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Opening extract from

Would the Real Stanley Carrot Please Stand Up?

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For Clare, Dylan and Charlie

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Thin ribbons of smoke curl up from the thirteen candles on the cake, which is iced in black and white hexagons.

'Make a wish,' says Mum.

I smile because I know making a wish is supposed to be fun. The trouble is, I've made the same wish every year for as long as I can remember and it hasn't come true yet. I wonder if I might have more luck wishing for something different. It's not as if everything else is perfect. Far from it. Everyone is watching as I close my eyes and think about other stuff I could wish for.

The first thing that comes into my head is to wish I wasn't always last to be chosen when we're picking teams for a kick about. The other day in PE I was the last kid left standing as usual and Damian Cook was so desperate not to have me on his side that he practically begged Melanie Peters to join in.

'I can't play football,' she moaned.

'Oh, come on – you'll get the hang of it,' Damian said.

'I don't mean I can't play cos it's difficult,' Melanie replied, rolling her eyes. 'I can't play cos my leg's broken, isn't it?' She knocked her plaster cast with her crutch for emphasis.

'Oh, right.' Damian looked thoughtful for a moment. 'Couldn't you just go in goal?'

Melanie wrinkled her nose and shook her head.

'All right, I'll have Stanley Carrot,' Damian sighed.

That's not my real name, by the way. It's actually Stanley Harris, but everyone calls me Carrot – for obvious reasons.

Who am I kidding? I'm never going to be good at physical stuff (the birthday fairy can't work miracles, right?) but I even get teased about the stuff I am good at. I'm not being big-headed but I have quite a good vocabulary for my age and my brain stores up all sorts of facts and statistics that I hear on the radio or read in the paper. Dad calls me a walking encyclopaedia. I'm OK at art and I'm quite good at poetry – I won a national competition last month for a poem called 'The Beach'. If I was living in Renaissance Italy I'd be, like, the most popular kid in school. But these days it's just so much cooler to be able to pull a wicked wheelie than it is to describe a stormy seascape in rhyming verse.

'So come on, then,' Dad urges. 'What did you wish for?'

I open my eyes, give him a crooked 'it's a secret' smile.

'Are you OK?' Mum asks.

'Yeah, I'm fine. Why?'

'You looked like you were having some sort of turn.'

'I said I'm fine,' I say, trying not to sound defensive – but sounding really defensive.

This happens a lot. My face often *feels* like it's doing one thing (a secretive smile, for instance) but it actually looks like I'm doing something else (like having a fit).

'Who wants a piece, then?' my mum asks, plucking the candles from the icing.

'Yes please, love,' says Dad, smiling broadly. My dad is a mechanic at a garage up the road. He has short dark hair and always looks like he needs a shave. His eyes sparkle as Mum hands him a thick wedge of sponge, which he feeds hungrily into his mouth. 'Delicious!' he announces, unaware that he has a blob of cream on the end of his nose. 'I think we should have cake for breakfast every day.'

'Yay – can we?' cheers Bruno, my seven-year-old brother.

'No we can't!' Mum says sternly, but with a smile. 'Today's an exception because it's Stanley's birthday and I'm working this evening.'

'What, you're working this evening?' asks Bruno.

'That's right.'

'Are you, Mummy?' demands Bruno. 'This evening?'

'Yes, angel, I'm working this evening.' Mum turns to my nan, who is sitting in an armchair right in front of the telly. 'Any cake for you, Mam?'

'Just a very, very small slice for me,' says Nan. *Daybreak* is on and she has spent the last twenty minutes being rude about the presenters. Mum lays the knife on the icing, indicating where she's going to cut it. 'How's that?'

'A bit bigger than that, Pam. I want to be able to taste it.'

Mum adjusts the position of the knife.

'Bit bigger,' Nan urges. 'Bigger... bigger, tiny bit bigger. Lovely.'

Mum plunges the blade through the soft icing, slicing off a wedge of cake bigger than the one Dad has polished off.

'Goodness me, Pam,' Nan laughs, hefting the slab onto her lap. 'Anyone would think you're trying to fatten me up.'

'I'll cut you a smaller piece if it's too big,' Mum smiles and reaches for Nan's plate.

'No, no, don't worry,' says Nan, tugging the plate from Mum's grasp. 'I'll try and force it down.'

