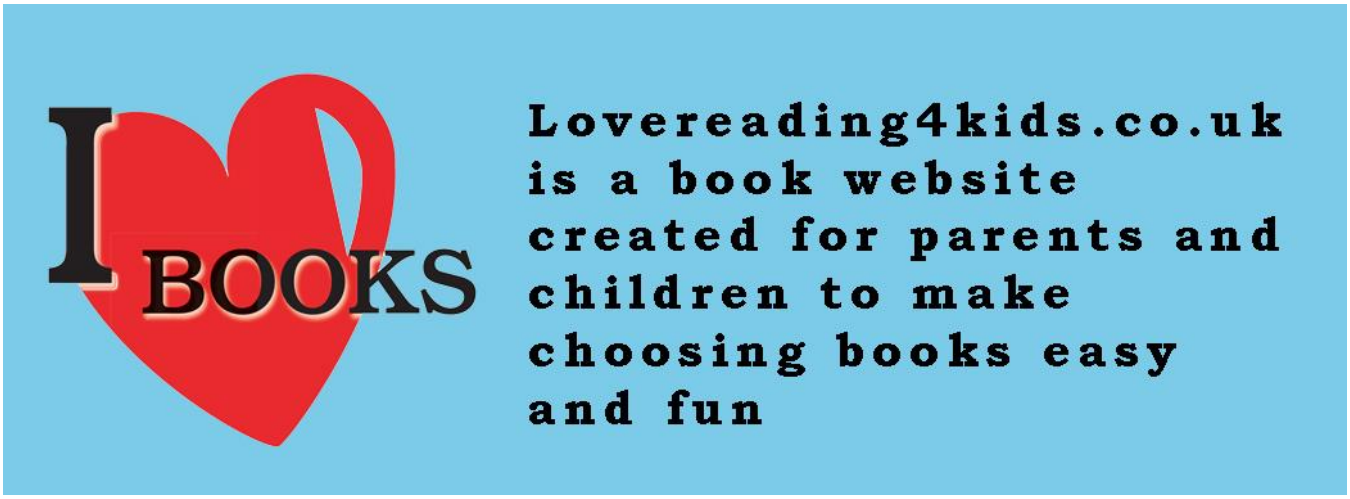


Opening extract from

Plain Jane

Written by

Kim Hood

Published by

O'Brien Press Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.



Extract from Plain Jane
Chapter 1
Pg 8-21

I didn't even knock on the basement window before sliding it open and tumbling through, to land on the sagging sofa beside Dell.

'Jesus, Jane,' Dell said. 'Can't you use the front door like someone normal?'

Dell hadn't yet turned on the lamp beside him, and with the fading light trying in vain to find its way in through the ground level window, the basement room was dark already. Dell was sitting where he always was, video controller between his thumbs. He hadn't even paused the game.

'I don't like to run into your dad upstairs. He'll be up any minute. He is on nights, right?'

You might say that Dell's dad and I have never warmed to each other. In a small village, you never 'meet' parents for the first time, because usually you have at least seen them around all of your life, but it was still different to meet Alan as Dell's dad and not just Alan-who-drives-the-red-Chevy. Dell and I had walked into the kitchen while his dad was eating breakfast – at four o'clock in the afternoon. I'd grabbed my history textbook before following Dell up the stairs. I guess the text was a kind of 'parent pleasing' prop, like it would suggest that I was doing homework downstairs.

Alan had looked me up and down in a way that pretty much creeped me out. It wasn't a 'are you good enough for my son?' look, put it that way. I didn't seem to meet his approval in the other way either though, as he had turned his attention back to the television on the counter before even saying hello. Not that he greeted Dell either.

Dell hadn't seemed phased by that though, walking around his dad to get to the fridge without a word to him. While he went about pouring us glasses of cola, and opening cupboards looking for anything to eat, I just stood there by the table, hugging my stupid *20th Century World History* textbook. Alan just kept watching the TV, which made me feel awkward. When I get nervous I can't stay still, so I had to start running my thumb across the page ends of my book, which made it slip out of my hand. My dive to catch it had only succeeded in knocking it further – right where Dell's dad's full cup of coffee was. So much for parent pleasing.

While I tried to mop up most of the coffee from the table and the textbook, Dell's dad had just watched me.

'So you're a smart girl, are you?' he said, and I wasn't sure if he was referring to the textbook or the fact that I had just ruined it, and his cup of coffee to boot, until he went on. 'You're wasting your time with Dell, then. He may be pretty, but he isn't too bright.'

