



## 1. THE BEGINNING

It is a few days after Christmas, 1989. I am living in New York, working in a dead-end job. It's worse than that; I'm employed by the production department of a failing magazine. I probably won't even have my dead-end job for much longer.

I've just taken the train in from my parents' house in Connecticut. It's cold, and the city has an air of spent goodwill: there are already Christmas trees lying on the pavement. I drop by the apartment of some friends, two girls who share a grand duplex in the West Village. I know they have people visiting, English people. But when I get there my friend Pat – who is himself English but lives in New York – answers the door. He gives me to understand that the two roommates are in the basement having a protracted disagreement. They argue a lot, those two, and have a tendency towards high drama.

I first see the English girl as she comes up from downstairs, where she has been attempting, in vain, to broker some sort of truce and salvage the evening. Her

short hair, charged with static, is riding up on itself at the back. She walks into the room, pauses to light a cigarette, and then looks at me and Pat.

‘It’s like a fucking Sartre play down there,’ she says.

We all go out to a bar. The English girl has a bright red coat and swears a lot. Her voice is husky, lower than mine. She is at once afraid of everything – she thinks she’s going to be murdered on the streets of Greenwich Village – and nothing. She is funny and charming, but also peremptory and unpredictable, with shiny little raisin eyes.

‘So,’ I say, turning to her, ‘how long are you here for?’

‘Look,’ she says, appraising me coolly. ‘It’s almost as if we’re having a conversation.’

If I’m honest, she scares the shit out of me. But by the end of the evening I very badly want the English girl to be my girlfriend. My plan is to engineer this outcome as quickly as possible.

There are a few flaws in my plan: the English girl lives in London, and I live in New York; I already have a girlfriend of some four years’ standing; the English girl does not appear to like me.

Nevertheless, at a New Year’s Eve party a few days later, after several hours of the sort of unrelenting flirtation that might better be characterized as lobbying, I convince her to kiss me. She doesn’t seem terribly flattered by my persistence, but I suppose a man who arranges to spend New Year’s Eve apart from his actual girlfriend so he can try it on with a comparative stranger is, first and foremost, a heel. She has every reason to be circumspect.

I'm not normally this decisive, or resolute, or forward. A born torch-bearer, I managed to keep my feelings completely hidden from the first three girls I fell in love with: Sarah, aged eight, who eventually moved away; Paula, aged ten, who also moved away, and Cati, aged eleven, who refused to do me the kindness of moving away. I'd come to understand love as an exquisite private pain by the time Jenni, aged fifteen, cornered me long enough to become my first girlfriend.

It's not that I'd never pursued anyone before; I just normally did it in a way that took the object of my affections a very long time to notice. I preferred to play it cool: waiting around in places where the girl I fancied might possibly turn up later, that sort of thing. This way I left myself an exit strategy whenever rejection presented itself – the paper trail of my courtship was non-existent – although in most cases the girl in question simply found another boyfriend while my long game was still unfurling.

I don't have time for any of that now. I have just two weeks to break up with my girlfriend and convince the English girl that she should not only like me, she should take me back to England with her.

It is a difficult fortnight. The English girl's lacerating wit makes her a very hard person to have a crush on. We go out together several times, but we drink so much that I often have to reacquaint her with our relationship's forward progress the next morning. You like me now, I tell her. It's all been agreed.

I also discover I have rivals, including a guy who engineers sound systems for nightclubs and who, she

tells me, has a gun in the glove box of his pick-up truck. I can't compete with that. I don't have a gun, or a glove box to put it in.

I break up with my girlfriend one evening after work, in a bar called the Cowgirl Hall of Fame, an episode of shameful expediency I hope won't haunt me for the rest of my life, but it does a little. I have to ask for the bill while she's crying, because I have a date.

This is not how I usually break up with people: directly, implacably, while sitting on one hand to stop myself looking at my watch. In fact I don't have a usual method; I've never needed to develop a technique. Girls break up with me. That's what happened the last time, and the time before that, and the time before that.

After hailing a cab for my weeping ex-girlfriend, I walk to a bar – the same bar as that first night – where the English girl is waiting for me. We are meeting here because our mutual friends do not approve of our burgeoning romance. They see me, not without cause, as an opportunist. The English girl has only recently come out of a long relationship – not quite as recently as eight minutes ago, mind – and it is generally acknowledged that I am being reckless with her affections. I only that know I'm being reckless with mine. In any case, I am currently unwelcome at the apartment where the English girl is staying.

