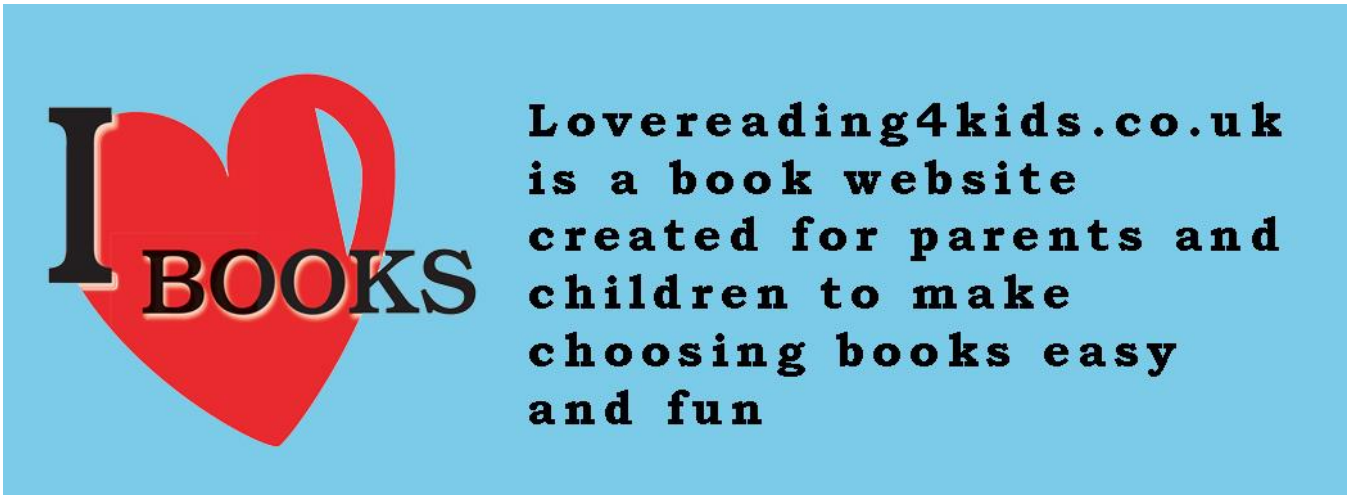


Opening extract from

Just Call Me Spaghetti-Hoop Boy

Written by

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1 Kapow!

I'm Adam Butters and I love comics. My favourite characters are the Titans, which are little green creatures that live on the moon. I don't live on the moon but on planet Earth; top floor flat, number 53 Pegasus Park Towers. I like sunshine, my old teddy bear, rolling down hills and eating spaghetti hoops (but not at the same time). I wear my bobble hat because it makes me feel safe. When it gets wet my classmates think it smells of dogs but I don't care. We do have a dog, although it doesn't *smell* of dog because it doesn't exist. It's an invisible dog called Sausage Roll and belongs to my six-year-old sister, Velvet. I've got an older sister too and unfortunately she *does* exist. She's called Minnie. But the most important things in my life are my mum and dad, and there isn't anywhere else in the universe I'd rather be than with them.

My dad is called Clark and he's the person who got me interested in comics – he also loves the Titans. Sinead, that's my mum, she's the best. She tells me that I am her heart, which is a bit daft because she's got her own heart. I think she means she's got me *in* her heart. And Mum's heart is big, at least the size of Mars (the planet, not the chocolate bar). She always says I take after her but that's impossible. Thing is, I can't take after Mum because she's not my real mother. Dad is not my real dad either.

Yesterday, my school teacher, Mrs Chatterjee, came up with the bright idea that we should make our family trees for a project. It made me remember I'm adopted. That was the first time I'd thought about my real mother since my last birthday. But Mrs Chatterjee said this project would help us discover lots of new things about ourselves and our loved ones, and, the thing is, I already know everything about my family. Instead, I want to know more about my *real* mother. So I've decided I'll do my family tree on her.

