

Normal

Robyn stared at the small screen, utterly bewildered. It was the seventh Michael Bolton music video she had seen that morning. Of all the people, why him? Bizarre, she thought as she munched away on a bumper pack of biscuits. It had been amusing at first, but after four hours of sitting on a coach, Michael's sultry tones were becoming a bore. The sun was now in full force and little spheres of sweat were snaking down her spine. Now, if Robyn was to see one more pained look into the distance, she was going to...

"Urgh," she pressed her forehead dramatically onto the seat in front of her in despair. "I'm sweating my tits off here."

"Robyn!" Mark scolded disapprovingly, shutting his Lonely Planet guide and looking over in exasperation. Since when had anyone in the family been so crass?

"What? I am!" she groaned, her arms hanging beside her, her forehead still supporting her weight.

Outside the sheer drops at the side of the road had dissolved into a wide flat valley boarded by mountains either side. The colours were so stark it was as if the scene was created on mass, making full use of a "fill colour" button. The earth was undeniably yellow, the leaves of the pineapple plants that stretched out far into the distance were green and the large expanse of sky was a sheet of blue. No mottled shading, no play of light.

Robyn stared out, her interest pricked by a village that had appeared out of the wilderness. There was the token donkey stood tethered by a manky rope, the usual fruit stall, and sure enough a metal hut surrounded by women in brightly coloured head wraps cooking chapattis. It was very much like every other before it, but the novelty hadn't faded. Toddlers with bare swollen bellies stared as the coach trundled passed. The older ones ran and waved their hands as they went by, their thin legs pumping fast in Velcro sandals and t-shirts splashed with Coca Cola logos.

Unlike his daughter, Mark didn't have the luxury of the window seat. He just had his own thoughts— specifically, what would happen if a piglet got loose on the coach. Would people act? He wondered, his mouth slightly ajar, not conscious yet of it slowly drying in the heat. Actually, people may not mind all that much, he concluded. It had, after all, been barely twenty-four hours since he had seen his

host chase their evening meal around the living room. In England, it would be completely different. Nobody would do anything, apart from take a picture. Maybe if they were lucky- and got the angle just right- they could get a selfie. Go viral. #pigpic. Yes, the anecdote alone wouldn't be enough. No. No one would know what to do. Embarrassing really. The police would probably be called or something ridiculous like that.

"You alright?" Snap. Mark was hauled out of his daydream on the UK's state of piglets and public transport.

"Oh nothing," it was too long a story to get into it now. "Just thinking I'd kill for a bacon sandwich."

"Christ," Robyn muttered. "Second day out of England and you're already pining."

The comment was not lost on Mark, and he felt the keen sting of disapproval. Fifty-one and this was the first time he had been out of Europe. Can't beat a scone and some clotted cream on the south Devon coast thank you very much. Travel wasn't something that came naturally, but he was trying wasn't he? He had to. He'd promised himself before he'd left. But you can't always quash every writhing worry in your stomach. First there had been the tuk-tuk driver that had abandoned them at the boat crossing. Then there'd been the stress of finding the right coach. And now, he was fretting over whether his son was indeed waiting for him at Iringa as planned. That's why they were in Tanzania, him and Robyn- to visit Tom. He'd decided to do a gap year before heading off to university and was staying at a camp in the Ruaha National Park.

Neither Tom nor Robyn could understand their Father's reluctance to broaden his horizons. Not that they were particularly clued up either. To them, it was all tribal pattern trousers, personal growth and edgy photographs. Mainly the edgy photographs, Mark suspected. He just found it...uncomfortable. His coral shirt was clammy against his chest and his bites on his legs itched. *You just have one of those skins*, he remembered Helen, his wife, saying as she rubbed little dabs of sudacrem into his back on his first venture abroad. See. It was in his DNA not to travel.

"Was it normal for men to perm their hair in the 80s?" Her question once again jolted him back into the present. She was, of course, gazing up at the wind machined locks of Michael Bolton on screen.

“Erm, I wouldn’t say acceptable. More of a celeb thing.”

“Everyone had bad hair cuts back then anyway. It’s a wonder anyone procreated, it really is.”

“Yes because nowadays it’s much better with your I don’t know top knots and whatever.” She rolled her eyes.

“Name one of my friends who has either of those hairstyles.”

“Liam!” he quickly pointed out. She ignored him and carried on.

“I’ve seen pictures of you back then. Disgusting.” She delivered the final word with relish, turning towards the window as if to signify the end of it– with her, as always, in the winning corner. “Did you bring that bottle of water?” she asked abruptly.

“Yes, Dobby serve master.” Mark replied, Yoda like in voice and bowing slightly as he did. She stared back, her eyebrows knotted as if looking upon a mad man.

“Dobby. You know. Harry Potter?” What must he have looked like?