So we meet at this bar most evenings. We drink martinis and laugh and then go back to my basement apartment, which is dark and generally grubby, except for my room, which is squalid. I leave her there in the mornings to go to work, and at some point during the

day she comes and drops off my keys. Occasionally, for a change of pace, we meet at a different bar. Sometimes we go out with English friends of hers. They like to drink – a lot – and they don't seem very interested in eating.

One thing we have failed to do over the course of the fortnight is go on anything approaching a proper date. Finally, towards the end of her visit, we arrange dinner in a cosy and unhygienic restaurant in the Bowery. Our mutual friend Pat is our waiter. The hard living of the past two weeks, combined with full-time employment, has taken its toll on me. During the meal I begin to feel unwell. My stomach churns alarmingly and I break out in a cold sweat. I'm trying to be lively and charming, but I'm finding it hard to keep track of the conversation. I push the food around my plate. I manage a few glasses of wine, enough to realize what a terrible idea drinking is. Finally, the plates are cleared. I pay the bill. She offers to pay half, but I refuse. When I stand up from my chair, I feel something deep in my bowels give way with a lurch. I excuse myself and nip to the toilets, which are fortunately close at hand.

I do not wish to go into too much unpleasant detail. Suffice to say I needed to spend about ten minutes in the loo to deal with the matter at hand, and found it necessary to part with my underpants for ever. On lifting the lid of the wastebasket I discover that I am not the first customer to face that problem this evening. Even so, I decide to throw them out the window.

I come back to the table with all the nonchalance I can muster, but I know from looking in the toilet's scarred mirror how pale I am.

‘Are you OK?’ she says. ‘You were in there for a very long time.’

‘Yeah, fine,’ I say. Our mutual friend approaches, no longer wearing his waiter’s apron.

‘Pat’s finished his shift,’ she says, ‘so we’d thought we’d all go next door for a drink.’

‘Oh,’ I say. ‘OK.’

I only need to drink two beers in a seedy bar to complete my charade of wellness, before our hugely successful first date comes to an end.

In the end the English girl flies back to London without me, but I have her phone number and her address. I write to her. I pick up a passport renewal application. Without telling anyone, I quietly lay plans to extricate myself from my own life.

How do I know the English girl is the one for me? I don’t. And I certainly don’t know if she thinks I am the one for her. Separated by an ocean, I begin to speculate about how I would feel if my holiday fling – an underwhelming American guy with a basement apartment and a dead-end job – kept ringing me to firm up what were supposed to be empty promises to visit. I would be distant and terse on the phone, I think – just like she is. I wonder if I am spoiling what we had by trying to prolong it.

Before I have even got my passport photo taken, she rings: she’s found a cheap flight, she tells me, and is thinking about coming back for the weekend. It takes me a moment to process this news, which is slightly incompatible with her general lack of enthusiasm for

our long-distance love affair. I know she hates flying. I can only conclude that she must like me more than she's been letting on. I'm a little stunned by the realization.

'OK,' I say.

'Try not to sound too fucking thrilled,' she says.

When I catch sight of her at the airport I feel my face go bright red. I'm suddenly embarrassed by how little we know each other. Two weeks in each other's company, on and off, plus four phone calls and a letter apiece. We've had sex, like, eight times. We've been apart for a month. She doesn't even quite look the way I've remembered her. That's because I have no photo at home to consult.

There wasn't much time to prepare for her visit, but I have done one thing: I've bought a new bed. My old one was small, borrowed and lumpy. The new one, delivered within twenty-four hours, touches three walls of my room. The bare mattress, silvery white, stands in sharp contrast to the grubby walls and the small, barred window that shows the ankles of passers-by. I'm twenty-six, it's probably the most expensive thing I've ever bought, and I'm embarrassed by it. I had only wished to provide an acceptable standard of accommodation, but it looks as if I've hired a sex trampoline for the weekend.

The next day she is woozy with jet lag. We stay in bed for most of the morning. At some point I sit up and see something on the floor that makes my heart sink: an uncompleted work assignment – a mock-up of a new table of contents page. It's been on my 'Things to Freak

Out about List' for weeks, and I've promised to deliver it by Monday. I pick it up and look it over. I've done no work at all on it, and now, clearly, I wasn't going to.

'What's that?' she says.

'Nothing. Something I'm supposed to have done.'

'Let's have a look,' she says.

'That's all dummy copy,' I say. 'I'm meant to write the words, but I don't know where to start. To be honest, it's ruining my life.'

'It can't be that difficult,' she says. 'You just need a stupid pun for each heading, and then a pithy summary underneath.'

