

# Still Me



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Penguin  
Random House  
UK

First published by Michael Joseph 2018

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Set in 13.5/16 pt Garamond MT Std  
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes  
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978-0-718-18318-9

TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-0-718-18319-6

[www.greenpenguin.co.uk](http://www.greenpenguin.co.uk)



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Epictetus



## I

It was the moustache that reminded me I was no longer in England: a solid, grey millipede firmly obscuring the man's upper lip; a Village People moustache, a cowboy moustache, the miniature head of a broom that meant business. You just didn't get that kind of moustache at home. I couldn't tear my eyes from it.

'Ma'am?'

The only person I had ever seen with a moustache like that at home was Mr Naylor, our maths teacher, and he collected Digestive crumbs in his – we used to count them during algebra.

'Ma'am?'

'Oh. Sorry.'

The man in the uniform motioned me forward with a flick of his stubby finger. He did not look up from his screen. I waited at the booth, long-haul sweat drying gently into my shirt. He held up his hand, wagging four fat fingers. This, I grasped after several seconds, was a demand for my passport.

'Name.'

'It's there,' I said.

'Your name, ma'am.'

'Louisa Elizabeth Clark.' I peered over the counter. 'Though I never use the Elizabeth bit. Because my mum realized after they named me that that would make me Lou Lizzy. And if you say that really fast it sounds like lunacy. Though my dad says that's kind of fitting. Not that I'm a

lunatic. I mean, you wouldn't want lunatics in your country. Hah!' My voice bounced nervously off the Perspex screen.

The man looked at me for the first time. He had solid shoulders and a gaze that could pin you like a Tazer. He did not smile. He waited until my own faded.

'Sorry,' I said. 'People in uniform make me nervous.'

I glanced behind me at the immigration hall, at the snaking queue that had doubled back on itself so many times it had become an impenetrable, restless sea of people. 'I think I'm feeling a bit odd from standing in that queue. That is honestly the longest queue I've ever stood in. I'd begun to wonder whether to start my Christmas list.'

'Put your hand on the scanner.'

'Is it always that size?'

'The scanner?' He frowned.

'The queue.'

But he was no longer listening. He was studying something on his screen. I put my fingers on the little pad. And then my phone dinged.

Mum: *Have you landed?*

I went to tap an answer with my free hand but he turned sharply towards me. 'Ma'am, you are not permitted to use cell-phones in this area.'

'It's just my mum. She wants to know if I'm here.' I surreptitiously tried to press the thumbs up emoji as I slid the phone out of view.

'Reason for travel?'

*What is that?* came Mum's immediate reply. She had taken to texting like a duck to water and could now do it faster than she could speak. Which was basically warp speed. *You know my phone doesn't do the little pictures. Is that an SOS? Louisa tell me you're okay.*

'Reasons for travel, ma'am?' The moustache twitched with



irritation. He added, slowly: 'What are you doing here in the United States?'

'I have a new job.'

'Which is?'

'I'm going to work for a family in New York. Central Park.'

Just briefly, the man's eyebrows might have raised a millimetre. He checked the address on my form, confirming it.

'What kind of job?'

'It's a bit complicated. But I'm sort of a paid companion.'

'A *paid companion*.'

'It's like this. I used to work for this man. I was his companion, but I would also give him his meds and take him out and feed him. That's not as weird as it sounds, by the way – he had no use of his hands. It wasn't like something pervy. Actually in my last job it ended up as more than that, because it's hard not to get close to people you look after and Will – the man – was amazing and we . . . Well, we fell in love.' Too late, I felt the familiar welling of tears. I wiped my eyes briskly. 'So I think it'll be sort of like that. Except for the love bit. And the feeding.'

The immigration officer was staring at me. I tried to smile. 'Actually, I don't normally cry talking about jobs. I'm not like an actual lunatic, despite my name. Hah! But I loved him. And he loved me. And then he . . . Well, he chose to end his life. So this is sort of my attempt to start over.' The tears were now leaking relentlessly, embarrassingly, from the corners of my eyes. I couldn't seem to stop them. I couldn't seem to stop anything. 'Sorry. Must be the jetlag. It's something like two o'clock in the morning in normal time, right? Plus I don't really talk about him any more. I mean, I have a new boyfriend. And he's great! He's a paramedic! And hot! That's like winning the boyfriend lottery, right? A hot paramedic?'

