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opening extract from

Girl, 15

Charming but Insane

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1.

VIRGO: A VERY FAT MAN WILL SIT NEXT TO YOU ON THE BUS, AND HE WON'T HAVE HAD A BATH SINCE CHRISTMAS

Eyes, nose, lips. Jess was drawing a face on her hand. She should have been making notes for her history essay: a list of 'Reasons why King Charles I was Unpopular'. But instead she was giving herself a love-tattoo of the beautiful Ben Jones. A touch of Leonardo Di Caprio, a hint of Prince William, the merest suggestion of Brad Pitt . . . The flicked-up hair, the slanty grin . . . Oh no! It didn't look like Ben Jones at all. It looked like a demented iguana.

Art wasn't Jess's strong point. She wrote: *Ben Jones*

– *or Demented Iguana?* under her tattoo, and coughed in a signal to her friend Flora that communication was desired. It was a kind of ring-tone. A cough in the rhythm of the latest Justin Timberlake single. Flora looked up from the next desk, and Jess held the tattoo up to her. Flora smiled, but it was a kind of pretend smile, and immediately afterwards Flora glanced furtively at Miss Dingle and dived straight back into her work.

Miss Dingle – Dingbat to her fans – was glaring from the teacher's desk. 'Jess Jordan! What's your pwoblem?'

'Oh God, Miss, there are so many,' sighed Jess, hastily pulling her sleeve down to hide the portrait-tattoo of Ben Jones: the Demented Iguana. 'Tragic broken home, hideous genetic inheritance . . . massive arse . . .' A few people giggled.

'Get on with your work,' snapped Miss Dingle, trying to sound steely and terrifying, even though she had a weedy little voice and couldn't pronounce her 'R's. 'If you showed half as much intewest in witing histowy pwojects as you do in twying to be amusing, you'd be the star pupil instead of the class dunce. You're going to fail misewably unless you pull your finger out! You think you're such a clever dick!'

Everybody hid their faces in their books and cracked up – as silently as possible, of course. The whole room shook. Miss Dingle always used this old-fashioned slang that sounded faintly obscene: *pull your finger out* and *clever dick*. 'And the west of you!' shouted Miss Dingle. 'Be quiet and get on with witing your List of Weasons – unless you all want to stay behind after school! I'm quite tempted to put the whole gwoup in detention! Don't push me too far! I can quite easily pull out the Big One!'

There was a muffled explosion as everyone tried to avoid laughing out loud by eating their own tonsils, but frenzied scribbling was also resumed. Nobody wanted to stay behind after school. Jess picked up her dictionary and tried to look intelligent. She turned the pages, hoping for a rude word. Suddenly she had an idea. Hey! Maybe you could consult the dictionary, a bit like the Tarot. Think of a question, then open it at random. Jess closed her eyes and concentrated. *Will Ben Jones and I ever be an item?*

Her finger jabbed at a word. *Parsley. A well-known garden herb, used for flavouring soup.* Well, not a brilliant result, obviously. But maybe there was a hidden meaning. Perhaps you could make a boy fall in love with you by rubbing parsley behind your ears,

or sprinkling chopped parsley in his pants while he was swimming.

Jess suddenly caught Dingbat's eye again. A dangerous moment. Hastily Jess copied down the title of the history essay. 'Reasons why King Charles I was Unpopular.' All she had to do was read chapter six of the history book. Jess flicked through the book and looked at the pictures. Charles I had sad, haunted eyes and a stylish goatee. Flora had told her that he had been only about five feet tall. Some kind of Hobbit, obviously. And then he had had his head chopped off – pretty bad news for anybody of course, but for a short guy clearly a disaster, style-wise.

'Reasons why King Charles I was Unpopular.' Jess looked across at Flora, who was writing so hard that her whole body was shaking. She had written three whole pages already, and if Jess was going to catch up with her, she'd got to make a start. Jess picked up her pen and let her imagination run away with her. This was always dangerous.

Reasons why King Charles I was Unpopular

1. He never changed his pants.
2. He refused to grow.

3. He passed a law saying everybody taller than him had to have their legs cut off.
4. He slurped his soup.
5. He used to bottle his farts and sell them to the tourists.

