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Opening extract from

Three Ways To Snog an Alien

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1

Something not right about the new girl. Not right.

I'm in science class watching her, trying to put my finger on *exactly* what's not right about her when Shelly Hobbs from my experiment group turns into me and I back into the table sending test-tubes and a water-flask flying.

'Doogie, oh Doogie you are so DUMB!'

Shelly Hobbs, she of the loudest mouth in the class. No, forget that. The loudest mouth in the school. My mate Matt says there's something sexy about her. I'm not sure what he means. I mean I know what sexy is. Course I do. Everyone does. But I suppose it's all a matter of personal choice.

She's calling me dumb because I've knocked over the jar of water. Well I probably am dumb if I'm honest. I mean I don't get half of the things we do at school. Like right now. We're doing an experiment to prove something fizzes in water. Duh. Science: what is that all about?

Shelly stands with her hands on her hips, still calling me dumb, and I can't think of a quick reply. Shelly has the biggest bazongas in the class and maybe that's why Matt fancies her. Me, I can't see what the fuss is about. Why are bazongas sexy? Don't get it. Don't get it at all. They're just in the way.

'It was your bazongas,' I hear myself say.

'*Wha-at?*' goes Shelly.

Matt is looking at me with his mouth open.

Well, yes. I can't quite believe that I said it myself. I mean I know I *thought* it. But I didn't mean to actually *say* it. It's like an invisible hand reached into my throat and pulled the words out, and no one is more surprised and red-faced than me. I look round, like someone else in the room might have said it. Like it was all the work of a ventriloquist hiding behind one of the science lab benches.

Shelly can't believe it either. I suppose I'm the last in the class to say something like that. 'Doogie, that's just outrageous!'

Matt sniggers. The fourth person in our experiment group is the new girl. Fresh arrived today. She looks at me and I see a light go on in her eyes. She wants to laugh but she doesn't. Instead she turns away and goes to fetch a roll of paper towels. When she gets back she hands me the paper towels so that I can mop up the mess.

'What's going on in this group?' snorts Pinky Lewis. Pinky is the science teach. Called Pinky cos he's pink. Logical really. He has a neat ginger moustache, ginger eyelashes and balls of ginger hair spilling out of his nostrils, like it's poking out of a rip in a sofa. We could have called him Ginger. But we don't, we call him Pinky.

'Small accident,' I say, wiping up.

'It's all in hand,' says the new girl, taking the soggy towels from me and dumping them in the metal waste bin. 'No problem.' And she looks at me again, and there's that light flickering. She hasn't said anything, but I know she's perked up because of what I just said. And in a weird sort of way I think that's why I said it. To make her laugh or something.

That is, I wanted to make that light come on in her eye. I think. Hell, I don't know!

Meanwhile Shelly looks like she might be ready to grass me up and tell Pinky what I said to her. She thinks better of it, which is a relief. School has a big downer on anyone saying anything about bazongas, knickers, knobs and all that; which is a bit of a strain since it's pretty much all of us in Year Eleven ever think about. Well, the boys, anyway. Well, not me. Well not *all* of the time anyway. The girls probably just think about eyeshadow and handbags and cuddly toys.

Now take my friends Matt, Wilko and Tonga. They're all souped up about getting a girlfriend. I'm not so sure it's a good idea. Some of them talk an awful lot. Like Shelly Hobbs. She likes to have her own way. So, say you're going to get a burger with Shelly Hobbs. What should take five minutes is now going to take longer because there will be all this chat: shall we have a drink with that; shall we have a quarter-pounder; if we have a large fries we can share it . . . all that. And you can't say: *get your own fries Shelly*, because that's just plain rude, ignorant, and anyway you have to be kind to girls if you're going out with them, and it's pretty annoying having to be kind when someone's all over your fries.

And not only that, you're going to have to think about onions. Why? Because if one of you has onions the other person has to have onions. Why? Because you might end up snogging, and there's nothing worse than snogging someone who has just sucked down an onion ring when you haven't. What's worse, if you like onions you might have skipped the onions for this very reason and then you never get round to snogging at all. Which is a waste, when you could have had onions.

And then there is the question of what to do together. Say you want to go down to watch United on a Saturday and she wants to go to the cinema. There's a Saturday gone. And say you do go to the cinema and you want to watch *Zombie Inferno* and she wants to watch *Romantic Island*. You know who is going to win. And so you end up watching *Romantic Island*, and that's your Saturday for you.

