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Operation Sunshine

Jenny Colgan

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Extract

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Chapter One

'Holidays suck,' Lydia was proclaiming loudly, stabbing her straw into her drink to make her point. We were in a new West End bar which had been recommended in *Time Out*. Places like this normally intimidated me, but Lydia loved them; her dark eyes flashed at the cheesily good-looking barman, and her movements got more emphatic. You'd notice her.

'They SUCK!'

'Well, that's your opinion,' I said, a little stiffly under the circumstances. But I was the one who had brought up the subject of holidays, and now I was being told that, therefore, my dreams and desires were effectively a big pile of steaming dog turds that I'd just deposited between us on the bar.

'It's not an opinion,' she said. 'It's a fact. Everybody

knows. You've got to fly in a shitty plane, which is always shit, sit on some stupid bus for nine hours, sleep in some stupid room that's nothing like as nice as your own, listen to other people shouting all night, get sunburnt, get hungover, spend all your money, have a shit time, get knocked over by a car, remember you forgot to buy travel insurance, get your leg amputated and get flown home on a cargo plane to face three years in debtors' prison.'

'And that's what always happens, is it?' I said.

'Pretty much.'

I sighed. This wasn't going exactly as planned.

You always see, don't you, other people's holiday snaps, where they're patently having the most fabulous time somewhere incredibly exotic, and you ask them about their holiday (if you have a lot of time on your hands at work, which I do) and their faces go all slack and dreamy and they get a faraway look in their eyes and say something stupid like, 'Well, we'd get up early in the morning and go running along the surf on the empty pink sand, then pick coconuts and fruit for our breakfast in the hammock.' And you think, Eh? How come I got vomited on by a child all the way from Gatwick to Fuerteventura and ate chips every night for a week?

Or they organise massive gangs of chums.

'Oh, yes, thirty of us are going sky hiking in the Peruvian Andes, then we've taken a luxury villa for a month in a cloud forest.'

How do people do that? Do I have the wrong friends? I

can't get any three of mine to commit to going to the cinema on the same day without two cancellations, one cancellation retraction, one falling out between two people who then refuse to sit together, a skirmish over the M&Ms and nobody paying me for the booking fee.

'My last holiday,' said Lydia, tossing back her long black hair, 'I copped off with a bloke who lives two doors down from my mum. Ten years of my life getting away from that place, and then what happens?'

'Well, if you knew that, why'd you cop off with him?'

'Durr! Because ON HOLIDAY they make you drink big goldfish bowls full of spirits until you're nearly unconscious, that's why. Chalk another one up to "why holidays are shit" by Lydia Li.'

'Well, THAT is why you have to listen to me,' I said.

I was doing my best to be assertive, whilst not being blinded by the retro disco lighting. It's important to be assertive with Lydia. Not that she's the most insanely competitive woman that ever lived. OK. She's the most insanely competitive woman that ever lived. If *you've* broken your leg, *she* was once skiing in St Moritz with Prince William and she did the world's highest ski jump and broke her neck and the doctors said it was a miracle and they gave her the Nobel Prize for prettiness.

You never ever wear new clothes if you're going to see Lydia. If she likes them she'll say, 'Oh, I like your outfit – very WAG.' (Even if it's, like, a grey sack made out of plasticine.)

And if she doesn't, she'll say, 'Oh, that was seventy per cent off down the King's Road – is that where you got it?'

We work next door to one another. We're receptionists on Harley Street in London, where all the plastic surgeons reside.

Lydia is 50 per cent convinced that one day a rich man is going to come and pick his wife up from surgery but instead get blasted by a lightning bolt and fall in love with her instead. I've told her this is both unlikely – rich men NEVER bother to pick up their wives, and their wives wouldn't want them to – and immoral, but she won't be moved. Her other 50 per cent is convinced that she's going to pull a young doctor. She doesn't date very much. No wonder she went mad on holiday.

So being assertive, my friend Bailey says, would help me no end. Growing up with three evil brothers in a very small house meant I had to develop a very loud mouth to even get fed, or rescued when the horrid beasts I had to share a home with, also known as John Jr, Patrick and Cassandro (Mum went a bit mental at the end), had alighted on some new form of torture involving holding me down whilst they shut the automatic door of the garage on my head, or setting fire to one of my pigtails, or threatening my pet rabbit with dire dismemberment whilst tying me to a tree. It wasn't what you'd call idyllic. I'm only stunned (and occasionally disappointed) that they're all now rational adults roaming free and not in some prison somewhere.

We didn't go on foreign holidays when I was young, partly because we didn't have much money for all six of us, but mostly because Mum and Dad knew the boys would behave so unbelievably badly that we'd all end up getting deported.

