



Westminster Abbey

Micol Ostow



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speak

An Imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

*For Caroline, for braving the hall bar, the dining halls, the West End,
and the rest of Western Europe with me when we were mates back
at City University (such a bad influence you were!). And for letting
me star in all of your stories from our time in London.*

SPEAK

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The whole place just seemed so . . . British.

There was no other word for it. It wasn't exotic in the way that she imagined the Far East would be. It wasn't idyllic like a Caribbean island. In fact, it was just as dank and gray as she'd been promised. And yet, expansive, colorless, and understated as London seemed, it was, to Abby, completely alive. She was living her *Let's Go*. Or *Fodor's*. Either way, it was cool as all hell. She half expected a Beefeater to come marching by.

"Are you ready, then?" Zoe slid down off the lion.

"Yeah, um, will you just take my picture? In front of the lions?" Abby asked, handing her digital camera over.

"Sure thing, sister. Closer to the right. Not that close," Zoe commanded, waving.

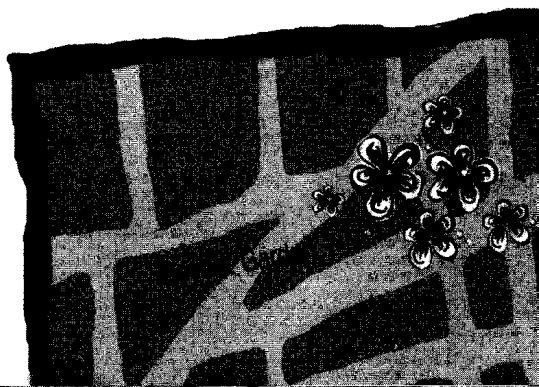
"Okay, this is it. You look bee-yoo-ti-ful. Smile."

She put the camera down and placed her hand on her hip in frustration. "Excuse me, but do you have some form of clinical depression? Seasonal Affective Disorder, or something? Because where I come from, that's not a smile, that's indigestion."

Abby burst out laughing.

"Yes, much better." Zoe raised the camera again. "Now say . . ." A smile of her own spread across her face. "Say 'Westminster' Abby!"

"Westminster Abby!"



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Abby's London



Application
Students Across the Seven Seas Study Abroad Program

Name: Abby Capshaw

Age: 16

High School: Hamilton School of Upper Manhattan

Hometown: New York City

Preferred Study Abroad Destination: London, England

1. Why are you interested in traveling abroad next year?

Answer: I'd like to enrich my high school academic experience by challenging myself to take college-level courses, and to expand upon my personal growth by studying in a foreign country.

(Truth: Actually, I wasn't the one who wanted to travel abroad in the first place. This was all my parents' idea—but I'm beginning to think it's not such a bad one.)

2. How will studying abroad further develop your talents and interests?

Answer: English and writing are especially appealing to me, and I hope that my experiences in England would deepen those interests.

(Truth: I'll be thousands of miles away from home, so I might actually be able to have some fun that doesn't entail playing Boggle with the 'rents.)

3. Describe your extracurricular activities.

Answer: Hamilton Peer-to-Peer Program Tutor, Alpha Zeta Honors Society, Member of Future Leaders of America

(Truth: Not much to report. My parents only approve weekend outings that include a sleepover at my best friend Dani's house.)

4. Is there anything else you feel we should know about you?

Answer: I'm responsible and focused, and I'm confident that I'd excel in finding a balance between exploring a foreign country and doing well in my classes.

(Truth: I can't wait to spice up my life with a little British influence.)

Chapter One



"In the event of an emergency, a member of the flight crew shall direct you to the nearest exit."

Abby Capshaw shifted nervously in the narrow confines of her tiny window seat. One of these days, she vowed to herself, when she was long past high school and making an actual salary instead of a paltry allowance and some money from babysitting, she was going to spring for a first-class ride. The plane had taken off, like, three seconds ago, and already her knees were cramping.

