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Opening extract from

The Art of Being Normal

(Extract taken from an Uncorrected Proof Copy)

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1

One afternoon, when I was eight years old, my class was told to write about what we wanted to be when we grew up. Miss Box went round the class, asking each one of us to stand up and share what we had written. Zachary Olsen wanted to play for the Premier League. Lexi Taylor wanted to be an actress. Harry Beaumont planned on being Prime Minister. Simon Allen wanted to be Harry Potter, so badly that the previous term he had scratched a lightning bolt on to his forehead with a pair of craft scissors.

But I didn't want to be any of these things.

This is what I wrote:

I want to be a girl.

2

My party guests are singing 'Happy Birthday'. It does not sound good.

My little sister Livvy is barely even singing. At eleven, she's already decided family birthday parties are tragically embarrassing, leaving Mum and Dad to honk out the rest of the tune, Mum's reedy soprano clashing with Dad's flat bass. It is so bad Phil, the family dog, gets up from his basket and slinks off mid-song in vague disgust. I don't blame him; the whole party is fairly depressing. Even the blue balloons Dad spent the entire morning blowing up look pale and sad, especially the ones with 'Fourteen Today!' scrawled on them in black marker pen. I'm not even sure the underwhelming events unfolding before me qualify as a party in the first place.

'Make a wish!' Mum says. She has the cake tipped at an angle so I won't notice it's wonky. It says 'Happy Birthday David!' in blood red icing across the top, the 'day' in

'birthday' all scrunched up where she must have run out of room. Fourteen blue candles form a circle around the edge of the cake, dripping wax in the butter cream.

'Hurry up!' Livvy says.

But I won't be rushed. I want to do this bit properly. I lean forward, tuck my hair behind my ears and shut my eyes. I block out Livvy's whining and Mum's cajoling and Dad fiddling with the settings on the camera, and suddenly everything sounds sort of muffled and far away, a bit like when you dunk your head under water in the bath.

I wait a few seconds before opening my eyes and blowing out all the candles in one go. Everyone applauds. Dad lets off a party popper but it doesn't 'pop' properly and by the time he's got another one out of the packet Mum has opened the curtains and started taking the candles off the cake, and the moment has passed.

'What did you wish for? Something stupid, I bet,' Livvy says accusingly, twirling a piece of golden brown hair around her middle finger.

'He can't tell you, silly, otherwise it won't come true,' Mum says, taking the cake into the kitchen to be sliced.

'Yeah,' I say, sticking my tongue out at Livvy. She sticks hers out right back.

'Where are your two friends again?' she asks, putting extra emphasis on the 'two'.

'I've told you, Felix is in Florida and Essie is in Leamington Spa.'

'That's too bad,' Livvy says with zero sympathy. 'Dad, how many people did I have at my eleventh?'

'Forty-five. All on roller skates. Utter carnage,' Dad mutters grimly, ejecting the memory card from the camera and slotting it into the side of his laptop.

The first photo that pops up on the screen is of me sitting at the head of the table wearing an oversized 'Birthday Boy' badge and pointy cardboard party hat. My eyes are closed mid-blink and my forehead is shiny.

'Dad,' I moan. 'Do you have to do that now?'

'Just doing some red-eye removal before I email them over to your grandmother,' he says, clicking away at the mouse. 'She was gutted she couldn't come.'

This is not true. Granny has Bridge on Wednesday evenings and doesn't miss it for anyone, least of all her least favourite grandchild. Livvy is Granny's favourite. But then Livvy is everyone's favourite. Mum had also asked Auntie Jane and Uncle Trevor, and my cousins Keira and Alfie. But Alfie woke up this morning with weird spots all over his chest that may or may not be chicken pox, so they had to give their apologies, leaving the four of us to 'celebrate' alone.

Mum returns to the living room with the sliced cake, setting it back down on the table.

'Look at all these leftovers,' she says, frowning as she surveys the mountains of picked-at food. 'We're going to have enough sausage rolls and fondant fancies to last us until Christmas. I just hope I've got enough cling film to wrap it all up.'

