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Opening extract from

Six Steps to a Girl

Written by
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Published by
Simon and Shuster

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Acknowledgements: Thanks, as ever, to Moira, Gaby, Julie, Melanie and Sharon. Also to Daisy Startup and to my editor, Venetia Gosling.

First published in Great Britain in 2007 by Simon and Schuster UK Ltd,
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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-13: 9781416917335

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Times by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman, Reading, Berkshire

www.simonsays.co.uk

1

My girl

*For what is a brat, what has he got
When he finds out that he cannot
Say the things he truly thinks
But only words, not what he feels*

**'My Way'
Sex Pistols**

The first time I saw her was at my dad's funeral.

I know what you're thinking – his dad dies of cancer
and a few days later he's eyeing up some girl.

It wasn't like that.

Well. It was. But it's not like I was on the pull or anything. And it wasn't as if I could see much of her, either. She was wearing an enormous overcoat. Just a flash of blonde hair showing over the top.

I didn't notice her at first.

I was sitting there, front row of the crematorium,

between Mum and Chloe. I knew the place was packed – I'd turned round a few times and had a look. Lots of black clothes and pale faces. It was January – dead cold, with ice on the roads, so Mum was worried people wouldn't turn up. But they did – masses of them. All Dad's family. Friends. Even a couple of ex-girlfriends who made a big show of coming up to Mum, arms outstretched, trying to hug her.

Mum was hating it. I could hear her teeth grinding. And she was gripping my arm tight with her fingers.

Then Uncle Matt stepped up to the front. He's not my real uncle, just Dad's best mate. The crematorium went quiet.

Uncle Matt talked about Dad – how he'd known him since they were at school. How my dad was this great guy. Loved punk music. Played the guitar when he was younger. Always in trouble as a kid. *Blah, blah*. Loads of laughs. *Blah, blah*. Spirit of adventure.

I'd heard it all before and it still didn't make sense. I mean, Uncle Matt was making out like Dad was this real rebel when he was young. But *real* rebels don't give it all up for a nine-to-five job and a mortgage.

No way.

Not that Dad couldn't be a laugh sometimes. But he was ordinary. Just an ordinary, middle-aged guy with an ordinary, boring, office job.

"But in those last few weeks," Uncle Matt went on,

“what he told me he would miss most of all was the chance to see his children grow up.”

Mum’s grip on my arm tightened even further. I could hear lots of sniffing behind me. I glanced sideways at Chloe. Tears were streaming down her face. She was always closer to Dad than me. I mean, it’s not like Dad and I had lots of rows or anything. But he’d been ill for so long. And we’d never had much in common. I don’t think he had any idea who I was.

Maybe that’s why I didn’t feel like crying. Maybe that’s why his dying didn’t feel real.

Uncle Matt sat down and a couple more people stood up. Someone read a poem. After that Chloe started bawling loudly and Mum leaned right across me to hold her hand. I wanted to get up and switch seats but it would have been too embarrassing. So we all stayed there, in what must have looked like this massive, miserable cuddle.

At last it was over. At the end they played “My Way”. Not the classic Frank Sinatra everyone’s heard of – but this punk version. Apparently Uncle Matt reckoned my dad would’ve loved it.

It just sounded stupid.

Getting out of the crematorium building took ages. Mum was still clutching my arm, stopping as person after person came up to her.

“... so sorry ...”

“... a release ...”

“... miss him so much ...”

As we reached the door I caught sight of Chloe. She was standing near all the flowers laid out on the ground, surrounded by girls from her class.

I recognised most of her friends. Chloe's a year older than me but we get on quite well. So long as I stay out of her room she's pretty cool. Anyway, right now she and her friends were all crying their eyes out. The other girls were hugging her and patting her on the shoulder, each of them jostling for the position of Most Important Friend at the Funeral.

All except her. The girl in the enormous overcoat.

She was standing slightly on the edge of the group. I was sure I hadn't seen her before, even though at that point I could only see her big coat and the back of her head. I stared at the way her smooth blonde hair curled onto her back.

And then she turned round.

I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I just stood, transfixed by her face.

She was beautiful.

Not attractive. Not pretty.

Massively, awesomely beautiful. Like a model or a film

star. Heart-shaped face. Big eyes. And these incredibly sexy, pouty lips.

I'd never seen a real person who looked that good.

"Luke," Mum hissed.

"What?" I said.

"Uncle Matt was just speaking to you. Why didn't you say something?"

I shook my head. I was dying to look at the girl again. I hadn't even heard Uncle Matt.

"Can I go and see if my mates are here?" I said.

Mum sighed. "Of course," she said. "But don't go far away. I . . . I . . ." Her voice cracked and she looked down.

I felt a stab of guilt as she let go of my arm. But Uncle Matt was instantly at her side, taking her hand and drawing her over to talk to some other people. I sighed with relief. Then turned round to look for the girl.

