is bottom of the list.

But I can't *really* ask Jessica Swallow to go with me, can I?

Then again, it would solve the issue around taking another student with me. I could tell her I need to be accompanied by a responsible adult and that my parents are unavailable, or dead, or something, and that she's my only option and did I mention Executive Club? Hang on. What am I thinking? I have a girlfriend who, even though she's let me down, is a bit miserable at the mo. Also Jessica Swallow is happily back together with Hampton FC legend Joe Boyle. If I tear their relationship apart, then Joe's form on the pitch will suffer again and Hampton FC will definitely be relegated this year. I can't have that on my conscience.

I crossed Jessica Swallow firmly off the list with a marker pen. I'll talk to Joz tomorrow.

9.13pm

I caught Mum and Dad playing Rude Scrabble on the iPad this evening. They denied it but I know what they're up to. They've adjusted the settings so they get fifty bonus points by putting down swear words. I won't go into details because this is a diary that will be read by my probation officer, but needless to say Dad was delighted when mum put *SHAFT* near a triple-word score because he happened to have two *C*s, a *K* and a blank.

I've made them delete all the rude words they added to the dictionary.

'I play Scrabble with Molly sometimes,' I pointed out to Mum. 'I don't want her pressing the Hint button and having it suggest she adds *J*-O-*B* to the word *HAND*.'

Mum looked a bit sheepish then, and she promised she wouldn't do it again, but Dad was cracking up in the kitchen, so I don't trust them one iota.

'It looks like Megan can't come to New York,' I said as Dad came back in, breathing weirdly and with a red face.

'Have you broken up already?' Mum asked, a bit too quickly. I looked at her in hurt surprise.

'No,' I said. 'But thanks for immediately jumping to that conclusion. '

'So why isn't she going?' Dad asked.

I explained about her gran, that she hadn't been well for a while and in any case thought my name was Simon. I didn't

say that I thought it was a poor excuse but maybe they picked it up from my tone.

'When I get old,' Dad said. 'Put me on a flight to Switzerland. I don't want to be a burden to anyone.' He says things like this a lot. But I suspect when it comes to the crunch Molly and I won't be able to prise his fingers away from the boarding gate at Heathrow.

'I've changed my mind,' he'll squeal. 'I don't want to go with dignity.'

I'll have to get something in writing.

I'm joking.

Monday 22nd April

You know how in fly-on-the-wall documentaries the producers often have to inject some artificial tension into the story? They might be filming some B-list celeb learning how to do something for the first time, like baking a cake, or recording a song, or performing open-heart surgery and there'll be a phone call they're nervously waiting for where they find out if the cake rose, or the song got to number one, or the patient survived.

> 'This is the big moment,' the voice-over person (usually Dermot O'Leary) will say. 'If things have gone badly, it could mean the end of (insert B-list celeb's name here)'s career in baking/singing/cardio surgery.'

Well, my whole life is like that. A series of moderately dramatic episodes and a constant, low-level anxiety. There's the occasional properly exciting moment, of course, like when I won at the All-UK Knitting Championship. But mostly it's minor triumphs or, more often, slight disappointments.

I popped into the school office at break today.

Lloyd Manning was sitting outside Mrs Tyler's office looking thunderous.

'What have you done this time?' I asked. I was full of courage knowing that he couldn't very well start gouging my eyes out here in the office.

He ignored me.

'Don't talk to him,' called Miss Lucie the receptionist. 'What do you want here, anyway?'

'Is Mrs Tyler free?' I asked.

She was, as it happened, and Miss Lucie told me to go straight in.

'Hi, Ben,' she said brightly. 'What can I do for you?' Mrs Tyler's been a lot happier since I won the knitting competition. I'm not saying it was entirely down to me, but a week after the win, Virilia announced a new three-year sponsorship for the school. We're now the Virilia Academy of Excellence in Mathematics and Agriculture. The sports hall is getting a new roof and has now been renamed the Virilia Academy Stadium of Dreams.

'You know how I won that knitting competition,' I began.

'Yes. Thank you,' she said.

'Well, I've been given two tickets to go to KnitFair USA.

In New York.'

'How wonderful.'

'But it's in term time. In a couple of weeks, as it happens.'

She frowned and paused.

Dermot O'Leary popped up in my head and started speaking in a quiet, concerned voice. 'Will Mrs Tyler allow Ben to travel to the US? If she doesn't, it could mean the end of Ben's hopes.'

'How long would you be going for?'

'A week, just a week,' I said. 'And a day, because I'd fly back on the Monday.'

'And you said you had two tickets? Will your mother be going with you?'

'Er . . .'

'Another student?'

'Possibly . . .' I said slowly, trying to gauge her reaction.

'Who?'

'I'm not sure yet,' I replied. 'I have a few options.'

'I'm happy for you to go, Ben,' she said. 'Mr Hollis from Virilia will be delighted to hear you are pursuing your knitting interests. You know they are very keen for us to develop our entrepreneurial focus. I am however less sure about allowing *two* students to go. I'd have to be reassured that it would be in the long-term interests of the other student as well.'

Oh God. Looks like it might have to be my mother after all, if I don't think of something quick.

* * *

Dear Ms Gunter,

Thank you for your letter dated 19h April, requesting my attendance at a Waypoint Assessment Conversation on the 4th May. I am emailing you today to ask if it would be possible to re-arrange the date for that appointment as I will be in New York at that time attending KnitFair USA.

Sorry about this. I am free the week before, or the week after. Or indeed any other week. My calendar is almost entirely empty right up until the SuperStitch Eisteddfod in Wokingham on the 24th June.

