

To: Ben
Sent: 4th April
Subject: I'm here!

I feel so alive! I imagine my blood cells doing crazy congas along my veins and arteries. What a weird bloke I must be. Are we all weird, or is it just me? I'm so attached to you, I feel so *relaxed* when I'm slumped on your sofa, drinking your tea. And now here I am in Spain, feeling positively liberated.

I know you'll take this in the right spirit. You've always been able to see round me—and through me. You probably understand what I'm feeling better than I do. And of course it is a bit of a relief to be in a different country from Tim. Not to mention the WBM, God bless her. She is a sweetie, of course. So tactful, so understatedly affectionate, never putting a foot wrong. She'd be so upset if she thought there was even a hint of the possessive mother in her behaviour. And yet, and yet... The way her lips move, when she's being carefully undemonstrative.

I've got onto the WBM, and stuff you already know, maybe to avoid thinking about Tim. I can't help feeling guilty, even though I never encouraged him—never even flirted with him. It seems that to suffer from guilt you don't have to be responsible: it's enough just to know that the other person is hurt. And he's such a straightforward, nice bloke. Human life's a mess, isn't it? So badly organised. As our own dear 'Mr W H' says, "If equal affection cannot be\Let the more loving one be me."

What was I supposed to do about Tim? I hardly even noticed him to begin with—and in any case, I can't go on fretting. This has to be it. If Tim wants to do the unrequited love dance, that's down to him. Through the big window of this Internet shop I can see sunlight shimmering on the blue Mediterranean. A whole set of us are tapping happily away at our keyboards. I'm still alight with exhilaration, with the sense that I can go where I want, free as the breeze. If a weird rare feeling like this has the goodness to drop in, why should I spit in its face?

A few facts, before this e-mail gets too long (maybe it's too long already, but I know how indulgent you are). I found the house last night. It was a bit shabby from being let out all those years, but so warm on the top floor that I only needed a couple of sheets on the bed, and they were clean. This morning I came out on the balcony to an estate agent's dream of a view. Sea, sea, sea, the wonderful picture-postcard Peñon, the mountain at my back—even the bayside sprawl of new housing estates and new high-rise apartment blocks beautifully aglow in the sun below me.

It was warm enough—in early April, would you believe?—for the swimming pool to look inviting, but I'd hired a car at the airport, so I rushed into town for a slice of tortilla and a *café solo* in a smelly small bar. I'm determined to live in the real Spain, even if my father's house (my house now) is in a town overrun by settlers from Northern Europe. With the taste of fresh black coffee in my mouth, I felt buoyant enough to beard the (real) estate agents.

No, not now. I was going to give you the comedy of my first business dealings, and tell you about Henri, but I'll save that for tomorrow. The heat and scents of Spain are calling to me, and I can't sit still any longer. Sorry.

Look after yourself—and say hi to anyone who knows me.

To: Ben
Sent: 5th April
Subject: Ayer, hoy y mañana

I said yesterday that I wanted to live in the real Spain, but actually it's all the real Spain. This little town is probably older than Madrid—there are Roman remains—and it's the nature of Spain to be overrun by settlers. Once the Moors from the South, now the Danes and Germans and Belgians and English from the North. The Dutch have a historic right to be here, since the Netherlands were once ruled by Spanish kings. And weren't the English involved here, too? Wellington? Something called the wars of the Spanish Succession? I'm sure you'll give me the ins and outs of it.

Anyway, even this Internet shop is typically Spanish. Euros have been the official currency since January 2002—and what do we have to put into these machines to send and receive e-mails? Pesetas. The computers were set up for pesetas, and smiling laid-back José (who owns the business) doesn't want the expense of converting them. So he sells you pesetas for euros. If you have any left at the end of your session, he buys them back. No one loses, and the past lingers on into the present. So Spanish.

