

The Ex-Boyfriend's Handbook

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Extract

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Sunday 16th January

7 p.m.

‘Edward. Let me get this straight. You’ve called me right in the middle of *Antiques Roadshow* just to tell me your girlfriend’s gone to bed?’

‘*Tibet*, Dan. Jane’s gone to Tibet. She’s left me.’

It’s the first time I’ve said those words out loud, and my voice cracks a little down the phone line. My girlfriend of ten years, the woman who I’ve been sharing my bed, my flat, my *life* with, has gone. Vanished. Departed. Cleared out. And, by the looks of things, cleared me out as well.

‘What do you mean, “she’s left you”?’

‘Dan, there’s no clearer way of saying it. Jane’s. Left. Me.’

I can almost hear the cogs turning in Dan’s head as what I’ve just said sinks in. ‘Stay where you are,’ he says. ‘I’ll be right over. And don’t do anything stupid.’

Don’t do anything stupid? I put the receiver down, wondering what Dan’s idea of doing something stupid would actually be. Wearing socks with sandals, possibly.

I stare disbelievingly around my flat, which appears

to be almost as empty as I'm feeling inside. The place looks like it's been ransacked: wardrobe doors still ajar; drawers left open as if they've been rifled through in a hurry; and the CD rack empty except for a couple of dodgy rock compilations and my collection of digitally re-mastered Queen albums.

While I wait for Dan to arrive, I walk from room to room, compiling a mental check list of what Jane's taken. The chairs and dining table set she bought from IKEA: gone. The red imitation leather sofa her mother gave us which made obscene noises whenever you sat down too quickly: missing. The breadmaker that she won in a competition and then used just the once: well, I won't miss that, I suppose. Even the Picasso poster she bought as a souvenir from that exhibition we saw five years ago in Barcelona has been neatly removed, leaving just the faintest outline on the kitchen wall where it used to hang. At least she's left me the bed, although most of the rest of the furniture seems to be missing. All *her* things, now I come to think of it.

I'm amazed at how clinical Jane's been; how effectively she's managed to excise herself from this flat, and my life, without leaving so much as a trace of the ten years we've been together. The only hint of anyone else ever having lived here is the photograph I find on the floor in front of the bookshelf of the two of us, taken at college, when we first met. Jane and I always used to smile when we looked at it, remembering the time it was taken, and just how happy and carefree we were back then. She'd even bought a special

frame, and given it pride of place above the fireplace. But as I prop it up on the mantelpiece I realize she's taken the frame but left the picture, and I'm not smiling any more.

I retrieve Jane's note from where I've screwed it up and thrown it into the fireplace, smooth it out, and read it through one more time, even though I can already remember it word for word.

Dear Edward,

By the time you get this letter, I'll be on a plane to Tibet. I'm going away for a while because I need to sort some things out, and while I'm gone, I suggest you do the same.

Let's face it, Teddy, you've let yourself go, so I'm letting you go too.

I'd tell you not to think about following me, but I know that a romantic gesture like that would never even occur to you. And that's part of our problem.

As I'm sure you've noticed, I've taken my things, although I've left you the bathroom scales – you might want to use them for something other than stacking your old newspapers on.

I'll be back on April 16th, so perhaps we'll talk again then. Meanwhile I suggest you use this opportunity to take a long hard look at yourself in the mirror.

Jane

P.S. I realize at this point I'm supposed to say something like 'it's not you, it's me', but in actual fact, it is you.

As I finish reading, my hands are shaking. I fold the note carefully and place it in my pocket, then light a cigarette and inhale deeply, longing for the calming buzz of the nicotine, hoping it will take the edge off the pain I'm feeling.

It doesn't.

7.59 p.m.

I'm smoking my fourth cigarette, and wondering where on earth Dan's got to, as he only lives in the next street, when he finally rings my doorbell. I buzz him in impatiently, a swirl of cold Brighton air follows him in through the door, adding to the chilly atmosphere already in my flat.

Dan takes one look at my miserable expression. 'How are you?' he asks.

