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Opening extract from

Boys Don't Knit

Written by

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1st July

Mum and Dad are at it again. They're doing that thing where they make food-based double entendres all the time, thinking it goes over our heads. It goes over Molly's head, she's only six and she never listens to Mum or Dad anyway. I guess it used to go over my head too, when I was little. But I'm older now, and more sophisticated. I know what they're up to and it makes me want to vomit.

On Friday night, we had chicken Kiev and baked potatoes. As she was serving, Mum said, 'Dave, could you get the spuds out?'

And Dad said, 'I'm always happy to get my spuds out for you.'

This is what passes for humour in our house. Though that wasn't quite as sick-making as today when we had a BBQ down in the park. Mum was carrying too much from the car and nearly dropped a pack of burger buns.

'Let me take hold of your baps, Susan,' Dad said.

'Don't squeeze them too hard,' Mum replied, giggling.

How can I make them stop?! Surely they know I understand the concept of the double entendre, even if Molly is too young to get it. In fact, I know they know, because Dad winked at

me as he made the bap comment, trying to include me in the 'joke'. They've both been trying to be more inclusive and matey with me lately, ever since the lollipop lady incident. It's like they've talked it over and decided it must have been their fault and that I need more support or something. I liked it better the way it was when they'd just ignore me and offer no support whatsoever.

Mum and Dad never really got angry with me about the lollipop lady, even when that policewoman told Dad he might be made to attend an Effective Parenting Course. Even when I had to go to the Magistrates' Court. Even when I got probation for twelve months. It's the first time I've ever been in any real trouble. To be quite honest, I think a part of Dad was pleased I'd finally done something lairy, as he put it. He's always telling me stories about the scrapes he used to get into with his friends.

Anyway, Bap-gate wasn't the only embarrassing thing that happened at the BBQ today. Dad insisted on bringing his big iron bucket barbecue, which is about the size of the Olympic Cauldron. We'd had to come in his work truck as it wouldn't have fitted in the back of Mum's MPV. Dad had filled it with equal thirds of wood, briquettes and fire-lighters. Thankfully Molly had disappeared into the woods down near the river, looking for animals.

'Are you sure you're allowed to light that thing here?' I asked, uncertainly.

'The sign says you're allowed barbecues as long as they're raised off the grass,' Mum said. She was sitting on a bench, twisting her long fingers, practising her magic by making boiled eggs disappear, one by one.

'I think, though,' I said, 'that they mean those little disposable jobs you get from Robert Dyas, rather than the nuclear fission-fuelled thing we've got. We only have one pack of sausages and some chicken drumsticks to cook. We're not burning a Viking chief.'

Dad ignored me, as he usually did when he thought I was fussing. That's what they think I'm doing. Fussing. But it's not fussing, it's worrying, and with good reason, because people around me like to do stupid things.

It was then that I noticed Megan Hooper with her family. They were at a picnic table about a hundred metres away. There she was, sweet Megan Hooper with her ample chest, sitting next to her weirdly hot mother and opposite her normal-looking dad and her quiet little brother with the enormous Bambi eyes. They had a little supermarket BBQ and were laughing and eating posh crisps one by one and they just looked so neat and organised and I found myself wishing I was part of their family.

'Seriously though, Dad,' I said haltingly, as he squirted flammable jelly over the critical mass. 'Maybe you should take out some of the fire-lighters?'

'Nah, it'll be fine, Ben,' he replied. 'You need heat when you're cooking on a barbecue. You've got to make sure it's hot enough to cook the meat all the way through, do you see?'

I could see all too well. So I stepped back, and he stepped forward and dropped in a match.

The ensuing fireball must have been visible from space.

It's OK, though, because Mum's since drawn his eyebrows back on with eye-liner. We had to wait forty-five minutes before it had cooled enough to cook on and then it only took

about twenty-six seconds to burn the chicken. But just when I noticed that the sausages were looking comparatively good, Dad took away my appetite.

'Give that one there to your mum, she likes a nice, long sausage.'

I couldn't bring myself to look over at the Hoopers while all this was going on, but I could feel them looking back at my messy family standing around Mt Vesuvius, their eyes on my back, hotter than the barbecue itself.

Why does no one ever listen to me? This is how I got into trouble in the first place, because no one would listen to me.

3rd July

Today I received a letter from Claudia Gunter at West Meon Probation Services. The letter was reminding me that under the terms of my probation I need to keep a 'journal'.

She sent a template for me to follow, as though I were some illiterate.