Somehow at this point Jess's inspiration dried up and she began to think about Ben Jones again. She formed a plan to steal a bit of DNA from Prince William and Brad Pitt. Just the kind of work she would enjoy. With a dash of each, together with leg of toad and eye of newt, she ought to be able to genetically engineer a Ben Jones lookalike, in case the real one proved unavailable. She gazed in adoration at the tattoo of Ben Jones: the Demented Iguana. How she longed to have his babies. Or possibly lay his eggs.

Jess started another list: 'Reasons why Ben Jones is Popular.' This was much easier than the history list.

1. Hair like golden grass (if only I could picnic on it).
2. Eyes blue enough to swim in (he's beginning to sound like a holiday destination).
3. A cute, slow, slanty smile that could defrost Antarctica.

4. Doesn't speak much, i.e. not loud and trashy, and . . .
5. Oozes mystery and charisma.

Suddenly, the bell rang. A massive sigh of relief spread through the room. Everybody put down their pens, yawned and stretched. Tiffany, a plump, dark-haired girl with savage eyebrows, turned round to Jess and hissed, 'Don't forget my party tomorrow night! Be there or else!'

'Sure,' said Jess. 'I was gonna stay in and darn some divine socks, but for you – I'll make that major sacrifice.' Tiffany's family was quite rich – at least, by Jess's standards – and Jess was quite looking forward to quaffing champagne and swinging from the chandeliers.

Jess's best friend, the goddess Flora, was the only person in the class who hadn't finished working yet. She scribbled away harder than ever, her golden hair glittering. One grain of her divine dandruff could make the blind see again, and revive small insects that had been trodden on.

Flora finished off her sentence with a flourish, tossed back her hair with a great flash of supernatural light, turned to Jess and grinned. *It's a good job the beautiful, over-achieving bitch is my best friend*, thought

Jess, *or I might just have to kill her.*

'Jess Jordan!' thundered Miss Dingle in her tiny fairy's voice, above the noise of people packing up their bags. 'Will you come up here and show me your List of Weasons, please!'

2.
VIRGO: YOU WILL OPEN A PACKET OF PEANUTS IN A PUBLIC PLACE WITH FAR TOO MUCH PANACHE

Detention was quite relaxing, actually. Jess wrote her extra work in very large handwriting and managed to cover five pages. Miss Dingle seemed preoccupied. She kept writing things down and then screwing up pieces of paper and throwing them away. Maybe she was drafting a Lonely Hearts ad.

Histowy teacher, 38 but looks 57, bad hair, flat chest, knock knees, no 'R's, seeks gentleman companion for badminton and what follows natuwally.

Although Jess's own Lonely Hearts ad wouldn't be very tempting either.

Girl, 15, Charming but Insane, huge bum, massive ears, seeks . . . Well, seeks Ben Jones, but failing that, large Muslim-type burka garment to cover her deformities.

Jess handed her essay in. Miss Dingbat made a long sad speech about how clever Jess was, how well she could do if she tried, and how terribly she was under-achieving. All her teachers were desperately upset about it. Jess imagined them all weeping in the staffroom. There had never been under-achievement like it, apparently. It was almost an achievement in itself. *A shame there isn't a prize for under-achievement*, thought Jess. *I'd walk it.*

'Now, Jess,' tinkled Dingbat with a severe frown, 'Underneath all your wise-cwacking I know there's a sewious scholar twying to get out. Think how pwoud your pawents would be if you wealised your potential. Now off you go – and wemember, I'll be looking for signs of impwovement!' Jess nodded, trying to look tragic and guilty, and left the classroom.

She started thinking about her dad. If only he lived nearby! Two hundred miles is a long way to walk if

you want to drop round after school. Her dad sent her silly text messages and joke 'horrorscopes' every day. But she hadn't seen him face to face for months.

Jess's mum and dad had separated soon after she was born, possibly because of the shock of her appearance. Judging by the baby photos, she had resembled a bald and poisonous pudding. Perhaps they had blamed each other. Anyway, soon afterwards her dad had gone off to live in Cornwall, which is about as far away as you can get without actually entering the sea.