Great. A fridge full of food to remind me just how wildly unpopular I am.

After cake and intensive cling film action, there are presents. From Mum and Dad I get a new backpack for school, the *Gossip Girl* DVD box set and a cheque for one hundred pounds. Livvy presents me with a box of Cadbury Heroes and a shiny red case for my iPhone.

Then we all sit on the sofa and watch a film called *Freaky Friday*. It's about a mother and daughter who eat an enchanted fortune cookie that makes them magically swap bodies for the day. Of course everyone learns a valuable lesson before the inevitable happy ending, and for about the hundredth time this summer I mourn my life's failure to follow the plot of a perky teenage movie. Dad drops off halfway through and starts snoring loudly.

That night I can't sleep. I'm awake for so long, my eyes get used to the dark and I can make out the outlines of my posters on the walls and the tiny shadow of a mosquito darting back and forth across the ceiling.

I am fourteen and time is running out.

3

It's the last Friday of the summer holidays. On Monday I go back to school. I have been fourteen years old for exactly nine days.

I'm lying on the sofa with the curtains closed. Mum and Dad are at work. Livvy is at her best friend Cressy's house. I'm watching an old episode of *America's Next Top Model* with a packet of Maryland double chocolate chip cookies balanced on my stomach. Tyra Banks has just told Ashley she is not going to be America's Next Top Model. Ashley is in floods of tears and all the other girls are hugging her even though they spent almost the entire episode going on about how much they hated Ashley and wanted her to leave. The America's Next Top Model house is nothing if not brutal.

Ashley's tears are interrupted by the sound of a key turning in the front door. I sit up, carefully placing the packet of cookies on the coffee table beside me.

'David, I'm home,' Mum calls.

She's back early from her meeting.

I frown as I listen to her kick off her shoes and drop her keys in the dish by the door with a clatter. I quickly grab the crochet blanket at my feet, pulling it up over my body and tucking it under my chin, getting into position just before Mum walks into the living room.

Immediately she pulls a face.

'What?' I ask, wiping cookie crumbs from my mouth.

'You might want to open the curtains, David,' she says, hands on hips.

'But then I won't be able to see the screen properly.'

She ignores me and marches over to the window, throwing open the curtains. The late afternoon sun floods the room, making the air look dusty. I writhe on the sofa, shielding my eyes.

'Oh for heaven's sake, David,' Mum says. 'You're not a bloody vampire.'

'I might be,' I mutter.

She tuts.

'Look,' she says, gesturing towards the window. 'It's beautiful out. Are you seriously telling me you'd prefer to lie on the sofa in the dark all day?'

'Correct.'

She narrows her eyes before perching on the sofa by my feet.

'No wonder you're so pasty,' she says, tracing her finger down the side of my bare foot. I kick her away.

'Would you rather I lie in the sun all day and get skin cancer?'

'No, David,' she says, sighing. 'What I'd *rather* is see you doing something with your summer holidays other than staying indoors watching rubbish all day. If you're not watching TV, you're holed up in your room on the computer.'

The phone rings. Saved by the bell. As Mum stands up the blanket snags on her wedding ring. I reach to grab it but it's too late, she's already looking down at me, a quizzical expression on her face.

'David, are you wearing my nightie?'

It's the nightie Mum packed to take to the hospital when she had Livvy. I don't think she's worn it since; Mum and Dad usually sleep naked. I know this because I've bumped into them on the landing in the middle of the night enough times to be scarred for life.

'I thought it might keep me cool,' I say quickly. 'You know, like those long white dress things Arab men wear.'

'Hmmmmm,' Mum says.

'You'd better get that,' I say, nodding towards the phone.

I keep the nightie on for dinner, figuring it'll be less suspicious that way.

'You look like such a weirdo,' Livvy says, her eyes narrowing with vague disgust.

'Now, Livvy,' Mum says.

