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an extract from
How Not to Disappear

Written by
Clare Furniss

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Chapter four

From: hattiedlockwood@starmail.com

To: wilde_one666@starmail.com

Subject: NOT BEHAVING LIKE A KNOB: A BEGINNER'S
GUIDE

I've been ignoring you, Reuben, but a) I don't suppose you've noticed and b) even if you had, I'm resigned to the fact that you wouldn't even know why. So let me help you out.

I know you're **terribly** busy lounging around on beaches and everything but you're supposed to be my friend and part of what that entails, dearest Reub, is NOT FORGETTING ABOUT ME JUST BECAUSE I'M NOT WHERE YOU ARE.

So, here is a short guide to not being COMPLETELY CRAP: (YES I KNOW I'M USING TOO MANY CAPITALS BUT I DON'T CARE.)

- 1) Open laptop or take phone from pocket*
- 2) Write friendly, informative message, featuring amusing

anecdotes and asking after the wellbeing of your dearest friend (me)

3) Send

4) Go back to whatever more interesting thing you were doing

*Ideally when sober enough to type

Not difficult really, is it?

ANYWAY because I am a generous and forgiving person I am writing to you anyway.

So, I know you're probably still getting over the driving test excitement but I have more thrilling news . . . I have discovered a mystery long-lost relative. A great-aunt to be precise. Her neighbour phoned earlier in the week and told me about her. Gloria. She's my dad's aunt and she's not very well so she wants us to go and visit. But the weird thing is, none of us knew anything about her till now. No one ever mentioned her before. Do you think there was some massive family feud? Or maybe she's got a criminal past or she was locked up in one of those awful lunatic asylums or something? I hope it wasn't something boring like someone being left out of someone else's will or not turning up to someone else's wedding. Mum's being funny about it. She says it's because she's so stressy about work and Carl's wedding madness. But also I reckon it's because this old lady is related to Dad. I don't know. It's like she wants to pretend she was never married to him. Anyway, I've decided I'm going to go and see the great-aunt – Gloria – on my own. Everyone else is off having an adventure.

You're in France (I assume) being an international playboy. Kat's in Edinburgh being a drama queen. Admittedly, going to see my great-aunt isn't quite as glamorous as partying in Biarritz or wherever you are but still, it's better than another day at the Happy Diner. I was having a totally rubbish day at work and I just told Mel that's it. I'm going. There's nothing you can do about it.

Other than that everything's the same. Of course.

Hattie x

PS Please tell me you know really that Jack Kerouac is an American novelist, poet and literary iconoclast and NEVER, under ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, played for Chelsea.

In fact, my conversation with Melanie hadn't happened quite like that. I'd been on my break and Mack had said, 'Coming outside? Or have you still "given up"?', waving a pack of Marlboro Lights at me. And I'd gone, because it was a lovely sunny day and the staff room in the Happy Diner where we have our lunch was hot and airless and full of angry wasps, which are my all-time nemesis. And also because I really, really wanted a cigarette, and because I just wanted everything to be like it always is, and I thought what harm can it do, really? But then outside had been just as hot and everything smelt of traffic fumes and the cigarette had just made me feel sick and dizzy and a bit sad.

Mack looked at me.

'You all right?' You seem a bit down.'

I shrugged, because I didn't quite trust myself to speak, and Mack said, 'Hey, what's up, Hats?'

He's a good bloke, Mack. Not the sharpest knife in the drawer, if you know what I mean, but kind. I managed to say, 'Oh, you know,' but I knew I was going to cry and I think he did too, so I just legged it to the loos and locked myself in a cubicle and cried in there. And I was just thinking how wrong it was that I'd become the sort of person who's forever crying in toilets, when I heard the door go and someone came in. I sat and waited for whoever it was to go to the loo and then go away but they didn't, they just made lots of clattering and hissing noises, so eventually I had to wipe my eyes and go out. And when I did it was only Evil Melanie, spraying her non-lank hair until it was this kind of rock-hard halo, surrounded by a hanging cloud of Elnett fumes that made my mouth taste of chemicals. She stared at my face, which I thought I'd done an okay job of cleaning up in the toilet cubicle, but could now see in the mirror was all smeary and puffy, and said, 'You've been crying, haven't you?' Queen of Empathy, she is, our Mel. I mumbled something about hay fever, as she got out a bottle of perfume, dabbing some on her neck and then, horrifically, into her monumental cleavage. And then she fixed me with this deeply unnerving look and said, 'I've thought you've been looking a bit peaky recently. And don't think I haven't noticed Mack sneaking you extra pancakes when you've been on your breaks.'