Fred Parsons was sitting on the wall outside school. He had his hood up and his big grey eyes looked out from under it like an owl in a cave. Jess pulled his hood off. Fred had long wispy hair which hung down messily around his collar. Only people with thick hair should grow it long. But Fred cultivated the eccentric Victorian poet hairdo because he thought it made him look like an intellectual.

'Get your blinking hair cut!' boomed Jess, like an army sergeant. She always greeted Fred this way. 'Get off that wall, stand tall, eyes on the horizon! You look like the Hunchback of Notre Dame.'

'Ah, Miss Jess Jordan!' Fred greeted her, ripping out his earphones. 'How was detention? Pleasant, I hope? Did Dingbat pull out the Big One?'

'Delightful, thank you,' replied Jess. 'One might almost say, addictive. I helped her draft her Lonely Hearts ad. We are now the best of friends. Practically inseparable.'

'I wasn't waiting for you, by the way,' said Fred. 'I was merely too tired to walk home after school. I might even not go home at all and sleep here. It'll save time in the morning.' Jess knew he had waited for her, though. They always walked home together. She had known Fred since they were three years old. They had met at playgroup, when he had hit her over the head with an inflatable bus.

'I was thinking of calling at Flora's on the way home,' said Jess. 'Wanna come?'

Fred got up off the wall and they set off together. 'I'm not coming in when we get to her house,' he said. 'I will never enter the Barclay household. I'd rather see my mother dance naked in front of the whole school.'

OK, Flora's house was a bit intimidating. It was rather like heaven. Flora and her sisters Freya and Felicity were all blonde. Her mother was blonde. Her dad was blond. The dog was blond. Even the carpets were blond. You had to take your shoes off by the front door and walk about in your socks.

'If there was a film made of our lives,' said Jess, 'who would play Flora?'

'Oh, Britney Spears, obviously,' said Fred right away.

Jess didn't much like the way he said *obviously*. 'And who would play me?' she demanded, hoping it would be Christina Ricci or possibly Catherine Zeta-Jones.

'You?' Fred sounded startled, as if the very idea of Jess in a film was some kind of tasteless mistake. 'I dunno . . . er, er, er . . . possibly Mike Myers in drag?' Jess hit Fred quite hard with her empty water bottle, not once but again and again and again, all over his head and shoulders. 'Violence!' gasped Fred. 'I love it!'

'In that case,' said Jess, 'I will never hit you again,' and she tossed the bottle into a bin as they passed. Although violent, she had been well brought up and would never throw down rubbish in the street. In her room, however – well, that was another story.

They had reached Flora's house. It was a tall, elegant building painted white, with neatly-clipped bushes in chic pots either side of the front steps. Somehow the birds never pooed on Flora's house. It was a sign that the Barclay family were the Chosen Ones. Things were very different at Jess's ramshackle

little home, two streets away. Stray dogs travelled miles across the city and queued up to poo in her front garden.

'Come in with me, Fred!' whispered Jess. 'Flora's dad is so scary. Please. Just for a minute. You can engage him in masculine talk about cars or football or something. You only have to take your shoes off. You won't lose your virginity or anything.'

Fred backed off. 'I would rather have all the hairs in my nostrils pulled out one by one than spend half a minute in that hell-hole. Besides, my socks smell of an expensive French cheese that has been left out in the sun.'

Jess stood stranded on the doorstep. Fred retreated up the road. Jess frantically tried to think of something to say that would detain him. 'Wait! Wait! What are you going to do tomorrow night? There's a party at Tiffany's. Are you coming?'

'No way!' Fred pulled a face. 'I plan to lie down on the sofa and watch something very violent on TV.'

Jess felt disappointed. Fred was so NOT a party animal. She sighed, and rang Flora's bell. Fred slouched off down the road in the manner of an orang-utan. When he got to the corner, he looked back, and Jess stuck out her lip, scratched her armpits,

and made a hooting noise like a chimpanzee. It was at this moment that Flora's dad opened the door.