To be fair, there are tiny bits I already know about my background because Mum told me. The first thing is that I was adopted when I was very little. Mum and Dad brought me home to the flat and they had a "welcome home" party for me, and Minnie – who was four years old then – gave me a gift. After that I started crying and, according to Mum, she reached out to me and I looked up at her, tears in my eyes, and she held me and then I smiled. It was a wonderful moment. "I held you in my hands," said Mum. "But really I held you in my heart."

Another thing, which Mum told me when I was seven, is that there's an important envelope for me and I can open it when I turn sixteen. An envelope didn't sound all that interesting then, but now I'm eleven I do wonder if there are answers inside. Like where I came from, where I was born, what my real mother was called, and why she had to give me up. Maybe Mum doesn't know these facts, but if I'm doing a family tree project I'll need to find out.

You see, Mrs Chatterjee likes facts when we're doing projects. She says facts are like anchors. And it was only when she said that that I realized… I've got no anchor. Because I don't know the facts about me, or where I came from. So I need to do something to change that.

Today is the Friday before half-term. At the end of school, Mrs Chatterjee sent us away with homework to do over the week we're off. Everyone groaned when she said, "Find out whatever information you can to start working on your family tree when we return." Then she followed it with: "This will be the best project you'll ever do."

So now I'm at home, looking down at my notebook, and it's as blank as snow without a footprint even though I've been holding a pencil for the last twenty minutes. Outside there's a storm whipping around the tower block. The wind rattles the letterbox like an angry monster. I feel its cold breath sweep down the hallway and swirl around my bedroom and tighten its fingers around my chest. Shivering slightly, I rise from the bed and go and stare out of my window, my fingertips pressed against the glass making ten marbles of warmth. "Stupid project," I mumble. "Why am I the only person who doesn't know who their mother is and can't do the project properly?

No gold star for me." There's a distant rumble and slivers of lightning ignite the clouds and that's when I realize: I just need to find the envelope.

Even though I'm not sixteen, Mum always said it was important and that she was keeping it safe for me. Right now I want that envelope more than a first edition comic with a free gift on the front cover. And I know I should just ask Mum if I can have it, but she's been a bit stressed and weepy recently – even though she's tried to hide it – and I don't want to risk upsetting her. So I turn away from the window, pad across the floor and open my door, before tiptoeing down the hall towards Mum and Dad's room. Logic tells me that the envelope is bound to be there. But as I reach for the handle, Velvet appears from nowhere and pokes me in the back, saying she's on the way to the kitchen. Then she asks me what I'm doing.

"I am looking for an envelope," I say. Sometimes the truth is a lot less likely to attract attention than making up a complete lie. It works, because Velvet is totally disinterested and she sticks her finger up her nose and begins digging around.

"I'm looking for chocolate milk," says Velvet.

"Well, you won't find it up your nose."

Velvet pulls the sort of face Grandma says will stick like that if the wind changes and then wanders away to the kitchen. As I open Mum and Dad's bedroom door and ease into the shadows, I can hear the distant drone of Minnie rehearsing her lines for her part in the school play. And I can hear Dad laughing at something on the TV and then Mum's telling him he nearly burst her eardrum and Dad's saying he can't help it if he's got a loud laugh. And Velvet is pulling open the fridge and rattling bottles. But another thing I can hear, and it's louder than everything else, is the *thump-thump* of my heart.

The envelope isn't under the bed or in their bedside drawers. All I can see in Dad's drawer is a load of badges advertising his key-cutting company, Surelock Homes. Dad loves working with his hands, from cutting keys at work to making models of comic-book characters at home. Mum's always complaining that the flat is too small to make life-size models of Batman, but Dad does it anyway. I've got a life-

size Titan in my bedroom that Dad made. Luckily a life-size Titan only comes up to my knee.