Take Matt for example. He comes over all weird when Shelly's around. Fidgets. Acts daft. Keeps flicking his hair and making remarks which are meant to be funny but which are not. I feel sorry for him. He's in a state really. He's a good friend and I keep trying to think of ways to help him out of his misery. I think you should do your best by a mate. I mean, I admit I'm no expert but I said I'd tell her for him. Set up a date. But he just went mad. I even offered to go on a date with him to keep him company. But he just didn't want any help.

I've snogged a girl. Plenty. Okay, not plenty. One. It's all right but it's not as good as it's made out to be.

I had this girlfriend once. Kind of. It wasn't official. Well, I didn't exactly go making a public announcement about it. You don't take out an ad in the paper. You don't hire a little plane to trail a banner across the sky. Sometimes you don't even know yourself if it's official. I mean when is it official? After you've had a snog?

On holiday once in Skegness, there was this girl by the sea wall. She was just an ordinary girl – pretty, nice hands, fairly good hair, smelled okay – and she came up and told me I was good-looking and started talking about all kinds of things of no interest, like what's your name, where do you come from, what music do you like. She had nice sandy coloured skin – I dunno maybe she was Spanish or part Indian or

something – but she had these coloured fabric bangles on her wrists and I thought it looked sort of cool. Thing is I didn't know what to say to her. My mouth kept going dry so I let her do all the talking. She had an iPod playing in her ear even while she was talking to me. My face kept going red every time she made eye contact. I had to look away a few times, like I was watching for a passing ship out at sea.

Then she asked me if I wanted to walk down the pier with her. I thought, why? Then I thought why not, even though I had other important things to do. So we went down to the pier. She didn't stop talking all the way except to hum a tune that was going on in her ear. When we got there we chucked a few stones in the sea. That was about it. Then she asked me if I wanted to meet her later.

When we met up later it was as if she hadn't stopped talking from the moment I left her. I mean I heard her coming from a hundred metres away. Talking to me, maybe, or to herself. This time her hair was wet as if she'd just had a shower. As for me, I prefer to make sure my hair is dry before I go out. It's up to the individual.

After a bit we stood against the sea wall for a while. She kept ripping out her earpiece from her iPod and sticking it in my ear so I could get a load of whatever it was. I liked her touching me but after about the third time of this I had a sore ear. Then she came right up to me and we snogged.

It was all good. Not great, but all right. I think she must have been sucking mints earlier. I tried to put my tongue in her mouth but she wouldn't let me. I only did it because I wanted to look like I knew what I was doing.

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I reckon that counts as going out. I mean even if you're talked half to death by a girl it still counts as going out. Anyway the next day she went back to Runcorn so I didn't see her again. I did look up the bus timetables but, you know, Runcorn is a pretty long way.

The girl by the sea wall was a type nine, and Angelica Vinterland, the new girl in class, is also a type nine. As everyone knows there are only nine types of female. Body types and all that. (This is scientific – I read it on the Internet.) Shelly is type three: large mouth, big bazongas, fattish legs. Matt goes for type threes. Angelica is type nine: small bazongas, tall and bony, nervy. I prefer type nine. When I do eventually decide to let someone go out with me it will probably be a type nine.

The spillage is mopped up and Pinky drifts off to supervise another group at the back of the classroom. Angelica and Shelly fill up the jar I've knocked over and we start all over again with the experiment to see what fizzes. Duh.

'No worries,' says Angelica now that the experiment is under way again.

'Right,' I say, 'no worries.'

Then my other mate, fatboy Tonga, sneaks up behind me and hisses in my ear. 'You fancy her.'

He's another good mate, is Tonga. But even so I let fly and graze his scalp with my knuckle. It catches him a light burn. I know this because it takes the skin off my knuckles.

'Hoi!' Pinky shouts from across the class. 'I saw that!'

Tonga rubs the side of his head and gives me an evil grin. 'You do,' he says. 'You're, like, smitten.'

2

Well, I can't concentrate on school and it's not my fault. Every time I look up, she's looking at me. Angelica, the new girl. She pretends not to, and that just makes it worse. That's girls for you: if they're looking at you they pretend they're not; and if they're not paying you any attention they make out that they are.