I scabbled around in my handbag for a tissue. When I looked up the man was holding out a box. I took one. ‘Thank you. So, anyway, my friend Nathan – he’s from New Zealand – works here and he helped me get this job and I don’t really know what it involves yet, apart from looking after this rich man’s wife who gets depressed. But I’ve decided this time I’m going to live up to what Will wanted for me, because I didn’t get it right, before. I just ended up working in an airport.’

I froze. ‘Not – uh – that there’s anything wrong with working at an airport! I’m sure immigration is a very important job. *Really* important. But I have a plan. I’m going to do something new every week that I’m here and I’m going to say yes.’

‘Say yes?’

‘To new things. Will always said I shut myself off from new experiences. So this is my plan.’

The officer studied my paperwork. ‘You didn’t fill the address section out properly. I need a zip code.’

He pushed the form towards me. I checked the number on the sheet that I had printed out and filled it in with trembling fingers. I glanced to my left, where the queue at my section was growing restive. At the front of the next queue a Chinese family was being questioned by two officials. As the woman protested, they were led into a side room. I felt suddenly very alone.

The immigration officer peered at the people waiting. And then, abruptly, he stamped my passport. ‘Good luck, Louisa Clark,’ he said.

I stared at him. ‘That’s it?’

‘That’s it.’

I smiled. ‘Oh, thank you! That’s really kind. I mean, it’s quite weird being on the other side of the world by yourself

for the first time, and now I feel a bit like I just met my first nice new person and –’

‘You need to move along now, ma’am.’

‘Of course. Sorry.’

I gathered up my belongings and pushed a sweaty frond of hair from my face.

‘And, ma’am . . .’

‘Yes?’ I wondered what I had got wrong now.

He didn’t look up from his screen. ‘Be careful what you say yes to.’

Nathan was waiting in Arrivals, as he had promised. I scanned the crowd, feeling oddly self-conscious, secretly convinced that nobody would come, but there he was, his huge hand waving above the shifting bodies around him. He raised his other arm, a smile breaking across his face, and pushed his way through to meet me, picking me up off my feet in a gigantic hug. ‘Lou!’

At the sight of him, something in me constricted unexpectedly – something linked to Will and loss and the raw emotion that comes from sitting on a slightly-too-bumpy flight for seven hours – and I was glad that he was holding me tightly so that I had a moment to compose myself. ‘Welcome to New York, Shorty! Not lost your dress sense, I see.’

Now he held me at arms’ length, grinning. I straightened my 1970s tiger print dress. I had thought it might make me look like Jackie Kennedy, the Onassis Years. If Jackie Kennedy had spilled half her airline coffee on her lap. ‘It’s so good to see you.’

He swept up my leaden suitcases like they were filled with feathers. ‘C’mon. Let’s get you back to the house. The Prius is in for servicing so Mr G lent me his car. Traffic’s terrible, but you’ll get there in style.’

\*

Mr Gopnik's car was sleek and black and the size of a bus, and the doors closed with that emphatic, discreet *thunk* that signalled a six-figure price tag. Nathan shut my cases into the boot and I settled into the passenger seat with a sigh. I checked my phone, answered Mum's fourteen texts with one that told her simply that I was in the car and would call her tomorrow, then replied to Sam's, which told me he missed me, with *Landed xxx*.

'How's the fella?' said Nathan, glancing at me.

'He's good, thanks.' I added a few more xxxxs just to make sure.

'Wasn't too sticky about you heading over here?'

I shrugged. 'He thought I needed to come.'

'We all did. Just took you a while to find your way, is all.'

I put my phone away, sat back in my seat and gazed out at the unfamiliar names that dotted the highway: Milo's Tire Shop, Richie's Gym, the ambulances and U-Haul trucks, the rundown houses with their peeling paint and wonky stoops, the basketball courts, and drivers sipping from oversized plastic cups. Nathan turned on the radio and I listened to someone called Lorenzo talking about a baseball game and felt, briefly, as if I were in some kind of suspended reality.

'So you've got tomorrow to get straight. Anything you want to do? I thought I might let you sleep in, then drag you out to brunch. You should have the full NY diner experience on your first weekend here.'

