

Thanksgiving in London

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They didn't even have turkey on the airplane. The coach cabin was long and wide, and it smelled like a stuffy old minivan. The lights were off even though it was just past sunset. This had something to do with helping the passengers get used to the time change, but it just made Carrie feel sad. Back home it was Tuesday night, and her friends were getting ready to celebrate a few days off from school. But Carrie was stuck inside a metal tube with the lights turned down, waiting for a boiled chicken dinner. This was not how she had imagined her Thanksgiving vacation.

The trouble began that spring, when her older brother announced he was going to "study abroad" during his junior year of college. He told Carrie while she was doing homework, calling her on her cell phone and shouting, like she was the one who was supposed to be excited.

"Guess what, Sis?" he said, forgetting that no one over ten years old likes to be called 'Sis.' "I'm going to London!"

"Why? Are you going to marry someone in the royal family?" She could think of no reason to go overseas, unless it was to marry someone whose family members wore crowns.

"I don't think Jessica would like it if I suddenly got married to some English princess."

"You're still dating?"

"Obviously."

Obviously. Obviously Brian and Jessica would never break up. They had been going out since before he got his driver's license, and they had stayed together all through the first two years of college. Because Jessica knew Carrie when Carrie was still a kid, she never stopped

treating her like one. She bought Carrie dolls, pinched her cheeks, and looked surprised whenever Carrie did something to show she was older than five—something like reading a newspaper. Carrie felt guilty about disliking her brother's girlfriend, especially when Mom said they were probably going to be getting married sometime soon. But she couldn't help it. Jessica was boring. Jessica was unpleasant. And Jessica was never going away.

"So are you two going to London together?" Carrie asked. "Like on some kind of big stupid, romantic vacation?"

"Nope," said Brian, his voice suddenly far too serious. "She's not coming. I'm going alone."

"I think she'll be all right without you for a week or two."

"It's not just a week. It's the whole semester. From August until New Year's."

"Are you nuts?! That's way too long to leave the country."

"Nah," scoffed Brian, lighthearted again. "It'll be cool."

"Are you crazy? What are you going to watch on TV?"

"They have TV in England."

"Yeah, weird TV with English accents and tea and crumpets and who knows what. And I bet they have all kinds of weird candy and weird soda and—oh my gosh! Brian, they drive on the wrong side of the road. What is that even about?"

"I don't know. You can find out for yourself in November."

"What do you mean?"

"I talked to Mom and Dad this morning. Instead of me coming home for Thanksgiving, you're going to meet me in London. It's gonna be awesome!"

Carrie laughed a funny kind of laugh, very sure that this Thanksgiving was not going to be awesome at all.

As she picked at her boiled chicken dinner on the plane, Carrie's stomach squirmed at the thought of an English Thanksgiving. Doing some pre-trip research on the Internet, she had come across some really horrible stories about English food. They boiled everything and didn't use enough salt. They ate terrifying sausages, with blood and guts and stuff all stuffed inside. And worst of all, they didn't know the first thing about dessert—or, as they would say, "pudding."

"They don't even know how to make pies!" Carrie told her mother, who was already halfway through some trashy paperback she had bought at the airport bookstore.

"I'm sure they know how to bake a simple pie," said Mom.

"No. They don't. They put meat in their pies. Gross meat, like lamb and I don't even know what."

"They also make sweet pies."

"The worst is this thing called Stargazy pie."

"I've never heard of that."

"You're lucky! It's a fish pie. Do you hear me? A pie made of fish. And on top of it, they cut a huge, ugly shrimp or lobster or something in half, and set it on the pie with its claws pointing up in the air, like it's breaking through the crust to gaze at the stars."

"How original."

"Sure. Original. That's what you say when I think of something that freaks you out. So don't pretend this isn't gross. And they think it's great. It's like a delicacy or something."

"Eat your chicken, Carrie. I'm trying to read."

She poked at her chicken, wishing it were turkey; a great big one with skin that crackled and had meat oozing with flavor. And brown gravy and cornbread stuffing and—oh no. What if they didn't have cranberry sauce in England? *You can't trust a country that puts fish in pie. What they call cranberry sauce*, she thought as she picked through her sad little airplane salad in search of a crisp piece of lettuce, *is probably just blood and pomegranate seeds.*

Or something even worse.

Carrie and her parents stood outside Brian's apartment, freezing under a cold fluorescent light. Her brother did not pick up his phone. He did not answer his doorbell. He did not respond to rocks thrown against his window. And when someone finally came to let them in, it wasn't Brian. It was Jessica. This was not the worst surprise that London had to offer.

"Hey, little girl!" Jessica squealed, as she forced Carrie into a hug. "Welcome to Britsgiving!"

As Jessica led Carrie's dad upstairs, Carrie hung back to whisper to her mom. "You didn't tell me she was going to be here!"

"We wanted to surprise you. Isn't it great? This way you'll have a girl closer to your age to hang out with while we're here. Maybe she can take you shopping!"

Carrie seethed. She clenched her fists and screwed up her eyes and breathed loudly through her teeth. Since Brian left for college, she had gotten very good at seething. He had always been the best part of her family—the part that kept her parents from doing crazy stuff, like not warning her about the presence of horrible girlfriends at family functions. If their family was an engine, Brian was the lubricant—the thing that kept the machine running

smoothly. Without him there, the family had started to overheat. It was shaking itself to pieces. It was going to explode—if Carrie didn't explode first.

Once she was finished seething, she marched up the stairs, dragging her suitcase behind her and wishing she hadn't brought so many heavy books.

"Brian's just in the shower," shouted Jessica. "He'll be out in a minute. Let me show you the place!"

The apartment was terrifying. It wasn't even an apartment, really. It was a fancy kind of dorm owned by the school, but all the furniture was really cheap, scratched up, and smelled just like the airplane. There were ten people living in this tiny little place, although none of them seemed to be around, so the apartment was mostly empty except for all the junk on the floor.

Jessica showed Carrie the filthy hallways, crowded bedrooms, and one of the bathrooms that seemed way too dirty, even for college students. The whole time she was giggling, saying stuff like, "Isn't this fantastic?" and "I bet you can't wait to go to college and get a place like this." But nothing prepared Carrie for the kitchen. It was the size of a coffin, with a toaster oven and two electric burners, and a fridge smaller than the ones they put in hotels.

"Where are we going to cook?" asked Carrie.

"Oh, I don't know," said Jessica. "We'll find a way."

Carrie spun around to stare her down. Cooking was the best part of Thanksgiving. The whole family would gather in their kitchen, with Mom making stuffing and Dad fussing over the turkey while Brian and Carrie peeled potatoes and snapped the ends off green beans. *It is appropriate that this kitchen is the size of a coffin, because Thanksgiving is dead*, Carrie thought.

Carrie was about to scream to let out all the anger she had been feeling ever since she unwrapped her boiled chicken dinner on the airplane, when something grabbed her from behind. She spun around in the air, her feet out in front of her, with the smell of pine nettle body wash in her nose.

"Hey, Sis! Welcome to London!"

Brian set her down, and then she realized that no matter how many changes had happened, her brother was the same as ever. Carrie hugged him back, and she knew Thanksgiving was going to be okay.