Me and Mr Darcy

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Published by
Hodder & Stoughton

Extract

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First published in Great Britain in 2007 by Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline

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A Hodder paperback

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A CIP catalogue record for this title
is available from the British Library

978 0 340 84113 6

Typeset in Plantin Light by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound by Mackays of Chatham Ltd, Chatham, Kent

Hodder Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder and Stoughton Ltd
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

Chapter One

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single girl in possession of her right mind must be in want of a decent man.

There's just one problem . . .

'. . . so we had a drink each and shared a pizza, but you asked for two extra toppings on your half, which means you owe . . . Hang on a minute, I've got a calculator on my BlackBerry . . .'

Sitting in a little Italian restaurant in Manhattan's Lower East Side, I stare across the checked tablecloth and watch, dumbfounded, as my date pulls out his CrackBerry and proceeds to cheerfully divvy up the bill.

. . . where on earth do you find a decent man these days?

I'm having dinner with John, a thirty-something architect I met briefly at a friend's birthday party last weekend. He seemed nice enough when he asked for my number – nice enough to share a pizza with on a Tuesday evening after work, anyway – but now, watching him hunched over the table, number-crunching, I'm fast realising I've made a mistake.

'. . . an extra seven dollars seventy-five cents, and that includes tax and tip,' he declares triumphantly, and shows me the screen to prove it.

A very big mistake.

To be honest, I blame Mr Darcy.

I was just twelve years old when I first read *Pride and Prejudice* and I fell for him right from the start. Forget fresh-faced Joey from New Kids on the Block or leather-clad Michael Hutchence from INXS – whose posters I had tacked to my wall – Mr Darcy was my first love. Devastatingly

handsome, mysterious, smouldering and a total romantic, he set the bar for all my future boyfriends. Snuggled under the bedcovers with my flashlight, I couldn't wait to grow up so I could find a man like him.

But now I have grown up. And here I am, still looking.

Digging out a twenty-dollar bill from my pocket, I pass it to John.

'Have you got the seventy-five cents?' he prompts, his hand still outstretched.

You have got to be kidding.

Except he's not.

'Oh . . . um . . . sure,' I mutter, and begin rooting around in my change purse.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not Renée Zellweger. I don't *need* a man to complete me. I have a career, I pay my own rent, I have a set of power tools and I know how to use them. And as for the other thing, well, that's what battery-operated toys were invented for.

I hand John the seventy-five cents. Then watch in disbelief as he proceeds to count it.

Still, that doesn't stop me hankering after a bit of that good-old fashioned romance I'm always reading about in books. Or daydreaming about meeting someone who could sweep me off my Uggs and set my pulse racing. A dark, handsome, *faithful* man, with impeccable manners, brooding good looks, witty conversation and one of those big, broad, manly chests you can rest your head upon . . .

Instead, in the last twelve months I've been on one disastrous date after another. Now, OK, I know everyone has a bad-date story to tell. It's completely normal. Who hasn't been out with Creepy Guy/Mr Nothing in Common With/The Forty-something Fuck-up (delete as applicable, or in my case, don't delete any of them)? It's just part of being single. It has to happen once. And twice is bad luck. *But a whole string of them?*

For example, here are a few off the top of my head:

1. Bart had 'issues with intimacy'. Translated, this meant he wouldn't hold my hand as it was 'too intimate', but it was perfectly OK to ask me back to his to watch a porn movie on our first date.
2. Aaron wore white cowboy boots. Which is bad enough. But after cancelling on me at the last minute, telling me that he had to work late, I spotted the boots glowing in the darkness of the movie theatre that night. Scroll up and there was Aaron on the back row with his tongue down another girl's throat.
3. Then there was Daniel, the nice Jewish banker who invited me over for a home-cooked dinner. Unfortunately, he 'forgot' to tell me it was his mother doing the cooking. Sorry, did I say mother? I mean, *smother*. Five courses and three hours of listening to how fabulous Daniel was later, I managed to escape before she got out the baby photos.
4. And now there's John, otherwise known as Mr Chivalrous . . .