'Sounds great.'

'They won't be back from the country club till tomorrow evening. There's been a bit of strife this last week. I'll fill you in when you've had some sleep.'

I stared at him. 'No secrets, right? This isn't going to be –'

'They're not like the Traynors. It's just your average dysfunctional multi-millionaire family.'

‘Is she nice?’

‘She’s great. She’s . . . a handful. But she’s great. He is too.’

That was as good a character reference as you were likely to get from Nathan. He lapsed into silence – he never was big on gossip – and I sat in the smooth, air-conditioned Mercedes GLS and fought the waves of sleep that kept threatening to wash over me. I thought about Sam, now fast asleep several thousand miles away in his railway carriage. I thought of Treena and Thom, tucked up in my little flat in London. And then Nathan’s voice cut in. ‘There you go.’

I looked up through gritty eyes and there it was across the Brooklyn Bridge, Manhattan, shining like a million jagged shards of light, awe-inspiring, glossy, impossibly condensed and beautiful, a sight that was so familiar from television and films that I couldn’t quite accept I was seeing it for real. I shifted upright in my seat, dumbstruck as we sped towards it, the most famous metropolis on the planet.

‘Never gets old, that view, eh? Bit grander than Stortfold.’

I don’t think it had actually hit me until that point. *My new home.*

‘Hey, Ashok. How’s it going?’ Nathan wheeled my cases through the marble lobby as I stared at the black and white tiles and the brass rails, and tried not to trip, my footsteps echoing in the cavernous space. It was like the entrance to a grand, slightly faded hotel: the lift in burnished brass, the floor carpeted in a red and gold livery, the reception a little darker than was comfortable. It smelt of beeswax and polished shoes and money.

‘I’m good, man. Who’s this?’

‘This is Louisa. She’ll be working for Mrs G.’

The uniformed porter stepped out from behind his desk and held out a hand for me to shake. He had a wide smile and eyes that looked like they had seen everything.

‘Nice to meet you, Ashok.’

‘A Brit! I have a cousin in London. Croy-down. You know Croy-down? You anywhere near there? He’s a big fella, you know what I’m saying?’

‘I don’t really know Croydon,’ I said. And when his face fell: ‘But I’ll keep an eye out for him the next time I’m passing through.’

‘Louisa. Welcome to the Lavery. You need anything, or you want to know anything, you just let me know. I’m here twenty-four seven.’

‘He’s not kidding,’ said Nathan. ‘Sometimes I think he sleeps under that desk.’ He gestured to a service elevator, its doors a dull grey, near the back of the lobby.

‘Three kids under five, man,’ said Ashok. ‘Believe me, being here keeps me sane. Can’t say it does the same for my wife.’ He grinned. ‘Seriously, Miss Louisa. Anything you need, I’m your man.’

‘As in drugs, prostitutes, houses of ill-repute?’ I whispered, as the service lift doors closed around us.

‘No. As in theatre tickets, restaurant tables, best places to get your dry-cleaning,’ Nathan said. ‘This is Fifth Avenue. Jesus. What have you been doing back in London?’

The Gopnik residence comprised seven thousand square feet on the second and third floors of a red-brick Gothic building, a rare duplex in this part of New York, and testament to generations of Gopnik family riches. This, the Lavery, was a scaled down imitation of the famous Dakota building, Nathan told me, and was one of the oldest co-ops on the Upper East Side. Nobody could buy or sell an apartment here without the approval of a board of residents who were staunchly resistant to change. While the glossy condominiums across the park housed the new money —: Russian oligarchs, pop stars,

Chinese steel magnates and tech billionaires – with communal restaurants, gyms, childcare and infinity pools, the residents of the Lavery liked things Old School.

These apartments were passed down through generations; their inhabitants learnt to tolerate the 1930s plumbing system, fought lengthy and labyrinthine battles for permission to alter anything more extensive than a light switch, and looked politely the other way as New York changed around them, just as one might ignore a beggar with a cardboard sign.

