

Going the Distance

Time and tide wait for no man. But post-graduate students would, for at least five minutes, before they inevitably drift from the lecture hall. The moment I passed through the door and locked eyes with him, I had a feeling that he was not the kind to be so generous with his time, nor accustomed to waiting on anyone else's. As soon as he clocked my checked flannel shirt and burnt orange beanie, he made the snap decision that I wasn't worth his, and broke away from my gaze, making a rather deliberate effort to frame the moment as purely accidental.

Helen, from behind the bar, beckoned me over with unusual urgency.

"What time do you call this, then, Rod?"

"What? It's only been five minutes, I swear." I shot her an easy grin, checking a non-existent wristwatch on my arm, as I leaned down on the bar top with one elbow. Helen tutted with annoyance, her eyes returning to the damp glassware in her care.

"Twenty minutes! You made that poor sod wait twenty minutes for you. When he stumbled in here and tried to order the *house wine*, I genuinely thought this was it. Waterloo's finally been gentrified."

"You didn't scare him too badly, did you? He looked as if he'd witnessed a bloody crime when I walked in." Super Hans

"Hey, all I did was try to get him to loosen up a bit. I just asked him whether he had a rough day at the bank, that's all." She sounded genuinely proud of that joke.

I leaned in, thirsty for intel. "Christ, what did he say in return?"

"*Actually, the court.*" Helen said, putting on a terrible impression of a royal, "And then he kind of froze up, like he'd said the wrong thing."

I stroked my beard, pondering. "So, what do you reckon? Jury duty, defendant out on bail or—?"

Helen placed her dry glass aside before grabbing another wet one, briefly meeting my eyes, before continuing her polishing. "Nah, definitely a barrister. Seen plenty of his type on the tube. They all get off at Holborn. None as bloody handsome as this one, though. Where the hell did you find this guy, Rod? And why the hell did you bring him here?"

I paused for a second, thinking about my approach.

"I was scouted by a literary agent—"

Helen looked up at once.

"What? With one of your famous outlines?"

Her jab stung, but I pressed onwards, smirking, "—to go on a blind date with her younger brother. Thought it would be a laugh, honestly, like an icebreaker seminar. Might be good material for a book one day! Besides, as she says, 'it's not who you know, it's who you—'"

Helen abruptly interrupted my punchline with a cough, rolling her eyes with exaggerated flair. "Well, I really hope your plan isn't to quote *Peep Show* all night to 'clean-shirt' final boss over there." She glanced quickly over her shoulder at my date, as if checking he was still there. "Cor, he is well posh, isn't he? Even his hair's a bit floppy."

"Probably because you lot crank the heating up so high in here. Christ, Helen, I thought you cared about the environment." It became obvious from Helen's expression that I had touched a nerve with that comment.

"Oh, piss off, Plato. Quit stalling and go talk to your man-friend."

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As I made my approach to the table, his attention snapped to meet mine, but I immediately recognised his intention: his finger raised into the air, his face signalling alert. My own hand was faster. With one decisive motion I plunked my rucksack on the ground by the opposite sofa. Both his expression and his finger slackened.

"Ben? I'm Rod." I beamed at him as I presented my hand over the table. Unsurprisingly, his once raised hand had now folded back onto his lap.

His mouth was agape. "I am awfully sorry! I thought—"

"—that I worked here?" I gave him a soft chuckle to pretend I didn't take offence. "Yeah, I get that a lot. Hazard of not dressing up, I suppose, but I didn't have any teaching today."

Ben gave a slow affirmative nod before cautiously taking my outstretched hand, his grip just as uncertain as the expression on his face. With a quick brush down of the seat, I sat down to meet those pale blue eyes.

"You look like you were expecting somewhere with tablecloths. Sorry to disappoint."

I couldn't be certain my sarcasm would land, so I arched my eyebrows for good measure. Thank God, he chuckled at that, even if it was with furrowed brows. The expectant half-pout remained on his face as he, yet again, waited for me to lead the conversation.

"Let's look at this as a new experience," I began, compromise in my voice. "It doesn't have to be terrible. Let's try to have a good time. I promise you, the croquettes here will change your life."

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My little pep talk did not seem to have its intended effect. The date slowed to a crawl not three minutes after placing our order. My questions about pop culture and personal interests were met with curt answers and more anxious hand-rubbing. His furtive glances between his flashing BlackBerry on the table and the door told me everything I needed to know. At that point, I wasn't even sure we'd last until the food arrived. Well, if I was losing him anyway, we might as well go nuclear.

"So," I began, with more confidence than I quite felt, "did you come here straight from work?"

