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opening extract from

Girl (Nearly) 16

Absolute Torture

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1



Disaster! Jess tried to hide her horror.

Her mum frowned. 'What's wrong, sweetheart? It's what you've always wanted. A trip to see your dad! I rang him about it last night and he can't wait to see you! And there'll be sun, sea, art and ice cream! Plus lots of interesting places on the way down to Cornwall. It's the holiday of a lifetime. For goodness sake, Jess! What's the matter?'

Jess could not possibly, ever, tell. She would rather run through the supermarket stark naked and farting than reveal her secret to Mum. This sudden fabulous

surprise holiday was going to ruin her life, big time. Jess's heart sank and sank and sank until it was right down on the carpet like a very ill pet.

But she must try and sound delighted. 'Nothing's wrong! I've just got a bit of a headache. But hey, Mum! Thanks! It'll be fantastic! When do we leave?' She tried desperately to force a bit of enthusiasm into her voice, but it was hopeless – like trying to cram her bum into size 10 jeans.

'We'll set off the day after tomorrow,' said her mum, with the excited smile of a practised torturer. 'Early. There won't be so much traffic then, and we can just potter gently down into the countryside. Oh, I can't wait! It's going to be marvellous!'

Mum's eyes glazed over and she stared out of the window with a look of faraway rapture, as if the angel of the Lord had just appeared over Tesco's. 'Ruined abbeys!' she drooled. 'Rare wild flowers! Bronze Age burial mounds!'

Jess sometimes thought her mum was slightly off her head. Maybe if her parents had stayed together it would have kept Mum sane. But then again, maybe not. Her dad was kind of crazy, too.

'Start packing!' said Mum. 'You've only got twenty-four hours!' And she rushed off upstairs,

possibly to pack *Fabulous Fossils and Fascinating Cracks in the Ground* or *Sexy Sea Urchins of the South West.*

Twenty-four hours! Jess had to think fast. She had just one day to put an end to this obscene talk of a holiday. Could she become dangerously ill in twenty-four hours? Could she discreetly vandalise the car so it would never, ever, start again? Could she, acting with utmost care of course, slightly burn the house down?

She had to see Fred. Dear Fred! He would know what to do. Perhaps they could elope. Although they had no money. Perhaps they could elope to the bottom of his garden. It was a bit overgrown down there. There was a huge tree. They could secretly live in the tree. A bit like Tarzan and Jane, only without the muscles or the beauty.

Darling Fred! She had to text him now! Jess raced up to her bedroom but – how cruel fate was – her mobile phone had disappeared. The floor of her room was covered with scattered heaps of clothes, CDs, books and empty chocolate wrappers, as if it had been ransacked by wild animals in the night. Jess flung the debris around for a moment and then decided to cut her losses and just go round to Fred's house without texting him. He was bound to be

there. He almost never went anywhere without telling her, these days.

She just had to check her make-up first. Jess headed for the kitchen where there was a small mirror above the sink, so you could stare into your own tortured eyes as you washed the dishes. Oh my God, her eyebrows were rubbish. They would have been rubbish even on an orang-utan.

Never mind. This was no time to pluck an eyebrow. She flung open the fridge and grabbed a can of Coke. No, wait, that should be water. Although she and Fred were close, they hadn't yet passed the gas barrier. Silent pants were desirable in his company.

Jess got a glass of water and drank it whilst looking in the mirror. Glug, glug, glug went her throat. Like a snake eating a whole family of gerbils. Most unattractive.

'Have you seen my teeth?' came a sudden spooky voice behind her. But it wasn't a spectral presence. It was only Granny. Actually what she said was 'Have you feen my teeth?' because when she lost her teeth she couldn't pronounce her 's's. She called Jess 'Jeff'. This was slightly irritating. Jess wasn't completely opposed to the idea of a sex change, but if she did unexpectedly become a male person, she wanted to

be called Brad, not Jeff.

'Have you looked under your pillow?' asked Jess. They went into Granny's room and found the teeth immediately.

'My goodness, you are brilliant at finding things, dear,' said Granny. 'You should work in airport security when you leave school.'