'So, how about we do this again?' he's asking me now as we're leaving the restaurant.

'Oh—' I open my mouth to reply but instead give a muffled yelp as John lets the door swing back in my face. I just manage to stop it with my elbow. Not that he notices – he's already on the sidewalk lighting up a cigarette.

Rubbing my bruised elbow, I join him outside. After the warmth of the restaurant the cold hits me immediately. It's December in New York and it's way below zero.

'What are you doing Friday?' he persists, raising his eyebrows and taking a drag of his cigarette.

Oh, hell, what do I say now?

I falter. Come on, Emily. You're both adults. It will be fine. Just be honest and tell him.

Tell him what? pipes up a little voice inside me. That you'd rather stick pins in your eyeballs than go on another date with him?

'Erm, well, actually—' I say in a constricted voice and then stop mid-sentence as he blows smoke in my face. 'I'm kind of busy,' I splutter.

Busy being too busy to go out with a complete dickhead like you, pipes up that voice again. Only this time it's yelling.

'Too many parties, huh?'

Trust me, I *so* want to be honest. Why let him off the hook with an excuse? Why protect his feelings? What about those of the next poor, unsuspecting girl he's going to date? It's my duty to tell him. I mean, not only is he cheap and rude, but he has hair plugs.

That's right. *Hair plugs*.

I glance at them now. Under the street lamp, you can see the neat little rows dotted across his shiny scalp. Tiny seedlings of hair planted in a desperate attempt to disguise his receding hairline. Despite my feelings, sympathy tugs. Oh, c'mon, don't be so mean, Emily. He deserves understanding and kindness, not judgement and derision.

Swallowing my annoyance, I force a smile. 'Yeah, 'fraid so.' I nod, rolling my eyes in a 'Phew, I'm exhausted from all this crazy partying' kind of way. Honestly, I should be an Academy Award-winning actress, not the manager of a quirky little bookstore in SoHo.

In truth I've been to one party. It was at the Orthodontists' Society and I had a cold. I spent the whole evening popping Sudafed and discussing my cross-bite, and I was in bed by nine thirty. The excitement nearly killed me.

'But it was nice meeting you,' I add warmly.

'You too.'

John appears to visibly relax and I feel a warm, virtuous glow envelop me. See. Look what a difference a few kind words can have. Now I feel really good about myself. Saint Emily. Hmm, it's got quite a ring to it.

Buoyed up by my success, I continue: 'And the plugs are amazing.'

'*Plugs?*' John looks at me blankly.

Shit. *Did I really just say that?*

'Er . . . I meant to say pizza. The *pizza* was amazing,' I fluster, blushing beetroot and trying not to look at his hairline, which of course my eyes are now drawn to with some kind of magnetic force.

Argghh. Look away, Emily. Look away.

There's an excruciating pause. We both try to pretend we're not aware of it. Me by picking my cuticles. Him by surreptitiously patting his hair and checking out his reflection in the restaurant window when he thinks I'm not looking. Guilt overwhelms me. Now I feel like a *really* bad person. Maybe I should apologise. Maybe I should—

In one seamless move, John takes a final drag of his cigarette, grinds it out under his foot and lunges for me.

Oh, God. This isn't happening. This can't be happening.

It's happening.

For a split second I freeze. Everything seems to go into slow motion. I watch him looming towards me, eyes closed, mouth open, tongue sticking out, and realise he's misinterpreted kindness for a come-on. Fortunately (or should that be unfortunately?), I've been on enough bad dates in the last year to keep my reflexes sharp, and at the last moment I come to and manage to swerve just in time.

His lips crash-land on the side of my face and he plants a sloppy kiss on my ear. Eugghhh. I pull away sharply. Even so, it's a bit of a struggle as he has his hand wrapped round my waist like a vice.

We spring apart and face each other on the sidewalk.

'Well, in that case, I think I'll grab a cab home,' he says curtly, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his pleated pants.

'Yeah, me too,' I reply shakily, wiping my spit-soaked ear with my sleeve.