And I panicked big time, because Melanie has this amazing instinct for gossip and sussing out people's darkest secrets. According to Mack, she worked out Big Jim's dad was gay before Big Jim did. So I said, 'Yeah, my great-aunt's really ill actually. I didn't want to say anything but it's really getting to me.' And then without planning it, I said, 'I was wondering if I could swap my shifts so I can go and visit her.'

She gave me a hard stare. Asking to swap shifts is a worse offence than poisoning the customers, in Mel's book.

'We think she may not have long,' I said, and I sort of did a bit more crying, for effect.

'Yeah okay,' she said. 'You'll have to make it up next week, though.'

'Thanks Melanie,' I said. 'Really appreciate it.' And she said, 'Here, borrow my mascara. You look a right state.' When I'd finished sorting my face out she said, 'You sure that's all it is? Nothing else going on? You can tell me if there is, you know.' And I said, 'No, that's all,' and practically ran out of the loos before she could say anything else.

When I got back to the staff room, Mack had left some pancakes for me, covered with a plate to stop the wasps getting them, which set me off crying again, but luckily no one was around to see.

From: wilde_one666@starmail.com

To: hattiedlockwood@starmail.com

Subject: Re: NOT BEHAVING LIKE A KNOB: A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

What? NO! Are you out of your tiny mind? You're going to meet someone you've never heard of who claims to be your mysterioius great-aunt? This is a terrible idea Hats. Really. Possibly your worst ever. And there's some pretty stiff competiton for that particular accolade.

It's like paying money into the bank account of whoever sends the emails saying they're the son of the deposed king of Nigeria. Did they ask you for your pin number/date of

birth/mother's maiden name/inside leg measurement? Your 'great-aunt' is probably some evil fraudster type with a terrible beard and a yacht full of Bollinger and glamour models all funded by gullible fools like you, and you'll end up on Watchdog sounding like a right bloody mug and all the viewers will laugh at your idiocy. Or even worse the aunt will turn out to be a serial-killer pervert with a penchant for short buxom know-it-all redheads. And when you get there you'll be led down to a dungeon filled with such people, all chained up, wearing metal bikinis like Princess Leia when she's Jabba the Hut's slave, and you'll all be forced to submit to his every twisted desire (ok we may possibly be wandering into the world of my own private fantasies here) But anyway the point is that as you are led down to your doom all your fellow stunted flame-haired know-it-alls will all be wailing HOW COULD WE HAVE BEEN SO STUPID AS TO FALL FOR THE GREAT-AUNT STORY? HOW?! WE, WHO ALWAYS THOUGHT WE WERE SO BLOODY CLEVER.

And in twenty-seven years time, when I come and rescue you, (because obviously I will have been on the case, Sherlock-Holmes-like, for all those years, following up leads the slow witted police miss, never giving up on you) you will be wizened and grey and broken while I will have retained my youthful good looks and possibly even become sexier with age in a sadder worldly kind of a way. And the first thing you will do is to put your aged, bony hand on my surprisingly muscular upper arm and say REUBEN I TOTALLY SHOULD HAVE LISTENED TO YOU. IF ONLY I HAD HEEDED YOUR WISE WORDS ABOUT NOT FALLING FOR THIS NONSENSICAL DRIVEL ABOUT GREAT-AUNTS NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE HAPPENED.

But on the plus side there will probably be a film of it and Johnny Depp will play the older me.

So don't say I didn't warn you. And anyway even in the highly unlikely event that she does turn out to be your actual great-aunt, do you really want to spend all that time and money going to visit an ill pensioner you don't know? You'll probably just spend the whole day looking at old photos of her long-dead cats and changing incontinence pads. Although I suppose she might be really ill and secretly a millionaire and put you in her will.