When I can't seem to answer, he doesn't know how to react. We stand there for a second, and then begin an awkward dance as he tries to give me one of those male hugs where you touch at the shoulders while ensuring no body contact below the nipples, but I don't know what he's trying to do and instead lean forward to try and shake his hand. We end up accidentally bumping heads, which digs my glasses painfully into the bridge of my nose.

As he lets me go, I jab a finger at my watch.

'That's what you call "I'll be right over", is it?'

Dan's my best friend, although there are times I could gladly punch him in the face. He's one of those annoyingly good-looking guys, with almost model

features, and a smile that could get him off a murder charge. Trouble is, he knows this.

'Sorry, mate' he says, grinning sheepishly. 'Had to get ready. Make sure I looked OK.'

'Looked OK? Just to come round and see me?'

Dan shrugs. 'Never know who you might bump into. Paparazzi and all that.'

'Dan, you're a daytime television presenter on a rubbish antiques programme. I hardly think you're going to have photographers camping outside your front door.'

Dan doesn't reply, but just taps the side of his nose in that annoying way. I sigh with exasperation and show him through into the front room.

'Jesus, Edward. It looks like you've been done over,' are his first sensitive words.

'At first I thought I had been,' I say, wistfully. 'And then I wished I had.'

Dan examines the space where the hi-fi used to sit, then inspects the near-empty CD rack. He walks into the kitchen, then through to the bedroom, silently taking in the scene, then turns to look at me, a puzzled expression on his face.

'At the risk of asking a stupid question . . .'

'That's never stopped you before.'

'You are sure you haven't been? Burgled, I mean.'

I nod. 'Pretty sure. Burglars don't normally only take half your stuff. Especially not just your girlfriend's half—'

'Or your girlfriend,' says Dan, peering inside the near-empty wardrobe.

‘Thanks for reminding me.’

‘Sorry,’ he says, following me back into the front room. ‘Shame, though. At least then your insurance would have replaced everything. And with some decent furniture.’

‘Yes, well.’ I remove Jane’s letter from my pocket and wave it in front of him. ‘Things kind of fell into place when I found the note. Burglars don’t usually leave a note.’

Dan stares at it for a second or two, as if it might be infected.

‘What does it say?’

‘What do you think it says? The usual “Dear John” stuff.’

Dan looks a little confused. ‘Er . . . Which is?’

‘Sorry, Dan. I forgot the concept of the woman actually doing the dumping would be alien to you.’ I unfold the piece of paper and speed-read it in front of him. “‘Dear Edward, you’ve let yourself go, it’s over, I’m off.’” That about sums it up.’

Dan takes it from me and reads it through slowly, his lips moving as he does so. Eventually, he hands it back to me with a grimace.

‘That’s terrible.’

‘I know. How could she do it? Just end it like this?’

‘No. I mean the fact that she calls you “Teddy”. Yuk.’

Dan takes his jacket off and looks around for a place to throw it, a task made somewhat difficult by Jane’s recent removals. Eventually, he just puts it back on.

‘Well, look on the bright side,’ he says. ‘At least you

don't have to go through that painful "sorting out who gets what" time.'

'Thanks, Dan. That really makes me feel better.'

He punches me playfully on the shoulder. 'Don't mention it. Any time.'

'I was being sarcastic.'

'So was I. Anyway, how on earth did she manage to get it all out without you knowing?'

'Yeah, well, I'd been away visiting my parents for the weekend – my mum's birthday – it'd been planned for months, and then at the last minute Jane hadn't been able to come. Emergency at work, she said.'

Dan sticks his lower lip out and nods appreciatively. 'Ah, the old "emergency at work" line.'

'She said that she might be out when I got back. I didn't realize that she meant out of the country.'

'And out of your life, by the looks of it,' he says, taking Jane's note back from me and reading it once more. 'What are you going to do?'

I take my glasses off and rub my eyes wearily. 'I don't know. I just . . . She . . . I mean . . .'