Silence. We both stand on the kerbside trying to hail a cab. Finally, after a painful few minutes, I see the familiar sight of a yellow cab with its light on. It pulls up and I heave a sigh of relief and reach for the door handle, but John beats me to it. I'm pleasantly surprised. At last! A bit of chivalry.

Heartened, I soften and throw him my first real smile of the evening as he tugs open the door. Perhaps I've misjudged him. Perhaps he's not so bad after all.

Without hesitation, he jumps inside and slams the door.

'Well, thanks for a great evening,' he says, sticking his head out of the window. 'Happy Holidays!'

'Hey!' I yell, suddenly finding my voice. 'Hey, you've stolen my—'

But the cab takes off down the street with a screeching of tyres.

Abandoned on the slushy sidewalk, I watch the tail-lights disappear into the traffic and, despite my anger, I suddenly feel myself crumple inside. Unexpectedly my eyes prick with tears and I blink them back furiously. Honestly, what's got into me? I'm being ridiculous. The man was a total moron. I'm not upset. I'm fine, totally fine. And sniffing determinedly, I stuff my hands in my pockets and head off in the direction of the subway.

'You should have called the cops.'

It's the next morning and I'm at work at McKenzie's, a small, family-owned bookstore, where I'm the manager. I look up at Stella, my assistant, who's standing on a stepladder stacking books.

'Why? For stealing the first cab?' Smiling resignedly, I pass her more titles. 'Please, Officer, my date stole the first cab. He's not a gentleman. Arrest him.'

'No, not for that,' she retorts, putting one hand on her hip and pulling a horrified expression. '*For wearing pleated pants!*'

Stella and I met when she came in for an interview and bowled me over with her extensive knowledge of literature. At least, that's what I'd been expecting after reading her impressive CV. However, five minutes into the interview it became apparent that works of fiction weren't just limited to the bookshelves. Having just graduated from fashion college, Stella didn't have the first clue about books, thought a thesaurus was a dinosaur and finally confessed that the only thing she ever read was her horoscope.

'Well, at least she was honest, and honesty is very important,'

I'd pointed out to Mr McKenzie, the owner, as justification for hiring her.

To tell the truth, it had been a case of the lesser of several evils. With her bubblegum-pink hair and bizarre asymmetrical outfit that, to a fashion flunky like me, looked frighteningly fashionable, Stella had seemed like she'd be a lot more interesting to work with than some of the other applicants – such as Belinda, a self-confessed 'Internet geek' who spent every evening on her sofa updating her blog on MySpace, or Patrick, who was nearly forty, still lived at home with his parents and 'adored modern jazz'.

Exactly. Like I had a choice.

Three years and an entire rainbow of hair colours later, we're the best of friends, and although professionally speaking I'm her boss, most of the time it doesn't feel like that. Probably because when I give orders Stella ignores them.

'But seriously, Emily, you should have punched this John guy's lights out,' she continues, vigorously shoving a fistful of books on the shelf. 'If he'd stolen my cab I would have killed him.'

'I don't doubt it.' I nod. Behind all those wacky outfits and perfect accessories lies the fierceness of a Rottweiler. In fact, Stella once nearly killed an ex-boyfriend by squirting pepper spray at him during an argument over who should win *Survivor*. It triggered an asthma attack and he had to spend the night in the emergency room.

'So, what are you going to do now?'

'Delete his numbers.' I shrug, ripping the tape off a fresh cardboard box.

From the top of the stepladder Stella throws me a sympathetic look. 'Oh, fuck. I'm sorry, Em, that sucks.'

'Hey, I'm over it,' I say, doing my best to sound casual. 'Don't worry, I'm not upset over last night. More resigned.'

I'm trying to put a brave face on things, but to tell the truth, last night really got to me. It wasn't John that upset me – he was just the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. Or to put it

another way, the date that broke me. Because that's it. I've decided. No more disappointment, dashed hopes and disastrous dates. I'm done.

'You know, I have a friend who's got this really hot brother that's just broken up with his girlfriend . . .'

'Thanks, but no thanks.' I shake my head determinedly.

'But he's really great,' persists Stella.