What was I supposed to say to that? It wasn't a joke either. No one laughed. Worse, Dell didn't seem to even be embarrassed by the comment. There aren't many things people can say that I don't have a smart comeback for. In fact I have a tendency to open my mouth without thinking, even when I shouldn't. That though, shut me up.

'It isn't like he doesn't know you're here,' Dell said now. His shoulder bumped mine, but it wasn't a greeting; his car on the screen just happened to be taking a sharp turn to the right, and he followed it with a lean in that direction. He was right of course. There were not many nights I wasn't here. Dell's dad might not have cared, but there was a time when my parents would have given me serious grief for even thinking about being in the house with a guy with no adults around.

'Yes, but if we don't *see* one another, we can *pretend* I'm not here.' I gave Dell a shove and reached over for the bag of chips in front of him. 'It's an agreement we have.' I thought it might be an agreement that Dell had with his dad as well. I'd seen Dell and his father in the same room of their two-floor duplex only a handful of times in all the while we had been going out, with no more talk between them than that first day. And that was not many times, given that it felt like Dell and I had been together forever.

Dell kept up his furious driving through the streets of Sin City. I waited to see whether he would ask me about my day; I knew he wouldn't. I was glad he wouldn't really, but I wasn't going to let him off so easily either.

'I had a smashing day; thanks for asking, Dell. And how about you? Any scintillating news from the gas station? Did you put enough money into the pockets of the multinationals?' I had to nudge him again before he registered that I had asked him a question.

'Huh? It was alright.' He paused the game and looked at me with that wide-open smile he has, the one that would disarm any girl. 'Susan is going to give me full-time hours when Linda goes off to have her baby.'

I wanted to make some wisecrack about being glad that he had climbed to such dizzying heights on the ladder to success, but I didn't. I could see he was genuinely proud of himself. Dell doesn't have a lot of confidence at the best of times, though most people don't know that. I didn't know that until we got together.

He'd been two years ahead of me in school, and by the time I started high school in town he had established himself as cool. He was good at every sport, and that matters a lot around here. Plus he is that sort of good looking that makes every girl want to be near him, but without any of the bad-boy look to him. I think me and my friend Tracey spent all of eighth grade secretly swooning over him.

That was before he quit school. Not that quitting school was earthshattering or anything – lots of guys here do it because they can get a job in the mine without graduating. But with Dell, he just didn't go back after grade 10. He doesn't talk about it, and his dad never questioned it at all. I'm sure Alan thinks Dell was just too stupid to do grade 11 – and so even Dell doesn't really believe his dyslexia had anything to do with his bad grades. I guess it was easier to just quit.

Maybe it was that the only light now was the blue glow from the screen, but looking at him, I could see what he would look like at forty – still little-boy cute, only with a bit of a gut and a v of forehead reaching back from each temple. Would he be sitting on this same sofa? Would I be sitting beside him? Would he be just home from his full-time job at the gas station?

I pushed the image away and took the video-game-free-moment to give him a hug. Someone had to congratulate him, and nobody else in this house was going to do it. His dad was too busy living the dream – working shifts at the mine and filling his shed with empty Budweiser cans. Just like half the town.

'How's Emma?' He didn't always ask; Dell wasn't one to go looking for bad news.

'Maintaining that fighting spirit that everyone is so fond of talking about.' In truth, when I'd left her two hours ago, she'd been sucking on ice, because it was the only thing that wasn't coming back up. The room had reeked of puke.

Dell definitely didn't want to hear about that though. Nobody did. Everyone held fast to the image of ten-year-old Emma-Rose, dressed in a frilly pink tutu, dark brown curls framing her pixie face. Never mind that the photo on the dog-eared poster, appealing for donations for 'our angel', was three years out of date.

My little sister wasn't always a living angel. Once she was a normal, sometimes annoying, always there (the way a chair in the sitting room has always been there and you don't even think about whether it should be or not) part of the family. To tell you the truth, I never thought much about her before 'The Diagnosis', and ever since, I have been trying my best to think even less about her. That is rather difficult though, as the world tends to love a Living Angel. At least, that is my experience.

Not that my experience is that broad, mind you. The official population of my village, Verwood, is 423 – give or take the few who swear they're leaving for good and never coming back, and then do within six months.

Anyway, maybe it's because we live in such a small place that 'The Diagnosis' focused so much attention on one child. I mean, if we lived in a big city like New York or Paris or probably even Kamloops, nobody would have noticed as much. There must be millions of sick kids. Well, maybe not millions, but thousands at least.

