

Gap year

London, England.

The uni had booked this gorgeous hall in central London for our graduation, Steph and Kat were waiting for me outside. Steph was wearing a blue gown that revealed her cleavage, she studied English with me but only got a 2:2, I got a 2:1. Kat did a history degree and got a first, I don't know how she managed it, it's a boring subject. She was wearing a black dress that concealed her flabby stomach. Mostly.

We collected our caps and gowns. Honestly, I didn't like them. They were far too dark, as though we were going to a funeral and you couldn't see my dress beneath it. Anyway, we posed for our graduations selfies and I'd just finished uploading them when our families arrived.

Mum burst into tears when she saw me wearing my graduation attire and then she ran into the toilets to re-do her make up before she would let us take any pictures. Daddy just stood there beaming. My little brother Ryan was more interested in his phone.

Then Daniel arrived with his family.

Daniel is the president of the university's rugby team. Or he was before he left to graduate. He's basically a human tank and although he did a finance course he's just as thick as a tank too. We've been going out since first year when we were in halls together but he broke up with me last month because he wanted some space, apparently.

The organisers made an announcement and Steph, Kat and I (see good grammar, I told you I was an English student) took our seats in the front row. Then the Dean of the university did a speech and then a special guest who's name I can't remember came on stage and did another speech. After an hour we were finally allowed to collect our certificates. We formed a single file queue at the side of the hall, as our names were called out you stepped onstage, shook hands with the Dean, had your

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picture taken, took your diploma, waved to your family and walked down the exit stairs. We then had to go around the audience to retake our seats and watch everyone else.

Steph and Kat were miles before me in the queue and standing right behind me was bloody Daniel.

'Alright?' he asked but I blanked him and watched my girls.

'Stephanie Dagnan,' the Dean said and Steph stepped forward. Her dress covered her legs so she glided over to the speaker, collected her diploma, smiled at her family as her picture was taken and then glided off stage. She looked so elegant, like a swan.

'You okay?' Daniel asked me. 'You're shaking.'

'I'm fine.'

'Katie Dominic,' the Dean said and Katie scuttled on stage. She glanced at the crowd, took her diploma and then scurried away.

We watched the other graduates in silence until it was my turn.

'Grace Pemberton.'

Daniel said something as I stepped onto the stage, I think he said good luck, but I didn't answer him. I used the smile I had been practicing in the mirror at home and took my diploma from the Dean as the cameras flashed. The diploma we collect is actually a piece of lead piping with a red ribbon around it, we were sent our real diplomas in the post. I spotted my family in the crowd, Mum was clutching a tissue, Daddy was aiming his camera at me and Ryan was glancing up from his phone, the light of the screen bathing his face.

'Daniel Premp-ton.'

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I tried to look around as I stepped off the stage but my heels missed the step and I staggered.

Daniel swaggered onto the stage and his rugby club friends in the audience cheered. He took the pipe, smirked at the camera and strode after me.

When the ceremony was finally over. Steph, Kat and I hurried back into the entrance hall to meet our families.

Daddy brought the picture the professional photographer had taken while Mum frantically tried to re-do her make-up before we took more pictures. Ryan couldn't give a toss.

After ten minutes, it was time.

I gave Mum and Daddy a goodbye kiss and extracted Steph and Kat from their families. We dumped our hats and gowns on the return desk along with our pipes, collected our suitcases from the cloak room where we'd stashed them and legged it to the nearest tube station.

When you think about it, we're not on this planet for long and most of us find ourselves stuck in same corner of it. Between them, Mum and Daddy have only visited seven countries where as Alexander the Great, according to Kat, conquered twenty-five or something like that. I want to see the world before adult life captures me and chains me behind a desk.

So I did something that you have to do when you're young. Something wild. I booked Steph, Kat and I on a gap year around the world.

The date today is October twenty fifth. I want to return to London on October twenty fifth of next year.