Normally Abby would be paying attention to the announcements that the captain was making over the



loudspeaker, or craning her neck to see the flight crew's safety demonstration. She was a firm believer that one never could be too cautious—she'd seen *Castaway*. It was important to be prepared. And Abby was nothing if not the responsible type. She was spacing now for two very specific reasons.

For starters, she couldn't understand a word that the captain was saying. She knew he was speaking in English because this was a British Airways flight and, well, he *was* English, but she had quickly discovered—with no small amount of dismay—that apparently a British accent was actually kind of tough to decipher in any context other than a Hugh Grant movie. Since boarding Flight 0178 to London's Heathrow Airport, Abby had found herself doing more politely ambiguous nodding than she had, pretty much, ever done in her whole life (family reunions notwithstanding).

So listening to the captain was essentially an exercise in futility. Though she did note with some amusement that he pronounced *direct* as “die-rect.”

Just like Hugh Grant. Mmmm...

The other reason that Abby was slightly less concerned than usual about hearing the announcements had to do with why she was on this plane to begin with: the whole “responsible type” thing. As in, she was tired of it. And she was looking for a change. Starting now.

Abby's junior year of high school had begun with a vow:

Things were going to be different this year. Last fall, on September 13, Abby had turned sixteen. She was a Virgo. Normally she didn't pay all that much attention to things like horoscopes and the zodiac, but her best friend, Dani Schumacher, was a huge believer in it, and, as such, kept Abby well informed on the subject.

According to *Who Do the Stars Think You Are?* (a dubious source, in Abby's humble opinion), being a Virgo meant that Abby was "a hardworking, dedicated personality who wants perfection in all you do. Because you are very organized, you make the perfect party planner!"

In other words, totally boring. (Except for that party-planner thing, which didn't so much apply to her life. Though one time her principal asked her to put together a casual going-away thing for her English teacher. But there was nothing sexy about a party your principal asked you to plan.)

Abby had to admit to herself that life in New York City was pretty much okay. She went to a nice private school where the kids were decent and down-to-earth, even though most of them had a lot of money—definitely more money than she had (well, technically, more than her parents). She got very good grades and tutored through a peer-to-peer program. She had a small, close-knit circle of friends. Maybe she wasn't captain of the cheerleading squad or anything like that, but she fit in and felt well liked.

Terminally boring.



She had discovered that she was a little vanilla. Actually, way more than a little. She needed some flavor. Some hot fudge or colored sprinkles. Ideally, she could spin “vanilla” into “hot fudge sundae.” The goal had been to put the plan into action over the course of junior year. But things hadn’t quite worked out the way Abby’d planned.

Her parents were completely overprotective of her (not that she’d ever given them reason to be—so unfair), making her stay home most Friday nights for “family time” and forbidding her to date until she was seventeen. Seventeen was ancient. Seventeen was *senior* year. By then, everyone in school would have paired off and she’d be lucky to go to the prom with her cousin Jeff. Clearly that was out of the question. Things had to change, and fast.

“Biscuits?”

Abby felt a tap at her arm and looked up to see a cheery blond flight attendant beaming away at her. “Huh?” she asked.

“Biscuits, luv. A package.”

Abby peered at the plastic package, trying to decipher what was inside. It was definitely something of the edible variety, that much was for sure, but as a general rule, she liked to have a vague sense of what she was eating before she dove in. Then again, she *was* sort of hungry. She nodded and took the snack. If nothing else, it was a crash course in British culture.

"Something to drink?"

Abby shrugged. "Water?"

"Certainly. Fizzy or still?"

"Um... tap. Plain. I mean, still," Abby stammered. The flight attendant passed a small chilled bottle across the row. Abby took her drink and placed it down on her tray, then ripped open the package of biscuits.

Oh! Biscuits were cookies. These were plain and flat, and cream-colored, probably vanilla-flavored. Not very exciting. Kind of like Abby's life. How appropriate.