I woke this morning no less cheerful, but in a more contemplative mood than yesterday. The panorama of sea and Peñon and beachside town was just as breath-taking, but my eye seemed to be drawn to the houses right under where I stood. My father's house (I still find it hard to say 'my house') is so high up the mountainside that I can see all the neighbours' roofs. (It's a *huge* estate.) I found myself dwelling on the tiles—some of them discoloured by bird-droppings, the new ones a pristine orange, the old ones burned by the sun into different shades of brick and buff. I imagined the lives that had been lived in those houses, as over twenty or thirty years the tiles had faded, cracked, been replaced...

Oh shit, all my pesetas are going to run out before I give you any news. Let's get straight to the estate agents. It's at the low end of the main shopping street, which falls sharply from the old town towards the sea. (You can see the sea all the way down. It turns an ordinary European high street into a Hollywood backdrop.)

After I finally worked out how to open the glass door—I was pushing and pulling and pushing before I noticed there was a catch you had to depress—I took a deep breath and went in. A big white clean-smelling air-conditioned office, with desks round three sides, and tiers of house ads in the windows. A hum of conversation, the rumble of a photocopier by the back wall. I saw that no one had taken any notice of my fumbings at the door. And no one was taking any notice of me now.

The desk immediately in front of the door, where I now know the secretary/receptionist should be sitting, was empty. At most of the others sat fattish men in check shirts. There were chairs in front of them all, for clients. Clients actually sitting in a couple of them. Which should I pick?

One man—balding, glasses—seemed to be looking with something approaching human interest at my left ear, so I went across and plonked myself in front of him. Using one of the Spanish phrases I had got off by heart, I explained that I had come to discuss the house of *Señor Fisher*. (I made sure I pronounced it 'Feesh-air'.) He replied in German—or it might have been Flemish. I tried again. He came round the desk, gestured me to my feet, and took me across the room to another man. Pointing, "This gentleman," he said, in heavily accented English. Unfortunately, 'this gentleman' was one of the few already engaged with a client, so I pulled the chair from the next desk—smiling an appeal to the desk-owner—and waited.

The 'gentleman' (a Frenchman called Henri, as I found out when I talked to him) was slimmer than the others, and his short-sleeved shirt might not have come in a pack from a chain store. He was getting money from a plump dark-haired woman whose house he'd evidently just sold. He had a file open in front of him on the desk, the woman a big spring folder open on her lap. They seemed to be talking in German again, so it was just as well I was feeling adequate to anything. Otherwise, my heart would have been in my Gucci sandals.

The two of them would have little disputes, each referring to their own figures, then each time the woman would take her wallet out of her handbag, open it, and select some banknotes—which Henri would put in a brown envelope. I discovered later that he was making sure she had paid all the bills on the house. In Spain, apparently, telephone and electricity bills and the like don't go to individuals. They go to houses. So if you buy a house where bills have been unpaid, you're liable for them. Henri was making sure this didn't happen.

More weirdness to follow. I finally got to speak to Henri. I gave him a cheery "*Buenos días*", to which he replied—in Spanish, to my relief.

Then he said, in English, "What language are we speaking? It will be easier in English, I think." So much for my accent. I explained who I was, and that my father had left me his house in his will.

He interrupted me. "This was a house for rent?"

"Yes, but—"

He got to his feet. "I am sorry. You have been waiting for the wrong person."

I was taken across the room again, to yet another desk. A dark-haired man who seemed to be in pain, and kept touching his lower back. As I once again explained who I was, his face grew puzzled.

"*Lo siento*," he said, "I deal only with the rents. You are now staying in the house yourself, no?"

"That's right."

"You wish to make all the arrangements with the notary, so that the house is registered in Spain under your name?"

"Exactly."

He made a move as if to get up, but it would obviously have hurt him too much. "Here I deal only with the rents. You must speak to that gentleman."

And pointed at Henri.

At this moment no one was sitting in the chair in front of Henri—but he was on the telephone. When I sat back at his desk, he raised an eyebrow.

There was no other acknowledgement of my presence. He went on talking—in Spanish—to whoever was being impossible at the other end of the line. (I could tell that from Henri's tone of voice.)