'But he does!' Livvy protests.

Mum and Dad exchange looks. I concentrate really hard on balancing peas on my fork.

After dinner I go upstairs. I take out the list I made at the beginning of the summer holidays and sit cross-legged on the bed with it spread out in front of me.

Things to achieve this summer by David Piper:

1. Grow my hair long enough to tie back in a ponytail
2. Watch every season of Project Runway in chronological order
3. Beat Dad at Wii Tennis
4. Teach my dog, Phil, to dance so we can enter Britain's Got Talent next year and win £250,000
5. Finish my Geography coursework
6. Tell Mum and Dad

I had one glorious week of being able to scrape my hair into the tiniest of ponytails. But school rules dictate boys' hair can be no longer than collar length, so last week Mum took me to the hairdressers to have it all cut off. Points two and three were achieved with ease during the first two weeks of the break. I quickly realized four was a lost cause; Phil isn't a natural performer.

Five and six I've been putting off in turn. I've practised six plenty. I've got a whole speech prepared. I recite it in my head when I'm in the shower, and whisper it into the darkness when I'm lying in bed at night. The other day I sat my old toys, Big Ted and Mermaid Barbie, on my pillow and

performed it for them. They were *very* understanding.

I've tried writing it down too. If my parents were to look hard enough they'd find endless unfinished drafts stuffed in the drawers of my desk. Last week though, I actually completed a letter. Not only that, I very nearly pushed it beneath Mum and Dad's bedroom door. I was right outside, crouched down by the thin shaft of light, listening to them mill about as they got ready for bed. All it would take was one push and it would be done; my secret would be lying there on the carpet, ready to be discovered. But in that moment, it was like my hand was paralyzed. And in the end I just couldn't do it and went racing back to my room, letter still in hand, my heart pounding like crazy inside my chest.

Mum and Dad like to think they're really cool and open-minded just because they saw the Red Hot Chili Peppers play at Glastonbury once and voted for the Green Party in the last election, but I'm not so sure. When I was younger, I used to overhear them talking about me when they thought I wasn't listening. They'd speak in hushed voices and tell each other it was all 'a phase'; that I would 'grow out of it'; in exactly the same way you might talk about a child who wets the bed.

Essie and Felix know of course. The three of us tell each other everything. That's why this summer has been so hard. Without them to talk to, some days I've felt like I might burst. But Essie and Felix knowing isn't enough. For anything to happen, I have to tell Mum and Dad.

Tomorrow. I'll definitely tell them tomorrow.

Right after I've finished my Geography coursework.

I climb off the bed, open my door a few centimetres and listen. Mum, Dad and Livvy are downstairs watching TV. The muffled sound of canned laughter drifts up the stairs. Although I'm pretty sure they'll stay put until the end of the programme, I place my desk chair under the door handle. Satisfied I won't be disturbed, I retrieve the small purple notebook and tape measure I keep locked in the metal box at the bottom of my sock drawer. I position myself in front of the mirror that hangs on the back of my bedroom door, pull my T-shirt over my head and step out of my jeans and underpants.

An inspection is due.

As usual, I start by pressing my palms against my chest. I will it to be soft and spongy but the muscle beneath my skin feels hard like stone. I take the tape measure and wrap it around my hips. No change. I go straight up and down, like a human ruler. I am the opposite of Mum who is all fleshy curves – hips and bum and boobs.

Next, I stand against the doorframe and measure my height. 168 centimetres. Again, no change. I allow myself a tiny sigh of relief.

I move downwards to my penis, which I hate with a passion. I hate everything about it; its size, its colour, the way I can always feel it just *hanging* there, the way it has a complete mind of its own. I discover it has grown an entire two millimetres since last week. I check it twice but the tape measure doesn't lie. I frown and write it down.