I'm JOking. Obviously.

DON'T GO.

xR

PS I am fine, thnks for asking. Oh no, you didn't did you – Is that part of the sulking thing? Well I am tickety-boo actually (just to annoy you) apart from my liver which is um not. Anyway must go. These cocktails won't drink themselves you know. xx

From: hattiedlockwood@starmail.com

To: wilde_one666@starmail.com

Subject: Re: NOT BEHAVING LIKE A KNOB: A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Reuben,

I am not completely stupid. I have not given anyone my pin number. And while you may think it's a waste of time to

show some concern for an elderly relative, I don't.
Anyway, you just enjoy your cocktails.

PS BUXOM? You make me sound like a medieval serving wench. And I'm not a Know-It-All. I'm just cleverer than you.

I press Send. But the truth is I'm smiling as I do it. It's the first proper email I've had from Reuben since he left. It's funny. It's Reuben funny. It's everything I've been missing about him. And he's been thinking about me.

'Emailing Reuben by any chance?'

Carl comes into the kitchen as I'm typing and I shut my laptop quickly.

'No.'

'Yes you were.' He grins. 'I know you were. You were smiling as you were typing.'

'No, I wasn't. Anyway, I was . . . researching something, actually. For college. About . . . Shakespeare.'

He laughs and nods in a *Yeah, right* kind of a way. Bloody Carl.

'So have you heard from him?'

'Who? Shakespeare?'

'*Reuben*,' he says, pretending to cuff me round the head. 'Smart arse.'

'Oh, him. Yes, as it happens, I have.'

'Nice of him to get in touch. Still living the high life is he?'

I shrug. 'No need to make it sound like a crime, Carl. If your dad was loaded and lived in the south of France wouldn't you go and stay with him instead of staying here being a personal trainer to the aged?'

'How long's he going to be out there for then? Has he said?'

'Dunno. He's staying with his dad for a while and then maybe going travelling a bit. Maybe a few months. Maybe a year. I don't think he knows.' I try to sound bored, as if it's no big deal to me what he does.

'So he's definitely dropped out of college? Not coming back?'

'Nope.'

'Shame,' he says. 'For you, I mean.'

'Why for me?' I say. 'I'm the one who's going to get my A-levels and go to university and have a brilliant time and then get an amazing job and earn loads of money and change the world.'

Unless I have a baby.

'Course you are, Hats,' Carl says. 'That's my girl. I just meant you'll miss him.'

I shrug.

'Well, fair play to him, I suppose,' Carl says. 'You can learn a lot by seeing the world. Wish I'd done more of it myself when I was younger. Travel and adventure is in some people's nature you know. Restless souls. Itchy feet.'

'Oh what? Like *yours*, you mean?'

He nods, completely missing my sarcasm.

'That'll be your athlete's foot. You should really see someone about that.'

Carl's always going on about how he's got Irish and Guianese grandparents and how he's got Traveller roots back in the distant past; he's trying to make himself sound a bit exotic and interesting. He grew up in Surrey. It's like how he always says he wants *Wild Thing* played at his funeral. As Kat said, he doth protest *way* too much. Although

Kat did once say she thought he was quite sexy in an obvious, toothpaste-ad kind of way, for a dad. I pointed out that he's not a dad and that, what with Kat being gay and all, she may not be the best judge of Carl's sexiness, obvious or otherwise. She rolled her eyes and said, 'Just because people fancy girls it doesn't mean they can't fancy boys too.' And I said, 'Yes, I'm perfectly well aware of that, thank you, but have you ever actually once in your life fancied a boy?' And she said, 'Not yet.' So I said, 'And if you ever do fancy a bloke, is it really likely to be Carl?' And she said, 'Ew, no, not in a billion years. But he's the kind of bloke my gran would describe as "dishy",' and I said, 'EXACTLY, THANK YOU, I REST MY CASE.'

