

What's the opposite of a bucket list? You know what I mean by a bucket list, right? It's a list of all the things you want to do before you die. Which when you're only a twelve-year-old boy could be quite a long list actually, as you haven't really done ANYTHING yet. But, to tell you the truth, I don't want to do anything much. It's easier and less scary to stay at home in my room on my computer.

So what would you call the opposite of a bucket list? A list of all the things you want to make sure you NEVER. EVER. DO. **EVER.** All the awful, terrible, horrible, embarrassing, dangerous, scary, dumb things you need to avoid. Like, I know I never want to do anything where you might have to use a parachute. I mean, why would anyone want to throw themselves out of an aeroplane? That's just stupid. And hot-air ballooning. How is it possible to make something that is

really boring and really dangerous at the same time? OK. Let's be clear. I want to avoid going up in the air in the first place. Actually, it's not so much the going up that worries me – it's the coming down.

What else? Anything where I might come across dangerous animals is right out. Obviously. Swimming with whales? No. Going anywhere near sharks? No. Canoeing up the Amazon? No. The Amazon rainforest is full of snakes, spiders, piranhas, crocodiles and those fish that swim up your willy if you have a pee in the water.

Backpacking in Australia?

NO. NO. NO. NO. NO.

Did you know that twenty-one of the world's twenty-five most poisonous snakes live there? And they have crocodiles. And spiders the size of footballs. And killer jellyfish. Plus they have a massive hole in the ozone layer so you basically shrivel up into a crisp and drop dead if you go outside. Australia is very far away and, as far as I'm concerned, it can stay there.

What else?

I definitely want to steer clear of octopuses.

And . . .

Well, maybe I should just show you my list.

Except I don't know what to call it.

Not a bucket list . . . The only words I can think of to call my list are a bit rude, but . . .

Oh yes. I know – duck it!

A DUCK-IT list.

So here's my duck-it list. Ten things to avoid at all costs (there's a law that says lists should always be ten things). Actually, I think most of the things on my duck-it list are things other people would probably put on their bucket lists, but I really hope I never have to do any of the following . . .

STAN'S DUCK-IT LIST

1. Bungee jumping.
2. Anything where you have to use a parachute.
3. Dancing.
4. Dancing in public.
5. Going on Strictly Come Dancing.
6. White-water rafting.
7. Fire-eating.
8. Alligator wrestling.
9. Kissing.
10. Going on holiday with people you don't know.
11. Octopuses.

All right, sorry – it's not ten things. I had to add number eleven in at the last minute. I panicked.

I panic a lot.

I'm panicking right now.

Why?

Because number ten is happening . . .

I'm going on holiday with people I don't know.

This shouldn't be happening to me. It's an absolute DISASTER.

I keep thinking about how on earth I got here. 'Here' being the Shopping Maze Of Doom at Stansted Airport, completely lost at four o'clock in the morning. I wonder what I could have done differently – how I could have stopped this happening.

All right. Calm down, Stan.

Maybe I'm being overdramatic. I'm not actually going on holiday with complete strangers. I'm going on holiday with Felix, who is my best friend.

OK, to tell you the truth, Felix is not *exactly* my best friend. I don't really have a *best* friend. I have five friends and Felix is one of them. They're all about equal on the friend scale, I suppose. Sometimes I like one of them better than the others. You know how it is. Every now and then I'll have a fight with one of them and then we aren't friends for a bit, but it doesn't usually last long and mostly we forget what the fight was about. Right now, though, I'm having to pretend that Felix is my best friend, because his mum and dad are taking me on holiday to Italy for two weeks.

So, when I get there, if anyone asks me who I am, I've got to say, 'I'm Felix's best friend, Stan.'

Which will be a bit of a lie. To be honest, if I was forced to rank my friends in order, Felix would probably be number five. I don't mean to be rude, but we're not actually that friendly. And if you'd asked Felix before if I was his best friend, he would have said no.

Actually, what he'd have said would have been more like: 'What? Are you mad? Stan? Ha! No way.'

But you see what happened is that Felix was meant to be going on holiday with his *real* best friend, Archie (who is maybe my number four). Archie is really good at football and everybody wants to be his friend, even the girls, but Felix had to make a last-minute change of plan because three weeks ago Archie broke his leg playing football.