“Yeah I got that Mark.” Why she insisted on calling him Mark he did not know. “But I don’t remember laughing the first time round, five years ago. Unlikely to start now.” He reached forwards and rummaged around in his rucksack. He found the bottle and handed it over.

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Robyn couldn’t remember a bus journey this bad since year nine. The whole year was on a trip to the Science Museum. And as if that hadn’t been bad enough, it had taken seven hours to get there on the hottest day of the year. The result was complete delirium. Hadn’t she conducted the whole coach to a rendition of Billie Jean at one stage? That was it. It was the week Michael Jackson had died. She doubted she could achieve such a feat here. She needed food for a start. She needed a nap. She– yes! Robyn’s eyes widened as she looked back towards her Dad.

“You know what would be great right now?” she asked excitedly.

“What?” he didn’t bother looking up from his book.

“If these chairs were like Nanna’s bed. A massage would be bloody brilliant right about now.” She leant her head back into her seat and closed her eyes.

“Thought I’d escaped talking about that. She wouldn’t stop going on about it.”

“She’s a modern woman Mark,” she reasoned. “Fully entitled to a good vibe sesh.” She let the words hang there. Just so the horror could sink in. The corners of her mouth twitched. And when she opened her eyes slowly to glance over at her Father,

she found she couldn't contain herself. For Mark, there was nothing to say. He just looked at her, a little appalled as her chuckling grew bigger. It was only making her laugh even more so he returned to his book, shaking his head. She was gone, unable to control her laughter now. Every time she neared the end, the thought would spark another round. Tears were flowing by the time she'd finally slowed to halt.

"Are you finished?" he asked dryly.

"Haaa, yeah" she wiped away a few remaining tears. "Just making myself laugh— as per."

"Well I'm glad someone finds you funny."

"You're chatting brown Mark. I'm hilarious." With that she flicked out her phone and began scrolling. What could have possibly happened since last time she'd checked, he wasn't sure.

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Half an hour passed. Nothing much happened. Mark tried to take an interest in Robyn's social life and Robyn made a jibe at Mark's man boobs. He'd always thought it would be issues with his teenage daughter's self-esteem he'd encounter, but that was all a load of rubbish. It was his. He couldn't go an hour without some reminder of his aging, decrepit form.

It was about three in the afternoon and they had reached another village. And as they passed what Mark assumed must be some sort of petrol station, the coach slowed into a layby. A cloud of dust billowed from the breaking wheels until they grounded to a halt and the engine emitted a long, exhausted hiss.

"Oh great, another frigging stop." Robyn complained. "May as well get off." She stretched slowly out of her seat, her head dipped awkwardly under the overhead.

"We'll both get off then," he interjected hurriedly.

"But we might lose our seats. I'm only going to stretch my legs." Her tone was already indicating a frustration at her Dad's protectiveness.

"Yeah..." Mark faltered, searching for some sort of solution. His delay tactic was rumbled.

"Dad." She was calm now and he saw a slight smirk creep across her small mouth. What was it? Compassion? Reassurance? Not quite. It was a sort of condescending belief in her own open mindedness. "Don't worry, if I decide to take up any offers of

marriage I'll be sure to write." And that was that. Mark watched her as she went, slightly self conscious under the inquisitive looks she was receiving.

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Robyn scuffed the ground beneath her with her sandal. Raising her face towards the sky expectantly, she awaited the sun's rays to bathe her in warmth. No comfort came, just blazing heat burning red behind her eyelids. The safari camp couldn't come soon enough. Tom would make the holiday a little more normal. It was weird traveling alone with her Dad, like she'd decided to go on some bizarre backpacking trip with him. What was worse was that she could feel a deep and profound "chat" coming on. She wasn't looking forward to it. God help her if it was with some African sunset or something. The cringe was real.

He should just accept they weren't like that and just get on with things. DMCs* weren't a father daughter requirement. That had always been her Mum's department. She didn't have a Mum anymore, but that was beside the point. Why not just palm that responsibility to her Aunt or something? Robyn looked at the row of shops made with corrugated metal and wooden posts. She was greeted by stares. Not threatening, just confused. She smiled, and the women laughed shyly behind their mouths and whispered to their friends. A little embarrassed, Robyn continued on.

She loved her Dad, of course. They got on too, even if most of their conversations resembled a game of insults chicken. But they weren't ...what? Close? No they were, just not "sharey". They did things together. He made her breakfast every morning; that was good, Robyn noted. The whole trip was probably for her but... She just didn't like being guilt tripped into playing some sort of winning duo like in 'Father of the Bride'. It just wasn't them.

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A group of sellers had spied their opportunity and gotten onto the coach. Piled high on their shoulders were corn on the cobs, packets of nuts and biscuits aplenty. Immediately the coach was sparked to life with the chatter of bartering. Mark watched on, impressed by their ability to balance such precarious weight. Spotting Mark a few seats away, a young man carrying a bunch of football shirts

* Deep meaningful conversation

shuffled excitedly down the aisle towards him. Soon enough a spectrum of nylon was under his nose to examine.