Mum doesn't seem to notice that Carl isn't in fact exotic *or* interesting. Maybe that's what love is: the failure to notice your beloved's inherent ordinariness. She once said Carl was her Heathcliff, by which I think she meant all rugged and good-looking and in love with her, rather than a sadistic, damaged and obsessive madman. And I laughed and said if someone made *Wuthering Heights* into a musical and there was a TV show to choose who would play Heathcliff, they'd want someone who looks exactly like Carl to win. He's like Heathcliff Lite. Heathcliff ÷ ageing boyband singer + catalogue model = Carl. When I told him this he thought it was a compliment. Mum knew it wasn't.

'Oh, you're soooo clever aren't you, Hattie? So bloody *clever*.'

'What, so now being clever's a bad thing?' I said innocently. 'That wasn't what you said when I was doing my exams.'

Mum gave me her *Someone-Please-Remind-Me-Why-I-Ever-Had-Kids* look.

I smiled at her sweetly but I knew really I was being a bit mean so I offered to make Carl a cup of tea and he was pathetically grateful, which made me feel bad but also completely right about the Heathcliff thing.

The most annoying thing about Carl, apart from his tendency to wear tight-fitting pastel-coloured clothing and the fact that he can never quite manage to walk past any kind of reflective surface without checking himself out, AND the fact that he can refer to himself in the third person as The Bingo Wings Buster, is that he never quite knows whether he's supposed to be my parent or my friend. When he moved in four years ago he was full of how he's not trying to replace anyone and it's not his role to give me a hard time blah-de-blah. But he can't help himself. It'll be evening, and Mum'll be upstairs working or out at one of her things – yoga or Italian or Mindfulness – and he'll be all 'Hey, Hats, how you doing?' or 'D'you wanna bottle of beer?' and I'll know he's about to start on one of his 'I Know I'm Not Your Dad But ...' conversations about how important it is to knuckle down and get my grades, or drugs, or positive body image or whatever. Or about Reuben.

The last one was about Reuben, back before he went away. Looking back, it makes me think maybe Carl's not as stupid as he looks because it was way before what happened with me and Reuben, that weekend in Norfolk. I didn't know it was going to happen then. Didn't even want it to. Not really. Not *exactly*.

'I hope you know what you're doing with Reuben,' Carl had said.

'I'm not doing anything with Reuben.'

He raised an eyebrow.

'Not like that,' I said. 'I've told you. He's my *friend*.'

Carl just stared at me.

'What?' I folded my arms and stared back. 'Are you seriously telling me you think it's impossible for men and women to just be friends?'

He shook his head. 'I *know* men and women can just be friends, Hattie.' He looked at me. 'But I don't think you and Reuben can.'

I didn't know what to say for a second. I felt myself blush, as though he'd caught me doing something embarrassing.

'I'm going out with William, in case you'd forgotten.' (Which I was at the time. More or less. It was just before he dumped me because he felt our relationship had begun to 'lose its spark'. I was furious that lethargy and not wanting Reuben to be right meant I hadn't got round to dumping him first.)

Carl laughed.

'What?' I said, folding my arms and trying to look him in the eye but not quite managing it.

He shook his head. 'William.'

'What about him?'

'Well, exactly.'

I tried to think of an indignant reply, but somehow nothing came out so I just sat there with my mouth open, knowing I looked stupid.

'Don't think I haven't noticed you ignoring his phone calls,' Carl said. 'Making excuses not to meet up with him.'

'No I don't. I really did have a headache.'

'I thought you were dyeing your hair.'

'I was going to. But then I . . . forgot.'

Carl smiled and shook his head. 'Hattie, I can always tell whether it's Reuben or William calling by your face when you look at the caller ID on your phone. When it's William,

your face looks a little bit like it did that time when you put your boot on and Alice had filled it with jelly. Whereas when it's Reuben—'

'Yeah, all right, Carl,' I cut in quickly. 'I know you're just trying to wind me up and you're not going to. So you might as well give up now.'

He laughed and then carried on looking at me in his sad-eyed way that would probably get his Senior Zumba ladies a bit over-excited but I think just makes him look slightly vacant. 'I'm only trying to help, Hats. I just don't want you to get hurt. I like Reuben, I really do. He's funny. He's fun to be around. But he's—'

'He's what?'