Ben let out a heavy sigh, rubbing his hands together incessantly. "Ah, well, yes—I do apologise. I was trying to get everything sorted for tomorrow, and I didn't really have the time to go home and change appropriately."

"Christ. This late?" It was pushing half nine by then. "What do you do, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Ah—well. I'm a barrister. A junior one, I suppose."

"Oh, is that so?" I replied, with a tad more enthusiasm than needed. "I hope it's not too much of a liberty if I pick your brains a little. What do you think about decriminalising non-lethal self-defence weapons in the UK?"

At the mere mention of the topic, his eyes lit up. His body, guarded throughout the evening, shifted at once into active engagement. And he did exactly what I had asked of him: he gave me his thoughts on the matter, rather than his opinions. He dismantled my hypotheticals with casual ease, with none of academia's usual condescension, but with the grace of someone who had plainly done the reading and was more than happy to help me catch up.

Admittedly, the question was a total gambit, but I was more than happy with the results I'd received. I watched his body loosen with every argument he explained away. Although he made no attempt to unbutton his jacket, the hyper-alertness of those first few minutes gave way to something far easier. Before long, he was leaning back with one elbow along the back of the sofa, his legs crossed. I had to admit, he was rather performative with his free hand as he navigated the subject, and his diplomatic precision was not merely effective, it was genuinely impressive. Worst of all, it elevated his already boyish good looks to entirely new heights.

I was so busy observing this entirely different person sitting opposite me that it didn't occur to me that I had run out of cards left to play. Helen returned to the table at exactly the right moment, her tray loaded with our food.

It was Ben who thanked her first—rather too politely for this establishment—instead of me, for the imminent rescue from what was shaping up to be a fairly public ego-execution. He had already snapped back into his engaged position by then, facing her with complete sincerity as she set down our plates. As I helped rearrange them on the table, I immediately noticed the tactical disappearance of his BlackBerry.

Ben's eyes were now assessing the options before him, his hands ironing his pleated trousers restlessly in anticipation.

"Help yourself," I said, gesturing towards the tapas.

I did not need to repeat myself. Ben practically lunged for a croquette with his fork while I picked up another between two fingers.

"So," he asked, finally taking a relishful bite of his prize, "what do you teach at King's?"

I could tell from his face that I had been right about the croquettes.

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It quickly became apparent that Ben had never been on a proper date before. Every time he was handed the floor, he seemed to treat it as an invitation to share another hilariously out-of-touch facet of his life: how he had grown up on a 'small' estate just outside of Oxford, how he believed his butler secretly hated him because of his insistence on calling him Master Benedict, before quickly following up with a plea for me never to do the same. Surprisingly, he had a great deal to say about meritocracy, a subject he seemed genuinely passionate about, and unsurprisingly, his variation involved his own background of Oundle School boarding, Bristol Law, and the injustice of watching his learned 'friends' from Oxbridge sail seamlessly through Chambers on gilded waves.

I also began to notice that Ben used the time I was talking about my novel to shovel food into his mouth, tactfully leaving me just enough of each portion. To his credit, he still nodded along and asked appropriate follow-up questions, but I could only admire the commitment for so long before I broke my own flow.

"You know," I said, "the plates won't judge you if you finish them."

Ben glanced up, almost dropping his fork. "Where are my manners?" He said it while half-shielding his mouth. "I am terribly sorry. I skipped lunch today," he added. Then, after the slightest pause: "...and breakfast."

I saw my angle and took it. "With looks like yours, I don't think you need to go to such lengths to keep your figure."

It took him a second to register what I meant. Then he let out a nervous burst of laughter and took a long swig of the cider I'd convinced him to order.

I could tell he liked me. And despite his command of the law, he seemed to have no working vocabulary for flirtation, but the semiotics of his body were doing remarkable work on his behalf.

"So, when did you come out?" The question slipped out rather too comfortably. On paper, it was a sound follow-up question, inert and perhaps a little generic, but Ben's reaction was instantaneous. His eyes were now darting, our eye contact wavering. "I—I am not... *out* out, I suppose..."

"Oh."

"I—It's not that I don't want to... you know. Theo knows, of course. But it's... not becoming. I mean, for my career that is. Sorry..."

I must admit, I had forgotten about his literary agent sister. He began to drink again, giant gulps this time, as opposed to his modest sips from earlier. Was this why he had agreed to stray this side of the Thames? The thump of his glass hitting the table a little too hard broke me from my thoughts. I flashed a glance over at Helen. She had noticed too, and now looked back at me, awaiting directions. I gave her the signal for extraction.