Worried that I might start crying, a look of panic crosses Dan's face. He puts a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

'Edward – before you go any further, we need to sit down and talk about this. And we can't do that here.'

'Why ever not?'

Dan points to the space where the sofa used to be. 'Well, mainly because there's nowhere to sit.'

'Ah.'

I look up at him, and he smiles, and utters those immortal words, his cure-all for any situation.

‘Come on. Drink.’

Dan slips Jane’s note into his jacket pocket and marches off down the hallway. I stare at him for a moment, then pick the photo up off the mantelpiece, slide it into my wallet, and follow him out of the door.

8.15 p.m.

Our local, the Admiral Jim, is perched on the border between Brighton and Hove in a quiet mews that runs between our respective streets. It’s typical of the new wave of Brighton pubs: beer-stained carpets replaced with bare wooden floorboards; traditional ales swapped for the latest Czechoslovakian lagers; and brightly coloured alcoholic mixers with names like ‘Psst’ and ‘Rekd’ lining the shelves behind the bar. We like it not only because it is extremely local, but also because it’s one of the few places around here that doesn’t need a bouncer on the door, which is mainly due to the fact that it’s off the usual Brighton stag and hen party routes. Most weekday evenings, it is full of office workers sniggering, ‘I’m just at the Jim’ into their mobiles. As is customary on a Sunday evening, however, the place is a little quieter.

‘Hold on,’ says Dan, nervously peering in through the window. ‘Just let me check the coast is clear.’

This is a necessary precaution at most of the venues we visit because Dan, King of the one-night stands, has an unfortunate habit of regularly bumping into his exes. Most of them are, shall we say, less than

pleased to see him due to the abrupt manner of their dismissal, and aren't afraid to tell him so, sometimes quite forcefully. With a last relieved look, Dan pushes open the door, and I follow him inside.

'Tibet, eh?' he says, as we head towards the bar.

I make a face. 'Yup.'

Dan whistles in that 'ohmigosh' kind of way, and then his expression changes into a frown. 'Where exactly is Tibet, anyway?'

'You know, near India. Where Mount Everest is? In between China and Nepal.' Sometimes he's not the sharpest pencil in the box.

Dan starts to snigger. 'Nepal?'

'What's so funny?'

'Well, it's just, *Nepal* . . . I've always thought it kind of sounds like "nipple", doesn't it?'

I give him a pitying look. 'Dan – how old are you?'

'Thirty. Same age as you. Why?'

'Well act it, for God's sake.'

He grins at me. 'Just trying to lighten the mood a bit.'

I glare back at him. 'Well, don't. My girlfriend's just dumped me. I'm allowed to feel depressed.'

As I heave myself awkwardly up onto a bar stool, Dan leaps nimbly onto the one next to me. He pulls Jane's note out from his jacket and starts to study it.

'Tibet. She certainly wanted to make herself scarce, didn't she?'

'Christ, Dan' I say, snatching it from him and stuffing it into my back pocket before he can read any further. 'Don't mind my feelings, will you?'

‘Sorry, mate. It’s just that, well, you don’t seem that upset.’

I stare forlornly at the bar in front of me. ‘I’m too stunned to be upset, Dan. I’m surprised, shocked, confused . . .’ I search for the right word.

‘Bitter?’ he asks.

‘A little. It hasn’t really sunk in yet.’

Dan shakes his head. ‘No, a pint of bitter? Or something stronger? What do you want to drink?’ He nods towards Wendy, the Admiral Jim’s regular barmaid, who’s just appeared in front of us. She’s pretty, in a flat-chested Meg Ryan kind of way.

‘Ah. Bitter, please. Sorry.’

Dan flashes a smile at Wendy. ‘Pint of bitter please, gorgeous, and my usual.’

Wendy glowers at him, still not having forgiven Dan for doing his normal sleep-with-once-and-never-call-again routine with her flatmate the other week.

‘Hi, Edward’ she says cheerily, giving me a big smile while still ignoring Dan. ‘No Jane this evening? Left you has she?’