Jess laughed. Granny's teeth were always either in a glass of water on the bedside table, or under the pillow.

'No, Granny, I'm going to be a stand-up comedian, remember?' said Jess. 'Not as glamorous as airport security, obviously, but somebody's got to perform the back-breaking drudgery of making people laugh.'

Granny picked up her teeth and for a moment used them in a kind of ventriloquist act.

'Hello, Jeff!' she said in a squeaky voice she always used for the teeth. 'What'f for fupper?' Granny made the teeth chomp together in a hungry kind of way.

This little cabaret had amused Jess quite a lot when she was younger, but now, quite frankly, it was beginning to lose its allure. Jess was desperate to escape and fly to the arms of Fabulous Fred. She laughed politely and backed off down the hallway towards the front door.

'Let's go and watch the news,' said Granny, ramming her teeth back into her mouth with panache. 'There's been an explosion in Poland, it's terrible. Hundreds feared dead.' Granny was quite ghoulish in her addiction to catastrophe.

'I've got to go out, Granny,' said Jess, looking at her watch in an important way. 'I've got to say goodbye to my friends before I go on holiday.'

'Ah! Our lovely trip! I'm so looking forward to it, dear, aren't you? Grandpa and I spent our honeymoon in Cornwall, you know.'

Jess had heard this story approximately 99,999 times. *Please don't say anything more about it, Granny,* she thought desperately, *or I might just have to bundle you away affectionately but briskly into the cupboard under the stairs.*

'And,' Granny went on excitedly, 'I'm taking Grandpa's ashes so I can throw them into the sea!'

Jess smiled through gritted teeth and reached behind her to open the front door. 'Lovely, Granny! Fabulous idea! Ashes, sea – go for it! Kind of like, *The Afterlife is a Scuba-Diving Holiday*!'

Granny laughed. She was amazingly broad-minded and would probably laugh at her own funeral.

'Now you must excuse me, Granny – I really must

go! Flora's waiting for me in the park!'

'Oh, all right dear – I'll keep you posted on the Polish explosion when you get back!' promised Granny. She trotted eagerly into the sitting room, heading for the TV. It was already two minutes past five and she might have missed some glorious brand new disaster. Granny had come to live with them fairly recently and it had certainly brightened things up in the Jordan household. However, right now Jess's thoughts were elsewhere.

She ran out of the house and sped down the road. It had been a lie about Flora waiting for her in the park. An excuse to get away. The person she really had to see was Fred. *Please God,* she prayed as she hurtled off towards the sacred house where the divine Fred Parsons lived. *Save me, please, from this terrible holiday! Sprain my ankle! Sprain both my ankles! And please let Fred be in!*

2



As she ran to Fred's house, Jess tried to get a grip on the situation. But it was totally out of control. The best summer ever had turned into howling darkness in less than half an hour.

Jess and Fred had only just become an item, and they had planned to spend the whole summer together in the park. They were going to have a picnic lunch under a different tree every day. They had even planned some bus trips out of town, to wander through forests or walk hand-in-hand on a beach 'like an insurance ad', as Fred had put it.

And of course, once it got dark, they would probably have spent hours and hours practising the tiresome business of kissing and cuddling. Every night for the past week, by the park gates, in a private dark place under a tree, Fred had kissed her goodnight. Jess's skin sort of sizzled at the memory of it.

'I suppose we'd better go through the whole meaningless charade of a goodnight kiss – if we can manage it,' Fred had murmured, the first time. 'In fact, I've been chewing gum all evening in preparation for this moment.' He had spat out his gum – quite stylishly into a rubbish bin – and they had gone for it.

Their first kiss. It had been long, slow and delicious. Jess's heart had gone into overdrive. And eventually, when they pulled apart, Fred had whispered, 'What do you think of that? Awful, wasn't it?'

'Nauseating!' Jess had sighed, and laid her head on his heart.

What fatal instinct had made her mum choose this moment to plan a holiday? The very moment when suddenly just being at home had become heaven on earth? Normally, of course, Jess would have loved nothing more than to go down to the seaside and visit her slightly crazy but totally cute dad, and help

him with his rather gloomy paintings of beaches and seagulls, but just right now . . . the thought of going away was torture.