She mentally flipped through the glossary she'd been sent from her program director before leaving: *bird, biscuit, bloke, boot, broly, chemist, jumper, knickers, lorry, loo, newsagent, pants, trainers, WC*—the words were either completely foreign, or familiar, but with a totally different meaning. For instance, she'd been warned not to use the word *pants* to mean "trousers" because in England, pants were underwear. Like *knickers*. Knickers were also underwear. Totally confusing.

Abby didn't care—that much—though, because being in this cramped, crowded plane and navigating her way through secret, coded language and pseudoexotic snacks was the first step toward that hot-fudge-sundae lifestyle she so craved. She was on her way to London. To *live*.

A thrill ran through her just thinking about it. She'd been accepted to the S.A.S.S. program—a program that encouraged high-school girls to study abroad—then she'd



been approved for admittance to City College, a university based in the eastern area of the city, for a ten-week summer session. Ten weeks. In London, one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world. London was all about cool, sophisticated accents, fancy meals like “high tea,” live theater that rivaled Broadway, actual royalty complete with palaces and everything—and she’d be right in the middle of it.

Was she scared? No way.

She was terrified.

The most ironic part about the trip was that the whole thing had been her parents’ idea in the first place. *They* had been the ones who’d found the S.A.S.S. program and decided that it sounded like “an opportunity not to be missed.” *They* had been the ones who *insisted* that Abby apply. The same people who got on Abby when she received an A-minus rather than an A on a paper or a test (which for the record, was pretty damn rare). The same people who acted shocked when Abby professed a desire to see a movie with her friends rather than play Boggle on family night. It was these two people who had driven Abby to elaborate measures of faux rebellion such as talking on her phone from inside her bedroom closet when it was later than 10 P.M., her “phone curfew.” *Those people actually wanted her to move to England. For ten whole weeks.*

Ultimately, Abby’s reasons for wanting to stay and her parents’ *highly* uncharacteristic reasons for wanting to

ship her off to a different time zone were one and the same. One reason, to be precise. A boy reason.

A boy named James.

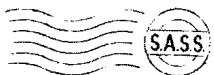
Back in November, Abby would have given anything not to be separated from James, which was obviously why her parents had insisted on doing just that. They pulled out that “not until you’re seventeen” bull, which Abby was pretty sure they’d made up on the spot just because she’d happened to take an interest in the opposite sex. She was too young to date, they proclaimed, but paradoxically, she was old enough to be thrown to the proverbial wolves for the summer. The British wolves.

Abby had used every tactic she could possibly conceive of: She cried, begged, pleaded, suffered weeks without talking to her parents or eating (in their presence, anyway)...to no effect. Abby loved James, James was bad news, Abby was going to England.

At the eleventh hour, Abby had finally come to terms with the tragic situation and used her rather prodigious babysitting savings to buy James a plane ticket over to England to visit her halfway through the summer term. There was *no way* that she was going to spend the entire summer apart from the boy she loved.

It was funny how things could change so dramatically, so quickly, Abby thought.

She took a sip of her water and broke off a tiny piece of her biscuit. It was hard and bland, like one might expect of



a cookie that was called a “digestive.” It tasted of vanilla—chalky, gritty vanilla.

But that was okay.

Because in seven hours—*wait, no, six and a half*, she to be separated from James, which was obviously why her parents had insisted on doing just that. They pulled out that “not until you’re seventeen” bull, which Abby was pretty sure they’d made up on the spot just because she’d happened to take an interest in the opposite sex. She was too young to date, they proclaimed, but paradoxically, she was old enough to be thrown to the proverbial wolves for the summer. The British wolves.

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Chapter Two



The country that once determined the meaning of civilised now takes many of its cultural cues from former fledgling colonies. The vanguard of art, music, film, and eclecticism, England is a youthful, hip nation looking forward. But traditionalists can rest easy; for all the moving and shaking in the large cities, around the corner there are quaint towns, dozens of picturesque castles, and scores of comforting cups of tea.

As the plane taxied along the runway, Abby reluctantly stashed her guidebook in her tote bag. From her post at