

Kevin and Julie travel to London. Kevin loathes sightseeing. Julie is the quintessential tourist. Kevin ends up enjoying the trip but doesn't tell Julie. He secretly writes a book about his fond memories to surprise her and express his love.

Julie's Gift: Memories of London

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JULIE'S GIFT:

MEMORIES OF LONDON

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Chapter 2

DAY ONE

It was time to start racking up those tourist points. Our first day would go something like this:

Breakfast at *Caffé Nero*

Riding the Big Bus in the rain

Hamleys Toy Store

National Gallery

Portrait Gallery

Trafalgar Square

Parliament

Big Ben

Westminster Abbey

Westminster Bridge

London Eye

Lunch at *Prêt a Manger*

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Dinner at *Da Corradi* in Shepherd Market

We had been in London less than an hour and all Julie could think about was her monstrous list of where we were to go and how to best strategically accomplish it all. To this end, after we quickly got settled in our room, we headed right outside of the hotel to *Caff  Nero*, Europe's version of Starbucks, for a planning session over coffee and croissants. I would say that women tend to spend much more time planning than men. I would have just as well started walking down the streets of London to see what there was to get into but so much for that concept. The good news was we picked an inexpensive place for breakfast because we couldn't have picked a more expensive time to go to London, in general. The pound was worth exactly one-half of the dollar. Luckily our breakfast was only fourteen pounds or twenty-eight dollars back home. I don't drink coffee, so by the time I had walked to our table, I had finished my six ounces of orange juice, eaten my chocolate croissant in three bites, and was ready to go. Meanwhile, Julie hadn't even finished putting sugar in her coffee. I was thinking, "Let's get going. We've got places to see. Move it." But she was still analyzing that list. Finally, after taking what was to be her last long sip of coffee, the lady spoke. She announced,

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“We’re taking the Big Bus sightseeing tour.” And that was that. The open-top Big Bus would allow us to hop on and off as we toured some of the sights on the list.

Since it had been raining intermittently, we opted to ride on the bottom enclosed level of the bus. That way we could remain dry—or so we thought. The only problem was when we boarded the bus, we didn’t recall seeing a warning sign that read “Watch Out! Wet Seats!” If we had, we probably wouldn’t have sat down in the huge puddles of water that had settled down on the seats from all the rain leaking in from the windows. We could have also used a warning that we weren’t going to be able to see a damn thing on the bus because of all the fog and moisture on the windows. Honestly, I couldn’t have cared less until I looked over at my wife and she had that fake look of “It’s fine. I’m having a great time.” on her face even though I could tell she was disappointed. This is how I know I truly love my wife because I instantly felt sad for her and then angered. We got screwed!

I somehow managed to pry the list out of Julie’s hands and saw that the famous Hamleys Toy Store was coming up as the next stop. I suggested that we abandon the bus to see the

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store. Basically, I was trying to put a smile back on her face by being upbeat, but at the same time, not reveal that I was actually looking forward to checking everything off that list if for no other reason than to make her happy. You see, as I often do, I had backed myself into a corner. I wasn't man enough to tell her that I had grown just as disappointed as she had about how our trip had started and that I was completely on board with having the full London experience with my girl. (Let it be known, Honey, that the one thing I enjoy the most in life is making you smile.) After checking out three of the five floors at Hamleys, that was enough of that. I think the kids would have enjoyed it much more if they had been with us.

After the toy store, we headed to the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery, which are located side-by-side off Trafalgar Square in central London. Together, these two art galleries house thousands of historically significant paintings, unfortunately, all insignificant to me. As soon as I entered the National Gallery, a yawn came over me and I snapped out of my enthusiastic mode. What could be more boring? We had walked blocks in the pouring rain without umbrellas for this? I couldn't pretend to be even the least bit interested. On the other hand, Julie, the art enthusiast, was gleaming at the thought of

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pinning over every portrait in *both* galleries. Since I didn't want to interfere with her experience, I took the opportunity to become acquainted with those fine English benches that I would get to know intimately. So as Julie took it all in, I sat and waited patiently. By the fourth bench stop, I had a reality check. It was one p.m. London time on Wednesday and we had left home Tuesday at six p.m. Eastern Standard Time. Basically, we had been going nonstop without sleep for thirty-five hours and still we had many more hours of excitement left in the day before rest time. Yippee!

Next on the list was lunch at *Prêt a Manger*, which I learned means "Ready to Eat." Instead of having a McDonalds or Burger King on every corner, London has these *Prêt a Manger* eateries and they are much better than your average fast food joint. They have cases upon cases of fresh pre-made sandwiches, salads, and other healthy items. The sandwiches looked great so I grabbed a turkey sandwich with lettuce, tomato, and mayonnaise. It was perfect except for the mayo. Mayonnaise absolutely grosses me out so naturally I asked if it was possible to get the exact same sandwich but "hold the mayo." I don't think they appreciated this request. The lady behind the counter was probably thinking, "Damn spoiled,

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pushy Americans.” When I finally told her that I was allergic to mayo, she relented and said, “OK, fine.” You’ll never guess whose idea it was to tell her I was allergic. It was none other than my quick-thinking wife. (Nice job, Honey!)