When I don’t answer, she flicks her eyes across at Dan, who mimes cutting his throat. Her expression rapidly changes.

‘Oh God, Edward. I’m so sorry,’ she says, blushing. ‘I had no idea. Really.’

I force a half-smile. ‘That’s okay.’

Wendy leans across the bar and rests a hand on my arm. ‘How are you feeling?’

As she says those words, I have to stop and think. It’s a very good question; how *am* I feeling? Numb,

certainly, a bit like that soldier in the opening scene of *Saving Private Ryan* who's lost his arm but walks around looking for it as though nothing's wrong, as if he's refused to admit to himself what's just happened, and so doesn't feel any pain. Though the trouble with that is eventually, when the shock wears off, he will.

I settle for the obvious. 'Pretty rotten, actually.'

Wendy gives my arm a squeeze. 'Well, if you want to talk about it, you know where I am.'

Dan clears his throat impatiently, obviously a little put out at having been ignored earlier.

'I think you'll find that's what I'm here for, sweetheart. A bit of man-to-man talk over a conciliatory pint. Give Edward here the benefit of my experience. That's if we ever get served, of course.'

Wendy stares at him, open-mouthed. 'And what makes you think that you're such an expert on relationships?'

Dan looks at her as if she's stupid. 'Because I've had so many, obviously.'

Wendy shakes her head, pours my pint, then bangs a glass of wine down on the counter in front of Dan, causing it to nearly spill onto his trousers.

'Four pounds ninety.'

Dan reaches into his jacket pocket then looks across at me apologetically. 'Sorry, mate. Forgot the old wallet. Didn't think we'd be coming out.'

With a sigh I hand Wendy a fiver, and we take our drinks and find a corner table.

'So,' says Dan, once we've sat down, and he's made sure that his trousers are Chardonnay-free. 'Did you

have any idea? That she was going to do something like this, I mean.'

'Of course not!'

'No surreptitious phone calls to Pickfords, anything like that?'

I think back over the last few weeks, trying to find any evidence of unhappiness. 'We'd had a few arguments recently, but nothing too serious. Just the usual stuff, really.'

'What sort of "usual" stuff?'

'You know' – I do an uncannily accurate, although very childish, impression of Jane's sometimes whining voice – "'When are you going to get off your back-side and do something about that beer belly of yours; smoking's a disgusting habit; don't you think it's time you thought about getting another job . . .'" Like I say – just the usual.'

Dan rolls his eyes. 'Jesus, mate. How long has that been the usual?'

'Er . . . last six months, I guess.'

'Six months? Did you not think something might be wrong?'

I shake my head. 'I just thought it was part of that "Women, can't live with them . . ." stuff.'

'Any other signs? Everything all right with her job?'

I shrug. 'I guess. We didn't really talk about her work that much.'

'What about her emotional state?'

I take a sip of my beer. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, for example, I once went out with a girl who was so emotional she cried at the slightest of things.'

Kittens, soppy films, you name it. One whiff of anything sentimental and on came the waterworks. Even, a couple of times, after sex.' He grins at the memory. 'Was Jane ever like that?'

I think back to our recently all too infrequent below-duvet liaisons. 'She never cried after sex. Though the last time . . .'

'The last time?'

'She, er, cried during.'

Dan attempts unsuccessfully to smother a laugh, but to his credit tries a bit harder when he realizes I'm not joking.

I light a cigarette and blow smoke at the ceiling. 'Why didn't she say something? Rather than just upping and leaving me like this?'

'It sounds to me like she was trying to.' Dan waves my smoke away but for once decides not to comment on what he usually refers to as my 'filthy habit'. 'How long had the two of you been going out for again?'

'Jesus, Dan. Try not to talk about Jane and me in the past tense so quickly please. Ten years.'

'Bloody hell! Ten years? A whole decade?' Dan's longest ever relationship probably just about lasted a month, and that's only because he was ill for two weeks in the middle of it all.

'Yup.'