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As I'm typing this my plane is taxiing off the runway at Heathrow. Steph is asleep on my left and Kat is reading a Chinese language book on my right.

Welcome to my travel blog. I hope you enjoy.

Hong Kong, China.

Jet lag sucks. Hard.

We staggered through Hong Kong International Airport, passed through security, collected our luggage and found a taxi driver who spoke enough English to understand that we wanted to go to a hotel.

We hadn't booked anywhere in advance or decided where we'll be going after Hong Kong. I thought it best to make it up as we go along. Then we can just go where our feet take us.

Kat spoke the Chinese she'd been practicing on the plane and we were given a room for the three of us. The cleaning staff had left origami figures on our pillows. Opposite our window, on the other side of the street, was a giant billboard that was advertising an anime show. I didn't recognise the characters and because I had the bed by the window I had to sleep with this giant cartoon face staring down at me.

When we awoke, it was dusk and I was itching to go explore the city. Only I didn't know what to wear. I heard that in some countries girls like us can get arrested for exposing too much skin. The receptionist didn't give us a second look when we left so I thought we were alright.

We walked around the streets of Hong Kong for two hours, searching for a night club. I could see brands that I recognised like Starbucks and McDonalds but even when we used the map apps on our phones we couldn't find a club. In the end, we ended up in a park in the middle of the city and took pictures of the blossom trees. We saw Geishas Girls on our way back to the hotel, Kat said they

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weren't real Geisha Girls but we took a couple of selfies anyway. Just outside our hotel was a midnight food market. I've never heard of a midnight market before, it was bloody humid already but because of the steam from where the vendors were cooking, my dress stuck to me like a second skin. We brought some noodles and took them back to our room. The Chinese food you buy in Hong Kong is different to the Chinese food you can buy at home in your local take away. It's actually Chinese, it's authentic.

We eat our noodles, uploaded our pictures and then we checked our notifications from graduation. I had over four hundred likes. Steph had three hundred and fifty but poor Kat only had one hundred.

I checked Daniel's page too, his graduation picture only had one hundred and thirty-four likes. Bless him.

The South China Sea.

Steph, Kat and I all caught food poisoning. It had to be from the food we had in the market because that's the only meal we had together, we each had different meals on the plane.

After I published that last post we'd decided not to stay in Hong Kong anymore and instead to go to Malaysia. Kat had booked a flight for us but because of our food poisoning we missed it and she wasn't able to cancel our tickets in time. We simply couldn't leave our hotel room... for a week. We missed Halloween, we missed our families and our own beds and every time I tried to sleep the giant cartoon head kept staring down at me, grinning. On the plus side, I lost tons of weight, most of my clothes are loose now which means I need to go and buy some more.

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Anyway, onto brighter things. When we recovered, we decided that we'd take a boat to Malaysia instead of a plane. Kat really wanted to take a boat, I'm not sure why but the pictures she showed us of the coast line looked superb.

We took a taxi to Hong Kong Harbour and explained to a man in uniform that we needed to take a boat to Malaysia. After using a translation app on my phone, giving the man the yen he kept asking for, he put us on a ferry. There were other tourists on the ferry but none of them spoke English and most of the locals had animals with them. The man sitting behind me had two chickens on his lap.

It was only when we'd left port did we realise that the ferry would take a week to reach Malaysia. Steph worked it out on her phone, I thought it'll only take a day and maybe a night.

Kat went to the toilet to have a panic attack and started throwing up. I started throwing up too but that was because of the boat rather than panic, I was fine with it, actually. I'm adaptable.

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

I won't lie to you, it was a long week on the ferry and although the ship had Wi-Fi I couldn't connect to it on my phone. We stayed in our cabin for the first couple of days until we'd acquired our sea legs. Once, when we were out on the main deck, Kat complained that she could see a whaling ship in the distance and started preaching to us about animal rights. Are fish even animals though? She then explained that the Chinese were building islands in the sea to claim more land or something. Steph had a go at her because she was still feeling sick and Kat ran back to the cabin crying. They didn't speak to each other for the remainder of the journey.