Helen appeared beside the table moments later. "I am sorry, but I am going to have to ask you guys to leave." She landed her line perfectly with a careful mix of politeness and seriousness.

Ben looked up at Helen in resigned acceptance, possibly priming another rambling apology. It was almost too easy. I couldn't let Helen upstage my heroics.

"Alright, alright!" I cut in before Ben could speak, with a touch more volume than necessary, "At least let the man use the facilities first!"

Helen gave me an irritated glare. *What are you doing?* I could almost hear her say. But I pressed on regardless.

"You need to use it, right, Ben?"

Helen now directed her attention onto me, primed to give me a deserved earful. However, before I could absorb the nature of Helen's disapproval, Ben's rounded vowels—somehow posher with his tipsy slur—tumbled out of his mouth, commanding my attention.

"I'm fine, honestly. I can manage. *Please!*"

The ferocity of the plea wrong-footed us both. We turned to see that Ben was now standing at his full height, and I only just realised how tall he really was. He had about a head on Helen, who was by no means a short woman. Sure, I still had about a good inch on him, but that was beside the point. We froze, our brewing argument dying on our lips, as though some higher authority had finally seen fit to weigh in.

Then, as though nothing had transpired at all, he turned to Helen with his disarming smile. "May I get the bill please? The food this evening has been wonderful."

Perhaps now was not the best time to bring up that Theo had comped me for this date.

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Outside the microclimate of the bar, the early spring air felt more like winter. I had my hands shoved into my pockets as we walked wordlessly down Lower Marsh towards Waterloo Station. I wasn't sure whether Ben was upset with me for the theatrics we—no, I—had pulled inside, but his expression was hard to read in the cold.

When I realised he had fallen behind, I turned, bracing myself for the dreaded 'it's not going to work out'. Instead I found him braced against a nearby wall, doubled over, one palm planted against the surface while the other worked frantically at his neck.

"Ben?" I approached with some caution, in case he was about to be sick. "Are you all right?"

As I got closer, I noticed that his tie was loosened and that he was trying to pull free the small brass stud from his starched collar. Finally, he straightened up to take in deep breaths of the cold night air, his collar flapping open. He hastily pulled it closed again once he realised I was watching, scrabbling to fix the stud back in place with quivering fingers.

"Hey, let me." I stepped towards him and reached out. His gaze lifted to meet mine. After a sheepish glance around, he gave a small nod.

After relieving him of both the collar and the pin, I quickly realised the task was proving more difficult than I had initially imagined. Not because it was mechanically complex, but because his proximity was proving to be an intolerable distraction.

At this distance, intricate details of him seemed magnified: the warmth of his neck against the back of my hand; the faint trace of woody cologne, absurdly mature on him; the jagged rhythm of his breathing; the nervous movement of his throat as he swallowed.

Deep down, I knew I should have backed off immediately after fixing the stud. But instead, I found myself reaching to straighten his tie, smoothing out the silk with delicate care. My gaze followed the knot up to his collar, then continued upwards, drifting past his jawline. My attention

lingered at his mouth, now slightly parted, as I felt my own lips begin to mirror his before I had quite realised.

Ironically, it was also Ben's lips that snapped me back to the present—or perhaps just how pale they were, even in the streetlight. I stepped back and saw that the colour had drained from his face. Only then did I realise I had been holding my breath. I raised my arms preemptively, bracing to catch his fall. It was all the invitation he needed. As he crumpled into my embrace, I felt the burden of his day collapse onto me. All the pieces fell into place. Him working late. Him skipping meals. He was making a real effort to come on this date, with a complete stranger, no less. I held him closer. A fierce protectiveness had taken hold of me then, for this man who had run himself ragged to be here tonight with me.

"Come on, Ben," I whispered in his ear, as I tightened my hold on him, "Let's get you home."

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It was 2007, and the city was not nearly as progressive as it wanted us to believe. Taxis still rolled past us without a second glance. I threw my arm up in a gesture of annoyance at my latest attempt, before letting it fall, slapping uselessly against my thigh. My other arm was grasped firmly around Ben's torso, propping him up. We definitely looked to be more than just friends. Perhaps sensing my frustration, Ben stirred momentarily, muttering, "Let's just take the tube, I promise I can manage."

"Stop it, Ben, you can barely stand!"

The truth was, I had no idea where Ben lived. For all my supposed meticulous planning, I had failed to do a simple Google search of the address Theo had given me before leaving my work desk. Besides, with Ben as closeted as he was, I could hardly drag him onto the tube half-conscious and draped over me.

Through sheer persistence, we did eventually manage to hail a cab. As soon as the doors were open, Ben collapsed onto the backseat.

