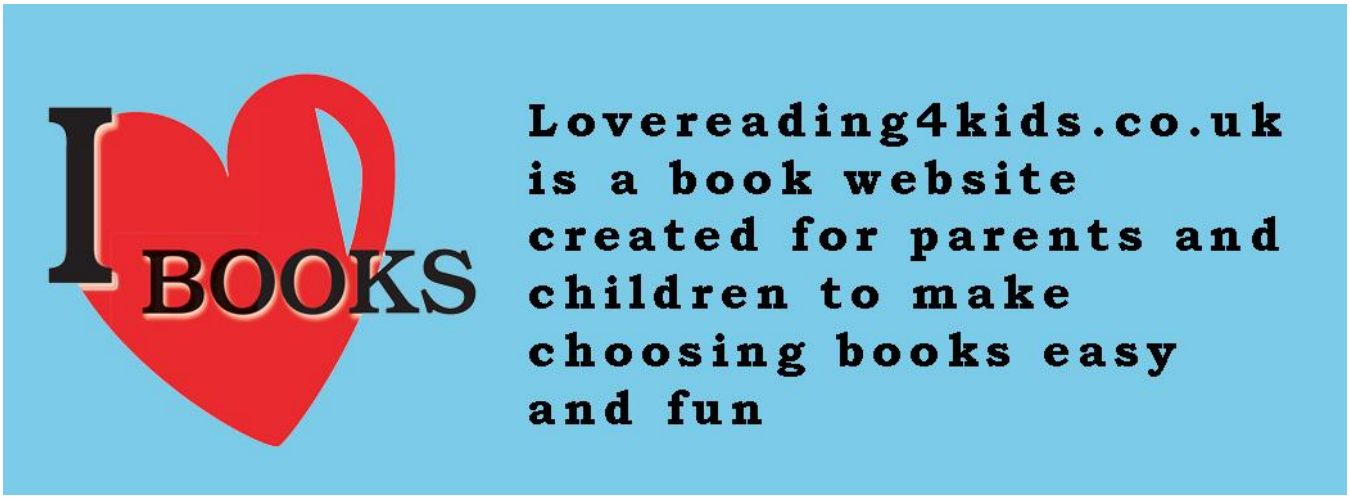


Opening extract from

Confessions of a High School Disaster

Written by

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Published by

Simon & Schuster Children's Books

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First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
A CBS COMPANY

First published in the USA in 2017 by Simon Pulse, an imprint of Simon & Schuster
Children's Publishing Division

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Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor, 222 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8HB

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-4711-6046-2
eBook ISBN 978-1-4711-6047-9

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Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



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Monday, August 10

Mom's gone. Not forever, obviously. For four months at the most, she said.

She came in here all shaky, with swollen eyes, and pressed her forehead into my forehead. Her breath smelled like pad thai. She was like, "Please know how much I love you." We both cried. She explained everything: She's going to Mexico to work on her novel. She knows it's sudden, but she also knows I'm mature enough to handle a little surprise. We'll be in touch all the time. We can Skype and chat and talk on the phone whenever we want. Maybe I can go visit her.

She gave me her blue-and-white porcelain rabbit,

which I've always loved, and a journal, and said, "If there's one thing I want you to remember, it's the importance of creating memories." I don't really want to remember this, actually. Plus I already write in this diary every day, but it seemed rude to tell her that.

Tuesday, August 11

Dad made me breakfast before he went to work: banana pancakes, bacon, and a strawberry smoothie. He sat there watching me eat. So did Snickers. I never give Snickers food from the table, but he never stops hoping.

"This is really good," I said.

"You don't have to finish it," Dad said, but I did, because he looked so sad.

"Don't worry," I said. "It's not for very long."

He unscrewed the blender from its stand. He wasn't looking at me.

"She has to work on her novel," I said. "It's impossible to get anything done here. She needs a room of her own."

He laughed, but not a real laugh, and said, "Right."

Wednesday, August 12

Things I love about Dad:

1. His dad jeans
2. His crinkly eyes

3. He sends me cat videos
4. He never yells
5. He still wears the fugly brown tie I got him for Father's Day when I was eight
6. He knows all the words to every '80s song
7. His dad smell (peanuts and limes)

Thursday, August 13

I try to forget that I'm starting high school in a few weeks, but sometimes the fact rushes into my mind and I get sweaty with fear.

However bad it is, it can't be worse than junior high. My theory is, they put the two most evil grades in one building to keep them from infecting everyone else with their awfulness. Basically all I did in junior high was text, straighten my hair, add to my Benedict Cumberbatch shrine, and worry about how to be more popular. Thinking about it makes me cringe.

I want to be different in high school. Like a new person.

