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The Boyfriend List

E. Lockhart

The Boyfriend List was a homework assignment for my mental health. Doctor Z, my shrink, told me to write down all the boyfriends, kind-of boyfriends, almost-boyfriends, rumoured boyfriends and wished-he-were boyfriends I've ever had. Plus, she recommended I take up knitting.

Ruby Oliver is fifteen and has a shrink. It might be unusual, but that's what happens when you lose your boyfriend and your best friends, become a social outcast at school and start having panic attacks. What else is there to do but skip school for the day, read mystery novels and eat spearmint jelly candies . . . ?

'Agonizingly funny' *Girl's Life* magazine

www.theboyfriendlist.com

Here is why I'm now a leper. I went to the Spring Fling with Jackson, even though he broke up with me before it and was already going out with Kim. So sue me. My ex-boyfriend that I was madly in love with wanted to take me to a dance, and it was only the second formal dance I was going to with a boy, and I had already bought a dress, and who knows? Maybe he'd see me in it and realize he made a big mistake. Really, I think almost any girl in my shoes would have done the same.

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CORGI BOOKS

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**For my dear old high school friends,
who were (and still are) excellent and hilarious—
and who never did anything like the bad stuff
people do in this book**

Here it is, the Boyfriend List. In chronological order.

- 1. Adam** (but he doesn't count.)
- 2. Finn** (but people just thought so.)
- 3. Hutch** (but I'd rather not think about it.)
- 4. Gideon** (but it was just from afar.)
- 5. Ben** (but he didn't know.)
- 6. Tommy** (but it was impossible.)
- 7. Chase** (but it was all in his mind.)
- 8. Sky** (but he had someone else.)
- 9. Michael** (but I so didn't want to.)
- 10. Angelo** (but it was just one date.)
- 11. Shiv** (but it was just one kiss.)
- 12. Billy** (but he didn't call.)
- 13. Jackson** (yes, okay, he was my boyfriend. Don't ask me any more about it.)
- 14. Noel** (but it was just a rumor.)
- 15. Cabbie** (but I'm undecided.)



Before anyone reading this thinks to call me a slut—or even just imagines I’m incredibly popular—let me point out that this list includes absolutely every single boy I have ever had the slightest little any-kind-of-anything with.

Boys I never kissed are on this list.

Boys I *never even talked to* are on this list.

Doctor Z told me not to leave anyone off. Not even if I think he’s unimportant.

In fact, *especially* if I think he’s unimportant.

Doctor Z is my shrink, and she says that for purposes of the list, the boyfriends don’t have to be official. Official, unofficial—she says it doesn’t matter, so long as I remember the boy and something about what happened.¹

The list was a homework assignment for my mental health. She told me to write down all the boyfriends, kind-of boyfriends, almost boyfriends, rumored boyfriends and wished-he-were boyfriends I’ve ever had. Plus, she recommended I take up knitting.²

I still have some doubts about Doctor Z, though by now I’ve been seeing her for almost four months. I mean, if I knew a fifteen-year-old who sat around knitting sweaters all day, I’d definitely think she had some mental health problems.

I know it’s weird to be fifteen and have a shrink. Until I had one of my own, I thought shrinks were just for lunatics, tragics and neurotics. *Lunatics*: insane-asylum candidates, people tearing their hair out and stabbing horses in the eyeballs and whatever. *Tragics*: people who get help because they’ve had something really bad happen to them,

like getting cancer, or being abused. And *neurotics*: middle-aged men who think about death all the time and can't tell their own mothers to stop poking into their lives.

A lot of my parents' friends are neurotics, actually, but the only other kid I know who sees a shrink (and admits to it) is Meghan Flack.³ She's had one since she was twelve, but she prefers to call it a "counselor"—like it's not a Freudian psychoanalyst her mom pays \$200 an hour, but some fun college girl who's in charge of her bunk at summer camp.

Meghan sees the shrink because her dad died, which makes her a tragic in my book. Her shrink makes her lie on a couch and talk about her dreams. Then he explains that the dreams are all about sex—which later turns out to mean that they're all about her dead father. Ag.