"He won't throw up, I promise." I said half-heartedly, as I climbed in after him.

The driver dismissed the issue with a wave of his hand. "Where to?"

I blurted out the address before I had the chance to think.

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It was only once the cab crossed Waterloo Bridge that Ben broke the silence between us.

"How did you know where I lived?" He muttered, eyes half closed. His head had found its way onto my shoulder at some point, while my rucksack sat awkwardly on my lap.

"Theo gave it to me."

"Oh." A resigned smile faintly passed over his face before his eyes fluttered shut again. I continued to watch him as he drifted out of consciousness. The obvious next gesture immediately occurred to me, but I thought better of it. The bar had been unreasonably warm, and I was not nearly confident enough in my own deodorant to risk lifting an arm in the confines of this cab. Instead, I fixed my attention on the meter, watching it tick steadily upwards until I found myself wondering how far we had left to go. When I finally looked out of the window, the imposing figure of the Albert Memorial was looming into view on my right.

Kensington. The realisation of Ben's postcode hit me in a flood of panic. Oh, how the tables had turned. I was the one who now felt out of place. Out of my depth.

"Christ, it feels like I am in a Richard Curtis film." I blurted out, with a burst of anxious laughter. The driver gave me a snort in reply, which was audience validation enough. Ben lifted his head from my shoulder. "What was that?" he asked groggily.

"Don't worry about it." I muttered.

I turned back to the window in affected nonchalance, one elbow propped against the glass. My hand covered my mouth as if it could contain the damage. For once I hoped Ben's cultural illiteracy worked in my favour.

It was not long before we pulled up outside an impressive Victorian townhouse, the kind that makes you suddenly conscious of your footwear. I palmed the driver a twenty-pound note.

"Keep the change, mate," I said, as I began to hoist the half-asleep Ben out of the cab.

"Night, boys," the driver replied with a wink. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

He stayed long enough to watch us make our way up the path before driving off.

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The first thing that hit me as we entered the townhouse was not the grandeur of the hallway, but the lingering smell of some expensive dried-up room diffuser. Seeing as there were no shoes by the door, I opted to keep mine on. Besides, I had no intention of staying long. We moved quickly through to the handsomely furnished living room, which had fancy wall switches that let you control the lamps without ever touching them. I decided on a dimmer setting; the last thing I wanted was to worsen Ben's migraine. He collapsed immediately onto the sofa, dragging a cushion beneath his head.

"Stay here. Let me get you some water," I told him, leaving him under the watchful eyes of himself and his family in the portrait above the mantelpiece.

The low hum of the fridge greeted me as I stepped into the kitchen. It was the kind that dispensed water too, of course.

The glassware was easy enough to find, arranged behind the only cabinet with a glass pane, each tumbler lined up in neat, evenly spaced rows. I could not help feeling as though I were standing in a showroom. It was only then that it struck me how tidy the whole kitchen was, the surfaces unmarred by watermarks. As if by instinct, I glanced over my shoulder before testing my hypothesis. I chose a spot near the pristine coffee machine, partially obscured by its shadow. One swipe of my finger across the surface revealed a thin layer of dust. I hastily rinsed my finger under the tap to remove the evidence, filled the tumbler, and made my way back to the living room. The warm, cosy ease of the room from before now felt hollow. Simulated.

Upon my return, Ben bolted upright from the sofa to receive the glass, one hand still nursing his eye. He blurted out an exasperated word of thanks before chugging the water in audible gulps. I stopped him before he could finish the glass.

"Wait, save some of that. Do you have any paracetamol? For your eye, I mean."

He surfaced for air before replying, "I believe there should be some in my ensuite bathroom upstairs."

He didn't hesitate to take my hand as I hoisted him up. As I turned off the light, I made a mental note to correct the misplaced cushion before I left. The water seemed to have helped Ben sober up significantly, as we made short work of the ascent. Reaching the first floor, I noticed there was only one door slightly ajar, which rather gave the game away.

I felt bad stepping onto the plush carpet in my trainers, though another pair of Ben's dress shoes lay carelessly by the door, exposed in the spill of hallway light. The room, once illuminated, stopped me short. The floor was strewn with clothing: underwear and socks, dress shirts, chinos collapsed in crumpled heaps. By the desk sat an overflowing wastebasket full of sandwich cartons and drink bottles, with stray snack wrappers scattered across the beige carpet.

Ben suddenly broke away from me, catching me completely off guard. He kicked off his shoes to join the discarded pair and trudged straight to the wardrobe, where he began to disrobe with ritualistic care. Opening the sliding wardrobe door, he removed a hanger, placed his jacket on it, and reunited it with the ranks of almost identical suits, varying only in different shades of dark.