I move up closer to the mirror, so the glass is only a couple of centimetres away from my nose and I have to fight to stop

myself from going cross-eyed. First, I run my fingers over my chin and cheeks. Some days I swear I can feel stubble pushing up against my skin, sharp and prickly, but for now at least the surface remains smooth and unbroken. I pout my lips and long for them to be plumper, pinker. I have my dad's lips – thin, with a jagged cupid's bow. Unfortunately I appear to have inherited pretty much Dad's everything. I skip over my hair (sludge brown and badly behaved, no matter how much product I use on it), eyes (grey, boring), nose (pointy-ish) and ears (sticky-outy), instead turning my head slowly until I am almost in profile, so I can admire my cheekbones. They are sharp and high and pretty much the only bit of my face I like.

Last of all I inspect my hands and feet. Sometimes I think I hate them most of all, maybe even more than my private parts, because they're always there, on show. They're clumsy and hairy and so pale they're almost see-through, as if the skin is thin pastry stretched over spidery blue veins and long bony fingers and toes. Worst of all, they're huge and getting huger. My new school shoes are two whole sizes bigger than last year's pair. When I tried them on in Clarks at the beginning of the holidays I felt like a circus clown.

I take one last look in the mirror, at the stranger looking back at me. I shiver. This week's inspection is over.

4

It's hot. It's been hot for days now. The thermometer that hangs in the kitchen says it's thirty three degrees. I've got all the windows and doors open and I'm still dying. I'm lying on my twin sister Amber's bunk sucking on a raspberry ice pop. It has turned my tongue bright blue. Dunno why. The last time I checked raspberries were pink.

At night I sleep on the bottom bunk because Amber reckons she gets claustrophobic, but when Amber's not around I like to hang out on her bunk. If you lie with your head at the end closest to the window, you can't see the other houses or the rubbish bins or the mad old lady from across the way who stands in her front yard and just yells for hours on end. All you can see is the sky and the tops of the trees and if you concentrate really hard you can almost convince yourself you're not in Cloverdale at all.

'Leo!' Tia yells up the stairs.

Tia is my little sister. She's seven and a complete pain in the neck. Mam let her have a pair of high heels for her last birthday and

when she's not watching telly she clomps round the house in them, talking in an American accent.

Tia's dad is called Tony. He's in prison, doing time for handling stolen goods.

My dad is called Jimmy. I miss him.

'Leo!' Tia yells again.

'What?' I yell back.

'I'm hungry!' she wails.

'Then eat something!'

'We've got nothing in!'

'Tough!'

She starts to cry. It's ear splitting. I sigh and heave myself off the bunk.

I find Tia at the bottom of the stairs, fat tears rolling down her face. She's short for a seven-year-old and paperclip-skinny. As soon as she sees me her tears stop and she breaks into this big dopey smile.

I search the cupboards and fridge. Tia's right, the kitchen is bare and God knows what time Mam's going to be back. She left just before lunch, saying she was off to the bingo hall with Auntie Kerry. There's no money in the tin so I take all the cushions off the settee and check the inside of the washing machine and the pockets of all the coats hanging in the hallway. We line up the coins on the coffee table. It's not a bad haul – £4.82.

'Stay here and don't answer the door,' I tell Tia. She'll only slow me down if I take her with me.

I put my hoodie on and walk fast, my head down, sweat trickling down my back and sides.

Outside the shop there's a bunch of lads from my old school.

Luckily they're distracted, mucking around on their bikes, so I pull my hood up, fastening the zip to the top so all you can see are my eyes. I buy crumpets, Tizer, washing-up liquid and a chocolate Swiss roll that's past its best before date.

When I get home I stick the *Tangled* DVD on for Tia and give her a pint glass of Tizer and a slice of the Swiss roll while I wash the pots and stick a couple of crumpets in the toaster. When I sit down on the settee she scampers over to me and plants a wet kiss on my cheek.

'Ta, Leo,' she says. Her mouth is all chocolaty.

'Gerroff,' I tell her. But she keeps clinging on, like a monkey, and I'm too tired to fight her off. She smells of the salt and vinegar crisps she ate for breakfast.