'It's a bit more complicated than that,' I say.

'No it isn't,' she says. 'Give me a pen.' She does the first one, scribbling the words in the margin.

'That's not bad,' I say.

'There you are,' she says. 'Only eleven more to go.' She sits there with me, in my new bed, a fag hanging from her lips, treating my dreaded assignment like a crossword puzzle, and completing it in under an hour. Two thoughts flash through my head simultaneously: Amazing! She can solve all my problems for me! and, Holy shit! She's smarter than I am!

Just before we finish my phone rings. It's my mother, who unbeknownst to me has driven into New York with my aunt to see some Broadway show. They are heading for a restaurant downtown, near me, and want to know what I'm doing for lunch. My heart starts to pound. I've never told my mother anything about the English girl who is smoking in my bed. I doubt she even knows I've broken up with my old girlfriend; she certainly didn't



hear it from me. I sit in silence, phone to ear, for so long that the English girl raises an eyebrow.

‘Can I bring someone?’ I say finally.

It is the single most alarming dining experience I’ve ever endured, including the one that ended with me throwing my pants out a toilet window. We have about fifteen minutes to get dressed and get there, and there is no time to brief the English girl on what to expect. The occasion is more formal than I’d anticipated: the restaurant, which I’d never heard of, is a bit grand, and my mother and my aunt are all dressed up. They have no idea who this girl from London is, or quite why I’ve brought her to lunch instead of, say, my girlfriend. I don’t quite recognize the English girl myself: she has suddenly turned polite and circumspect, even a little demure. She doesn’t swear once during the meal. I was surprised she’d even agreed to come, but she’s making a better fist of the occasion than I am. My brain keeps leaving my body to watch from the ceiling.

There is no point in the proceedings when I can draw my mother aside and explain why I’ve turned up to lunch with a mysterious English woman. Whenever they look at me both my aunt and my mother have legible question marks furrowed into their brows, but they are afraid to ask too much, having no idea where the answers might take the conversation. And we have prepared no lies. This, I realize too late, is a huge oversight.

The most anodyne enquiries (‘So, how long are you in America for?’) are met with unintentionally

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provocative responses ('Oh, not long. About thirty-six hours'). I'm trying to steer the conversation away from questions generally, especially the ones the English girl and I have never asked each other: what exactly is the nature of this relationship? But he lives here and you live there – how is that going to work?

By the time food arrives my mother and my aunt have begun to exchange meaningful glances. My biggest fear is that the English girl will go to the loo at some point, leaving me alone with them.

'That was weird,' she says afterwards, lighting a cigarette as we reach the safety of the corner.

'Sorry,' I say. 'But it's good you've finally met my mother. Now we can be married at last.'

'Fuck off,' she says.

In my new passport photo I look stunned, as if someone has just hit me on the back of the head with a skillet, and I have yet to fall down. I've only been abroad once before, on the eighth-grade French class's summer trip to Paris.

The passport shows that I first entered the United Kingdom on 2 March 1990. By the time of the last stamp on the back page, dated 28 October 1999, I will have three children. Whenever I take stock by asking myself that question – 'What the hell happened to you?' – I remember that the answers to that question are, by and large, indexed in this passport. It is the table of contents to the most tumultuous ten-year period of my existence. It's as if someone told me to get a life at the end of the 1980s and I took them literally. Looking at

the unshaven, stunned young man in the photo now, I can only think, 'You don't know the half of it, you git.'

On the morning of 2 March, I am sitting in a cafe in the King's Road, waiting for my new girlfriend to come and get me. My friend Pat, who has since moved back to London, is once again my waiter.

She picks me up in her car. As she drives me back to her flat in Olympia, I watch London scroll past the passenger window while making the sort of unappreciative remarks one might expect from a first-time American visitor of no particular sophistication.

'All these "TO LET" signs,' I say. 'Why hasn't anyone defaced them so they say "TOILET"?'

'Because no one here is that stupid,' she says.

'A lack of initiative, is what it is.'

The ten days go by in a blur. I have no bearings; I'm always lost. She drags me round a series of indistinguishable pubs to show me to a series of friends. On one such occasion I am wearing an old St Louis Cardinals T-shirt I found in a box of old clothes collected for a friend whose house had burned down – a shirt rejected by a homeless person with no possessions. 'This is my new American boyfriend,' she says, presenting me with two flat palms, 'in his national costume.'

I spend all my time trying not to look surprised by stuff, but every experience has something quietly remarkable about it. Cigarettes come out of the machine with your change taped to the outside of the box. There are more national newspapers than there are TV channels. Everybody has a tiny hotel fridge and no

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one ever suggests it's too early in the day to drink beer. London is unexpectedly old-fashioned and louche, and I am mostly charmed by it.