When we finally docked in Kuala Lumpur we went straight to a hotel and slept for several hours.

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When we felt better, and thank god that Kat had enough sense to bring some medicine with her because buying them aboard is a nightmare, we explored the city. We were lucky in the fact that the hotel receptionist spoke some English and told us about a guided tour that was taking place, starting a few streets away. It was perfect because I wanted to see the city and Kat wanted to do a historical tour to broaden her horizons or something.

The tour guide didn't speak English but he smiled kindly at us and took us around the city. He pointed out lots of historical buildings but we didn't know what they were. At one point I think he was telling us a ghost story because he made woo-ing sounds and raised his hands in the air like a zombie. Whatever he said must have been funny because the rest of the group laughed.

When we returned to our hotel, which is over a main road so I couldn't sleep, I checked my social media. People have stopped reacting to my graduation picture now but it's been three weeks. Three weeks ago, I was on the other side of the world. How crazy is that?

Ryan posted the picture of me falling off the stage at graduation. My mouth was open in a circle, my arms out like windmill blades.

I texted Mum and the photo was removed within five minutes but Daniel had already left a comment.

I clicked onto Daniel's profile. He's had two rugby matches since graduation and some girl has commented on every status. Her name is Joanna Frost. I don't recognise her. She signs off all her comments as Jo. Who does that? Who signs off their own comments with their name apart from pensioners who don't know how to use Facebook? This Joanna clown has no sense of online etiquette.

Sydney, Australia.

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Australia is like the land of eternal summer. We gave up on Malaysia after a week because of the language barrier and thought we'd go somewhere where they spoke English. We all slept on the plane to Sydney and woke up as we landed. The heat hit us like a punch in the face, it washed over us and I was sweating within minutes. I always complained about the heatwaves in London but this far worse.

We unpacked at the hotel and what's the first thing you do in Australia? You find the beach.

You know in American shows when the camera pans across the beach and everyone has either six packs or massive boobs. Australia was just like that. I didn't know which way to look there were so many fit men.

After we'd splashed about in the sea, five lads asked us to join them for a barbeque. I can't remember their names but they were all ripped and had surf boards with them. One lad with a ginger beard said he was the coach of the local surf school and took Steph out on his board. Kat and I watched from the beach as the other boys started their barbeque. The boys brought their own beer and we had already brought prosecco in the shops before we arrived.

It was late in the afternoon when the boys started smoking weed. This started freaking Kat out so we thought it best to leave. I didn't mind it really, I smoked weed at uni and I know Steph did too but I wished we could have stuck around. I heard one of the boys say he was going to go skinny dipping.

When we got back to the hotel Kat really kicked off. She accused me of ruining her holiday by drinking it away, instead of looking at the things she wanted to do like the Sydney Opera house. So I tried to explain to her what the definition of a gap year is, it's a time when you're meant to lose control, a time when you're meant to go crazy.

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Kat didn't want to understand and she threatened to go home. She wouldn't actually fly by herself but I'm a nightmare when I'm angry. I offered to call her a taxi to take her to the airport. Then Kat said something really low. She actually googled the therapist I'd seen in London and tried to call her.

Steph calmed us down and we reached a compromise. She suggested that we have a night out tonight, explore the opera house tomorrow and then go to New Zealand next week to look at the sets they used for The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings. I think they're boring films but it'll keep Kat happy.

Daniel had uploaded the result of another one of his rugby matches. His team lost but he'd had his picture taken being carried across the pitch.

His Mum, Linda, left a comment saying he was very brave so I guess he'd been injured.

Shame about the score, I commented.

Matalata, New Zealand.

The film sets are closed. Kat is devastated. It wouldn't have been too bad if they were closing for filming then we could try and be extras or spot celebrities but a sign said they were closed for renovations.