Everyone tucks in quietly.

'Anyone for more?' Mum asks at last. 'Chloe?'

For the first time since she arrived, my cousin Chloe

looks up from her mobile phone, her top lip curled in an expression of mild annoyance. 'What?'

'Pardon,' Mum smiles.

'I said *what*?' Chloe says, raising her voice.

Mum and Dad exchange a glance. Mum takes a breath and smiles. 'Would you like another slice of cake?'

'No thanks, Auntie Pam. I'm going in a sec, aren't I?' Chloe is tapping her bright pink nails on the sofa's padded leather arm. 'I'm meeting Aggie in a minute to catch the bus to school, yeah?'

Chloe only came round to give me my present: the new Jay-Z album. She's sixteen but could pass for twenty easily. I find myself marvelling at how she's changed since she was my age. Three years ago she was polite and plain and spent her spare time swimming and playing tennis. Now she is moody in make-up and spends her time on Facebook or 'chillin' out'.

'Who's Aggie?' Dad asks.

'She's my NBF, yeah?'

'Your National Banking Federation?' Dad feigns confusion.

'That's funny, Uncle Rick,' Chloe says, without a flicker of a smile. 'It means New Best Friend. Her name's Agatha Macey, all right?'

Agatha Macey is the coolest girl in school by a hundred miles. She is head girl, captain of hockey and always plays

the lead role in the school musicals. Oh yeah, and all the boys fancy her... I mean, the older boys. I wonder idly if she might invite me to hang out with them some time.

'And before you get any ideas,' Chloe says, pointing a pink talon at me, 'NO – you can't hang out with us. Ever.'

'I never said a word,' I reply, but I can feel my cheeks getting hot.

'Anyway, I gotta scoot, yeah?' Chloe stands and tugs at the bottom of her grey miniskirt. 'Thanks for the juice, Auntie Pam. Happy Birthday, Stan-the-man.'

'Thanks for the CD,' I say. 'See you at school.'

'Not if I see you first.'

I laugh and Chloe nods, then she's gone.

'So, do you like your cake?' Mum asks.

'I chose it,' Bruno says proudly. 'It's a football.'

'No way!' I try and look amazed. 'I thought it was a giant black-and-white planet?'

'No,' Bruno insists. 'It's a football, isn't it, Daddy?'

'You bet,' Dad laughs.

'If I had a wish I'd wish I could play for Man United,' Bruno announces. 'I want to be a striker and score in the World Cup Final. Will I get money if I'm a footballer?'

'Just a bit,' Dad laughs. 'You'll get more money for one match than I'll make in ten years, probably.'

'I'll buy us a new house with a playroom and a big garden, and—' Bruno pauses as if dreaming up the most

amazing feature he can imagine. 'My own room so I don't have to share with Stanley.'

'Good,' I say. 'Anyway, *I'm* sharing with you. That was my room for years before you came along, so—'

'OK, Stanley,' Mum says calmly. 'Bruno was only saying it'd be nice to have his own room.'

'You can have a big new room too,' Bruno says to me, beaming a gappy smile.

'See,' says Mum. 'That's really nice of you, Bruno. What do you say, Stanley?'

'Er, thank you for being so generous with your imaginary fortune,' I say. But my sarcasm is lost on my brother, who is mentally arranging the toys in his make-believe bedroom.

Mum frowns at me and I raise my eyebrows as if to say 'What?' But I might actually be saying 'I don't believe it' or 'Where's my school bag?' for all I know.

I'm not sure what Bruno said that annoyed me anyway. Maybe the suggestion our bedroom is rightfully his touched a nerve. Or I might have been jealous because the idea of him playing professional football one day isn't that ridiculous. He's already training at the Reading Football Academy once a week.

Mum and Dad are both football fanatics – they met at a burger stand at Stamford Bridge – and they're really proud of Bruno. He gets his sporting talent from Dad,

who played semi-professionally while he was doing his apprenticeship.

Bruno has got Dad's eyes – bright blue and keen – and he has Mum's easy smile with a dimple in the right cheek. He's got her silly sense of humour and her temper too. They both lose it if they think they're being laughed at.

I've never met my real parents so I don't know who I get my eyes or my smile from.

