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Opening extract from

The Accidental Prime Minister

Written by

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Published by

Oxford University Press

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For my boys Joe and Harry
Love, always

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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and education by publishing worldwide in

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First published 2015

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-273774-8

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain
Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

I DONT LIKE MONDAYS

'BLEEEEEEEEEEEEP!'

There are many awful sounds in this world. Fingernails down the blackboard, Mum singing the theme tune to Match of the Day in the shower, bagpipes being played badly, in fact bagpipes being played brilliantly as well. But there are none worse than the sound of an alarm clock early on a Monday.

'Why are mornings so early?' Joe muttered to himself, before trying to grab his alarm clock, missing it and falling out of bed. This was not uncommon for

Joe. He often fell, even when no falling was required. He was one of life's great fallers. He fell into rooms, he fell out of them again. He even managed the almost impossible task of falling upstairs which let me tell you is no mean feat. Joe's life was a constant battle with gravity, one in which gravity clearly had the upper hand. He picked himself up from the bedroom floor and set about trying to get dressed without opening his eyes. It was a trick that he tried to help fool his sleepy head that he was still in bed. The downside was it made putting pants on very tricky indeed. Up to that point, putting on underwear with his eyes shut was as close to living on the edge as Joe's life got.

Joe lived in a tiny house in London with his mum. Dad had disappeared before Joe was born and he didn't have any brothers or sisters. The nearest he ever came to have a sibling was the time when a cat from down the street came to stay for ten days last year. Other than Mr Tiddles, it had only ever been the two of them. Joe's mum was a park warden, and that meant she spent most of her days making sure that the flowers were looked after and no dogs were doing their doings where they

shouldn't. It was a job she loved, and Joe loved her working there too. Joe's house didn't have a garden, just a tiny yard, the sort of place where you'd graze your knee if you fell over. Which as you know, is something Joe did a lot. So the park always felt like his and Mum's garden. When Mum wasn't in the park, pruning flowers and shouting at dog owners, she was in the kitchen cooking. It was her thing. She would stop off at the shops and buy the bags of food that no one else wanted which she'd use for inspiration in the kitchen, thinking up extraordinarily weird recipes with which to torture . . . I mean impress, Joe. Joe knew that it was really because money was sometimes tight, but it meant that meal times were never dull—I mean who can forget the cheese salad with onion gravy, or the plum tandoori crumble? Apart from the odd, odd meal, Joe's life was pretty unremarkable. Apart from . . .

BRRRRIIIIIIIING!

Just then the doorbell rang.

'LET ME IN, IT'S AN EMERGENCY!' came the exasperated cry from the other side. Joe's mum

opened the door and there stood Ajay, Joe's oldest and best friend.

'What is it, Ajay?' Joe's mum said sounding panic stricken.

'I smell your world famous fresh tea and toast with sour rhubarb jam, Mrs P, and I need a fix!' Ajay grinned and waggled an eyebrow up and down. Ajay

was the only person in the world who found Joe's mum's cooking not only edible, but enjoyable too. Then again, Ajay did once eat a fingerful of his own earwax in Geography for a bet so it's fair to say he probably hasn't got the most sophisticated palate.

'Oh, Ajay, doesn't your mother feed you?' Joe's mum asked, rolling her eyes. But she was well used to Ajay's tardis-like stomach.

'Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, Mrs P, that's why I make it my business to have as many as possible. Got any pork pies?' Ajay grinned, pushing past her in the direction of the breakfast table.

'You know I hate those things, Ajay!' Mum said shaking her head. 'I think it's the jelly, it makes me squeamish.'

Ajay and Joe had been friends since they were at nursery when they found out they had the same birthday. And let me tell you, when you're five, that sort of thing blows your mind, which pretty much means you're destined to be bestest friends for life. If it wasn't for Ajay, school would be nothing more than a yawn factory. Ajay was the sort of boy that made

even the dullest, dreariest things in life seem a giggle. He was always scheming, always thinking of a plan to make the teacher laugh. Or trying to figure out how they were both going to become millionaires by next Tuesday. These plans nearly always involved Joe and nearly always failed—but that was half the fun.

Ajay was just about to tuck into his tea and toast dripping in sour rhubarb jam when there was a loud clatter from the letterbox as an important-looking brown envelope landed on the mat.

'Bit early for the post isn't it?' Mum said. 'Ooh, it says Special Delivery.' Mum opened it, and unfolded the letter.

Joe knew instantly that something was wrong. He could see it on Mum's face.

'What is it, Mum?' Joe asked.

'Yeah, Mrs P, what's happened?' Ajay asked too.

'It's the park . . . they've shut it down.'

For a second no one said a word. Joe and Ajay looked at each other, then back at Joe's mum. Her face was pale, her jaw dropped open. She stared at the letter, her eyes watery and ready to spill over with tears.

'Shut the park!' Joe said furiously. 'They can't do that, it's . . . it's the park!!'

'Yeah, everyone loves that place!' Ajay joined in.

'You boys best get to school, or you'll be late,' said Mum, her voice all shaky.

'But what about . . . ?' Joe started to say.

'You leave that to me, I don't want you worrying.' Mum tried to smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. If she was trying to reassure Joe, it wasn't working. He knew his mum needed that job—how else was she supposed to put sweet-and-sour spaghetti on the table?

'Don't worry, Mum, I'll . . . I'll think of something.'

Joe's mum just nodded, turning away to wipe her eyes.

Joe and Ajay grabbed their bags and reluctantly headed out of the door. Neither of them said anything for what seemed like ages.