So we just walked around for a bit, rambling. Steph and I tried to make the most of it by using the time to plan out where to go next but Kat was in a right foul mood. Just because she couldn't do what she wanted.

When we got back to the hotel I had a shower and when I came out Kat had gone. I called her and she had a massive go at us on the phone. Accusing us of hi-jacking her holiday. As if. She was in a taxi on her way to the airport. Steph wanted to chase after her but I didn't. For one, we wouldn't

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beat her to the airport, by the time we arrived she would have already checked in at the gate. If she wanted to leave let her. It would be easier traveling without her anyway.

But we would have to change our plans. Steph and I had dinner in a seafood restaurant and returned to our room to brainstorm.

The gap year idea wasn't working out. Kat had seen to that. We couldn't really justify spending a year abroad without all three of us. It's November so we agreed we should return to London next summer and spend our Christmas aboard.

But we've agreed that we didn't want to stay in this continent. It has too many bad memories. We listed the countries we wanted to visit. Steph wants to go to Turkey. That's fair enough, I'm not bothered. I want to go Dubai. Although I went there with Daniel during our second year, I'd kill to go there again.

I'm putting these new plans on this website for two reasons. One is to show Kat that we could go on without her. If you're reading this Kat I'll make sure to send you our holiday pictures. The second reason is to prove to Daniel that I could have fun without him.

That Joanna girl has commented on his status.

Don't worry. You'll do better next time. Jo. x.

Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

The plane to Dubai was alright but trying to find a hotel was a nightmare. Our taxi driver claimed he was going to take us to some decent hotels but then he tried to charge us for driving around the city for three hours. We told him that we weren't paying and he started shouting and threatening to call the police. Luckily, the taxi didn't have locking doors so we both got out and legged it.

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Steph found us an hotel and once we'd dumped our bags we went shopping in the designer stores for a couple of hours so I could buy clothes that fitted me.

When we got back to the hotel I realised that I'd brought so much stuff that I would be over the airport's weight limit. So I posted this status on Facebook.

Does anyone know how I can take the items I brought with me in Dubai home to England without going over my weight limit on the plane? #firstworldproblems

Mum answered first. She said I could post it to her, as a gift. It's a nice loophole in the law so I nipped down to the shops to find some wrapping paper, tape and scissors. It was only when I returned to my room I realised that my handbag was unzipped and my purse missing. I spent the next hour on the phone to my bank cancelling all my cards. I lost all my cash in pounds, euros and yen. Steph said we shouldn't call the police because we didn't know if the taxi driver had lodged a complaint against us. You hear horror stories of brits banged up aboard, don't you? I told the hotel manager but he said that because it happened outside the hotel he couldn't do anything.

Istanbul, Turkey.

After we'd arrived in Turkey and checked into our hotel Steph said she wanted to visit the Hagia Sophia Museum. It's basically a cathedral, it looked beautiful. When I came to Turkey with Daddy last year we'd spent all our holiday at the beach.

I was posting pictures of the museum to Facebook when I saw something appear on my newsfeed.

Daniel had changed his relationship statues. He now claims he is in a relationship with that Joanna girl.

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Daniel's status had fifty reactions and rising. Most were boys from Daniel's rugby club. I clicked on Daniel's new profile picture. He and Joanna were wrapped in each other arms kissing on the Southbank of the Thames. They were wearing their graduation caps and gowns so they must have been in a relationship since October but only now decided to make it official.

Steph caught me crying by the hotel's pool and suggested we go out tonight to put my mind off it. I agreed but I phoned my therapist first to see if she thought it was a good idea. She did but she also said I should stop obsessing over things and try to contact home more often. I've only called Mum twice so far, once on the ferry to Kuala Lumpur and after my purse was snatched in Dubai.

Thebes, Greece.