So we always ended up in a caravan park in Wales, where the boys would instantly turn feral and run free, returning only for frequent top-ups of sausages and ice cream. We always stayed one week in one place and one week in another so that the boys didn't get enough time to form an international criminal conglomerate with all the other children on the site.

I'd sit inside with my parents and we'd eat crisps and play card games as the rain beat against the window whilst I indulged my fantasies of being a cosseted only child. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't the same as returning to school sporting a suntan and ankle bracelet with ribbon braids in my hair, and talking about mysterious dark waiters and romantic young men on motorbikes and staying out all night, like the other girls in my class.

When I was seventeen and just about to start college, I had my first all-girls' holiday, to Malaga. I looked forward to it for months. I stuck the tickets above my desk and fantasised solidly with my friends about the gorgeous boys who were going to fall madly in love with us, and spent every Saturday going in and out of Dolcis and Ravel choosing exactly the right pair of white stilettos. Tanya and Claire

promised that we'd get free drinks everywhere and that it would be sun, sea and snogging all the way. I pored excitedly over letters in *Jackie* that said, 'I fell in love on holiday but now I don't know if I'll ever see him again,' and vowed to take the problem page's wise advice, and not put too much hope into a holiday romance when it probably wouldn't work in the rainy days back home (although I was sure mine would).

So it did come as something of a disappointment when it turned out that our one hundred and twenty-nine pound special was a room in a grubby white building next to a small pool filled with pissing children and surrounded by bull-necked families who'd brought their own packets of lard and deep-fat fryers.

This wouldn't have mattered if we weren't chased around by tragic-looking reps effectively begging for a huge share of our holiday money to take a 'party cruise', which we duly did. Tanya pulled one of the reps, who it then turned out Anne-Marie, another, slightly plumper girl, had a thing for, precipitating an enormous row which split the camp and lasted the whole of the rest of the holiday. Which hardly mattered to me, I was so shivery and shaky with sunburn (I had covered my mousy locks in Sun In and sat out through the heat of the first two days) I couldn't think straight, and Los Animalo's only disco, the Slutty Slug, gave me a pounding headache the first five thousand times they played the 'Macarena'.

Between hugely intense levels of secretive bitching, dirty

looks, Anne-Marie showing how over the club rep she was by snogging a different bloke every night, until they started hanging around outside our apartment like stray dogs, it was not what you might call the holiday of a lifetime, particularly after I got home and my finkish brothers developed a new game called 'Peel the Skin Off Evie'.

Since then I'd kind of sworn off holidays. At college, whilst other people went off Interrailing and trying to make it through Italy on five quid a day, I worked in the local pub and tried to look interested when people showed me pictures of the lions they'd seen on safari in Namibia, or of the Tuscan villa they'd hired, or of them falling hilariously off a big yellow banana and I'd think glumly about the night Anne-Marie got sangria sick on Tanya's new coat and they went for each other's hair.

And now, well, I was older, Bailey had got me a job in London working for some very grumpy doctors on Harley Street, which sounds a lot more important than it actually is, and I have some new friends, which, post-holiday, seemed the best thing to do under the circumstances.

And I wanted a holiday. I hadn't been away for two years, apart from to visit friends who were working overseas which was less of a holiday (they never wanted to take you to the tourist attractions) and more of an extended piss-up. I'd been single for eighteen months. Eighteen months. I felt like a born-again virgin. It was a desert out there. Or at least it was if you didn't have tiny thighs and a modified

nose, like the clients I saw every day. They seemed to do all right.

And it hadn't exactly been wine and roses before then. My last boyfriend, Bill, had . . . well, it had never really progressed to the right moment to go on holiday. There isn't really a right moment, sometimes. With Bill I always felt like I was saying, 'Fancy going on holiday?' and he'd hear, 'Fancy getting a mortgage and getting married tomorrow and having nine children and you're never allowed to go out ever again and I'm about to put on four stone?'

He once condescended to take me on a long weekend barge trip with his unpleasantly sporty friends. It was the most boring thing I've ever done in my life. Travelling at two miles an hour whilst getting up and down to open locks isn't a holiday, it's exercise for a sixty-year-old recovering from a heart attack.

Maybe it's me. Maybe holidays and me are just not destined to go together. Maybe I'm designed to spend the rest of my life waking up at 7.40 a.m. and eating Weetabix for breakfast, even though I hate it, because apparently it means I won't feel hungry again until lunch, even though I always do and have a KitKat at eleven. With four fingers if it's raining. I'm not allowed to eat them in front of the clients though, we do a lot of liposuction, and they might turn wild and tear the wrapper out of my hands.

Back in the bar I toyed with my white wine. The rain was lashing down outside. I wasn't sure it was just about a

holiday. I think I need more excitement in my life. I shouldn't get so excited, for example, when a new flavour of Pringles comes out. I'm twenty-seven. I feel I should be exploring the world; having mad passionate love affairs; dancing in the surf.

