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Opening extract from

The Infinite Wisdom of Harriet Rose

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'I don't want any birthday presents this year – donate the money to a worthwhile cause instead,' was all I had said. How could I have guessed that such a simple suggestion would create uproar in our household?

I had not given the request much thought when I made it. In fact, the idea had only just occurred to me. Philosophers are like that sometimes – unfettered in their ideas, lateral in their thinking. That was why Plato was such a success. He would never have come up with his theory of Ideal Forms otherwise.

But my mother and Nana did not seem to understand such matters. And as a result, my simple, altruistic request appeared to have caused them a fair degree of unnecessary concern. I could hear them from my bedroom, where I had gone to escape their anxious glares and frosty silence.

'Did you hear what she said?' Nana was whispering, in the tone she reserved for her most important reflections. 'She wants us to donate her birthday money to a worthwhile cause! It's all your fault, Mia.'

'How on earth is it *my* fault?' my mother replied, forgetting her previous attempts to calm Nana down now that she herself was being blamed.

'You should never have let her answer the door the other day to those women handing out religious leaflets.'

'Harriet's an intelligent girl,' my mother responded, her powers of observation at their keenest. 'She enjoys lively debate.'

'It must have been some debate to go on right the way through *The Archers*,' Nana exclaimed.

'I thought it would be good for her,' my mother went on. 'How was I to know she would come away thinking she was Maria in *The Sound of Music*?'

In fact, my mother and Nana were mistaken. The exchange of views that had taken place on our doorstep between the two women and me had ended somewhat abruptly when I'd asked their views on Descartes' ontological argument for God's existence and the women had answered that they hadn't had a chance to discuss it with him yet.

No, if anyone had been responsible for my unusual birthday request it was not them. In truth, the idea had been entirely my own. Yet, like many ideas, as I had suggested in number 49 of my collection of Meditations, it had been brought to consciousness by the influence of my surroundings: Holy Innocents Church, to be more precise.

I had decided on impulse to go back to the church after an absence of a year and three months, a period that might seem disrespectful

to those of a prejudicial nature, but in reality that was far from the case. My visit had had a purpose, although I did not quite understand it at the time. Indeed, it was not until I noticed the confessional box that my purpose began to take shape. Not being a Catholic, confessional boxes had always been a mystery to me. I think that was what drew me to it in the first place. Mystery appeals to writers, even if their work consists only of reflective meditations jotted down in a notepad they keep in their handbag at all times in case a thought slips away before it can be captured.

I walked determinedly towards the box – I didn't want the other worshippers to think I was a novice – and knocked on the wooden door.

'Enter!' a voice said, like Father Christmas in his grotto. A lesser person would have turned and run away, but not Harriet Rose, creator of *The Meditations of Harriet Rose* and the recipient of two school prizes, one for English, the other for philosophy.

It was dark inside. Once my eyes had adjusted and I could see him – Father – staring at me through the grille, awaiting my confession, I leaned forward and whispered, 'I think I should admit straight away that I'm not a proper Catholic – in fact, I'm not a Catholic at all.' It was only fair that he knew. I didn't want there to be any misunderstanding between us.

'Our door is open to everyone,' he said.

'That's my fault, Father,' I replied, closing it. 'I thought it might seem a little dark in here otherwise.'

Then it dawned on me: I had nothing to confess. Does that sound conceited in a thirteen year old? Perhaps so, but it was the truth, and I wasn't stupid enough to lie in a confessional box. But that was where I was. I had come here for a reason: there had to be something I wanted to say.

'I did want to have a brief word with you about something,' I said finally, cupping my left hand round my mouth in case we were overheard from outside.

'What is it, my child?' the voice asked into the darkness. 'I'm here to listen.'

'It's about my father,' I whispered. 'I wondered if you could pass on a message to him from me.' Suddenly it felt warm in the box, comfortingly so, like being asleep in a big soft bed and dreaming of a faraway place where the sun always shines.