We didn't plan on visiting Thebes. After a week and a half in Istanbul we decided to move on. Money was becoming an issue. I'd manage to get a replacement bank card so I had access to my account but there wasn't any money in there. I was seriously deep in my overdraft. I'd called Daddy who was angry I'd spent most of his money but gave me five hundred more to tide me over. Because planes are so expensive I suggested that we take a coach tour from Istanbul to Madrid, stopping off along the way for day trips in major cities. It's expensive but cheaper than a plane. It'll be like a proper road trip only without the driving. We'd also have the benefit of seeing the countries we were passing through.

The coach was noisy and the road was so dusty that I couldn't see much out of the windows. The driver had to turn his headlights on. We passed through Bulgaria, a country that I've always wanted to visit but the driver didn't stop.

Then went through Greece. Steph was dying to get off and look around the temples. At first I didn't want to but then I remembered that Kat loved things like this. Turns out that Alexander the

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Great conquered Thebes so I took tons of photos and sent them to her on WhatsApp. Serves her right for flaking on us.

Unfortunately, I didn't realise the time and we missed the coach. The next one wasn't for another day and Steph completely flipped out at me. It's not my fault.

We had dinner in a small cafe to think things through. Now our money was critical and Daddy wasn't going to give me anymore, Steph wanted to go home. I argued that we could budget carefully and make our way to Madrid and then up through France back home to England. I could tell Steph was doubtful but I'm determined to make this gap year idea work. It isn't a year anymore, though. It's been three months. We'll be home for Christmas.

Joanna hasn't sorted out her Facebook privacy settings and put up a video of her cheering Daniel on at a rugby match where he scored a touchdown.

I stalked her Facebook account. She studied drama, she's an actor wanna be.

Madrid, Spain.

It's December and we've just reached Madrid. Steph wants to fly home but I keep saying that it would be cheaper to travel up through France on a coach. It's also a chance to look at Nice or maybe even Paris.

Lyon, France.

We only spent three days in Madrid. It wasn't anywhere as warm as I thought it would be and we couldn't buy anything or speak the language. Steph said that next time we take a holiday we

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should either learn the basics of the local language or stick to English speaking countries. I told her that if she wanted to learn new languages she should have stuck with Kat.

We honestly have the worst luck traveling. Our coach doesn't go via Paris as we'd thought, but non-stop from Lyon to Calais. It was meant to be nonstop but the driver punctured a tyre and we were stuck at the side of the road for three hours. We'd broken down beside a small airport. There weren't any large communal flights but Steph had a stupid idea. When I was in the loo in Starbucks she found a flight going to Southern England and boarded it. She left me a note on our table to explain what she'd done.

I watched her plane disappear into the horizon. I hope she hits turbulence.

I tried to ring Daddy but he was in a meeting at work and didn't answer. Mum was out at a Christmas party. Ryan answered the home phone, laughed at me but promised to tell Mum and Daddy what had happened.

Then I rang Daniel.

The English Channel.

The coach was fixed three hours later and it took me another four hours to reach Calais. When I checked Facebook, Steph had landed safely. She and Kat were having a massive go at me online.

The ferry has Wi-Fi but the storm is so bad I'm not able to comment on anything. At this rate, I won't even be home for Christmas.

Newcastle, England.

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I spent Christmas morning in a premier Inn in Dover. I caught the first coach I could up country, round the M25 and then up North but there's been a flood outside Sheffield and the driver said the motorway is more of an ice rink. It took me twelve hours to get from Dover to Newcastle. Then I had to change at Newcastle to my local bus which was an hour change over and one more hour of travel.

Ryan has already uploaded pictures of Christmas dinner. He'd taken a photo of Mum surrounded by the presents she'd received, Daddy carving the turkey and a before and after photo of his dinner plate.

The bus took me past Daniel's house. His Dad hadn't shut the front room curtains and I was stuck at a traffic light literally outside his window. They were all washing up, Daniel, his Mum Linda, his Dad Mark, his dog Scamp and Joanna.

She was wearing a stupid paper hat!