Just been to José for more pesetas. Must cut this short. Once Henri got off the phone, I explained why I had been sent back. He went across to the pained bloke for the file, and over the next hour or so we sorted everything out. He was impressed by the fact that I had my father's Spanish will with me, and a photocopy. (The lawyers in England had explained all that to me.) I have an appointment at the notary's later in the week.

I should say that Henri interested me in his own right. In his forties, I should guess, but lean, with shrewd brown eyes. He could be a 'friend of Dorothy'. On the other hand, the thoughtful way his eyes

rested on me may simply have been an expression of the Gallic mind at work. Summing me up; getting my qualities under appropriate heads. (Aren't you impressed by how much I've learned from you?)

Before I sign off, I should say that I haven't had a drink today. Or yesterday. Or any day since I left England. Here in Spain no one would raise an eyebrow if I ordered a *coñac* or some exotic liqueur at breakfast time, let alone later in the day. I haven't.

One day at a time. *Mañana* is another day. Such a cliché. So powerful. Perhaps, by the time I'm thirty and back in England, my life will be my own again. I can see some of my friends' faces—Pete's for example—expressing their utter certainty that I don't have it in me to beat the habit. I hope they turn out to be wrong.

It shouldn't be too hard. After all, what is there to stress me here? I've nothing to do except have a good break, and sort out what I'm going to do about the house—sell it or keep it. And I've given myself a couple of months. (So nice of Gunners to put my job on hold.)

I've also decided not exactly to give up sex, but not to go looking for it. A spring resolution. I feel so elated, from the moment I wake up in the morning, that I don't want any ordinary excitement to get in the way. I want just to *be* here, to draw strength from the sea and the mountains and the culture. I've never thought about this before, but it seems to me you get a more vivid sense of what people are like when you don't talk to them—as though talking was actually a way of keeping them at a bearable distance. What do you think?

Looking forward to hearing from you. Take care.

To: Ben
Sent: 9th April
Subject: Re: Spring wishes.

Well, you really are my fairy godfather, so I have every confidence in your beautiful wishes coming true. Thank you, too for the stuff about Wellington, and Jenkins' ear, and the Web sites. I had no idea our histories were so entwined.

I take your point about not having too many resolutions to keep. But really, I've been here nearly a week, and sex just hasn't been an issue. Of course, people look at me in the street, or in bars (I only drink coffee). Women more than men, as usual. But even in the case of the men, I haven't felt the smallest inclination to respond. A sexual fling would be so superficial, when I'm developing such a *deep* relationship with the place.

I've also had all the legal formalities to occupy me (you wouldn't believe how long you have to wait around for notaries, nor how brisk the formal encounter is). And a longish discussion with Henri about what I would get for the house if I sold it, and what I'd make if I kept on renting it out.

My father's "other woman" got the house in England, of course. The house they lived in together. It's odd that my inheritance should be a house that for years has been lived in by strangers. Perhaps I feel that it should be mine for a while, before I sell it on. Or perhaps what is making it difficult for me to decide what to do about it isn't the money, but the fact that it was my father's house. Even though he's dead, I have a weird sense that I need to resolve our relationship before I can do anything with the material object he left me.

Although the WBM never did anything to keep me from my father, her hold on my loyalty was so strong that I hardly ever saw him. If he made an overture, I'd find excuses. Now I feel oddly guilty—not in the way I do about Tim, but deeper. Frighteningly deeper. I want to work out what kind of man he really was, what he really felt for the WBM and me, how they came to separate (all those years ago), how things went on the way they did. I already have a lot of the information. What I need to do now is to make more satisfying sense of it. I don't want a story with goodies and baddies, a story about who was to blame; I want a history, a solid history with everything laid bare, in which everyone's part (including my own) makes the same sort of obvious sense as the parts of the royals and generals involved in the Spanish succession.

I have already begun thinking about it, as I sit in the shade by my pool. I take care, incidentally, to stay out of the sun—or to slap on plenty of cream if I can't avoid it. Odd how the world is full of people who want to feel the heat and get sunburnt. I like a nip in the air—I'm already missing the frosty air of Northumbria, would you believe?—and after my morning shower I get a simple pleasure from looking at the cool whiteness of my body in a mirror.

