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opening extract from

Help! I'm a Classroom Gambler

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A WARNING TO ALL READERS

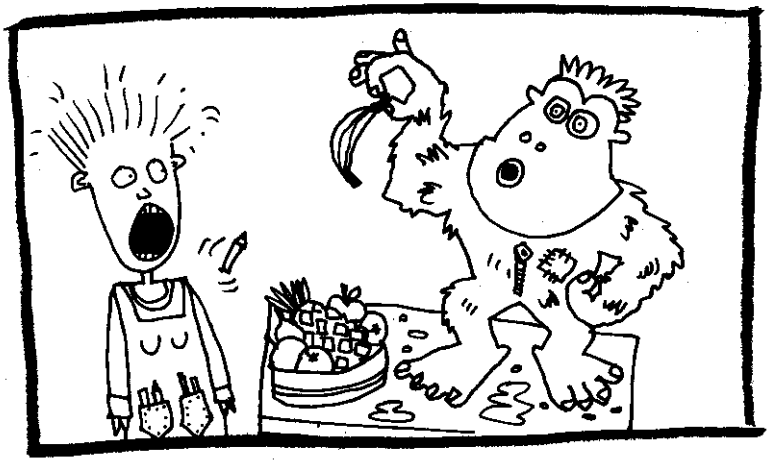
This diary is for school kids everywhere – but no one else. So it must be kept in a safe place at all times!!

Do not ever (I repeat *ever*) allow any parents or teachers to read this book – as it will only frighten them.

Thanking you in advance for your kind co-operation.

Harvey

Chapter One



WEDNESDAY JANUARY 4TH

All I did at breaktime was turn into a gorilla. And you can't tell me that's against the school rules, because it isn't.

It was a brilliant dare. The best I've ever done. A superb gorilla costume as well. A neighbour of my mate, George, had hired it and George had managed to 'borrow' it before it went back. It was dead comfortable. I reckon they should abolish our boring uniform and let us all come to school in gorilla costumes instead. We'd be so much happier.

Anyway, I lolloped off to the gym, where I swung about on the bars. Received a

massive cheer as well (about half the school were watching me).

The last part of my dare was to go into the art room and grab a banana from the bowl of fruit. I thought that would be so easy and it was – until someone screamed. Very loudly.

Mrs Wadlow, the art teacher, should have been guzzling coffee in the staffroom with everyone else. Instead, she was stealing forty winks. She'd jumped awake to find an extra from *Planet of the Apes* rampaging about in her art room. So I didn't blame her at all for screaming.

That's why I said, in my most reassuring voice, 'Don't be alarmed, Mrs Wadlow. I'll just slip my head off so you can see it's only me: Harvey.'

But not even the sight of me smiling at her in an extremely friendly way could calm her down. Instead, she stuck her face right up to mine – giving me an excellent view of the moustache nestling above her lips – and screeched on and on about my outrageous behaviour.

I stood there, wishing she'd just go away and have a shave, when a sudden hush fell over everyone. This could only mean one thing – the deputy head, Mr Monslow – or

Monster as we call him – had just materialized.

He is the most terrifying teacher in the entire solar system. Darth Vader could take lessons from him in scaring people.

He's about two hundred years old, a bit hunched up, and he prowls about the school with a very sour expression on his face as if he's just swallowed something bitter. One glance at him and you'll never smile again.

'What is happening here?' he demanded in his low, mournful, undertaker's voice. Mrs Wadlow immediately accused me of . . . well just about everything, really. She even said I'd been making disgusting noises. Didn't she know anything about wildlife?

I was told to get changed, and then report to Monster's gloomy barn of a room.

I stood in front of his desk while he stared out of the window. About twenty years passed, then he slowly turned round. He's got one of those faces that are all screwed up, like a little withered apple. 'I am not at all happy,' he moaned.

Keen to strike a friendly note, I cried,

'Oh, that's a shame. Anything I can do to help?'

'I am not at all happy with your behaviour,' he hissed. 'Your name has been brought to my attention several times this year already. And now this appalling spectacle today – do you have any explanation?'

Of course I did – but not one he'd ever have understood. So I said. 'I just thought it might brighten up a new term.'

'Brighten up a new term.' He rolled the words around in his mouth, a look of deep disgust on his face. Then he gave me a double detention and said I also had to write a letter of apology to Mrs Wadlow. (For what? Waking her up!?)

'And I don't want to see you in here again,' he announced.

'Well, I can agree with you on that one,' I said with a quick laugh.

But he didn't smile back, just waggled his eyebrows at me in a highly menacing way.

4.30 p.m.

Arrived home to find Mum, Dad and Claudia (my deeply annoying sister) sitting round the kitchen table gassing

away – until I appeared. Immediately they stopped talking and all gazed at me as if I were something they'd just ordered from the shops and wished to immediately return.