Here, Emma-Rose (and by the way, nobody called her that until 'The Diagnosis' – it was just plain Emma before that) is something of a phenomenon. People talk about her being an Inspiration, an Example of Hope, an Angel (thus the Living Angel theme I started with). But I know what they really wish for. They want her to die, so that she can be representative of something.

I'm not sure what. I'm only fifteen and not exactly a genius. I'm not even a driven, full-of-potential kind of fifteen-year-old. I'm a class-skipping, pot-smoking (well not really, but no one in my town would care if I was), hang-out-in-my-boyfriend's-basement-playing-video-games kind of fifteen-year-old.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not some jealous, left out sister, who is on the way to ruining her life. I actually really love my sister. I used to really love my whole family – when there was a 'whole' to love. Now there's just me, and there's Dad, and if there's any unit at all in the four of us, then it's Mom and Ems. But that is only because they're the only ones who spend any time together these days. I guess they have to. It's not like you can leave a sick kid by herself in the hospital day after day.

So I get it. That's the way it is. That's the way it has been for nearly three years. I'm kind of done crying about it.

But when I looked over at Dell, I couldn't help feeling like I was drowning a little. Drowning in this … waiting. This nothingness that had become my life.

So no, I was definitely not on the way to ruining my life. That would have been a whole lot more exciting.

When I turned onto our street, our house stood out like a missing tooth; it was the only one in complete darkness, even though it wasn't quite 9.00pm, even though Dad's truck was parked in the driveway. At least in darkness you couldn't see the pale blue paint peeling to reveal the ugly green that Mom had insisted on painting over before she would even move in.

Poor house. It wasn't getting much attention these days. Mom had been mumbling for weeks, every time she navigated her way through the overgrown shrubs at the front and had to wade through the grass bending over the cement walkway, that she was going to cut the grass *this* weekend. Well, *this* weekend wasn't going to be until next year now; the ground was frozen solid. At least this year there weren't still Halloween decorations hanging in the front windows weeks after the event. We hadn't even bothered to put any up. There hadn't seemed to be much point since we'd known that Emma would be back in the hospital by Halloween.

Dad was exactly where I thought he would be, on the sofa, stinking wool socked feet resting on the coffee table in front of him, mouth open, asleep. He'd obviously worked a double shift again. I felt a finger of guilt spread from my gut, seeing him so worn out like that. I should have come straight home from the hospital and made some dinner for us. That was it. From now on I was going to get it together and start making meals; at least on some of the nights Mom wasn't coming home.

How many times had I thought this? I *meant* to be more of a help. I mean, there wasn't too much reason why I couldn't have mowed the freaking lawn for my mother. Or done a bit of laundry, or done anything at all to help. I just couldn't seem to organise myself to actually follow through.

And the ironic thing? Nobody ever gave me a hard time about doing nothing. Nobody said anything at all about it. 'Before the Diagnosis' there is no way I would have gotten away with how little I do. Both Mom and Dad have this ridiculously strong work ethic and it has been their mission in life to drill it into their daughters as well. I'd always hated how Emma gave into it. She'd always made me look twice as bad when I had refused to submit to slave labour easily. She had left me to fight the battle for both of us, while she remained the good one.

'Give it a rest, Mom, will you?' I remember saying when she came into my room to complain about the mess, and to order me to clean it up immediately. 'It's not like I don't know how to clean it. I'll do it; just not on your timetable.'

'If you know so much about how to clean, why is it absolutely never done?'

'Like I said – my timetable. Summer 2017.'

Who knew that all it would take was a dose of cancer for my protest against chores to end successfully?

Only, now I could do with a little of that conflict. It turns out I can't seem to get it together without nagging.

Soup. I could heat up some soup for Dad.

I almost lost hope of doing even that though when I walked into the kitchen. The counter all around the sink was cluttered with dirty dishes. With Emma spewing her guts the last few days, Mom hadn't made it home at all, and well, I just told you how much I have been doing lately in the housekeeping department. And Dad was practically not here at all.

I lifted the fry pan, still covered with congealed bacon grease from Sunday's breakfast and found a pot that didn't need too much of a scrub. I tried not to look at the bits of food at the bottom of the sink. It reminded me of this afternoon.

It had been my job to hold the cardboard vomit-catcher today, while Mom took a break down in the cafeteria. I had known it was a bad day the minute I came into Emma's room. She was watching the DVD of Grandad again.

I would really like to stomp on that DVD until it was only tiny shreds of plastic. It is the most ridiculous piece of cinematography ever made.

I know it by heart at this stage, and you really do have to hear the entire spiel to appreciate how utterly horrible it is. Here is how it goes:

[Enter Grandad, tubes coming out of his nose, walking with a cane, taking a seat behind his giant, some-sort-of-professional-career desk that was the place we most often saw him at, before he got too sick to work.] But now I am digressing from the script.