'If he's that great, why did they break up?'

With the palm of her hand, Stella rubs her nose in concentration, her chunky wooden bracelets clanking loudly. According to Stella, ethnic is the new boho. 'Hmm, I'm not exactly sure. I think it might have been something to do with his drinking . . .'

I shoot her an incredulous look. 'You're trying to fix me up with an *alcoholic*?' I gasp indignantly.

'*Was*,' she retorts defensively. 'He's AA.'

'Well, then he's not allowed to date anyway,' I say firmly. 'It's part of the twelve steps or something.'

Stella looks suitably chastised. Chewing the purple nail polish from her fingernails, she waits mutely at the top of the ladder as I resume unpacking the paperbacks, peeling off the plastic wrapping and piling them up on the floor.

It's still early and the shop is empty. For a few moments we work together without speaking, until the silence is interrupted by the tinkle of the doorbell. I glance over and see a customer entering. A woman, wrapped up in furs. She catches my eye and smiles, before heading into the biography section.

'Why aren't men today like the men in books?' I continue, unpacking a pile of classics. 'Seriously, Stella, I've had enough of modern-day love,' I say firmly. 'And I'm sick of modern-day men. From now on I'm going to stick with the men in here.' I pause over a copy of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, fingering the cover affectionately. 'Just imagine being in a world where men didn't steal your cab, cheat on you or have an addiction to Internet porn, but were chivalrous, devoted and honourable. And strode across fields in breeches and white shirts clinging to their chests . . . yum . . .'

Absently flicking open the novel, I plunge straight into a sexually charged scene between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy. God, I love this bit. I lean against the bookshelf and continue reading.

'I mean, why can't *I* go out on a date with Mr Darcy?' I sigh wistfully. Pressing the open book to my chest, I gaze off into the middle distance.

'Oh, is he the cute guy who works at the Mac store?' pipes up Stella from the ladder.

I look up at her. Surely I didn't hear that right.

'Because I can try to get his number for you . . .'

'Stella!' I cry in disbelief. I knew her grasp of literature was slim, but this is unbelievable. Surely she's seen the movie at least. 'Are you telling me you *don't know* who Mr Darcy is?'

She looks at me warily.

'He's not the guy that works at the Mac store?' she asks tentatively.

'No!' I gasp impatiently. 'He's the sexiest, most romantic man you can imagine. Not only is he respectful and knows how to treat a woman, but he's this dark, brooding hero who's incredibly dashing and has all this repressed passion that's just waiting to be unleashed . . .'

'Jeez, he sounds like a female wet dream,' she giggles.

I throw her a sobering look.

'So, where do we find this Mr Darcy?' she asks in a subdued voice. 'I wouldn't mind meeting him myself.'

Picking up a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, I waggle it at her like a prosecution lawyer with a piece of evidence.

Puzzled, Stella narrows her eyes and peers at me for a moment, trying to work it out. Then suddenly it registers.

'*A book?*' she gasps in disbelief. 'This amazing man you're raving on about is a character in a *book*?' For a moment she glares at me, wide-eyed, then she stomps down the ladder and snatches the paperback from my hand. 'I'll tell you why you can't go on a date with Mr frigging Darcy,' she scolds. 'Because it's fiction.' Climbing back up the ladder, she holds the novel out

of my reach. 'He's not real. Honestly, Emily. Sometimes you can be such a hopeless romantic.'

She says it with such pity it's as if I'm suffering from a terminal illness.

'What's wrong with being a hopeless romantic?' I demand defensively.

'Nothing.' She shrugs, plopping herself down at the top of the stepladder and hugging her bony knees to her chest. 'But I'm afraid you're going to have to face facts. You need to live in the real world. This is New York in the noughties, not the pages of –' breaking off, she glances at the blurb on the back of the book '– a nineteenth-century novel set in the English countryside.'

Then Stella descends the ladder, grabs the rest of the pile of *Pride and Prejudice* and stuffs them unceremoniously on the shelf behind her. 'Repeat after me, Em: *Mr Darcy does not exist*.'