I barely glimpsed the grandeur of the duplex itself, with its parquet floors, elevated ceilings and floor-length damask curtains, as we headed straight to the staff quarters, which were tucked away at the far end of the second floor, down a long, narrow corridor that led off the kitchen – an anomaly left over from a distant age. The newer or refurbished buildings had no staff quarters: housekeepers and nannies would travel in from Queens or New Jersey on the dawn train and return after dark. But the Gopnik family had owned these tiny rooms since the building was first constructed. They could not be developed or sold, but were tied through deeds to the main residence, and lusted after as storage rooms. It wasn't hard to see why they might naturally be considered storage.

'There.' Nathan opened a door and dropped my bags.

My room measured approximately twelve feet by twelve feet. It housed a double bed, a television, a chest of drawers and a wardrobe. A small armchair, upholstered in beige fabric, sat in the corner, its sagging seat testament to previous exhausted occupants. A small window might have looked south. Or north. Or east. It was hard to tell, as it was approximately six feet from the blank brick rear of a building so tall that I could see the sky only if I pressed my face to the glass and craned my neck.

A communal kitchen sat nearby on the corridor, to be

shared by me, Nathan, and a housekeeper, whose own room was across the corridor.

On my bed sat a neat pile of five dark-green polo shirts and what looked like black trousers, bearing a cheap Teflon sheen.

‘They didn’t tell you about the uniform?’

I picked up one of the polo shirts.

‘It’s just a shirt and trousers. The Gopniks think a uniform makes it simpler. Everyone knows where they stand.’

‘If you want to look like a pro golfer.’

I peered into the tiny bathroom, tiled in limescale-encrusted brown marble, which opened off the bedroom. It housed a loo, a small basin that looked like it dated from the 1940s and a shower. A paper-wrapped soap and a can of cockroach killer sat on the side.

‘It’s actually pretty generous by Manhattan standards,’ Nathan said. ‘I know it looks a little tired but Mrs G says we can give it a splosh of paint. A couple of extra lamps and a quick trip to Crate and Barrel and it’ll –’

‘I love it,’ I said. I turned to him, my voice suddenly shaky. ‘I’m in New York, Nathan. I’m actually here.’

He squeezed my shoulder. ‘Yup. You really are.’

I managed to stay awake just long enough to unpack, eat some takeaway with Nathan (he called it takeout, like an actual American), flicked through some of the 859 channels on my little television, the bulk of which seemed to be on an ever-running loop of American football, adverts for digestion issues, or badly lit crime shows I hadn’t heard of, and then I zonked out. I woke with a start at four forty-five a.m. For a few discombobulating minutes I was confused by the distant sound of an unfamiliar siren, the low whine of a reversing truck, then flicked on the light switch, remembered where I was, and a jolt of excitement whipped through me.



I pulled my laptop from my bag and tapped out a chat message to Sam. *You there? xxx*

I waited, but nothing came back. I couldn't remember when he had said he was on duty, and was too befuddled to work out the time difference. I put my laptop down and tried briefly to get back to sleep (Treena said when I didn't sleep enough I looked like a sad horse). But the unfamiliar sounds of the city were a siren call, and at six I climbed out of bed and showered, trying to ignore the rust in the sputtering water that exploded out of the shower head. I dressed (denim pinafore sundress and a vintage turquoise short-sleeved blouse with a picture of the Statue of Liberty) and went in search of coffee.

I padded along the corridor, trying to remember the location of the staff kitchen that Nathan had shown me the previous evening. I opened a door and a woman turned and stared at me. She was middle-aged and stocky, her hair set in neat dark waves, like a 1930s movie star. Her eyes were beautiful and dark but her mouth dragged down at the edges, as if in permanent disapproval.

'Um . . . good morning!'

She kept staring at me.

'I – I'm Louisa? The new girl? Mrs Gopnik's . . . assistant?'

'She is not Mrs Gopnik.' The woman left this statement hanging in the air.

'You must be . . .' I racked my jetlagged brain but no name was forthcoming. *Oh, come on*, I willed myself. 'I'm so sorry. My brain is like porridge this morning. Jetlag.'

'My name is Ilaria.'

'Ilaria. Of course, that's it. Sorry.' I stuck out my hand. She didn't take it.

'I know who you are.'

'Um . . . can you show me where Nathan keeps his milk? I just wanted to get a coffee.'

‘Nathan doesn’t drink milk.’

‘Really? He used to.’

‘You think I lie to you?’