[He clears his throat, lays his hands upon the desk, and throws his shoulders back.]

'Emma-Rose [even he gave in to the sentimentality of calling Emma that, the most unsentimental man I knew], you know that I am not a sentimental man [see, told you], and so I will not give you sentiment here. But you are a remarkable young girl, with a gift. When you dance, I want to dance with you.'

Are you getting the picture? I don't think I can go through the entire thing. It makes me nearly as ill as Ems was today to think about it.

[Skip to the end of the video.]

‘And so there is only this to say to you, sweet granddaughter: fight, fight hard. I love you more than I ever thought possible [I think this bit was in reference to skipping out on his wife and daughter – who happens to be my mom – and basically not getting back in touch for twenty years, until Emma and I came along]. I may not be here at the end of the fight, but you will be.’

I cannot believe that Mom lets Emma watch that video over and over again. I mean, it can’t be only me who thinks it is ludicrous for a dying man to give an inspirational speech to a little girl. I don’t even know how Mom forgave him for leaving her and Grandma when she was only six. I would certainly not have forgiven him. Nor would I have let him give my impressionable daughter a sick video about how to beat cancer with a bit of ‘rah, rah, let’s get better’.

Here I am, going off on a complete tangent. I tend to do that. It entertains me. God knows, this town is short on entertainment.

So yes, it was a bad day. Capital B, bad day. But then, days around our house range from ‘hey, it could be worse’ to ‘it can’t possibly be worse’.

Even on the bad days, Emma is nice to everyone. She knows I hate that video, so she had turned off the laptop when I came in. The effort to sit up and do that had been almost too much for her and she’d left her arm hanging off the side of the bed while she curled the rest of her body into a ball.

‘Do you mind if I pop out for a coffee, Jane?’ Mom had asked. She had her purse on her lap, ready for the minute I arrived. It didn’t look like she had even brushed her hair today. She didn’t have any make-up on. There was a time when she would not have been caught dead without it.

‘I’d say you need more than one, Mom.’

Mom had barely given Emma a reassuring kiss and left the room before Emma started to retch, trying to reach for the cardboard bowl herself.

‘Hold on, Ems. I’ve got you.’ There was at least something I could do on days like today – hold my little sister’s impossibly thin shoulders while her body protested what the drugs were doing to her in the only way it could. I couldn’t even hold her hair back anymore. She didn’t have any to hold back.

After the first bout was over, Emma had laid back, exhausted from a day of it. There was a trail of sick down one arm of her fleece pyjama top, a top she had had for two years and not grown out of yet.

‘I’m sorry, Jane.’ She is always apologising.

‘You should be. No self-respecting thirteen-year-old wears pyjamas with teddy bears on them.’ I took off my own hoodie and unhooked her drip, manoeuvring the line through arm holes until she was wearing the hoodie instead. I had to roll the sleeves up for her.

‘Do you think Mom will let me go to the high school when I’m done here?’ she had asked out of the blue. Sometimes I hate that Emma is so optimistic. Sometimes I think it should be me lying in that bed.

I’m not though, and Dad still had to eat, so I opened a can of tomato soup and even managed to find some ham and cheese to make him a sandwich as well. When I took it out to him, he hadn’t changed positions at all.

‘Dad.’ I gave him a shake. And then another, until he finally opened his eyes and sat up.

‘I did it again, didn’t I? Fell asleep before I could make dinner,’ he said. ‘I think it must be this chair that puts me to sleep.’

‘Definitely the chair,’ I said, ‘because it couldn’t have anything to do with working sixteen hours straight.’

Dad would have smiled at that once, but now his expression never wavered from weariness. He just heaved himself out of the chair and padded to the table, like he was a five-year-old, and I was his mother, just waking him from his nap. Where Mom had become nicer, in a weird absent way, Dad had just become a cardboard cut-out of himself. It’s like he hardly existed anymore. Sometimes I felt like doing more than shaking him awake; sometimes I wanted to scream at him, just to see if he would scream back.

It kind of just took too much energy though, so instead I went back in to get myself some soup as well, even though I wasn’t even hungry. And then we ate in silence, like we always do these days. We’d given up on the small talk a while ago.

‘Well, I better get to my homework,’ I said, when my bowl was empty.

Dad didn’t ask why it wasn’t done yet. He didn’t ask where I’d been all evening. For all I knew he hadn’t even noticed I wasn’t there before he collapsed in a heap in his chair.