I try to avoid looking at her during French. I don't mind French. Well I admit I can't speak a word of it but we've got this pretty assistant from Paris who at least makes a change from looking at our normal French teacher's moustache, and our normal French teacher is a woman. Angelica can speak confident French. Completely fluent. But let me tell you, it's a trick! She hasn't really learned it at all!

The trick is that her family lived in France for seven years. How can that be fair? Why should she be allowed to be in our French group when she can speak the lingo and all we can do is go *Bonjour Bonjour*? Why should she get her work marked the same as us when she's obviously going to come top? It's so unfair. She should be made to do Russian, say, instead. Makes the rest of us look thick, which is exactly how I do

look when the pretty French assistant asks me something in French and all that happens is that my face goes red.

And when I glance round, there she is, Angelica, sucking the end of her pencil and looking at me. She blinks slowly and this time doesn't even try to look away. No embarrassment at all! No, she just blinks at me.

And then, if that's not enough, at the end of the school day, just when all I want is to jump on the school bus and forget all about the jail-sentence of school, when my time is my own, when I can get on my PlayStation or have my tea, she stops me at the school gates.

I mean I can tell she's going to speak to me. I just know it. She's standing leaning against the wall with her legs crossed at her ankles, school bag slung over her shoulder, and even though there's about a hundred thousand kids squeezing through the school gates at the same time I just know she's going to say something.

How do I know? Because of the way she's looking at me. There's a tiny smile on her lips. Well, like the corner of her lips is twisted in half a smile.

She just swings alongside me. I don't say anything and I don't even look at her, but she's walking by my side. I ice up. I can't stop it but my fingers splay out and my arms are like planks of wood at the sides of my body. I don't like it. I don't like that she can have this effect on me. I can feel big knots in my neck muscles caused by keeping my gaze dead ahead. What's more I can see Matt and Tonga further ahead and any minute they're going to turn around and look back and see her walking with me and it's going to be . . . well, you know exactly what it's going to be.

'I can help you with your French,' she says.

'Eh?'

'I said I can help you with your French.'

'What?'

'I said I can help you get better at French. It's not difficult when you get going.'

'What?'

'I am speaking English right now, aren't I? What I mean is it's amazing how with just a tiny bit of practice you can get good at it.'

I stop dead and she stops dead too. The crowd of kids flow round us like water round a rock. I feel my face screw up. 'You what?'

'My God, I give up!'

'No,' I tell her, 'I know what you're saying. But what are you talking about?'

'I'm talking about extra French. So you can get better. It's easy.'

'Yeh, yeh, yeh, I know what you're saying. But what *I'm saying* about what you're saying is why would anyone want to do any more than we have to?'

'Duh! To get better at it?'

'Look, let's get this straight: school to me is like the prison of Alcatraz. I spend all my time dreaming about the bell at the end of the day. I don't think about anything else.'

I turn away and walk faster towards the bus. She walks alongside me. She has to skip every third step to keep up.

'You're funny! You are! But that attitude is why you're bottom of the class at everything!'

'Like I care!'

'Whoa!' she goes, as if I'm a horse. 'Whoa! You mean you don't mind that everyone thinks you're thick?'

'Hey, I'm not thick.'

'I know that. I've seen it. But all the teachers think you are cos you don't try. And all your classmates think you are too. They're laughing at you.'

'Sod off!'

'It's true. And you know it!'

We arrive at the bus stop. The bus is already there, engine ticking over, kids scrambling on like the school building behind them is a sinking ship and the bus is a life raft. 'What's it to you, anyway?'

And she just blinks at me. Slowly. One single blink. Then she hitches her school bag on her shoulder and walks away.

I get on the bus, shaking my head. There's a seat free in front of Matt and Tonga. 'Need sugar,' says Tonga.

I have a Mars Bar in my pocket that I was saving for the journey home, but I give it to Tonga cos he's always hungry. I suppose he's got a lot of fat to support. He unwraps it and sucks it down in one.

'Hey-up,' says Matt. 'Doogie has got himself a girlfriend.'

Well. I give him the knuckle for that.

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Gets to me though, that jibe about being bottom of the class. It doesn't matter how badly I do at school, or what the teachers think, I'm not thick. I'm just . . . I've got other stuff to think about. More important stuff. But what did get to me was when she said that the others were laughing at me. My classmates.