And I want to make out with someone. It's so humiliating that I'm a kissing virgin at this advanced age. Everyone halfway normal in my grade had their first kiss at, like, age 10. I've never even gotten a peck on the cheek (I'm not counting my parents or Uncle Julian). And the longer I go un-smooched, the more

freakish I feel. If I graduate high school without being kissed, I'll be too embarrassed to kiss anyone during college, and then I'll most likely die without ever even getting to second base. Something has to change fast. This I vow: I will kiss a guy before New Year's Eve. Or maybe it'll happen *on* New Year's Eve. OK, this I vow: I will kiss a guy before New Year's Day. Vow *taken*.

Friday, August 14

Before Dad left for work, he said, "Don't just sit online all day, OK, kiddo?" so I invited Hannah over, and we went to the pool. She put on SPF one billion because she's so pale she's basically light blue. She wouldn't shut up about how scary the first day of school will be. Finally, to get her to stop, I told her my mom left for Mexico on Monday. She gasped.

"It's not a big deal," I said, irritated.

"It seems like kind of a big deal."

I put my sunglasses on.

She said, "What's going on with her and your dad?"

"Nothing. She's working on her novel. That's it."

"Chloe, I'm so sorry."

"Ugh! Don't be sorry! She's writing, not dying."

I know I shouldn't be mean to Hannah, but she seriously drives me insane. The more intense and touchy-feely she gets, the more I turn into a block of ice.

Saturday, August 15

I pulled all my boxes of fall and winter stuff out of the closet, and I. Hate. Everything. It all says, *I have no identity of my own, so I'm going to wear the most generic clothing possible in a desperate quest to blend in.* My flowered sneakers from Hannah I love. The rest I would burn if I could.

I need a makeover. No, not a makeover—that sounds like some gross magazine. I need to dress like the person I really am. Which is . . . what? Hipster. Hippie. Stoner. Emo. Preppy. None of those.

Sunday, August 16

The first thing I do in the morning, lying in bed, before I'm all the way awake, is check everything on my phone. I don't even want to; it feels like I have to catch up on what happened while I was asleep, so I don't fall behind. I've tried to do a phone cleanse before, but the longest I've lasted is three hours. I don't understand why it feels so good to click while you're doing it and so disgusting after you're done.

Monday, August 17

I just talked to Mom!!!!! It wasn't for very long, because her phone was dying. She's in a small town with cobblestone streets and a bullring. She rented a one-room apartment that looks out on a courtyard.

"I miss you like crazy," she said.

"I miss you, too!"

"I can't wait to show you my place, babe. There are these Argentinean kids staying downstairs from me, and they have drum circles under my window 24/7. This morning, a stray cat showed up on my doorstep. She's orange, with one white paw. Doesn't that seem lucky?"

I asked if she wanted to talk to Dad, but she said she had to go find cat food before the stores closed, and she'd call him later.

At dinner, I told Dad everything Mom said. He nodded and smiled. He looked like he had a migraine, but when I asked him if he wanted an Advil, he said he was fine, just tired.

Tuesday, August 18

Things I love about Mom:

1. Artistic
2. Did yoga before it was cool
3. Genius writer
4. Lets me skip school all the time to hang out with her
5. Lets me watch and read whatever I want, because you can't shield your children from the world; you have to introduce them to it

6. Beautiful
7. Compliments me a lot

Wednesday, August 19

Hannah's mom drove us to the mall. She was wearing a pink short-sleeved cardigan and cork wedges with pink straps. On the way there, we talked about Hannah's older brother, Brian, who just left for his first semester at Dartmouth, which according to Mrs. Egan is the best school in the world.

"I'm telling you, Chloe, it's all about the family dinner. Eating together as a family is scientifically proven to raise your SAT score, did you know that?"

Hannah hissed, "Mom, stop."

"Oh, honey," Mrs. Egan said, looking at me in the rearview mirror. "Hannah told me about your mother."

I gave Hannah a look of death.

"She'll be back in December," I said.

"Of course she will!"

I refused to talk to Hannah in the mall until she bought me a soft pretzel and a Diet Coke. Even then I was being a total B. I went to all the stores with her, but I wouldn't try anything on. I sat in the armchairs they put there for boyfriends and husbands and pretended to fall asleep.

Even when Mom was here, we didn't have family

dinner. Usually Dad would make something for him and me, and we'd eat while Mom worked upstairs. Then she would eat carrots and hummus standing up at the kitchen counter. She can't be on a regular schedule, because she's an artist.

I'll do way better on the SAT than Brian. He's the kind of guy who says "She's driving with Mike and I" because he thinks "I" sounds fancier.