Me, I don't fit into any of my own categories. I'm not a lunatic, or even a neurotic. I started going to Doctor Z because I had panic attacks—these fits where my heart would beat really fast and I felt as if I couldn't get enough air. I only had five of them, which Doctor Z says isn't enough to count as a disorder, but all five happened within ten days—in the same ten days I—

- lost my boyfriend (boy #13)
- lost my best friend
- lost all my other friends
- learned gory details about my now-ex-boyfriend's sexual adventures
- did something shockingly advanced with boy #15
- did something suspicious with boy #10
- had an argument with boy #14
- drank my first beer
- got caught by my mom
- lost a lacrosse game
- failed a math test
- hurt Meghan's feelings
- became a leper

- and became a famous slut

Enough to give anyone panic attacks, right?⁴

I was so overwhelmed by the horror of the whole debacle⁵ that I had to skip school for a day to read mystery novels, cry and eat spearmint jelly candies.

At first, I wasn't going to tell my parents. I tend to keep them happy, get good grades, come home by curfew and not angst publicly about my problems—because as soon as I tell them one tiny thing about what's going on, they act like it's an earthquake. They can't bear when I'm unhappy. They try and fix it; they'd fix the whole world if they could, just to make me feel better—even when it's none of their business. It's one of the many hazards of being an only child.

So I was keeping quiet about the whole horror that is my life, and we had all sat down to dinner, and my mom was launching into some typical rant about the mayoral election or the rummage sale or some other boring thing she's cranked up about—when suddenly I got dizzy and my heart started banging hard in my chest. I had to put my head between my knees because I felt like I was going to pass out.

“Are you sick?” asked my dad.

“I don't know.”

“Are you going to vomit? If you're going to vomit, let me help you to the bathroom.”

I hate the way he says “vomit.” Why can't he say, “Are you queasy?” or “Is your stomach bothering you?” Anything but vomit, vomit, vomit.

“No, thanks,” I answered.

“Then are you depressed?” he wanted to know. “Do you know what the symptoms are?”

“Dad, please.”

“Does the universe seem pointless and bleak?” my father asked. “Do you think about suicide?”

“Leave me alone!”

“These are important things to ask. What about this: Do you feel like sleeping a lot? She slept until noon last weekend, Elaine.”

“Are you fainting?” my mother interrupted. “I think she’s fainting.”

“Is fainting a symptom of depression? I can look it up online.”

“Have you been eating?” my mother said, as if a lightbulb had gone on in her head. “Are you worried about your weight?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “No.”

“Do you count your calories all the time and think your thighs are fat? Because I saw you drinking a Diet Coke the other day. You never used to drink Diet Coke.”

“That was all the pop machine had left.” I felt like I couldn’t breathe. It was like a rugby player was sitting on my chest, bouncing up and down.⁶

“Eating problems are very common at your age.”

“That’s not it. My heart is beating really fast.” My head was still between my legs, under the table.

“It’s okay to tell us,” my mother said, sticking her head down under so she could see my face. “We support you. You don’t have to be skinny to be beautiful.”

“What do you mean, your heart?” asked my dad, sticking his head under, too.

“Fat is a feminist issue,” said my mother.

“It can’t be her heart,” said my father. “She’s only fifteen.”

“Shut up, you two!” I yelled.

“Don’t tell me to shut up,” my mother yelled back.

“You’re not listening!”

“You’re not saying anything!”

She had a point. I told her what was happening.

My mother sat up and banged her hands on the table. “I know. She’s got what Greg has. Panic attack.”

“Greg never leaves the house,” my father said, staying under the table to pick up some bits of food that had fallen under there.

“Greg has a panic disorder. He doesn’t go out because he gets a panic thing every time he does.”

“I’m not like Greg!” I said, sitting up slowly and trying to take a deep breath. Greg is a friend of my dad’s who runs a gardening Web site out of his apartment. He doesn’t go *anywhere*. If you want to see him, you have to visit and bring him take-out food. Books are piled up all over the place, and there are like four computers, and nine hundred plants blocking all the windows. He’s nice, but definitely insane.

“Greg started out like you, Roo,” said my mother. “A little attack here, a little attack there. Have you had more than one?”