Anyway, there's no envelope and it's not in Mum's drawer either. All she's got in there are lots of our front door keys that Dad cut as a practice exercise. I remember Mum saying she didn't need ten keys cluttering up the drawer, and Dad said at least she didn't have ten *mon*keys because they'd take up even more space, and we laughed for ages. I wish Mum would laugh like that again because when she's sad it makes me feel sad too and then I hide in my bobble hat. Dad's the opposite of gloomy. In fact, he's a right comedian sometimes, but even his jokes don't seem to be cheering Mum up at the moment. On top of the keys is a sign-up sheet for this place called Bellybusters that promises to turn you from *a couch potato to a glowing goddes*s within months, but that's all.

My heart's still thundering when I turn to the dressing table, and I pull that drawer open and suddenly it's as if the whole thing shimmers with a golden light – because I can see an envelope in there and on the front it says: *FOR ADAM. DO NOT OPEN UNTIL YOU ARE SIXTEEN*. My hands tremble like they're holding invisible maracas and then I do what any sensible eleven-year-old would do: I ignore what it says and open it.

Lightning rips the sky in two outside and the bedroom flashes in negative as I pull out a piece of paper. My birthdate is on the left side – same date, same year. The place of birth is Pegasus Park and I imagine that means the Pegasus Park Hospital. But it's not my name on the paper. My mouth is as dry as a flip-flop on Mars as I lean closer, trying to read the words. My name is on the envelope and it's my birthdate, so it must be *my* birth certificate. But the name inside says Ace Walker. As the penny drops on my head from the height of the Eiffel Tower, I realize that *I* must have been called Ace when I was born.

There's another name on the paper too: Rose Walker. That must be my real mother's name. There's a whooshing inside me and it feels like my blood is racing around my body in a super-fast car. My real mother called me Ace. Why would she do that?

I think about the word. It's kind of a strange name. Pretty different to Adam. But pretty cool as well. I mean, if something is ace it's excellent. So if I'm called Ace then I should be excellent too. It even sounds a bit like the names of the superheroes in my comic books. "Adam" isn't a superhero name – Adam is the sort of name a boy who hides under his bobble hat would have. But Ace… Could I really be an *Ace*?

There's a thunderous crack outside and it sounds like biting into a chocolate-coated ice cream. To say I'm excited about all this is an understatement. My name is Ace…like a superhero… I give this some further thought and find myself grinning like a loon. That's because when I read my superhero comics I always smile. Superheroes make everyone happy. If you're happy then you're not fed up and moody. And the one person who needs cheering up most of all is Mum and now I know exactly how to do it. I'm going to *be* a superhero! Yes!

Mum's not the only one who is going to happy after this. Everyone is going to love me. I'll get picked first for the football team instead of last. This is *sick*, but sick in a good way, not sick as in vomit. I'm ready to punch the air I'm so happy. And not only am I going to be a superhero, but I've found out my real mother's name, which means I'll be able to do the best school project *ever*. I can see it all. There will be the biggest brightest gold star, perhaps even a constellation, above my name. Mrs Chatterjee will say my tree is incredible and I'll say that's because it's a superhero's tree. Of course, I'll be humble too. I'll say I was simply trying to make everyone happy. It was my destiny.

Meanwhile, lightning snaps me out of my daydream and bathes the room in electro-silver again. There's another rumble and when I glance up I swear there's a shadow at the bedroom door, but when my eyes focus there's no one there. I'd like to hold onto the envelope and take it back to my bedroom to study it, but it's too risky in case Mum notices it's gone. After a final look inside the envelope to check there isn't anything else, I push the birth certificate back inside and try to seal it up again with spit before shoving it in the drawer and heading back to my bedroom.

My notebook isn't blank any more. In the last twenty minutes I've started my homework and written *ACE* in capital letters and I've drawn lightning bolts coming

from behind it. Underneath I've tried to draw a long-stemmed rose to represent Rose my real mother, but it looks more like a big smudge on a stick. I've written my birthdate and that I was born in Pegasus Park Hospital (I think). The page is filling up nicely with information, especially since I wrote Pegasus Park in big bubble letters.

I'm going to be Ace, I keep telling myself.

Everyone loves a superhero, because they're excellent.