Flora's dad made Jess uneasy. He was tall, jovial and terrifying. Everybody was afraid of him. His wife. His daughters. His dog. Even his carpet.

'Shoes off, please, Jess!' he commanded. 'How was extra French?'

'Extra French?' stuttered Jess. Flora appeared behind her dad, gesturing frenziedly. 'Oh, it was fine.' Jess tried to think of the French for 'fine'. 'Très belle.'

Too late, she realised that meant 'very beautiful'. But Flora's dad didn't seem to care. 'You must excuse me,' he said. 'I'm ordering some bidets from Turin.' He went back to the telephone and started talking in Italian, complete with gestures, which Jess thought was a little unnecessary. What a show-off! At least her own dad kept a low profile. The most assertive thing he had ever done was to send her a small sketch of a seagull. She would have preferred banknotes, obviously, but at least she could say her dad was a romantic artist starving in St Ives.

'Come in, Jess!' called Flora's mum.

Jess and Flora went into the sitting room. 'I told them you were at extra French,' whispered Flora, 'so they won't think you're a bad influence.'

'Jess! How lovely to see you!' Flora's mother was sprawled on the sofa, wearing an oyster-coloured satin dressing-gown like a glamorous movie star from the 1930s. She was drying her nail varnish by blowing on it through big, pink lips.

'Do excuse the mess,' said Mrs Barclay. Jess looked around in vain for a mess. The Barclay family didn't know the meaning of the word. If there was an Olympic event called 'Making a Mess', Flora's family would have to train arduously for months just to master the basics. Even then they'd probably think Making a Mess involved Not Rinsing Your Toothbrush.

'Excuse my déshabille,' said Flora's mother. Jess supposed that was a reference to the dressing-gown. If only she really *had* done extra French. 'I've just had a bath, and Henry and I are going to the opera. You must be tired after all that extra French. Get poor Jess a hot chocolate with cream, Flora. Sit down by me, Jess darling, and relax. Would you like a sandwich? How's your mother?'

'Oh, fine, thanks.' Jess wanted to say as little as possible about her mother.

'I saw her in the library yesterday,' drawled Flora's mother, inspecting her manicured nails with

satisfaction. 'I was terrified because I was late with my whodunits, but she was very kind and forgave me.'

Jess smiled gratefully. It was awful having a mother who worked in the library. Everybody saw her in her sad shoes, nerdy glasses and dreadful old hippie clothing. Sometimes she even forgot to comb her hair. How wonderful it would be to have a mother like Flora's, who called you 'darling'. Jess's mother only called her 'darling' when she was about to break some bad news, or apologise for a major failure on the maternal front.

It would also be wonderful to have sisters. Freya, Flora's elder sister, was away at Oxford University studying maths and How To Be A Love Goddess (the family business). Felicity, the youngest, was a musical genius. She played the flute. Jess could hear her tootling away even now, up in her bedroom. Felicity also kept doves in a dovecote out in the garden, and they flew to her windowsill and received tasty dove-food from her perfect white hands. Jess had no sisters or brothers, just a threadbare old teddy bear called Rasputin.

Flora's mum and dad went off to get dressed for their night out, and Flora made a cream cheese and gherkin sandwich for Jess. It was her favourite snack.

Flora often prepared delicious treats for her. Sometimes it seemed she got more mothering from Flora than she did from her actual mum.

'God, I'm so in love with King Charles I!' sighed Flora.

'Look Flo, he's just not right for you,' said Jess. 'It's the age gap. He's three hundred years older than you. People will talk. Plus he has no head. And even if he did have one, he wouldn't even come up to your shoulder.'

'Such a tragic life, though,' said Flora. She was a sucker for a sob story. Eventually Jess persuaded her that, if they went to Tiffany's party, there might be a boy there who looked a bit like King Charles I. Or, failing that, at least one who had recently been beaten up or who was recovering from a dangerous illness.

The only problem now was what to wear. And they only had twenty-four hours to decide. They agreed to spend the next morning in The Mall. The lack of suitable clothing was a crisis of truly global proportions. It required heroic action. So they decided to meet at ten o'clock in the morning – which, as far as Jess was concerned, was still the middle of the night.