“Four others,” I admitted, scared but also relieved that what was happening to me had a name.

“I’m making some calls,” said my mother, standing up and bringing her plate over to the phone. “You have to see someone about this.”

It was no use arguing. That woman is a whirlwind when she gets cranked up. She made Meghan’s mother, Sally Flack, who’s a doctor and lives down the block from us, come over right away and check my heart and breathing. Doctor Flack was in the middle of dinner. But she came anyway. My mother is a very forceful personality.

Meghan’s mom examined me in our bathroom and said I checked out okay⁷, and then my mom spent two hours on the phone, describing my symptoms to every single person we know and getting all her neurotic friends to give shrink recommendations.

●

Doctor Z came recommended by my mother’s friend Juana. I think my parents picked her because she was the

cheapest: Doctor Z works on a sliding scale—meaning she charges what people can afford to pay. I had my doubts about anybody recommended by Juana, who's a Cuban American playwright with thirteen dogs and four ex-husbands. She seems like a madwoman to me, but my mother says she's an artist. Mom says Juana doesn't worry about what other people think, and that makes her well adjusted.

I say, thirteen is too many dogs for good mental health. Five is pretty much the limit. More than five dogs and you forfeit your right to call yourself entirely sane.

Even if the dogs are small.

My mother drove me to Doctor Z's office on Thursday afternoon. We were early, and she let me drive around the parking lot since I just got my learner's permit, but that turned out to be a bad thing to do right before you go in to see your very first shrink and when your entire life is crashing down and you can't even talk to your best friend about it because she's half the problem.

Here's why: Your mom will make you insane. You will go so insane the shrink will commit you to a mental hospital the minute she sees you.

We were only going like five miles an hour in a circle around the parking lot, but Mom kept doing these sharp intakes of breath like she was at a horror movie.

"Roo! That guy is pulling out!"

"Uh-huh."

"Do you see him? There, he's backing up."

"Yeah."

"So stop!"

I stopped.

"Don't hit the brake so hard, Roo."

"I didn't."

"You did. I jerked forward in my seat. But it's okay, you're learning. It's practice. Oh!" she squealed, as I started

around the parking lot again. “Be careful! There’s a squirrel!”

“I wonder where I get my anxiety,” I said.

“What, you mean me?” My mother laughed. “It’s not from me. Your father is much more anxious than I am. You saw, he thought you were suicidal. Watch the turn there, not so sharp.”

Doctor Z’s office is in a blank building next to a mall. It’s full of orthodontists and dermatologists and all kinds of -ists I never even heard of, but when you get into her actual office, she’s hung African art on the walls and covered over the beige wall-to-wall with a deep red rug. Doctor Z herself was wearing a poncho. I kid you not, a big, crocheted, patchworky thing, over a long skirt and Birkenstocks. That’s Seattle for you. Psychologists wearing earthy crunchy sandals. She was African American, which surprised me. It shouldn’t have, but our family is white as far back on the family tree as I’ve ever looked, and I guess I picture people white white white unless someone tells me otherwise. Doctor Z wore these red-framed glasses that were too big for her face and gave you the sense that she took her poncho-wearing very seriously.

My mother said, “Hi, I’m Elaine Oliver, we spoke on the phone, blah blah Juana, blah blah blah,” and Doctor Z said, “Yes, so nice to meet you, and hello, Ruby, blah blah,” and my mother popped off to the mall next door and left me alone with the shrink.

Doctor Z offered me a seat and asked me about the panic attacks.

I told her I was having a bad week.

“What kind of bad week?” she said, popping a piece of Nicorette gum into her mouth.

“Just teenager angst. I’m not shattered or anything.”

“Angst about what?”

“I broke up with my boyfriend.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay.”

“I just met you.”

“Okay. What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

She didn’t say anything.

There was a box of tissues on her coffee table that I found annoying. Like she thought I was going to cry any minute. “Aren’t you going to ask me about my dreams?” I asked, after a minute. “That’s what shrinks do, isn’t it?”

Doctor Z laughed. “Sure. I can do that. Are you having any interesting dreams?”

“No.”

“All right, then.” We sat in silence for a bit. “Tell me something about your family.”