This annoys me. I've been keeping a diary for more than half my life. It's true that some of the earlier entries were a little rough. I read back through them last month and it was mostly self-pitying rants about not being allowed to watch the snooker (why did I even ever want to?) or having to go to bed before I'd finished sorting out my stamp collection. I'm aware that keeping a diary is considered part of the female domain, but in my life, with the family and friends I'm stuck with, it is the only reason I haven't run away and gone to live in the woods.

Anyway, I clearly remember telling Ms Gunter about my diary during our interview after the court appearance so I assumed there'd been some sort of mistake. I phoned her on the number at the bottom of the letter. It took an age for her to come to the phone and she seemed a little distracted when I explained who it was.

'Who? Fletcher? Oh, hello, Ben, how are you getting on?'

'I'm well, thanks, but I think there's been some confusion with the letter.'

'What letter?' she asked.

'The letter I received today asking me to keep a diary.'

'Oh, OK,' she said. 'The computer sends those. It's just a reminder.'

'I told you in our meeting of the seventh of June that I already keep a diary.'

There was a slight pause. Did I detect a sigh?

'Well, that's fine then, isn't it?' she said. 'Just keep going with your normal diary.'

'But there's a template attached to the letter. And the letter says I need to hand it in at the end of the probationary period.'

'OK,' she said slowly. 'What's the problem exactly, Ben?'

Claudia Gunter is clearly a busy woman, which perhaps explains why she was being a little slow. I pointed out that I couldn't very well keep going in my usual diary if I had to hand it in. It's leather-bound.

'Should I stop writing in my usual diary,' I went on, 'and switch to the template?'

'You can't do both?' she asked, sounding tired.

'I write a lot and won't have time to do both. I'm doing AS

levels this year.'

'So use the template,' she said.

'But then I'll need to hand it in,' I told her. 'And I won't have it any more.'

'Can't you photocopy it?' she spluttered. 'Look, Ben. You're a bright kid, if slightly . . . unusual. I'm not really that worried about you, to be honest, I have a hundred and four other clients, most of whom don't speak English, some of whom have murdered people. One of them killed an ice-cream vendor and ate his kidneys out of a waffle cone. Just sort it out, OK?'

I told her I would and hung up.

Ben Fletcher
3 Standish Place
Hampton
28th June

Dear Ben,

As part of your Fresh Paths Social Contract Probation Journey, you have been asked to complete a personal journal, giving as full an account as possible of the events of each day and recording, in detail, your thoughts, concerns and feelings. You are expected to complete at least two entries a week for the full term of your Probation Journey (twelve months). At the end of this period you will be asked to hand the journal to your probation officer. Please be assured the contents of the journal will be strictly confidential. Whilst the Home Office may use the information therein for

statistical or research purposes, your name will not be attached to the document. You should therefore feel free to write whatever you like about your life, your family, your school and your circle of friends.

Research shows that only a small minority of teenage boys keep diaries and we realise this may be a daunting prospect. We have attached a series of simple guidelines to help with your initial entries. Feel free to adapt or ignore these template suggestions if you feel confident to write the journal in your own style, remember, this is a private dialogue between you and your diary. As long as the writing is legible, it's up to you how you control the format.

I wish you success in your endeavour.
Yours

Claudia Gunter
West Meon Probation Service

4th July

Introduce yourself to your journal – remember, your journal does not know who you are, it can't see you, it only knows what you choose to write in it.

My diary knows very well who I am, thank you. But for the purposes of the exercise, I'll go along with this for now. I'm all over the template idea, believe me. Call me Mr Template. Otherwise known as Ben Fletcher. My friends sometimes call

me Bellend Ben which I'm not so keen on. I am small and thin with black hair and brown eyes. I don't like sports, though my mum thinks I like football. I don't like cars, though my dad thinks I like Jeremy Clarkson. I don't like fighting, though Lloyd Manning from school thinks I like being punched in the back of the head. What do I like? I like writing and reading and maths and organising things. I sort of like spending time with my friends, though I'm constantly worried about what new trouble they're going to get me into.

Why have you chosen to keep a journal?

Again, and without wishing to belabour the point, I've been keeping a DIARY for years. Now here comes West Meon Probation Service with their fancy template arrangement. The reason I chose to keep a DIARY was because sometimes my head is so full of thoughts and worries and confusion that the only way I can make sense of it all is to write it down on a clean, lined sheet of paper. Once it's written down, it's sort of locked into place and I can stop worrying about it for a bit. I suppose that at the heart of it, I keep a diary to try and bring a bit of order into my mad world.