While we were having lunch that cost fifteen pounds (around thirty U.S. dollars), we called Griffin and Sabrina to check in. Just hearing their voices made my heart ache. It hit me how far we were away from them and I kind of wished they were with us on a family trip. It’s not very often that we vacation without them. My son, Griffin, who we call Griff, and I have a very special father-son bond. He loves to be glued to my hip and I love it too. He is extremely strong-willed and doesn’t hesitate to express his fearless and outgoing personality. He thinks he’s part football star, part hip hop celebrity, and part comedian. But when no one else is around and he lets his guard down, he’s just a little boy who still loves hugs, kisses and being tickled. I hope the bond we have now remains the same forever. Now Sabrina, that’s my princess. I knew from the very moment we found out we were going to have a girl that I wanted her name to be Sabrina because one of my favorite movies of all times is *Sabrina* starring Audrey Hepburn, who before I met my wife, I always thought was the most beautiful

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girl ever. My Sabrina is a clone of her mother-smart, beautiful, independent, and self-confident (as evidenced by her black belt in Karate). We are pretty close but I hope she knows just how much I love her. I have to spend more time with her before she enters her teenage years when I'll probably take a backseat to the more important things going on in her life. Also, I better get the texting lingo down, since these days, texting is increasingly her preferred method of communication. Anyway, we'd only been gone one-half day and I was missing them already. Of course, being the real "He-Man", I didn't dare let on in front of Julie. Are you starting to see a pattern here? I'm not the most emotionally expressive guy. I couldn't even bring myself to tell my wife how much I was enjoying experiencing our little London adventure together. I wonder if she can sense things like that.

Big Ben was more like Big Deal. Turns out the real Big Ben isn't even that big clock you probably see all the time on TV whenever they show London. That's the Clock Tower. The real Big Ben is just a bell in the Houses of Parliament in Westminster. Never mind all that though. "Just give me the camera, Honey, and I'll take your picture in front of the real *and* fake Big Ben and let's keep moving along." Westminster Abbey

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was next. Now Westminster Abbey was extremely cool to see. This huge Gothic church is one of those places that you read about in text books or see on TV but neither does it justice. You have to see it in person to fully experience its magnitude. As I was taking in the splendor of Westminster Abbey, little did Julie know, I was also taking in the splendor of her.

My wife is truly amazing, and sometimes I swear I don't deserve her. Some of the things I admire most about her are her creativity, her outgoing personality, and her "get things done" attitude. For example, in little over a year, she took her division at the publishing company from "run of the mill" to a "powerhouse." And from what I could see, she accomplished this by simply treating her coworkers and authors with respect and showing them what can be done when you set a goal and reach for it. She does everything with the grace and strength of a ballet dancer. We are complete opposites. Case in point--I wouldn't look so hot in a leotard. Also, I'm TV smart and she's book smart. I can recite the sports almanac and she can recite quotes from Shakespeare. She loves to cook and I love to eat (a lot). She likes to dress up and I don't. I could go on and on. Why does she put up with me? Does she know how much I really love her? I think so. Everyone shows their love in

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different ways and Julie is very good at showing her love for me in all the ways that I need. For example, during this very trip, I knew she could have spent a longer time looking at all the sights but because she was being considerate of me, she cut a lot of things short. (Honey, I know you got to see a lot, but I'm sorry you probably didn't get to enjoy as much as you really wanted.)

Next on the list was the London Eye, a gigantic Ferris wheel, which is one of the most spectacular attractions in London. From about fifty-stories high, you get amazing views of London that stretch as far away as twenty-five miles, which makes for some really fabulous pictures. Damn. This was exciting too. Once again, here was something else that I would have never done if it weren't for my wife. The best part of being on the London Eye was the fact that it takes thirty minutes to go in a complete circle (moving at a speed so slow, you hardly feel like you're moving at all) which gave me time to calculate how long I had been up without sleep. I had gotten up Tuesday at six a.m. Eastern Standard Time and by then it was four p.m. London time. We'd been up a zillion hours straight with maybe a twenty-minute catnap on the plane. How

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much more fun can I take before I completely collapse on the streets of London?

Julie's suggestion was "Let's walk to Shepherd Market and find a restaurant to have dinner." My thought was, "For crying out loud! More walking! I'm tired as hell!" Oops. Turns out Shepherd Market was only thirty quick steps from our hotel and consisted of just five teeny blocks of shops and restaurants. Suddenly, I became very agreeable, "Honey, where would you like to eat? Any place is fine with me." She picked *Da Corridi*. Of all the places, she chose a really informal restaurant that served mostly pizza and pasta. Since it was our first night in London, I was sure that she was going to choose a fancier restaurant but I figured out what she was up to. She picked *Da Corridi* just to make me happy because she knows that I am more comfortable in casual settings, not to mention the fact that I love pizza. Although I appreciated her gesture, I didn't tell her and I regret that. Until the very last piece of pizza crust was gone, I felt about two inches tall. Next time, I will insist that we go to a nicer spot.

After dinner, we headed back to the hotel room to finally unwind. I made a dash for the remote and turned on the TV with

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excitement. It didn't take long to figure out that there were only six BBC channels available and they didn't even come in clearly. And to top that off, Pay-Per-View didn't work either. "Forget it," I said. I decided I would just go to sleep even though it was only seven-thirty p.m. Before dozing off, I looked over at my wife who seemed quite content. She was sitting up in bed reading a book and enjoying a glass of wine. She was in heaven. Tonight there would be no TV noise to disturb her; she would be free to enjoy her book set to the soothing melodic tone of my snores. *ZZZZZ*

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