I can't swim yet, unfortunately. The pool ripples so invitingly—but the water is freezing. You wouldn't even want to dip your toes in it. Maybe it doesn't get enough sun this early in the year—or maybe April's not a swimming month.

Thank goodness I have so much time—and so much good time, among exotic shrubs, with a bit of a breeze from the sea. It's probably a mistake to say it, but I have such a *strong* feeling that this is going to be a time of healing and growth. Nothing is going to go wrong.

To: Ben
Sent: 11th April
Subject: Insight and foresight

I don't think you believe in 'tempting fate' any more than I do. It must be comforting to live in a world where fate has designs on you, or things recur eternally. Philosophy's 'conspiracy theories'. But it's much more exhilarating to live in the real world, in which life itself is an accident—and only cock-up theories tell the truth.

On the other hand, I may well not be very good at predicting the future. I remember you once saying about me, in your best throw-away manner, "So much insight, so little foresight." (For myself, I'm not even sure about the insight.)

I'd better give you a few facts about my life here, so you can exercise your own predictive skills. I mean to be totally—if uncharacteristically—methodical about it. First, the invariables (as we say in the computer world).

My house is round, with three floors, the upper ones connected by an outside spiral staircase. (It's an adventure just going from one floor to another.) A climbing rose, and a lot of Mediterranean plants that I don't yet know the names of. Purple flowers a bit like irises, and some pink—also yellow-orange—flowers that may both be gazanias. A lemon tree. Oleander and bougainvillea in new leaf.

It's really quite cool on the lower floors of the house, and the sun disappears behind the mountain some time before it sets. (Apparently, they only get a couple of hours' sunshine here in the winter.)

I get up every morning between eight and nine. (If this was a real holiday, it'd be more like eleven.) To an immediate sense of excitement that I feel I still haven't described properly. Not anything like the

excitement of gay bars and dancing and gossip (not that I'm knocking them). It's as though it's always been exciting just to be alive—and an invisible barrier kept me from being aware of it. At some point—on the plane here? at the airport? in the car as I drove between Wild West mountains and the sea?—it just melted away.

The simplest things have become privileges. I suppose it's a bit like being let out of prison—or coming back to earth from a shuttle. Standing under the shower, as the warm water gushes jerkily onto my head and shoulders, I feel like water could claim me for ever. Even shaving is a pleasure. And then comes breakfast.

I've discovered a bar/restaurant actually on the urbanisation (as I'm learning to call it). A German owner, who was originally keen to serve me his idea of an 'English breakfast', but who was happy to accept that not all English people like greasy fried eggs and streaky bacon burnt to a crisp. I have toast, and wonderfully tangy black coffee.

What else is invariable? Only the end of the day, I suppose. I go to bed—sober, and on my own.

I could say that was it, but it occurs to me now that there's one other thing I do every day, which I may have been avoiding. I think about my father.

I wonder, with a kind of frustrated sadness that my exhilarated state happily makes space for, what that once living man was really like. He was obviously never the cold fish that the WBM—without ever attacking him explicitly—subtly made me believe. So what was he? What made him tick? What was it like to be with him? Who was he to his friends when they spent time with him?

Here, in his house, even though he only came here once or twice in the last few years, I have a sense of his presence. There are things he left for tenants, but which were originally his. Blankets, ornaments, cups and saucers. I hold them in my hands and try to get to him. Or sometimes I look up, and it's as if he'd been standing in the doorway, looking at me, afraid to speak or hold out his hands, and got out of the way as soon as I lifted my head.

I was going to move on to the variables of my days here, to tell you about the odd encounters I've had, but I want to stop now. He loved me, you know, Ben. I have to face it. He left me the house here. What else would he have liked to give me?

Take care.

To: Ben
Sent: 12th April
Subject: All is well

No, no, no. It was really good of you to reply immediately to yesterday's e-mail, even though I was only half way through telling you what I meant to. But you needn't worry about me being on my own and brooding. I am every bit as elated as I keep telling you I am. I'm not forcing anything, or kidding myself that I'm having a good time when I'm not. And I absolutely love being here on my own.