'And did you, I mean, *do* you, love her?'

I redden slightly. 'What do you think?'

'And you never thought about, you know,' he lowers his voice, 'the "m" word?'

I shake my head. 'I kind of just . . . assumed that we'd always be together.'

'Did you ever tell her that? In more romantic terms, obviously.'

I stare glumly into my beer. 'Obviously not.'

'Ah.'

Dan pretends to be interested in something floating in his wine glass until I break the awkward silence.

'I mean, it's not as if I've ever cheated on her.'

'Never? Not even once? In ten years?' says Dan, aghast.

I look back angrily at him. 'No. Of course not. We don't all have your . . .'

'Opportunities?'

'I was going to use the word "morals", but that would suggest that on some level you actually had a few.'

Dan shrugs. 'Harsh, but fair.'

'I mean, okay, so maybe I wasn't the most attentive of boyfriends. But I was faithful. And reliable. And . . .' I struggle to find something else, 'good at my job.'

Dan shakes his head. 'Doesn't matter a jot, mate. Funny creatures, women. Do you think Mrs Einstein was impressed with all that stuff about Albert's relatives?'

'*Relativity*, Dan.'

'Exactly. Nope, she was more concerned whether he remembered her birthday, or forgot to put the toilet seat down.'

I sit there miserably for a while, until Dan leans across to me. 'Listen,' he says, 'would it make you feel

any better if I told you that she tried it on with me once?’

I look up with a start. ‘She didn’t, did she?’

‘Nope. But would it make it easier if I said she did?’

‘Be serious, Dan. Did Jane ever say anything to you? About us?’

He shakes his head. ‘Nothing.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Yup. Oh, apart from that she wished that you were more like me. And had a bigger . . .’

‘Dan!’

‘Relax!’ He rolls his eyes. ‘I’m just trying to cheer you up.’

‘Dan, cheering someone up normally consists of trying to make them feel better about *themselves*, not harping on about how great you are.’

Dan looks surprised. ‘Really?’

I take Jane’s note out again and stare at it, searching for clues, until Dan reaches across, takes it from me, and wordlessly slips it back into his pocket. Suddenly, my despair turns to resentment at the way she’s just dismissed ten years in less than ten sentences. I find the photo of her and me in my wallet, and throw it angrily onto the table.

‘Bloody cheek! “*You’ve let yourself go*”. Hardly. I mean, we’re all a little heavier than we were at college.’

Dan pats his stomach proudly. ‘I’m not.’

‘You wouldn’t be. I mean us normal people. I’m not that different to how I used to look, surely?’

Dan opens his mouth as if to mention something, then thinks better of it, and stands up.

‘Hold on a sec.’

He walks over to the other side of the pub, removes a clip-framed photograph from the montage between the toilet doors, and puts it down on the table in front of me. It’s of the three of us at a fancy-dress party here at the Admiral Jim last December. Jane, courtesy of a blonde wig, white charity-shop evening dress, and a not inconsiderable amount of padding, is dressed as Marilyn Monroe. She’s pouting at the camera, flanked by Dan and me, him all teeth and daytime-TV tan in his no-effort-required James Bond dinner suit. I’m brandishing a plastic sword, and squeezed into the Roman legionnaire’s outfit I’d bought from Woolworth’s toy section in desperation late that afternoon.

Dan eventually stops admiring himself in the photo, and squints at my outfit.

‘Who were you supposed to be again?’

‘Russell Crowe. You know, in *Gladiator*.’

‘Russell Crowe?’ laughs Dan. ‘You look more like Russell Grant. In a mini-skirt!’

I snatch the picture away from him and stare at it crossly. ‘It was a child’s outfit. Of course it didn’t fit properly.’

Dan passes me the college photo and urges me to compare the two. ‘Even so, mate. You’ve got to admit that you’ve put on a few pounds over the years.’

I stare at the two images in disbelief. It’s like one of those ‘before’ and ‘after’ adverts you see in the Sunday supplements for the latest miracle exercise machine. Except the wrong way round.