It's midnight. Tia is in bed. Amber's staying over at her boyfriend Carl's house. Carl is sixteen, a year older than us. Amber met him at the indoor ice rink in town last year. She was mucking about, trying to skate backwards and fell and hit her head on the ice. Carl looked after her and bought her a cherry slush puppy. Amber said it was like a scene from a film. Amber's soppy like that sometimes. When she's not being soppy, she's as hard as nails.

I'm watching some stupid action film on telly with lots of guns and explosions. It's nearly finished when the security light outside the front door comes on. I sit up. I can make out shadows behind the swirly glass. Mam is laughing as she tries and fails to get her key in the lock. I hear a second laugh – a bloke's. Great. More fumbling. The door finally swings open and in they fall, collapsing on the stairs giggling. Mam lifts her head up and notices me watching. She stops giggling and clambers to her feet. She puts an unsteady hand on the doorframe and glares.

'What you doing up?' she asks, kicking the door shut behind her.

I just shrug. The bloke gets up too, wiping his hands on his jeans. I don't recognize him.

'All right, our kid?' he says, holding up his hand in greeting, 'I'm Spike.'

Spike has inky black hair and is wearing a battered leather jacket. He has a weird accent. When he says he's from 'here, there and everywhere', Mam starts laughing like he's said something really hilarious. She goes off to the kitchen to get him a drink. Spike sits down on the sofa and takes off his shoes, plonking his feet on the coffee table. His socks don't match.

'Who are you then?' he asks, wiggling his toes and putting his hands behind his head.

'None of your business,' I reply.

Mam comes back in, a can of Strongbow in each hand.

'Don't be so rude,' she says, handing Spike his can. 'Tell Spike your name.'

'Leo,' I say, rolling my eyes.

'I saw that!' Mam barks. She takes a slurp of her cider and turns to Spike.

'Right little so-and-so this one is. Dunno where he gets it from. Must be from his father's side.'

'Don't talk about my dad like that,' I say.

'I'll talk about him how I like, thank you very much,' Mam replies, rummaging in her handbag. 'He's a good-for-nothing bastard.'

'He. Is. Not.' I growl, separating each word.

'Oh really?' Mam continues, lighting a cigarette and taking a

greedy puff on it. 'Where is he then? If he's so bloody marvellous, where the bloody hell is he, Leo? Eh?'

I can't answer her.

'Exactly,' she says, taking a triumphant swig of cider.

I can feel the familiar knot in my stomach forming, my body tensing, my skin getting hot and clammy, my vision fogging. I try to use the techniques Jenny taught me; roll out my shoulders, count to ten, close my eyes, picture myself on a deserted beach, et cetera.

When I open my eyes Mam and Spike have moved on to the settee, giggling away like I'm not even in the room. Spike's hand is snaking under Mam's blouse and Mam is whispering in his ear. She notices me watching and stops what she's doing.

'And what do you think you're looking at?' she asks.

'Nothing,' I mutter.

'Then get lost will ya.'

It's not a question.

I slam the living room door so hard the entire house shakes.

5

Family legend goes that Mam's waters broke as she was waiting to collect a chicken bhuna, pilau rice and peshwari naan from the Taj Mahal Curry House on Spring Street. Family legend also goes that she was still clutching the naan when she gave birth to Amber an hour later. I took another half an hour. Auntie Kerry says I had to be dragged out with forceps. I must have known that I was better off staying where I was.

My first memory is of my dad changing my nappy. Amber reckons you can't remember stuff that far back, but she's wrong. In the memory I'm lying on the living room floor and the telly is on behind Dad's shoulder, and he's singing. It's not a proper song, just something made up and silly. He has a nice voice. It's only a short memory, just a few seconds, but it's as real as anything.

After that, the next memory I have is knocking Mam's cup of tea off the coffee table and scalding my chest. I still have the scar. It's the shape of an eagle with half of one wing missing. I was two and a half by then, and Dad was long gone. I wish I could remember