When I think about my father, and feelings of sadness or puzzlement settle, it's as though they come with the permission of my elation. They are guests; the elation welcomes them. Better: being alive means being alive to everything, including pain and loss and sadness, and what matters is that I *do* feel so unusually alive. Does that make sense to you? I can't believe I'm so odd a bloke that you don't have any idea what I'm talking about.

Anyway, I'll give you a brisk sense of what my days are like, which you say I still haven't given you. I do a lot of walking—round the town, along one or other of the two long promenades. Or I sit by the pool, reading Lorca in the bilingual edition you gave me. I cook my favourite meals—you know only too well what they are—or I eat out.

I do meet people. Not a lot of Spaniards. It would be quite wrong to say that the communities here are segregated—but they do tend to stick together. On my first or second day here a bloke in a blue and white striped shirt was walking towards me not far from my house. He nodded and said, "Hello." I assumed he was English, and began asking him a couple of questions. A defensive look appeared on his face, his lips twitched in what may have been meant as a smile but came out as a grimace, and he was off. I have discovered since that Germans say "Hello". He was obviously German and had been hoping that I was too.

I've also discovered that almost no one among the foreign communities here speaks fluent Spanish. Some are not even up to my level, and have been living here for years. In the supermarkets and petrol stations they read what they have to pay from the electronic displays. When they eat out they go to a restaurant run by someone from their own country.

They stick to their own food, too. The bigger supermarkets have stuff from Germany, Belgium, England, etc. Then what are they doing here? you may be asking. I guess most of it is the climate. It's also cheap. And there's another reason. The Spanish are so welcoming. Yes, there are bars you can go into where you see on people's faces that they think you've made a mistake, that you'd be happier with your own kind. But if you talk to them in Spanish, chat about things they're interested in, and show that you want to live in Spain rather than in an expatriate colony, suspicion and resentment simply vanish into the air.

I've seen that happen. Not yet to me, of course. I can't pretend my Spanish is that good. But I have signed on for classes at a small language school, and will be starting in a couple of days. So I don't feel a complete fraud in telling you that I've done most of my socialising among fellow Brits.

In bars I usually order a bitter Kaz—which is a kind of non-alcoholic Campari. A bit of a girly drink, I imagine—but when did that ever stop me? If people challenge me, I usually say that I used to drink a lot, but I'm not drinking at the moment. Last night a girl gave me a particularly sharp look.

"What are you saying?" she asked. "That you're an alcoholic?"

There is only one way to answer that question, once you've committed yourself to a treatment programme. "Yes," I said, "I'm an alcoholic."

"Aren't you exaggerating a bit?" she insisted. "You're a bit young, aren't you?"

"I started young," I said—which is the truth, but comes out a bit glibly. Of course I could sense the sexual interest that lay under her aggressive manner—and I could see that in the eyes of someone straight she'd have been worth encouraging, with her shiny pink lips and blonde bob.

She held my eyes. For some reason I didn't look away. She must have taken it for an unspoken 'I'm on, if you are.'

"At least you won't have problems getting it up, then." Her tone was just as challenging, but the tiniest of flushes came into her cheeks, and I was suddenly aware of her breathing.

In the rest of the bar people were laughing and talking in loud voices. Glasses clinked. The barman was filling a glass with foamy beer from the tap.

I suddenly felt really sorry for the girl—as though I'd been putting one over her, when really she was putting one over herself. “Even before I started drinking,” I said, “I knew I was gay.”

I thought she was going to say something cutting. Instead, she just made a rueful face and said, “Cool.” Then, “Maybe we'd fancy the same blokes.”

And we got into a conversation about that. Fun, but as I think about it now, so superficial. Sitting at this computer, staring at the screen in front of me, I feel much more vividly in touch with you than I do in conversations with strangers. I go back to a feeling I think I expressed on my first day here, that there's something deeply limiting about conversations as such. They are literally all talk. Real meetings are silent.

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