Then Mum and Claudia got up and left without a word. Something was up all right. I soon discovered what it was. Monster had only rung Dad to complain about my 'appalling behaviour' today.

Dad wasn't angry or sarcastic. That's not his style. But he was so disappointed in me. 'This isn't the way to behave,' he said.

He doesn't realize: acting silly is the only way I can get through the deadly grind of school. But then, I bet Dad was a really keen pupil. Even now, whenever there's a meeting at my school he's in the front row with his little notepad, and so enthusiastic you think someone will surely give him a gold star. While Claudia (who's two years older than me) is the creepiest know-all in the whole school.

So there you have it: a family of super-swots – and me. A bit of an idiot. All right, take out the 'bit of'.

'We don't want you to throw away all your chances,' cried Dad. 'You're at a school with an excellent reputation.'

A few years ago it didn't even have a uniform. But then this new, whizzy headmaster took over. He's practically vanished now (you can still spot him most weeks in the local paper though, shaking hands with some businessman) but the school's become a hot ticket because of its strong sense of community (pause while I break a rib laughing) and firm discipline.

Dad said. 'Until your behaviour – and attitude – improves, I'm stopping your pocket money.'

I wasn't expecting that. 'Just because I innocently dressed up as a gorilla—' I began, indignantly.

'Please don't look on this as a punishment,' said Dad.

'What is it then?'

'A chance for you to think and change direction.'

'I could think much better with some money in my pockets,' I replied.

'Despite this little setback,' said Dad, 'we believe you have great talent; it just hasn't been channelled properly yet. We also know you won't let us down.' Then he started looking so hopeful I had to turn away.

6.15 p.m.

Dad's little pep talk had got to me. I'll admit that. And I was actually staring at a maths textbook when Claudia stormed in. Of course she knew about me dressing up as a gorilla and was absolutely furious about it (I'd brought disgrace to the family, all that lark). Then she said, 'Now, ask me what I did at school today?'

'Only if you promise not to tell me,' I replied.

'Mr Kay was explaining a maths equation on the board and then even he got stuck so I had to go up—'

'Interest level, zero,' I announced.

'I was only explaining that I'm the ideal person to make sure you do better at school in the future.' Then she actually grabbed my maths textbook.

'Put that back at once,' I growled.

'Don't be silly, Harvey, I'm helping you.'

'No you're not, because you're leaving right now. Anyway, you're only pretending to help me so Mum and Dad think you're even more wonderful than before . . . so go and show off somewhere else.'

'All right,' she sighed. 'If you're happy to be known as the class fool.'

'Yeah, that suits me just fine,' I replied.

She flounced out and moments later I heard shocked yelps from Mum and Dad as she told them what I'd said to her.

Fool. Idiot. The very naughty boy right at the back of the class. That's me. Except I don't think I am bad. Well, not really bad. It's just I find school stupendously, spectacularly, mind-blowingly DEPRESSING. Not to mention BORING. So I want to liven things up a bit. I'm a kind of human firework really: hurling a splash of colour onto the dull canvas of school by doing something totally mad.

Like a dare.

At my primary school I was the very first boy to dance like a chicken on the back field. I never looked back after that.

That same week I got inside the recycling bin and rolled down the path, while still inside it. Later that term, I climbed the Christmas tree at school, stood outside a friend's house waving a sign saying 'I'm mad', and asked a really shouty dinner lady if she'd like to marry me.

Another time I even went up to the grumpiest teacher in the school and said, 'Please, miss, I need a wee-wee.' No wonder I was known as the King of the Dares.

Then last September when I started at my new school, I met George. But I never, ever suspected we'd become brothers-in-dares.

He's half a mile smaller than me with huge, dark, grey eyes, which make him look like he's been alive for at least two hundred years. He's extremely serious too – walks around frowning all the time. But one day after school, he left his mobile phone behind on the sweet counter. I went after him and we got talking.

We discovered that we both liked bird-watching, reading and eating chocolate. In fact, we had so much in common. So we spent more and more time together. George is very deep. I like that in a friend. But he doesn't know much about the ways of school . . . unlike me. So I look out for him and now we just seem to belong together like – bacon and eggs.

Of course I told George all about my 'dares'. He was highly impressed but he thought the word 'dares' was a bit childish. He thought we should call ourselves . . . 'Chancers'.

And I'm now doing much more sophisticated things. For instance, speaking with an Italian accent for two whole lessons so

the supply teacher really believed I was Italian.

We spend ages planning our challenges too and keep them top secret until the day.

I'm cooking up a challenge for George for next Monday. He was asking me about it tonight. But I refused to even give him a clue.

I just said that it's going to be totally brilliant.