Remembering at last why I was even here, I turned away in search of the paracetamol. The ensuite was conveniently right by the door—a spacious one at that, having both a bathtub and a bidet. I couldn't help but feel that Ben's bedroom had the layout of an upscale hotel room.

I found the paracetamol in the mirrored bathroom cabinet. There was nothing else in there remarkable enough to invite snooping. When I shut the door, Ben was standing beside me. His tunic shirt was now collarless, though he still had his trousers on.

"Christ, you scared me," I exclaimed, holding out two paracetamol tablets along with the half-empty glass.

"You're a lifesaver," he replied brightly, before necking the pills almost at once and draining the rest of the water. There was something deeply unsettling in the practised ease of it. He set the glass down by the sink and brushed past me to run the bath.

Ben, I realised, had kept his trousers on solely because of my presence.

"Wait a moment," I told him, rushing out of the bathroom.

"What?" Ben called from behind me as I was halfway out the door.

I turned to his bed, which had been left in disarray, save for the pillow, which had been placed with curious precision. On instinct, I lifted it. Beneath lay a neatly folded set of navy-striped pyjamas, the fabric faintly lustrous in the bedroom light.

Even in sleep he had to dress formally, I chuckled to myself as I carefully retrieved them.

The weight of the silk rather caught me off guard; I had not expected anything so luxurious to feel so heavy.

By the time I returned to the bathroom, Ben was in only his tunic shirt and boxers, balancing on one bare foot. He only just managed to get the other sock off and toss it to join its brethren when he met my intrusion with a look of surprise. His expression quickly turned pensive as soon as his eyes fell on what I was holding. Anchored to the spot, he received the pyjamas without meeting my eyes. His gaze remained fixed on the set, his thumb smoothing the fabric, seeking its comfort. He muttered a curt word of thanks under his breath, with the air of a begrudging schoolboy.

The rushing water orchestrated our stillness as it dawned on me that I had crossed an unspoken boundary.

"I'll leave you to it."

I felt my voice catch in my throat, coming out as a coarse whisper rather than its intended lightness.

As I turned to go, I caught him looking up at me—not quite stopping me, but not letting me leave cleanly either.

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With the water no longer running, I found myself staying, listening for the occasional splash from the bathroom—some small confirmation that he was still conscious. I convinced myself that was why I stayed, but in reality, I just wanted a moment to finally process everything that had happened since setting foot in his home. I sat at his desk, the mild disarray of stationery, punctuated by a worn Mont Blanc pen jutting from a dog-eared law tome, a status symbol reduced to yet another bookmark. The walls were otherwise blank, save for his framed diploma and a bar certificate, the latter dated only back to 2002.

He couldn't be older than thirty.

For someone who braved the Bar, he certainly hadn't been to many bars.

For once, my joke did nothing to settle me. My avoidance only deepened my growing shame. I had spent the evening conducting a study of his otherness, cataloguing every deviation from my own coordinates as if distance were data. But sitting at his desk, surrounded by the evidence of a life I had spectacularly failed to anticipate, I could only conclude one thing: the perceived chasm between our worlds was not his to cross. It had only ever existed in the limits of my own understanding.

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Ben finally emerged from the bathroom, his suit trousers and tunic shirt draped over his right arm. As soon as he spotted me, he stopped. I was glad to see the colour had returned to his complexion, his face now flushed with quiet embarrassment. His mouth parted, as though to ask the obvious.

"Well," I said lightly, giving his new uniform a slow once-over, "I suppose that's payment enough."

He blinked at me as I rose from his desk chair, picking up my rucksack from the floor, shouldering the straps in one swift motion before closing the distance between us.

I stood before him, perhaps for a moment longer than I ought to have.

"Goodnight, Ben."

I laid a hand lightly on his shoulder in parting, but it betrayed me almost at once, slipping lower along his silk-clad arm as I withdrew, skimming it slightly before I managed to turn away.

I had almost passed him when I felt the faintest tug at the hem of my shirt. Almost imperceptible.

Surprised, I half-turned to find Ben half-turned too, his fingers relinquishing the fabric of my shirt as our eyes met.

"It is rather late, is it not? Perhaps you should stay the night."

There was the faintest pause of deliberation before his final two words slipped out in a whisper.

"With me."

Immediately, Ben's eyes dropped away, as if he had said something foolish, but my own gaze held fast.

"Well," I replied with an affected sigh. Ben's attention settled on me once more, waiting for my verdict. I broke into a reassuring smile. "If it makes you sleep better."