'You all right, man?' Ajay asked, breaking the silence.

'I don't know . . . I can't believe they've closed the park. I mean, why?!' Joe said in disbelief.

'Dunno,' Ajay shrugged. 'But I know a man who might,' he said pointing down the road.

As they turned the corner at the top of Joe's street they saw a man in the distance. He had a ladder and toolbox and was busy hammering a sign into the park gates. This made Joe's blood boil. If Mum had been there she would have given him what for—no one hammers anything into anything without her say-so first.

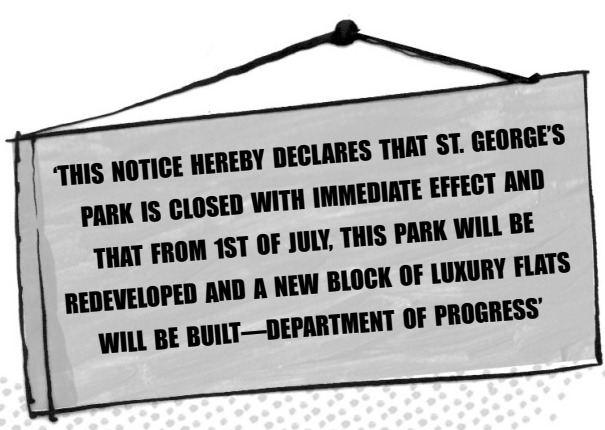
'Oi!' Ajay yelled, 'what are you doing?'

Joe read the sign: 'Under development'.

'What's going on?' Joe asked. 'Why have you closed the park?'

The man stopped what he was doing and shrugged, 'They don't tell me anything, I'm just the bloke who hammers things.'

Joe read the rest of the sign.



Underneath the notice was a drawing of a posh building, tall and made of glass. It had pictures of smiling people chatting and drinking coffee outside. Joe and Ajay looked through the park gates and could already see diggers moving in, ready to tear the playground apart.

'This can't be happening' Joe muttered, blinking back the tears. This was the place where he and Ajay hung out. Where they used to plot how they were going to become mega rich, and plan what to do if the world got taken over by zombies. This was the place where Joe and Ajay used to play football—or rather where Ajay would kick the ball and Joe would try to get out of the way of it before it hit him in the face. And now it was going to be turned into flats! Why wasn't anyone stopping this?

''Ello 'ello, anything I can do?'

Joe turned to see a policeman, standing by the sign and looking down at Joe and Ajay.

'Yes!' Joe gasped, 'Stop this man from closing the park!'

'Yes officer,' Ajay joined in, 'arrest this man.'

'Eh?' said the man hammering. 'What did I do?'

'You're closing the park!' Ajay yelled at him.

'I told you, I'm just the bloke who does the hammering, I'm not closing anything.'

'Just then, a group of police motorcycle outriders whizzed past, sirens screaming and lights flashing as they went. It was like something from a movie, only it was happening in their street.

'What on earth!' the man on the ladder said, nearly but, rather disappointingly, not falling off.

'OOOOH!' said Ajay said, glaring wide-eyed at the convoy of flashing blue lights and sirens. 'Do you think there's been a bank robbery? Or maybe aliens have landed!'

'Oh, I hope it's an alien invasion!' said Joe, 'we'd definitely get the day off school for that.'

'It's the Prime Minister.' said the policeman. 'He's visiting here today and I'm here as back-up.'

'You mean you're not here to stop them closing the park?' Joe said.

'Oh no, looks like the park's had it.' he said peering at the sign. 'Shame, I used to play here as a kid.'

'Where is the Prime Minister visiting?' Joe asked.

'A school I think . . . Yes, it's definitely a school.'

There was only one school down that end of the road. Joe and Ajay's school. Ajay and Joe looked at each other and, without saying a word, they grabbed their bags and ran. Well Ajay ran, Joe tripped over his laces.

'I bet he can save the park!' Joe yelled, picking himself up.

'Bound to!' Ajay grinned. 'At the very least we'll probably get out of double Algebra!'

'This is even better than the time that dog came in the playground and pooed on the netball court!' yelled Joe.

'Well, I don't know, that was a pretty special day,' said Ajay seriously, 'but it's definitely up there.'

By the time Ajay and Joe got to school there was a huge crowd already there, of excited school children, policemen, TV reporters, and cross-looking members of the public. There, at the front of the crowd, stood the headmaster, Mr Brooks.

Ajay nudged Joe, 'Mr Brooks looks . . . well, really weird. Has he combed his hair differently?'

Mr Brooks had indeed combed his hair, but that

wasn't it. Suddenly Joe figured it out.

'I know, I KNOW! He's smiling!'

'Oh yeah,' Ajay realized. 'It's really creepy, isn't it?''What's going on, Mr Brooks?' said Joe.

Mr Brooks sighed impatiently. 'Oh no, not you two! I warn you—any mischief and you'll be for the high jump!'

'Is the Prime Minister coming, sir?' Ajay asked, looking at the big black limo that had just pulled up behind the police motorcycles.

'Yes. It was supposed to be a secret, you know, for security reasons, seeing as how he's pretty much hated by most people these days. But some buffoon must have told the papers. I mean, look at all these cameras!' he said, suddenly grinning and running a licked finger over one eyebrow.

The doors of the black limo opened and out stepped a stout man in a mud-coloured suit. He had a red wobbly face, in the middle of which sat a bulbous nose, like a cherry on a particularly disgusting trifle. The man dabbed his sweaty face with a hanky and attempted to flatten his wispy hair with a clammy hand.