Well, he wasn't playing at the time. He was celebrating scoring a goal and tried to do a sort of somersault. He landed funny and there was a loud snapping noise. Like someone shooting a gun in a film. It was really horrible. His bone was sticking out of his leg. I felt sick looking at it. Although it was a little bit cool at the same time. I think Archie might not be able to play football for a while. I wonder if this will make a difference to how many people want to be his friend.

Anyway, Archie's still on crutches, so I've taken his place on the holiday. And I know I wasn't even Felix's

first choice of substitute. He asked a few other boys, but they were already going on holiday with their own families.

I didn't have any plans to go on holiday with my family. We don't really go on holiday in the summer because Dad says it's too expensive and crowded everywhere.

'The travel companies really rip you off,' he says every summer as he fills up the plastic paddling pool in our tiny garden with a hose. 'They totally put their prices up in the school holidays. It's criminal. All the airlines and hotels and holiday firms charge twice what they usually do.'

So we normally have our family holiday in the Easter break. We go to Wales. In case you don't know what Wales is, it's a country next to England where it rains all the time. We go to the same cottage every year. It belongs to my Uncle David. I think Uncle David rents it out in the summer, which is why we go at Easter. The cottage smells mouldy, and it never gets warm. Last time we went I recklessly decided to go for a swim in the sea and lost all feeling in my legs.

So this is all a bit different for me. Before today I'd only ever been on an aeroplane once before, when I was ten. Mum's dad, my grandad Johnny, died and left her some money in his will. She wanted to give us all a treat. We went to Spain for a week and Dad got the flu.

All he said about the holiday was: 'Never again.' Even though Mum really enjoyed it. Me too. You could get sausage and chips, it was warm, and you didn't risk acting out the last scene from *Titanic* every time you went in the sea.

Whenever we go to Wales and Dad's not around, Mum looks out at the rain and says, 'Never again,' and we both laugh. It's 'our little joke' (that's what Mum calls it). To tell you the truth, I don't find the joke that funny any more.

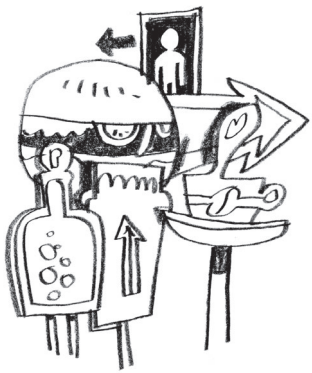
So, as I say, we usually spend summer at home in London. But this summer is different because when Felix asked me if I wanted to go on holiday with him I panicked and said yes.

Oh god. What have I done? All I needed to do was to say no and none of this would have happened. I wouldn't be lost in Stansted Airport in the middle of the night.

Maybe you don't just need to avoid going on holiday with people you don't know – maybe you need to avoid going on holiday altogether.

I definitely have to make a new list – REASONS NOT TO GO ON HOLIDAY.

Because this is hell.



Reason 1: Airports

I know I said that all lists should only be ten things, but I can tell that this one is going to be much, much longer. I reckon we'll end up with at least thirty, so I'm calling it '30 Reasons Not To Go On Holiday'.

So, anyway, number one: airports.

What's wrong with airports? I'll tell you what's wrong. Airports cause you to go mad. You want proof? Well, right now, I'm surrounded by people who are shopping, even though it's half past four in the morning. You can't tell it's half past four because there are no windows and the lights are very bright, which is making me feel really weird. The bright lights have obviously

sent everyone else round the bend too, otherwise why would they be shopping? It's like some twisted scientific experiment to find out what would happen to people if you made it day all the time. (I can tell you what would happen – they'd go mad and start shopping.)

I mean, you don't go to an airport to do your shopping, do you? You go to an airport to catch a plane. But the people here have a dangerous, deranged look in their eyes and they're buying everything they can get their hands on.

I don't know what to do. I'm wandering around, totally lost, in a sort of maze made from shops. Actually, I can't tell if it's lots of smaller shops or one big one. I don't know where one part ends and another begins. And you can't escape. Everywhere you turn there are bottles of champagne, headphones, sunglasses, foreign plugs and perfume that's been made by pop stars. There's even a gleaming sports car. And why is everything so BIG? There are massive bottles of gin, huge packets of M&M's, giant Toblerones.

And tills. Hundreds of tills.

I'm beginning to crack. I feel an uncontrollable urge to buy something.