'Do I know your father?' he asked.

'He's a handsome man,' I found myself explaining, 'with fair hair and pale blue eyes that twinkle when he laughs, and a dimple in his chin.'

'And does he come to Holy Innocents?'

'He used to. I can't say if he still does. I have no way of talking to him now, the way you do. But he always spoke highly of it. He loved its majesty, he used to say, its splendour, its mix of grandeur and humility. I remember one Christmas, his last as it turned out, standing not far from where we're sitting now. The pews were full to bursting so we had to stand, my father and mother and me. That Christmas was hard for us all. We knew how ill he was – he couldn't hide it from us any more. But he wanted to come here and sing his favourite carols. And how he sang! You can't have missed his singing voice, even in the midst of the crowd, which was spilling out into the street.' I had to stop for breath. It was airless in there. That was all it was.

'I understand,' he said quietly, and for a moment he sounded just like my father. 'And you have a message for him, you say?'

'Yes,' I said hesitantly – I hadn't quite worked out what the message was, 'if you happen to be speaking to him. I've tried to

myself, but I just can't hear him any more. My mother says I will in time, but that doesn't make sense to me at all. I thought there was no time where he was, so what's keeping him? It's more than a year now, Father.'

'Tell me your message,' he said, in his low, thoughtful voice, which raised my hopes no end. 'What is it you want to say to your father?'

'Only that I miss him.' I choked – I wouldn't have if only I'd prepared something, but I hadn't. 'And I love him. And I can't believe how brave he was. And I wish we'd never argued, but sometimes it really was his fault, but I didn't mean the things I said when I was angry. And that Liverpool are doing well in the FA Cup. And my mother still can't stop thinking about him and wishing he was here with us. And much as I love having Nana live with us, it's not the same as it was before. But we're trying to be brave like he was. And trying to do things that would make him proud. Or make him laugh. It's his laugh I like to remember most.'

The silence that followed made me fear that Father had left the confessional box without me hearing, or had fallen asleep. Either would have been understandable, frankly. I'd gone on far too long. There must be time limits attached to these boxes. There was probably a queue a mile long outside.

'Be assured, my child, that Father has heard your message.'

It was exactly the sort of ambiguity I loathed. 'Do you mean *my* father, or you, Father?' I enquired – precision was such an important quality of the reflective mind.

'I meant both,' he replied.

'And what should I do now?' I continued, sensing that our meeting was being drawn to a close.

'You should pray, and I shall pray for you too. Concentrate your mind on all your talents and the positive aspects of your life – I feel there are many. Carry your love for your father with you into the world and make a difference to it, my child. Then you will begin to see that he is still with you.'

'I meant, Father,' I explained, 'what should I do now in the confessional box? How do I get out?'

'Push the door hard,' he said, a little louder than before, 'and it should open.'

His words had lingered with me after I left him. What did he have in mind for me? Which door was I to push hard? And if I did, would it really open?

As I left the church and headed for Harvey Nichols, it occurred to me that the Father and I might have been brought together for a purpose. I had needed help and it had been sent – and not just any old help but the most worthy, spiritual type you could ever wish to find. Didn't that prove something about this life and its meaning? Didn't that demonstrate something about me? What stronger proof could anyone hope to find that they were important to the world in a spiritual way? It was my duty to live up to the purpose for which I had undoubtedly been chosen, and I made a pact with myself, there and then in that incongruously noisy London street, that I would not let myself down by allowing the petty, materialistic elements of life to distract me any more.

And what better time to begin than on my birthday? It wouldn't just be a celebration of fourteen years on earth, it would be a landmark, a catalyst in my life. Given time, my mother and Nana would understand. They were intelligent, sensitive women themselves, how could they fail to? I would concentrate my mind on my many

talents, as the Father had told me I should, and I would make a difference to the world. Maybe he was right and by so doing I would see that my father was still with me. And that would be the greatest present of all.