When I am, everyone will be happy – including Mum. As I'm drawing Ganymede – which is the largest moon of Jupiter – next to all the Ace stuff in my notebook, Mum knocks on my bedroom door and when she enters I feel a fireball whoosh up my cheeks. I'm sure I've got guilt written all over my face, except it must be in invisible ink because Mum doesn't seem to notice – and she doesn't mention the opened envelope in her drawer, so it's obvious she doesn't know what I've been up to. Instead she says, "Your room, Adam…" Mum looks at the Titan in the corner and shakes her head. "It's small, isn't it? I think it needs decorating. We could get rid of the old comic-book wallpaper."

"I like the wallpaper," I argue. Dad tore lots of pages out of old comics and we put it up together. When I'm bored I can read the stories, and it doesn't matter how many times I read them, they still cheer me up. My favourite is a story about the Titans. They're looking for their creator, The Grand Moon Master. When they find him, their emerald hearts will glow red and they'll live together for ever. Mum says the comic wallpaper is nice but we've got to make the most of the small rooms and the whole flat is due a makeover.

The flat is small, Mum's right. Mum and Dad have a room, I have one, and Minnie and Velvet share – although Minnie has put a red line across the floor and no one is allowed to step on her half. But even though the flat is small it's still amazing, because it's like living on top of the world and being able to look out and touch the stars. "I don't want my room to change," I reply. "I like it the way it is." Defeated, Mum nods and says it's just a thought she had. Then she trots over to look at my notebook and I have to close it quickly because I don't want her to see everything I've been drawing. And I definitely don't want Mum seeing I've written ACE because

she'd be suspicious. "It's nothing important," I say, the bobble on my hat nearly blowing back with the force of me slamming down the pages.

But it *is* important. When Mum's gone I pick up my pencil again and whisper, "Finding out about my family tree for this project *is* important. I want to know more and surprise Mrs Chatterjee and get a gold star – maybe even two." The pencil pushes into the paper. I let it dance in circles around the page. I know Mum would be hurt if she realized I'd gone searching for my birth certificate, but that's because she's had a lot on her mind recently. It's not just that she seems a bit sad and worried – she's always whispering to Dad and then shutting up when we come in the room too.

I look down at the page and see I've drawn a superhero. If I was this superhero, I'd be so excellent Mum would have to cheer up. Everything would be perfect and everyone would be happy. That's what I want most in the world.

The pencil tip snaps.

2 Splat!

Mum always says when you need to do something "there's no time like the present" (although I am not sure this applies to homework). Next morning, I'm on the case writing notes about all the characteristics an excellent superhero should possess:

1) Superpowers
2) Courage
3) Being a clever clogs (that's what Grandma calls it)
4) Being honest and kind
5) Being special
6) A mission

As I scan the list I realize that number six is probably the most important. In my opinion, a superhero who doesn't have a mission isn't *actually* a superhero. Proper superheroes are trying to achieve a goal – I've learned that from my comic books. Well, my mission is to be the most excellent person I can be and make everyone happy.

I give the end of my pencil a chew as I glance down at the rest of the list, and then stop, realizing my gums don't like splinters. So number six is sorted: my mission is to be the most excellent kid on the planet. And I've got oodles of number five, being special. I once won a badge for a class quiz and Mrs Chatterjee said I was very special and it wasn't for having the highest score but for thinking "out of the box". To be honest, I didn't think I was in a box in the first place, but then teachers say strange things. I'm definitely numbers two and four as well, because I once told Minnie she looked like a Twiglet in her brown skinny jeans. That was a) honest and b)

courageous, because she kicked me in the shins straight after. And she was wearing boots with studs on them.

Number one – superpowers – might be a touch more tricky and require more practice. This morning I've already almost broken my ankle trying to fly from my bed, and Mum's been shouting that it sounds like I've got a breakdancing hippopotamus in my room. Clearly flight is not my superpower at this stage. Neither is mind control, because after I'd had breakfast I tried to hypnotize Mum into letting me off washing the dishes, only she blinked rapidly to block my mind waves and then she threw the rubber gloves at me and told me to stop staring at her like I was constipated. Then I thought maybe my power could be mimicking animals, like the comic-book character Animal Man, but Velvet's already got that superpower because she really believes it is Sausage Roll barking when it's actually her.