“Yes?” the man looked encouragingly towards Mark.

“No thank you.” Mark shook his head, really quite sternly he thought.

“Hakuna matata, hakuna matata.” But he carried on pointing to the yellow lettering splashed across the front anyway. “Ahh? Ahh?” Another chance to inspect the craftsmanship in the stitching at point blank range was courteously given.

“No” Mark replied, trying to be as convincing as possible.

“Okay, I give you.” A business card was suddenly thrust forwards. Unexpected. After a moment’s deliberation he took the card. Trucksuits & T-Shirts it read. Wow. Whether it was the well-meant charm or just the novelty, Mark had changed his mind.

“Hello, yes, two please.”

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From the small rock she was sat on, Robyn surveyed her surroundings. She’d been watching men pack up their little stalls and feed in and out of the coach. They were like ants carrying enormous weight, apart from their movements were slow, the heat binding them all like syrup. Down the street there were people sat outside on plastic chairs eating fresh watermelon. There was a tuk-tuk sat beside one of them. Robyn smiled to herself as she remembered the morning’s incident. Bless him, she could tell her Dad had been teetering on the edge all morning but that had been enough to push him over. *This isn’t funny Robyn*, he’d hissed. *Where the bloody hell has he gone?* They couldn’t have looked more out of place if they’d tried. They were sat surrounded by locals boarding the river ferry to the capital, confused, guidebook in hand and with suitcases perched precariously across their laps... She noticed a few families returning to their seats and got up to follow them.

On the coach, she made her way over to her Dad, him by the window this time. He was grinning broadly. Suspicious, she thought.

“Got something to show you,” he declared chirpily. Robyn looked down hesitantly at the card he had presented in his hand. She took it, read it, and Mark watched the creeping smile stretch broadly across her freckled face.

“Oh my God!” she laughed. “That’s amazing. How can you get it that wrong?”

“Best of all you can wear said T-Shirt for yourself.” He pulled out the bundle of blue material from his rucksack.

“Mark you babe!” she inspected the top and pushed out her lower lip in appreciation. “It’s quite nice actually. I’m impressed.”

“Yeah I thought they were. I got one too. What do you reckon? Think we could rock the matching outfits look?” She lent away from him, inspecting his expression with caution.

“You know what’s worrying is that I can’t actually tell whether you’re joking.”

“Of course I am. Wouldn’t want to look like you.”

“Bit rude.”

“But I did get one,” he put his top up to his chest to demonstrate.

“So you can use it as proof that you left the country that one time?” she asked sharply.

“I think we had that joke about an hour ago.”

“Yeah well, you did insist on joining me on his trip.” It was meant as a joke but he fell silent. Suddenly, he seemed all grave. Now you’ve done it, Robyn thought. Here it comes.

“I insisted because I thought it would be a good thing, to spend time with you.” She was finding it hard to meet his eye. “It’s important after everything that’s happened—”

“Dad,” she cut him short. “Look, I know you’re trying really hard and everything but honestly it’s fine. I’m fine.”

“I’m just talking Robyn.”

“Yeah I know but...” she trailed off looking out the window.

“But what?” he pleaded.

“But I don’t need to talk things over all the time. If it’s good for you, fine—”

“It’s not about me,” he protested. “It’s about making sure you’re not dealing with things on your own—”

“Well then, I’m telling you I’m fine.” She was getting more worked up. Her voice was becoming higher pitched and if he wasn’t mistaken, cracking slightly. This isn’t how he’d wanted it to go.

“Okay.” They fell quiet for a while, both with their eyes firmly in front.

“Sorry,” she broke the silence. “I just don’t want you thinking you need to make sure I’m okay all the time. We’ll remember and talk about her. But in terms of us, I just want to be normal with each other. I think we could both do with a little bit of normal. Don’t you think?” As he studied her face, he realised she was quite sure.

“Normal.”

Mark opened his Lonely Planet, trying to focus his attention on a section about some caves. But this time he wasn’t looking at anything at all. His eyes sunk until the surface of the black and white text blurred and swam like ripples on a pond. He was mulling over what she just said, then her in general, and then, in particular, her hand. Him rubbing in a dock leaf to soothe the angry stings that were flaring hot white on her skin; her beaded tears being rubbed away by her podgy hand. Incredible, he mused, how the perfect antidote for the sting could be found immediately.

And the other hand? Well he’d thought about that too many times before. Holding it in the hospital ward for her Mum’s scans, for her chemo, for her results. Maybe “normal” was this antidote. Not to ignore what had happened to Helen, as if they could. But to keep their relationship a dependant, a constant, just normal...

“No offers of marriage then?” he asked.

“Pff I know! What is the world coming to?”

“Good taste?” And as he turned to her, he was relieved to see her smiling.