It was impossible to tell her mum, hopeless to try and explain. If Jess even tried she would be in the worst trouble ever. Because Jess's mum wasn't what you'd call boy-friendly. She wasn't a man-hater exactly, but she only ever let men into the house if the washing machine wasn't working.

Jess sometimes thought she would never have the courage to defy her mum's disapproval and get married. She would have to go and live thousands of miles away in Kalamazoo and pretend her husband was a large dog called Henry.

Jess arrived at Fred's house, panting. She had run all the way. If you want to get fit, she thought, don't join a gym – fall in love. She rang the doorbell and tried to put on a casual, glamorous expression, even though her cheeks were bright red and her lungs were wheezing like an old church organ infested with termites.

Fred's father opened the door. Behind him, Jess could hear football on TV.

'Is Fred in?' she panted.

Fred's dad shook his head. 'He's gone out,' he said.

'Oh no! Do you know where he's gone?' cried Jess in dismay.

Fred's dad shrugged. 'Sorry,' he said in a final kind of way. He didn't invite Jess in to wait till Fred got back. Fred's mum would have known what to do. She would have invited Jess in, offered delicious food and drink, and settled her down to wait with albums full of adorable photos of the infant Fred.

But his dad was a complete duffer. 'Excuse me,' he said now, as the sound of the football crowd soared in excitement on the TV, 'I must get back to the football.' And, with a regretful smile, he shut the door in her face.

Jess was devastated, paralysed and appalled. Fred's whole street seemed to go dark. Black clouds were gathering, and she had a feeling that vultures were circling overhead. For a moment she was on the verge of tears, but she managed to get rid of them by sort of swallowing the back of her nose. It tasted vile. What should she do now? Where should she go? She was facing disaster, and where was Fred when she needed him? Mysteriously and infuriatingly out.

She only had one hope. She had to go and see her best friend Flora. Thank goodness Flora hadn't gone on holiday yet. She was due to leave in a couple of

days on a 'Costa Rican Adventure'. Jess wasn't sure exactly where Costa Rica was, but the photos in the brochure suggested that Flora would be trekking through rainforests full of beautiful birds and butterflies and relaxing on tropical beaches under swaying palm trees.

Flora's family could afford such treats because her dad was very big in bathrooms. But this time Jess hadn't felt jealous of Flora's holiday at all, because nothing in the world could be better than just hanging out in the park, all summer, with Fred.

There had been a slightly dodgy moment a few weeks ago, before Jess and Fred had got together, when Flora had revealed that she was crazy about Fred. But once Fred had confessed his perverted preference for dark, imperfect Jess rather than blonde, perfect Flora, Flora had dug deep into her character and produced an unsuspected angelic streak. She had only sulked about it for three days.

Jess broke into a run. She desperately needed some sympathy and Flora was usually very prompt with the hugs and hot chocolate.

The front door was opened by Flora's older sister Freya. Freya was at Oxford studying maths and sex appeal. Like all Flora's family, she was blonde and

almost illegally beautiful. She was kind of vague and dreamy as well, which somehow added to her angelic charm. If Jess had tried to be vague and dreamy it wouldn't have worked. She would just have appeared overweight and retarded.

'Oh – er – hello, Jess . . .' murmured Freya. 'Flora's . . . where is Flora? Er, yes, um, I think she's in the sitting room with Mummy . . .' And she drifted off to do some very hard sums or possibly rinse her hair in Extract of Camomile flowers. Jess took off her shoes (one always had to do this at Flora's, as if it was a mosque) and tiptoed to the sitting room. How soon would she be able to get Flora on her own and cry on her shoulder?

But an amazing sight met Jess's startled gaze. Flora's mother, who on a good day could pass for a low-budget Madonna, was lying on the sofa with a badly bruised cheekbone and a black eye, and with her leg in plaster! What on earth had happened? It seemed that Jess would be expected to provide sympathy instead of receiving it. How unfair life was!