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TOM HOLLANDER

15 OCTOBER 2011

Am I famous enough to cadge a free car?

The exciting thing about showbiz is, you never quite know where you are. I thought of a good test some weeks ago. I phoned Denee, my agent's assistant.

'Can you ring Audi and see if they'll give me a car. But for goodness sake be discreet.'

I know it sounds grasping, but I'd been forced to it. Orlando Bloom had a A4 3.0 TDI A4 when we did Pirates, which he let me drive up Regent Street because he was worried about his carbon footprint; Kate Winslet was in a Q7 last year in Cornwall when I got lost following her because I couldn't understand her directions; and Michael Gambon has an R8, but he probably paid for that. He also has a Ferrari. Fair enough. But when I saw the charming and talented Benedict Cumberbatch filling up what looked like an S5 at a service station near Oxford, something inside me snapped.

'They'd be happy to.'

'What? Really?'

'Yeah, they said they love you.'

'Fuck, that's amazing. I can't believe it. Wow.'

'Yeah, and they pay for everything except the petrol and any fines you incur.'

'Unbelievable. Seriously, what do I have to do?'

'Nothing.'

'Really? Brilliant.'

'They said they're having a polo match next weekend which they'd love you to go to, but no pressure.'

'Oh no. Do you think I should go?'

'Probably you should, if you want a car.'

'Yes of course, I must go... but will they pick me up?'

I went. In a chauffeur-driven A8. Benedict was there. And Nick Mason of Pink Floyd and Prince Harry and Charlize Theron. We all laughed and drank Pimm's in the sun. There were lots and lots of different kinds of beautiful new Audis. And a really delightful woman from the Audi press office called Tabitha. She was warm and mischievous and funny and clever, and she was giving me a car. It was hard not to fall in love with her. I asked her out to dinner.

'You don't have to take me out because I'm giving you a car you know.'

'No, no, I'm not, that's not the reason, it's because I really like you, of course it is.'

I phoned my parents.

'Mum! Dad! Audi are giving me a car!'

'Really darling, that's wonderful. Why?'

'Well I don't know, I think it's a form of recognition in a way, for, you know having achieved something.'

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'For Rev?'

'Well I suppose so, and also other stuff in the past, maybe. Pirates probably.'

'And they're just giving it to you?'

'Um, I think it's on an indefinite sort of semi-permanent loan.'

'Well, how exciting!'

'Yes, and when I get it, I mean when it's delivered, I'll come down and we'll drive around in it... I'm going to ask for a convertible.'

In questioning my motivation for dinner, Tabitha had alerted me to the danger of the situation. It was tricky. Lovely though she was, I must be careful not to drink too much and make a pass at her, because that might go badly and could jeopardise the car. On the other hand, if it went very well and she liked it, then we'd probably have to do it again, and again, or for at least as long as I wanted the car, which was, well, forever. I couldn't risk that. What if she tired of me? Or, God forbid, me her? What if there was some mechanical work that needed doing and I couldn't get it done because we were going through a difficult patch? So it was clear: at dinner don't flirt too much and don't talk about cars at all. Less fun as an evening, but the sensible way forward. And definitely the most honourable.

The evening arrived and we had a jolly time. We talked about the food, the wine, and the merits of the BlackBerry over the iPhone, while I firmly established my credentials as a genuine friend. We were each in our own bed by about 9.30.

Unfortunately, for a few days afterwards I was unable to stop myself from sending her quite a few texts and emails about which model of Audi I thought might be appropriate. Eventually I settled on a supercharged six-cylinder black S5 cabriolet. I had my car space slightly enlarged to accommodate it.

In due course, the car arrived. I felt a stab of disappointment. It was a pale hairdresser-blue four-cylinder diesel. But it was convertible, and had an iPod dock, and pretty lights in the footwells.

My nieces loved it. We listened to Rihanna with the top down and they waved their hands in the air.

Mum and Dad liked it as well. 'It's great,' said Mum. 'It's fine,' said Dad.

'Yeah, no, it's fine for now. I'll just keep it for a few months then ask for something a bit more me.'

'Quite right,' said Dad.

Several weeks later I emerged from a long swim in Ibiza and stretched out on to my towel. There was a missed call from Tabitha. I felt a twinge of guilt. I hadn't spoken to her since our dinner.

'Hello Tom, long time no speak, hope all's well, are you in? One of our drivers is outside your house to take the car back, but he says you're not there. Can you call me back as soon as you get this?'

'Hi Tabitha. Hi, um, what do you mean? — there's a repo man outside my house?! I don't understand, I thought the car was for me to use, you know, on a kind of semi-permanent basis...'

'Oh no, we always said we'd take it back this week... didn't you get the text message?'

'No! What message? No,' I spluttered. 'I mean I'm in Spain on holiday. Did I do something wrong? I mean... is this... is this... because of, y'know, dinner... is it because I haven't been in touch since dinner?'

'No, it's because we always lend cars out on a temporary basis. When are you back?'

'Late Thursday night, but I thought some people have them, y'know, semi-permanently?'

'Only in very exceptional circumstances... someone'll be outside to collect it at 7.30 a.m. on Friday, OK?'

'But what's Benedict's arrangement? Hello? Hello?'

When I next arrived to visit my parents, it was in my old golf. I explained I'd given the Audi back because it wasn't the right model and I'd prefer to wait for the right one.'

'Oh very good,' said Dad. "Take it away!" He laughed and waved his hand like an aristocrat.

'Ha! Yes,' I said. 'Sort of.'

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