‘No. That’s not what I was s—’

She stepped to the left and gestured towards a wall cupboard that was half the size of the others and ever so slightly out of reach. ‘That is yours.’ Then she opened the fridge door to replace her juice, and I noticed the full two-litre bottle of milk on her shelf. She closed it again and gazed at me implacably. ‘Mr Gopnik will be home at six thirty this evening. Dress in uniform to meet him.’ And she headed off down the corridor, her slippers slapping against the soles of her feet.

‘Lovely to meet you! I’m sure we’ll be seeing loads of each other!’ I called after her.

I stared at the fridge for a moment, then decided it probably wasn’t too early to go out for milk. After all, this was the city that never slept.

New York might be awake, but the Lavery was cloaked in a silence so dense it suggested communal doses of zopiclone. I walked along the corridor, closing the front door softly behind me and checking eight times that I had remembered both my purse and my keys. I figured the early hour and the sleeping residents gave me licence to look a little more closely at where I had ended up.

As I tiptoed along, the plush carpet muffling my steps, a dog started to bark from inside one of the doors – a yappy, outraged protest – and an elderly voice shouted something that I couldn’t make out. I hurried past, not wanting to be responsible for waking up the other residents, and, instead of taking the main stairs, headed down in the service lift.

There was nobody in the lobby so I let myself out onto the

street and stepped straight into a clamour of noise and light so overwhelming that I had to stand still for a moment just to stay upright. In front of me the green oasis of Central Park extended for what looked like miles. To my left, the side streets were already busy – enormous men in overalls unloaded crates from an open-sided van, watched by a cop with arms like sides of ham crossed over his chest. A road sweeper hummed industriously. A taxi driver chatted to a man through his open window. I counted off the sights of the Big Apple in my head. Horse-drawn carriages! Yellow taxis! Impossibly tall buildings! As I stared, two weary tourists with children in buggies pushed past me clutching Styrofoam coffee cups, still operating perhaps on some distant time zone. Manhattan stretched in every direction, enormous, sun-tipped, teeming and glowing.

My jetlag evaporated with the last of the dawn. I took a breath and set off, aware that I was grinning but quite unable to stop myself. I walked eight blocks without seeing a single convenience store. I turned into Madison Avenue, past huge glass-fronted luxury stores with their doors locked and, dotted between them, the occasional restaurant, windows darkened, like closed eyes, or a gilded hotel whose liveried doorman didn't look at me as I passed.

I walked another five blocks, realizing gradually that this wasn't the kind of area where you could just nip into the grocer's. I had pictured New York diners on every corner, staffed by brassy waitresses and men with white pork-pie hats, but everything looked huge and glossy and not remotely as if a cheese omelette or a mug of tea might be waiting behind its doors. Most of the people I passed were tourists, or fierce, jogging hard-bodies, sleek in Lycra and oblivious between earphones, stepping nimbly around homeless men, who glared from furrowed, lead-stained faces. Finally I stumbled

on a large coffee bar, one of a chain, in which half of New York's early risers seemed to have congregated, bent over their phones in booths or feeding preternaturally cheerful toddlers as generic easy-listening music filtered through speakers on the wall.

I ordered cappuccino and a muffin, which, before I could say anything, the barista sliced in two, heated, then slathered with butter, all the while never breaking his conversation about a baseball game with his colleague.

I paid, sat down with the muffin, wrapped in foil, and took a bite. It was, even without the clawing jetlag hunger, the most delicious thing I had ever eaten.

I sat in a window seat staring out at the early-morning Manhattan street for half an hour or so, my mouth alternately filled with claggy, buttery muffin or scalded by hot, strong coffee, giving free rein to my ever-present internal monologue (*I am drinking New York coffee in a New York coffee house! I am walking along a New York street! Like Meg Ryan! Or Diane Keaton! I am in actual New York!*) and, briefly, I understood exactly what Will had been trying to explain to me two years previously: for those few minutes, my mouth full of unfamiliar food, my eyes filled with strange sights, I existed only in the moment. I was fully present, my senses alive, my whole being open to receive the new experiences around me. I was in the only place in the world I could possibly be.

And then, apropos of apparently nothing, two women at the next table launched into a fist fight, coffee and bits of pastry flying across two tables, baristas leaping to pull them apart. I dusted the crumbs off my dress, closed my bag, and decided it was probably time to return to the peace of the Lavery.