So I forget about superpowers for now, and instead I turn to a new page in my notebook and write down a list of things I think a superhero should do. If I could do any of these, I'd be a superhero for sure.

HOW TO BE A SUPERHERO IN FIVE EASY STEPS

1) Save a cat from a tree
2) Help an old person
3) Help an enemy
4) Save a life
5) Save the world

For the rest of the morning I try to work out how I can save the world, because if you're going to do a good deed you might as well go BIG. I watch the news to see if there are any local issues I could get involved in. But there's only a clean-up on Pegasus Park dog poop. And I'm not sure that dog poop is a global threat, unless you stand on it in flip-flops, and then I suppose it is the end of the world.

Next, I try helping an enemy. I tell Minnie she's looking particularly gorgeous this morning and she asks if I'm feeling okay and then she says it's a double-bluff and that I'm up to no good, and I say smugly that I'm actually up to a lot of good. Because superheroes are always up to good. It's a fact. Minnie tells Mum I'm playing games and Mum asks what I'm playing and Minnie says it's not Monopoly.

"He's being nice to me."

Mum looks at Minnie and says surely that's a good thing. Then she runs her fingers through her hair and sighs like she's carrying the weight of a baboon on her back. But I give a little smile because if my plan works and I become a superhero, then it's bound to make Mum one million times happier than she looks now.

"Do you think I could save your life?" I stare at Minnie, thinking I might be able to achieve number four of the FIVE EASY STEPS without too much trouble.

"OMG, Mum," wails Minnie, staring at me like a vampire caught in sunlight, "Adam's going to kill me!" She narrows her eyes to tiny blades and when Mum leaves the room Minnie jabs her finger towards me and says she knows I'm up to something and she'll find out what it is.

So it turns out helping an enemy was a bad idea and I'm glum that I couldn't achieve numbers three, four or five. It feels like my list is more HOW TO BE A SUPERHERO IN FIVE NOT SO EASY STEPS, also known as HOW TO END UP BALD LIKE DAD BECAUSE YOU'RE TEARING YOUR OWN HAIR OUT. I'm as miserable as Big Foot with a sore toe, and go and sit in my bedroom and try to figure out how I can help an old person (number two). Which is when I hear Mum and Dad talking in hushed tones outside my bedroom door.

"It'll be a big change," whispers Mum.

I stop, straining every fibre of my being to listen.

"I know, but it's worth it. And I know the flat is small but we can make sacrifices. Let's not mention it to the kids yet though." Dad coughs.

I swallow and it feels like I've got a goldfish swimming about in my tummy.

"Yes. Let's keep it as a surprise." says Mum. There's a pause and then she says, "Oh Clark, I'm really nervous about this appointment." I hear Dad soothing Mum but I don't hear the exact words, even though I've practically got my ear superglued to the wall. "Hopefully it's okay."

I'm in shock. It's worse than when I scuffed my new shoes across the carpet and then touched the metal door handle and was nearly thrown halfway across the room. The reason I'm so surprised is that Mum and Dad are keeping secrets from us. Usually they tell us everything. I try to catch the rest of the conversation but it's all muffled and I can't hear anything else they say. Perhaps keeping the secret is why Mum's moody at the moment. She's not being horrible or anything, but it's like she's on a rollercoaster going up and down. One minute she's okay and the next she's staring out the window, her eyes glassy.

I don't know what Mum and Dad's secret is but I know if I'm a superhero it's going to make her less moody. I've just looked up the word "ace" in the dictionary and it says a person who excels; a genius, a master, first-rate, wonderful, outstanding, a star and a champion. It also says a playing card ranked as the highest card in its suit. I promise I'm going to be all those things listed (except the playing card – that would be tricky).