'So what did you wish for, Stan?' Dad asks again.

'If I tell you, it won't come true,' I say.

But deep down I already know it won't come true.

The letterbox clatters and Bruno runs out to the hall, scampering back a moment later and handing me a red envelope. I don't recognise the handwriting and I can feel my pulse quicken. I tell myself it's not from her, but as I slide my finger under the flap I secretly hope that it is.

'You haven't got time for that now, Stan,' says Dad, plucking the envelope from my grasp. 'Come and see your present.'

Receiving presents always fills me with dread. Everyone's waiting to see my reaction, but I know the harder I try to look pleased, the more likely I am to look terrified or confused or something. Dad ushers me to the side door, his strong hands resting on my shoulders.

'Close your eyes,' Mum says, her voice shrill with excitement.

I oblige and hear someone unlocking and opening the door. It's spring, but the morning air is cool and feels like a soothing flannel on my face. I feel Bruno nudging his way in front, slipping his little hand into mine.

'Wow!' he says. 'That's wicked.'

Mum almost purrs with pleasure at Bruno's reaction and I feel the pressure to match it with my own.

'Open your eyes,' says Dad.

I take a deep breath and do as I'm told.

I recognise the object in front of me, but it's so unexpected that it takes a moment to register. Stretching my lips apart I bare my teeth, bunching my cheeks up.

'Well?' says Mum, her word almost surfing on a giggle.

'What do you think?' Dad prompts, squeezing my shoulders.

'Wow,' I say, stalling. 'It's . . . I'm . . . this is so, so, *unexpected*.'

I turn to my parents who are both bursting with joy. I try desperately to muster something appropriate to say.

'Honestly,' I say, my face locked in this *happy* expression. 'You really shouldn't have.'

'It looks a bit small,' says Nan. 'Isn't it a bit small, Pam?'

'They're supposed to be like that, aren't they, Stanley?'

I nod my head a little too quickly.

'But he's already got a perfectly good bike,' says Nan.

'Nan's right,' I want to yell, but I continue grinning instead.

'It's not just a bike, though,' says Dad, patting the ridiculously low saddle. 'It's a *BMX*.'

'We know everyone hangs out at the skate park after school,' says Mum. 'And we didn't want you feeling left out.'

Dad hands me a matt black skate-style helmet. 'Now you can show those kids what you're made of.'

'Are you going to ride it to school this morning?'

'Course he is,' Dad laughs before I can think of a good reason not to.

Ten minutes later everyone is crammed into the side doorway watching me. My schoolbag feels like it weighs a ton on my back as I clip the helmet's strap under my chin.

'Get on it, then,' Mum urges.

'You've seen me ride a bike before.'

'OK, let's give the boy some space,' Dad says. 'We'll watch from the kitchen window.'

They shuffle inside and the side door closes. I size up the bike for a moment then grab the handlebars, wondering if my parents have any idea what makes me tick. I wheel my brand-new BMX down the path onto the driveway where I stop and get on. The saddle is so low my knees are up by my elbows. My head is below the level of the open kitchen window and I hear my parents talking.

'Do you think he likes it?' Mum asks.

'Why wouldn't he?' says Dad.

'Did you see the look on his face, though? He looked really . . . unhappy.'

'Stan always looks unhappy. And now he's a teenager it's only going to get worse. Don't worry, though, the grumpy, surly, awkward stage only lasts another seven years or so. By the time he's in his twenties he'll be an absolute delight.'

'And there I was thinking having kids was easy.'

I roll my BMX away from the window until my parents come into view. Seeing me, they both smile and wave enthusiastically and I give them a thumbs up, put my right foot on the pedal and push off. I freewheel for a couple of metres, but when I start to pedal my left knee comes up and knocks into my elbow. Swerving violently, I bounce across the rockery, through a fern plant, before emerging unsteadily onto the pavement.

I glance over my shoulder and see Mum looking alarmed, clutching Dad's arm. I give her a confident wave, then wobble round the corner and out of sight.

The combination of the BMX's seat position and its low gear means that my knees are pumping furiously up to my chin. I feel like a clown pedalling his tiny trike as I weave along. I manage to blend in with the rest of the school-run traffic for about ninety seconds, then I hear someone shout and I know I'm in trouble.