5th July

What were the circumstances surrounding the events that led to you being placed on probation?

The problem with my friends is that they don't really think things through. Not like me. My role is always to be the one

who points out how mad/dangerous/illegal their escapades are. They're not bad people. They're just stupid people. And needless to say, they never listen to me. Somehow though, I'm always the one who ends up paying for it.

So this is what happened, the whole truth.

It was a Thursday. We were hanging out in my garden because I had to look after my sister while Mum and Dad were both out. Molly was in the overgrown hedge at the bottom of the garden stalking young blackbirds with a fishing net.

My friends and I were discussing the fact that Anaya Anabussi was having an end-of term party on the Friday which none of us had been invited to, but Gex reckoned he could get us in because Anaya's sister Seneira fancied him.

'I don't really want to go,' I said. 'I don't like parties.'

Too much noise, too many people. I get anxious. And, since I'd just end up hanging out with Joz, Gex and Freddie anyway, why did we have to go to someone else's house to do it?

'They won't let us in without a bottle of spirits each,' Freddie said.

'Well, that settles it,' I said, relieved. 'None of us has any money. Let's just hang around here.'

But Gex had other thoughts. There's a side of him that makes me uneasy. He thought we should go and shoplift some booze from Waitrose in town as they aren't so security conscious as Lidl, where they employ Rod Hogan as the security guard and he used to be the bouncer at Wicked nightclub before he got fired for snotting the DJ.

'Why is shoplifting always the answer?' I asked.

'What do you suggest, Hermione?' Freddie asked. He

lay sprawled on the creaky deckchair hidden behind retro sunglasses. He was starting to go pink. 'Maybe we could raise money by selling fairy cakes at the Farmer's Market?'

Joz laughed. I gave him a look. Why wasn't he backing me up? I know he didn't like breaking the law any more than I did.

'I'm just trying to be, you know, moral about it,' I said. 'Shoplifting is stealing. There must be ways of raising money honestly.'

'Yeah,' Joz said. Finally he was speaking up. 'Freddie, can't you sell the dope I gave you last week?'

'Nah, smoked it,' Freddie said as I buried my face into my palms.

'Oh cripes,' I moaned. 'I really don't think this is a good idea.'

'Just chill, my man,' Gex said, taking charge. 'As you're a wuss, you can be look-out, innit.'

I sighed. Gex had totally missed the point again. I'm not cut out for stealing. I like things to be done fair and square. I'm racked with guilt if I help myself to more ice cream than anyone else at dinner. I once found a wallet on the street with £25 in it and handed it in to the police station. I'm a good guy. I'm a civilian.

'I especially don't like the idea of stealing from Waitrose,' I said, trying to make a joke out of it. 'It doesn't matter so much if you nick from the 99p shop on Argyll St, you're doing them a favour helping to clear the stock, but Waitrose? It just feels wrong.'

'They don't sell alcohol in the 99p shop,' Freddie pointed out, even further adrift from the point than Gex had been. Freddie's not the brightest, as we discovered in French last

year when he admitted he thought 'conjugate' was a scandal involving a stage magician.

'Why do you want to go to this party anyway?' I asked Gex, trying a different tack. 'You don't fancy Seneira; you said her new haircut makes her look like Dr Christian off *Embarrassing Bodies*.'

'Crumpet is crumpet,' Joz contributed unhelpfully.

'You don't look at the mantelpiece when you're poking the fire,' Freddie agreed.

'True dat,' said Gex. 'And if I make myself available, it gets you guys into the party, you feel?'

'Oh right,' I said. 'You're doing it for us.'

'Taking a hit for the crew,' he said.

Anyway, so after my parents came back, we biked up the hill into town and there I was sitting on the bench behind the checkouts at Waitrose, heart pounding, pretending to text but really watching out for the guard. If he turned up I was supposed to send a warning group text to everyone's phones, which were on vibrate. The plan was that Freddie and Joz would grab a couple of bottles each, fill up a trolley with loads of other crap, then when no one was looking they'd slip a bottle under the front wheel of the trolley and push it towards the checkout, rolling the bottle as they went. If anyone saw, they'd just act all surprised like 'how did that get there?' As the trolley got close to the lanes, they'd stop suddenly and the bottle would keep rolling, right through the checkout aisle and under the seat where Gex was sitting. He'd shove the bottles into a bag and walk right out. Then Freddie and Joz could just abandon the trolleys and go out the other door.