This was easy. I have a riff on my family. I spin into it whenever anybody asks me, because my parents are different than most of the people at Tate Prep, the school I’ve been going to since kindergarten. Tate is for rich kids, mainly. Kids whose parents buy them BMWs when they turn sixteen. The dads are plastic surgeons and lawyers and heads of department store chains and big companies. Or they work for Microsoft. The moms are lawyers too— or they do volunteer work and have great hair. Everyone lives in big houses with views and decks and hot tubs (Seattle people love hot tubs), and they take European vacations.

My folks are madmen by comparison. They send me to Tate on scholarship because “education is everything,” according to them. We live in a houseboat, which Kim and Cricket and Nora think is fun but which is actually a horror, because I have *no privacy* (none at all, because the whole house is tiny and built on an open plan, so if I want to be alone I have to go into my microscopic bedroom and shut the door and even then my mom can hear every word I say on the telephone), and because the area in Seattle where the houseboats are is completely far from anywhere you’d

want to go, and the buses run only once an hour. The other problem with the houseboat is bees. My dad runs an obscure garden tip newsletter and seed catalog from his home office: *Container Gardening for the Rare Bloom Lover*. The houseboat has a wraparound deck, and on every square inch of that thing are unusual breeds of peonies, miniature roses, lilies, you name it. If it blooms and you can grow it in a tub of dirt in the Pacific Northwest, we've got it. Which means we've also got bumblebees, all summer long, buzzing around our front door and sneaking in through the window screens whenever they can.

My mother won't set up a bug zapper. She says we've got to live in harmony with them. And truthfully, none of us has ever been stung. Mom is a performance artist (and part-time-at-home copy editor, to pay the bills), which means that she does these long monologues about herself and her life and her opinions about public policy and bug zappers. She gets hysterical onstage, yelling into the microphone and doing sound effects.

She's no longer allowed to talk about me in her shows. Not since "Ruby's First Period" became a major part of a monologue called *Elaine Oliver: Feel the Noise!* I only found out that my personal bodily fluids were her topic on opening night, when Kim and Nora and I were all sitting in the audience together (we were twelve). I died right there, stopped breathing, turned blue and went into rigor mortis in the middle of the Empty Space Theater's second row.

Dad had a talk with her, and she promised never to mention me onstage again.

I've gone through this riff a million times. It's a good way to keep a conversation going, and a good way to prep a friend so she knows she's not finding any BMWs or flat-screen TVs when she comes over. But it sounded different in the psychologist's office. Doctor Z kept going "Ummhmm" and "Oh, aha," as I was talking, as if she was planning on writing down shrinky-type things as soon as my fifty-minute

appointment was up. Stuff like: “Ruby Oliver, obsessed with getting her period, brings it up at first meeting.” Or, “Ruby Oliver, fixated on bumblebees.”

“Shows considerable anxiety about having less money than her friends.”

“Needs father’s help to stop her mother from embarrassing her.”

“First menstrual period, obviously a traumatic episode.”

“Thinking about hot tubs and privacy. Therefore, thinking about sex.”

Suddenly, the whole riff seemed weirdly revealing.

I shut up.

Doctor Z and I sat there in silence for twelve minutes. I know, because I watched the clock. I spent the time wondering if someone made that poncho for her, or she made it herself, or she actually bought it at a crafts fair. Then I looked at my low-rise jeans and the frayed edges of the 1950s bowling shirt I was wearing, and wondered if she was thinking mean stuff about my outfit too.

Finally, Doctor Z crossed her legs and said, “Why do you think you’re here, Ruby?”

“My parents are paranoid.”

“Paranoid, how?”

“They’re worried I’ll lose my mind and get anorexic or depressed. They figure therapy will head it off.”

“Do *you* think you’ll get anorexic or depressed?”

“No.”

A pause. “Then why do you think you had those panic attacks?”

“Like I told you, it was a bad week.”

“And you don’t want to talk about it.”

“I’m still in the middle of it,” I said. “Who knows if Jackson and me are really broken up? Because just the other night he kissed me, or maybe I kissed him, and he keeps looking at me, and he came back to this party I had and was all upset about this thing that happened.”