'He's . . . ' Carl paused. I could tell he was choosing his words carefully. 'He's not a person you want someone you care about to fall in love with.' He looked away from me as he said it.

'Well,' I said lightly, 'if anyone I care about looks like falling in love with him, I'll be sure to pass on the warning.'

We haven't really talked about Reuben since then, until now. I've avoided Carl's 'I Know I'm Not Your Dad But . . .' chats since what happened between me and Reuben in Norfolk, in case he could tell somehow. And, since I missed my period and started to suspect, I've tried to avoid conversations with Carl completely. Somehow he seems to have a knack for getting under my skin. Perhaps he really does understand me better than I want him to. I can't risk him working out that something's not right. Sure enough, he now gives me one of his concerned and understanding looks.

'You sure everything's okay, Hats?'

'Course.' I smile brightly. 'My days are spent serving deep-fried lard to the ungrateful and the morbidly obese. My evenings are spent being tortured by my deranged siblings. I'm totally living the dream.'

I know Carl likes my sarcasm. Sure enough he laughs.

'You know Al and Ollie think the world of you. And your mum and I really appreciate you doing your bit looking after them over the holidays while we're both so busy.'

'I couldn't take you away from your work, Carl. I'd feel personally responsible if the Hips, Bums and Tums of south London started to sag because of me. I couldn't have that on my conscience.'

As I'm speaking, an email from Reuben appears. I'm probably happier than I should be that he's got in touch again so soon. I try not to let it show but of course Carl clocks it.

'Oh,' Carl says with a smirk. 'Who's that from then? Shakespeare?'

I open it, already grinning as I read:

From: wilde_one666@starmail.com

To: hattiedlockwood@starmail.com

Subject: Re: NOT BEHAVING LIKE A KNOB: A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Oh by the way Hats I'm going travelling for a while. with Camille. french girl ive met. she's very . . . well french if you know what i mean. tres hot Hattie. tres tres hot. you'd like her.

anything going on in your lovelife or shouldn't i ask? please dont tell me youve got back with William. life's too short

for Williams Hats. Find a male Camille that's my advice. that sounds wrong. find yourself a hot enigmatic frenchman is what I mean. doesn't even have to be french. could be i dunno italian. german even if necessary. basically someone you don't really speak the same language as. that's my advice to you Hattie. you can have that for nothing. Much better idea than going round bothering elderly relatives who might really be psychopaths, don't you think?

xR

'You sure you're all right, Hats?' Carl says. Not bad news is it?'

'I said I'm fine, Carl,' I snap. 'Anyway, shouldn't you be at octogenarian boxercise or tasting gluten-free wedding cakes or something?'

From: hattiedlockwood@starmail.com

To: wilde_one666@starmail.com

Subject: Re: NOT BEHAVING LIKE A KNOB: A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Reuben.

a) No. There is nothing going on in what I laughingly refer to as 'my love life'.

b) Why oh why must you keep bringing up William? I stopped going out with him FIVE MONTHS ago Reuben. I think maybe you have some kind of weird William fixation. Please never mention him again. He was SO INCREDIBLY DULL that if you didn't keep going on about him I'd have completely forgotten him by now. Let's all MOVE THE HELL

ON, shall we? We all make mistakes – you more than most.

c) How am I supposed to find a smouldering non-English-speaking sex god in the Happy Diner hmmm? Tell me that.

d) Is your recipe for a happy and satisfying relationship *really* to find someone you can't talk to? Ever considered a career as an agony aunt, Reuben? Relationship counselor? No? Good. DON'T.

e) I'm not sure why Camille being hot and French should mean I like her, though I can certainly see why it means you would.

Hattie

But Reuben's last email has made my mind up completely about visiting Gloria. If I don't go Reuben will think it's because he told me not to and he'll think he was right. And he's not. He's an idiot. I'm going to prove him and Mum wrong, and I'm going to prove to myself what a good person I am, thoughtful and responsible and caring, not feckless and stupid, which is how I feel.

Yes. I don't care what everyone else says. I'm going to visit Gloria.