One night the English girl drives me to a Greek restaurant.

'We're meeting my friend Jason,' she says as we pull up. 'He's the last person I slept with before you.'

'Are you kidding?' I said. 'I can't go in there now.'

'Don't be such a baby,' she says. 'Come on.'

Something else unexpected happens during these ten days: we fight. Not the whole time, but more than twice. I cannot now remember anything about these arguments other than the impact they had on me. Our relationship was, in face-to-face terms, barely three weeks old. It seemed far too soon to have rubbed away the veneer of goodwill that comes with initial infatuation. Why are we arguing already? Either she is the most disagreeable person I've ever met, or I am the most infuriating person she's ever met (I should say that, after twenty years of marriage, it's still possible that both these things are true).

I am also profoundly annoyed because being happy and in love had been a major part of my holiday plans. I keep thinking: I took a week off work for this! I broke up with my girlfriend! I didn't come all this way just to visit the Tower of London.

Worst of all, she doesn't seem to share my fear that falling out at this early stage is reckless, or a bad omen. She enters into these arguments without showing the slightest worry about the damage that might result. Maybe she doesn't care.

I've never before had romantic dealings with anyone quite so direct. When she gets angry she does not cry, or attempt to explain her feelings of exasperation. Disagreeing with her is like facing an angry neighbour who has told you to turn down the music one time too many. Two months after we first met, she still scares the shit out of me.

Having committed myself to the high-wire act of a transatlantic relationship, I find myself struggling to cope with the hour-to-hour business of being together. I begin to suspect there is an element of sabotage in her attitude; maybe she sees the bickering as a kind way to euthanize a non-viable love affair. The day of my return flight is fast approaching, and we have no long-term plans. We have no plans at all.

When the final morning arrives, cold and soggy, it seems like the end. I make my own way to the airport in a state of bereaved resignation. I'm not at all sure the English girl is still my girlfriend. This, I realize, is what most long-distance relationships amount to: a brief, heedless romance, an expensive visit apiece, and a tacit acknowledgement of defeat. The English girl has a new job, and is about to buy a flat with a friend. She is embarking on a life in her own country that has no room for me in it. As the Gatwick Express crawls through South London, I think about what I'm going back to: my dead-end job, my stupid life, my tiny room, my gigantic, empty bed. The last place I want to be is home.

It's ironic, I think to myself as I glare through the window at a stately procession of back gardens, that a

train service calling itself the Gatwick Express moves so slowly that I could keep up jogging along beside it. What a stupid country. After a few minutes the train comes to a complete halt. Twenty minutes later, it has still not moved.

I call her from the airport.

'I missed my flight,' I say. There follows a brief, unbearable silence.

'Christ,' she says, pausing to blow smoke. 'Come back in on the train and I'll meet you at Victoria.'

In comparison to the outward journey, the brisk thirty-minute ride to London is a mere flashback: suburban gardens and quilted scraps of wooded ground flash by, reversing, and to some extent undoing, the abortive first leg of my trip home. I'm prepared for her to give me a hard time for being hopeless, but as we drive back to the flat she's in a giddy mood.

'You picked a good day to miss a plane,' she says. '*Reach for the Sky* is on telly.'

So we spend the afternoon sitting on the floor with a bottle of Bulgarian wine, watching an old black-and-white film. The extra day feels like a reprieve, twenty-four hours of happiness robbed from an unpromising future. Having never seen *Reach for the Sky*, I'd been expecting a weepy romantic saga, not the life story of double-amputee fighter pilot Douglas Bader. It appears to be her favourite film of all time. I think this is probably when I know she is the one for me.

Midway through Douglas Bader's rehabilitation, her friend Miranda – the one she's supposed to be buying a flat with – rings to say she's pregnant. A little later she

rings again to say she's getting married. In an instant, the future turns fluid.

I catch a flight home the next day; the day after that, I quit my job. I write a letter to my English girlfriend, telling her that as soon as I get my tin legs I'll be flying again.

That's my version, anyway. My wife remembers events slightly differently, insofar as she remembers them at all. When I reminded her of this particular turning point recently, she claimed not to recollect anything significant about it.

'You missed your flight,' she said. 'I remember that. Then you left the next day.'

'And then I came back,' I said. 'In June.'

'That's right,' she says. 'Were you made redundant or something?'

'No, I quit.'

'Oh. With a view to what, exactly?'