The thing is sometimes I pretend to be thick. To get a laugh. It usually works. You can make out you're a bit of a dong, and I like making people laugh. But they are supposed

to know. I mean if you're a clown in a circus everyone is supposed to know – aren't they? – that the clown takes off his make-up and his funny hat and goes home; and when he gets home he just wants to have his tea and read the paper. He doesn't shovel his dinner down his trousers, or fall over backwards reading the paper, does he? My dad said that it takes the cleverest guy to be the circus clown. But does the audience know that?

But if I say to Matt or Tonga, 'Hey, am I thick?' they will say, 'Course you are, that's why you're our mate.' And we'll have a laugh at that.

But now she's got me worried. Maybe I've spent so much time pretending to be thick that everyone thinks I really am thick. Or maybe even I've made myself thick. That's another thing that my mum used to say when I was a kid: if you keep on pulling that face the wind will change and your face will stick like that. Maybe that's what happened. Maybe the wind changed and I didn't notice.

I dunno. Something's wrong.

I know this: my school grades are all crap.

'Where're you going in such a hurry?' Mum says when I get in from school. 'Your tea is almost ready.'

'Back in a min, Mum.'

I nip upstairs to my bedroom, where I log on to the Internet. It's easy to find a couple of sites where I can do a quick bit of French. I know it's not really me but I have a point to prove. To myself.

I get past the introductions and then they start on directions. How to get to the baker's, that sort of thing. Anyway I give it a go. 'Est-qu'il y a une boulangerie près d'ici?' No no no. And *non* if you like. CBA: can't be arsed. Who needs to

ask to go to the baker's? You just go in a supermarket and there's the bread, piping hot from the oven. Why bother asking? You can see a supermarket from several miles away. It's like standing at the foot of a mountain and going, 'Où est la montagne?'

Forget it. Instead of doing French I have a great idea. I'd like to help Matt out of his misery about Shelly Hobbs so I google *How to pull a babe*. You can find out about most things on the Internet and I wonder if anyone who has been through all this before has any advice to offer. Well, loads of interesting stuff comes up. There's one website called DatingTips.com and I give it a pretty good read.

It's terrific! It's written by some older guy who obviously has had one or two girlfriends in his time, and he's just giving away all the secrets of girls! Everything you want to know about the way they think, what they're thinking at any given time, if they're telling the truth . . . it's amazing. He says he *knows the bends in the road*. I think by this he means that he can tell if there's an accident coming round the corner. Anyway he offers all this advice and he's even written a book on the subject which you can buy from him any time if you want to get really good at it. Mainly it's aimed at older guys because it talks about bars and shaving and driving to a date and all that; but I would say the advice is pretty good. I mean, say you're fourteen, it's probably the same advice as if you're twenty-four, isn't it? Maybe it gets different when you're ninety-four, but right now I'd say that it's all useful stuff on there that I can tell Matt.

I log off and go and get my tea. Which, it being a Thursday, is Chinese takeaway.

Dad has finished a job today so he's already home and tucking into his noodles. He's got sawdust in his hair and

plaster powder all down his trousers. He's a fishmonger. No, that was just a joke. He's a builder.

'Dad,' I say to him, 'do you think I'm thick?'

'Thick as pig-poo, son, like your old man.'

'Brian,' goes Mum. Like this 'Bryyyyyy-uunnnnn' She sings it. 'That's not very nice, Bryyyyyyy-unnnnn.'

'Well, he did ask me, didn't he?'

'You're not thick, Doogie,' she says. 'You're not thick, you're . . . uncomplicated.'

Dad accidentally snarfs a noodle because it makes him cough. Then he puts down his fork and wags a dusty white finger at me. 'It's your school work, son. If you paid more attention at school you wouldn't be thick. At the rate you're going you'll end up as a bloody builder, like me.'

'I don't see what's wrong with that. Tonga's dad is a university lecturer and you make twice as much money as he does. Wilko's dad writes books for a living and Wilko brings Chippo economy label crisps to school.'

Dad's head swells a bit at this news. He looks at Mum. 'Well, you'll end up like your mum. All beauty and no brains.'

'Bryyyy-unnnnnn.'

'Well, it will be no bad thing if you come into the building trade with me. Be a ladder-monkey.'

'Oh Bryyyyy-unnnnn,' Mum says, as if the decision is already made. 'I wanted him to be the first in our family to go to university.'

Dad sucks down a noodle. 'Flying saucers will land on our front lawn before that happens, the way he's going.'

'I don't like this takeaway,' I say.

'Me neither,' says Dad. 'Chuck it away. Let's have some proper junk food.'