Thursday, August 20

There's nothing better than going to the pool. Here's what to bring:

* Sunglasses
* Beach towel decorated with a picture of a New York City taxi, to help you dream up ways to escape the suburbs
* Pencil case with house keys and money for the concession stand
* Book

Then lie in the sun for hours, and do some breaststroke when you get too hot. Don't feel like you're being lazy, because you're reading *and* working on your tan. I know it gives you wrinkles, but what if you die in a terrorist attack when you're 20? Then you'll regret wasting your

time worrying about sun damage when you could have been living it up and looking cute.

Friday, August 21

Hannah came over seriously crying about our so-called fight. I felt like saying, "I have bigger fish to fry," but I didn't say it, first of all because that would be mean, and second of all because it would be a lie.

I said, "It's not a big deal. Sorry I wouldn't try on pants with you." She almost fainted with relief. It was raining out, so we ate a bag of cinnamon-flavored pita chips and I told her about my kissing vow. She doesn't understand how much I'm suffering, because she kissed Matt Welch last summer at Kayla Price's birthday party, and so now she is a normal human teenager rather than an unkissed freak. No matter how much I ask, she can only describe kissing Matt as "too wet," "kind of strange," and "not what I thought it would be like," which is so frustrating, because I'm dying to know every detail about nose placement and tongue texture and post-kiss facial expressions.

"Don't overthink it," she said, breaking off a corner of a pita chip. "When it's meant to happen, it'll happen."

"No, I need a plan, Hannah. I need to take matters into my own hands. Now help me come up with a list of prospects."

After hours of internet research, we had a list of three guys who are single, reasonably cute but not out of my league, popular enough but not *Popular*, not too druggy, not too mean, not too cocky, and not too player-y:

Zach Chen. Sophomore. Has a man bun (sexy, IMO), sings in an a cappella group (kind of dorky), and plays guitar in a rock band called Deposed Monarchs (again, sexy).

Luke Powers. Junior. Hockey goalie. Has a beautiful flowing hockey mullet like it's the 1970s. At least 6'2" and ripped. Hannah thinks I'm punching above my weight class on this one, but not everyone appreciates his hair, plus his Twitter reveals he's suuuuuper into Settlers of Catan, which, again, is not everyone's cup of tea.

Griffin Gonzalez. Fellow freshman. Has the best name in our class by a mile. Reads a ton, like me. Does a lot of eye rolling and sighing in English class when nonreaders talk. Gives off a vibe like he's counting the days until his PhD program starts. I'm scared of him and think he's a snob but desperately want him to like me.

Little do these guys know that one of them will make out with me before the year is over.

Saturday, August 22

I went to the pool alone. I like doing stuff by myself. It's easier to observe the world when you're not trying to keep a conversation going.

When I went to the concession stand to get a rocket pop, I had to pass this big bunch of older boys. They got quiet as I walked by, but I didn't look at them, so I'm not sure if it was a natural pause in the conversation or if one of them was, like, making a hand job gesture in my direction while everyone died of silent laughter.

After I got my Popsicle, I turned around to head back, and there was one of the guys, in line behind two shivering kids wrapped in striped towels. When he looked at me and I looked at him, I felt like a key sliding into a lock.

"You didn't get me anything?" he said.

"What? Oh, no, I didn't, um . . . Sorry. I don't—"

"Calm down," he said. "I'm messing with you. Wait for me, we can eat together."

While he ordered a SpongeBob ice cream, I studied him. I don't think Hannah would consider him cute. He has a face like bread dough, with raisins for eyes. Plenty of zits on his chin. His hair goes down to his shoulders, and I'm pretty sure it's in dreads. He's extremely tall and about the size of a riding mower, and he has big muscles in his arms and legs. I'm not talking about gym muscles either. Baling-hay muscles, not that there's any hay to bale around here.

I waited for him to pay, and then we went and sat on the bench by the sign-in sheet. It seemed weird that a

few seconds earlier, I had never seen this person, and now we were sitting side by side and acting like it was normal. Maybe it *was* normal. I don't know, because I never meet any new guys. I've known everyone in my class since kindergarten.

"Do you go to MH?" he said.

"I'm starting in the fall."

I must have looked petrified, because he said, "There's nothing to worry about."

"On a scale of one to ten, how horrible is it?"

"Two." He was biting his ice cream instead of licking it, which looked so freaking manly.

"You must be popular," I said. "Otherwise you would never say two."

"Oh God." He waved SpongeBob in the air. "That stuff is so stupid."

"You *are* popular!" I said.

"You're not?" he said.

For a second I considered lying, but I realized he would find out the truth on September 2—that is, if he even deigned to notice me at all.

"Nope," I said. "I'm not, like, a loser, but I'm not famous, either. I'm just kind of there."

"I find that hard to believe," he said. I'm pretty sure he was being gallant.