The city is fine, but it's hard to feel truly free with an Oyster Card. There must be more to life than magazine day (Tuesday – my favourite day. I especially like it when the stars tell you their diet and exercise secrets when we've had them in two weeks before).

'What if . . .' I said to Lydia. She really is intimidatingly beautiful, which makes the clients think they'll end up looking like her. I'm 'approachable-looking' according to Dr Bennet, which I think means they hired me so that even if an operation goes horribly wrong, the patient will still come out thinking, Well, at least I still look better than the receptionist. 'What if I organised a holiday so fantastic, you came back totally relaxed and had the best time you'd ever had and it was in paradise?'

Lydia looked at me sceptically. 'What, and it's free?' she said.

'No, of course it's not free. What are you talking about?'

'Oh. The way you're talking about it made it sound like it would be free.'

'No. But I'd organise it and do all the legwork.'

'Who's going? It'll have to be somewhere fancy.'

'Like all the really fashionable places,' I said casually, as if I was totally au fait with where those might be.

'They don't have to be fashionable.' She sniffed. 'They just need to have rich people in them.'

'Which makes them expensive,' I said.

'Well, duh.'

'OK, so do you have a secret trust fund I've never heard of? Are you not really a receptionist, but actually an heiress slumming it for a reality TV show?'

She shrugged. 'You asked what it would take to make me go on holiday with you, when it's a given that all holidays suck. And I'm telling you – somewhere posh and full of rich blokes but not too expensive for us.' She looked at me. 'Actually, I'm not sure we should go together after all.'

'What's wrong with me?'

Lydia didn't say anything, just played with her glass. 'Nothing. Oh, I don't know. Maybe I should take a busty blonde, you know? For contrast? Enhance my prospects?'

And she wasn't even joking. Proximity makes you some funny friends.

I wasn't downhearted. Yet. Next stop Bailey. I've known Bailey for ever. We grew up on the same street, and spent a lot of time hiding from my brothers.

His mother, in the manner of a zookeeper feeding fish to sharks, kept throwing him together with the beasts in the hope that they'd all become friends, rather than Bailey becoming Chump.

I think of Bailey as my backup. He's not gorgeous, but he

is funny, well off and really smart. Lydia keeps going on about wanting to meet him. I do my absolute best to keep them apart; I don't want her getting her talons into him.

It didn't help that he was very small and very clever and absolutely refused to know when he was beaten – even the time John Jr buried him headfirst in the sandpit he still came out spitting mud and threatening to curse them unto the third generation (he was going through a *Lord of the Rings* period at the time).

To escape the sheer brute force he took to hanging about with me, even when I made him spend an entire summer as a patient whilst my girlfriends and I played *Casualty*. I was always fascinated with medicine. It was one of the biggest disappointments of my life when I entered my third year of physics, chemistry and biology, hoping to romp into a fabulous career as an emergency doctor (this was pre-*ER*, but nonetheless I think I already had George Clooney in mind before he was even invented), only to discover to my shock and horror that I didn't understand a word of it. Not wave forms, not Boyle's law, not photosynthesis.

How I was ever going to perform emergency transplant surgery when I couldn't even remember the parts of the flower I did not know, so I switched to business administration instead. Mind you, there's not a lot I don't know about healing times for bhleroplasty (that's your upper eyelid). Sometimes I think if I work at the Saint Harley Clinic for long enough I'll become a plastic surgeon by osmosis, another

scientific concept Mr Gahery failed to explain adequately to me in Year Nine.

Still, I do get to do quite a lot of interesting stuff at work – I've sat in on various ops, so I'm not the least bit squeamish, even for pus. And I run the back office too, all the paperwork. Well, most of it; Dr Bennet has a secretive streak. It's a more prestigious job than Lydia's, which drives her crazy.

Bailey came and found me a couple of years ago when I was drowning in a hospital basement on this ludicrous temp job I'd picked up, coding people's injuries in their medical files. So: hit on head, 310. Hit on head with brick, 310-12; hit on head with fish, 310-96; hit on head by flying saucer, 310-977, etc. It was doing my brain in.

'I've found a job for you,' he'd said, observing me over the top of his lunchtime hummus sandwich. 'It's got windows and daylight and everything.'

I liked it when Bailey did things like this for me. Made me think he cared.

'Oh, yeah?'

'Harley Street.'

'I don't believe in private medicine,' I'd said snootily.

'Do you believe in . . .' and then he'd mentioned a figure nearly twice what I'd been gritting my eyes up for.

'I also have very flexible moral standards,' I added (unnecessarily), thinking about Top Shop's new collection. Bailey briefed me for the interview too, to make me appear a bit classier than I actually am, and I was in.