Best wishes,
Ben

So about five seconds after sending that email I get a call from Ms Gunter.

'Hello, Ben? It's Claudia Gunter here from West Meon Probation Services.'

'Hi, Ms Gunter, I just sent you an email!'

'I know you did, Ben. That's why I'm calling.'

'Good news about KnitFair, isn't it?'

'Well . . .'

'Top male knitter Fabrice Gentile is going to be there. And there's a demonstration of a new system for shearing a sheep, treating and dying the wool and knitting it into a jumper all in a hundred and twenty minutes.'

'I'm sure it's going to be a blast, Ben,' she said. 'The problem is that you can't go.'

The incidental music swelled and Dermot piped up again. 'It's a crushing blow for Ben. And completely out of the blue.'

'What?' I spluttered. 'Why not?'

'You're on probation, Ben! One of the terms of your probation is that you don't leave the country.'

The room swam and I felt a bit sick.

'But you were there when I won the prize,' I protested. 'Why didn't you tell me then?'

'I thought it was next year's KnitFair they were talking about.'

'I was just getting back on the straight and narrow,' I said. 'A disappointing setback like this could force me back into a life of crime.'

'You shoplifted a bottle of Tia Maria from Tesco,' Ms Gunter said in a withering tone. 'You're not Tony Soprano.'

'It was Martini Rosso, actually,' I reminded her. 'From *Waitrose*.'

'Couldn't you phone them up and ask if you can attend next year's show?' she said.

'I've already got e-tickets!' I said. 'They're not going to want me next year. Especially if I have to tell them I'm a hoodlum.'

'You're hardly a hoodlum, Ben,' she said patiently.

'So why can't I go to America?'

Ms Gunter sighed. 'I'll make some calls. See what I can do.'

'Thanks, Ms Gunter,' I said, hope surging again.

'I'm not promising anything, Ben. The Home Office doesn't tend to make exceptions.'

I was so wound up after that roller coaster of a phone call that I couldn't even concentrate on my knitting. The Hoopie I was working on now has a noticeable sag to the left. I'm not even sure how I did it but the hem on the left is two to three inches lower than the right.

I've decided not to tell anyone I might not be going to America. This is the New Ben. Positive Ben. Focused Fletcher. If I pretend everything's OK, maybe it will be.

Tuesday 23rd April

I'm a little concerned about Molly. She came home from school on Friday to tell us she has a boyfriend named Finlay. I was alarmed to hear they'd had what Molly called 'a romantic moment' on the buddy bench. This turned out to be nothing more worrying than a quiet chat and an exchange of Moshi Monsters which isn't as disturbing as it sounds. Mum and Dad just laughed at the whole thing but I don't think it's right that children of seven should be having relationships. More to the point, what if Finlay and Molly outlast me and Megan?

I caught up with Joz at lunch today and asked him about New York. '*Another* knitting fair?' he asked, looking pained. 'I thought you were over the knitting thing.'

'I'm not,' I replied. 'Look, the fair itself is only on the

weekend, the week before is just sightseeing and . . .'

'. . . and what?'

'And the occasional knitting-related media event.'

'So I'd be like your assistant?'

'Yeah, like in the Tour de France. My support team.'

'I drive after you in a car with spare needles on the roof rack?'

'Yes, and inject me with performance-enhancing potions in the team bus.'

'Potions?'

'Tea,' I said. 'And Hobnobs.'

'And will we get the chance to go to a bar?'

'Mmm, not sure about that. You have to be twenty-one to drink in the US.'

'You're not selling this to me.'

'I can't believe you're considering turning down the chance to go to KnitFair USA,' I said, agog. 'They have a monkey there who can crochet. A crocheting monkey!'

He shrugged. 'Also I don't really want to leave Amelia just at the moment. She's pretty vulnerable.'

'I can't believe I'm hearing this,' I said. 'Don Joz the ladykiller. Author of *Fifty Shades of Graham*. International playboy, turns down a chance to go to the US because of some *girl*.'

'She's not just some girl,' he said. 'What we have is special.' He underlined this point by hawking a huge, phlegm-filled lugie onto a tree stump a few feet away.

'She's one lucky little lady,' I said, trying not to be sick and wondering how to change the subject. 'Any luck with the manuscript?' I asked after some thought. Joz has finished *Fifty Shades of Graham* and has sent it off to a few publishers

in London.

'Couple more rejections,' he muttered.

'Sorry to hear that,' I said. 'Maybe erotica is dead.'

'No chance. Erotica has been around for centuries. I've been researching it.'

'I bet you have.'

'I mean literary erotica. Anaïs Nin, Marquis de Sade. It's all free on Kobo.'

'Wait a minute. *You've* been reading Marquis de Sade?'

'Well, dipping in.' He leaned towards me and whispered. 'Did you know he used to eat people's poo?'

'Really?' I cried. 'That's disgusting.'

'He used to make his lovers eat marzipan so the poo wouldn't taste so bad.'

'If he doesn't like the taste, then why's he eating it?'

'I know. He should just eat the marzipan,' Joz said. 'Cut out the middle man.'

'I'm having a horrible flashback to that night at your place when you made me watch *The Human Caterpillar*,' I said, shuddering and laughing at the same time.

It's a shame Joz can't come to America. He's revolting, and a bit weird, but he's funny.

Well, that's three people off the list. Who's next? Oh yeah. Freddie. Sigh. At least he won't turn me down. He has no girlfriend, no job, no literary pretensions and, as luck would have it, all his grandparents are already dead.