ANYTHING . . .

But I mustn't. Mum would kill me.

She gave me some money last night – a twenty-pound note and two twenty-euro notes – but there's a catch . . .

MUM: Here's some money. But whatever you do, don't spend it.

ME: What's the use of money if I can't spend it?

MUM: It's for emergencies.

ME: How will I know if it's an emergency?

MUM: If you're not sure whether it's an emergency, then it's not one. Just don't spend any of it unless it's life or death.

ME: So if I'm dying I'm allowed to spend it. Won't that be a bit late?

MUM: Just don't spend it!

Mum's always worried about me, but she's extra worried about this holiday because she's not going with me. And I'm extra worried because . . . well, because Mum's not with me.

This would be easier and less stressful if I was with Felix, but I'm not travelling with him because he's already out in Italy. His mum and dad own a house there and they're staying in it for most of the summer.

Dad shook his head and let out a long sigh when he heard how long Felix was going to be away.

'That's not right,' he said. 'Not right at all. Everyone knows a summer holiday is two weeks. You go on a Saturday and you come back on a Saturday fourteen days later. A fortnight. Anything else is just showing off. It's not right.'

So, anyway, that's why I'm travelling with Felix's Uncle Simon and Auntie Emma.

I've never met either of them before this morning, and we've already become separated.

Simon and Emma stopped to buy some duty free (which is another name for alcohol), and Simon said I should go on ahead and meet them outside Burger King. I can't see Burger King anywhere and I'm worried I'll never be able to find my way out of the shopping labyrinth. There are even some people sleeping on benches – they look like they've given up and decided to live here.

Maybe I'll end up sleeping on a bench. Maybe I'll end up living here and become an old man with a big beard.

At times like this I wish I wasn't a kid. I can't wait to be grown up and not have to worry about everything all the time. Life is so much easier for grown-ups. They can just walk about the place like they know where they're going, and . . . I don't know . . . buy things and understand the world.

Which way do I go? This would be a whole lot easier if I wasn't so tired.

I had to wake up at three o'clock, which was a bit freaky and sort of a bit exciting at the same time. Mum was already up. In fact, I don't think she'd gone to bed. And I think she'd been crying. I've never really been

away from her before. She hugged me for slightly too long when Simon and Emma arrived to pick me up.

'Don't worry, Mrs P,' Simon said as I grabbed my backpack. 'He'll be in safe hands. I've only ever lost three children!'

This was a joke. Simon laughed. Mum didn't laugh. I just smiled. I was too tired to laugh. Mum gave Emma my passport and a special note that says she's allowed to take me abroad as I'm not allowed to travel on my own.

The night got even freakier as Simon drove us through London at half past three in the morning. There were all different people out on the streets and it was like I was seeing a secret world. After a while we left London and got on to the motorway. At one point Simon went to sleep and we nearly crashed. Emma didn't notice – she was listening to her audiobook, and Simon pretended nothing had happened. He made me talk to him after that, though, which was awkward because I'd never met him before and I'm not used to talking to grown-ups, apart from Mum (and sometimes Dad). In the end all I could think of was to tell him the plot of *Guardians of the Galaxy 2*, which I saw the other day.

I don't think he was very interested, but at least he didn't fall asleep again and kill us all.

Wait a minute! There's Burger King! I've made it. I'm free! I've somehow come out of the maze and into a busy

area that's surrounded by fast-food places and pubs and bars. Loads of people are eating. There's a queue at Burger King. At this time of the night! Are you even allowed burgers for breakfast? I don't know. But the strangest thing is that the pubs and bars are packed as well. People are drinking wine and champagne and cocktails and pints of beer. I tried beer once and didn't really like the taste and can't imagine why anyone would want to drink it at half past four in the morning.

And the thing that really makes this airport completely insane is that a lot of people are dressed for the beach, in shorts and vests, straw hats and flip-flops, as if they're already on holiday.

This airport has definitely sent everyone bonkers. Like we've all entered some kind of alternative universe where everything's back to front.

And then I see Simon and Emma and I relax a bit.

I won't be fully relaxed until I'm on the plane, though.

Actually, I won't be fully relaxed until we've landed.

Actually, to tell you the truth, I won't be fully relaxed until we get to the house in Italy.

No.

You know what, I don't think I'll be fully relaxed until I'm back in my own room.

At home.

With Mum and Dad.