She was still there. I wanted to see what she looked like under that huge black overcoat. It was way, way too big for her. The shoulders hung halfway down her arms and the sleeves dangled below her hands.

With a jolt I realised it was a man's coat. It was January. It was cold. Somebody must've lent it to her to keep her warm. *Let it be her father, I prayed. Or her brother. Please.*

One of Mum's friends came up to me, clucking about

how sad it was that Dad had died, asking how I was coping. I answered in grunts, hoping she'd get the message and leave me alone. I still hadn't seen anyone from my class. I knew some of them were here. They were probably too embarrassed to come and speak to me after all Chloe's noisy crying in the service.

Chloe was blowing her nose now. The skin around her eyes was red and streaks of make-up were smeared down her cheeks. She was talking to the girl in the big overcoat. My girl.

I was thinking about going a bit closer. Chloe was my sister, after all – surely it wouldn't look too obvious?

And then this guy wandered over to them. He was tall. Older. I vaguely recognised him as a sixth-former from school. He said something to Chloe, then slipped his arm round the girl. My heart beat faster. I mentally measured the overcoat against his broad shoulders. *Bastard*. It was his coat. Had to be. *Please let him be her brother*.

It was my one remaining hope. Then the girl looked up, gave him this dead sexy grin, and my hope was dashed.

2

The records

*Is she really going out with him?
Is she really gonna take him home tonight?
Is she really going out with him?
'Cause if my eyes don't deceive me
There's something going wrong around here.*

'Is She Really Going Out With Him?'

Joe Jackson

The girl didn't come back to our house. Neither did her boyfriend. I tried not to imagine what they might be doing instead.

The house was full of the family and friends who'd been at the funeral. The women brought food and laid it out on the kitchen table. The men produced bottles of whisky and made whisky sours. I hovered, hoping one of them would offer me a glass.

They didn't.

Mum and Chloe stood in the living room, surrounded by people. I kept looking at the armchair Dad used to sit in all day before he had to go into the hospice. It felt odd seeing other people sprawled all over it.

None of my mates had made it back from the crematorium. I guessed they'd gone off to the park to play football. I didn't blame them really. In fact I was pulling on my trainers in order to join them, when Uncle Matt cornered me in the hall.

"Where're you going?" he said. I could smell the faint tang of whisky on his breath.

"Just out." I stood up.

Uncle Matt put his beefy hand on my shoulder. "Look, son," he said. "I know this is hard on you, but how's your mum going to feel if you piss off now?"

I gritted my teeth. "I'm not your son," I muttered.

Uncle Matt's already flushed cheeks reddened further. His hand dropped from my shoulder. "No, I didn't mean . . ."

"Luke?" Mum appeared behind him. She was smiling, but her eyes had this awful, dead look about them. "Are you feeling all right?" she said.

"I just want to be on my own for a while." I looked at the hall carpet.

"Course," she said. "You go out, get some air."

*

I came back an hour later. I hadn't gone to the park in the end, just walked around a bit. When it came down to it, I couldn't face seeing my friends. Since Dad had got ill, they'd all been a bit weird with me – like they didn't know what to say to me anymore.

I didn't need that – especially today.

The house was virtually empty now. A couple of Mum's friends were still there, collecting up empty bottles and sweeping plastic cups and bits of sandwich crust into black bin bags. They told me Mum was upstairs, lying down.

But it wasn't Mum I wanted to see. While I'd been out walking I couldn't stop thinking about the girl from the funeral. I kept looking out, hoping I'd bump into her. But, of course, I didn't.

I had to know who she was. I went upstairs and knocked on Chloe's bedroom door – she's liable to go mental if you don't knock and wait for a reply.

"Go away," said a teary voice.

I pushed the door open a fraction. Chloe was sitting on her bed, surrounded by photographs. She looked up at me, wiping her face and scowling. "What d'you want?"

I hesitated. In this mood, Chloe was unlikely to tell me anything. I'd probably be better off waiting until later.

"Just wanted to see if you were OK," I lied.

Chloe narrowed her eyes. "Yeah, right," she said. "By

the way, thanks for pissing off earlier and leaving me to cope with Mum on my own."

It was clearly hopeless. I closed the door and turned away, but to my surprise Chloe called after me. "Hey, Luke, come back."

I opened the door again. Chloe stared at me for a second, then beckoned me over to the bed.

"D'you wanna look at these old photos of Dad?" She pointed to the snaps spread out on the duvet in front of her.

Not for the first time I marvelled at how quickly her moods could change. I tried not to step on any of the clothes and magazines littering Chloe's carpet as I crossed the room. I knelt down beside the bed and bent over the pictures.

Most were of Dad on his own, but there were some with Chloe in as well. She pointed to one where Dad was giving her a piggyback ride. She looked about six or seven. They were both laughing.

"So how was it for you?" I said. "The funeral and stuff?"

Chloe made a face. "Gross."

"At least all your friends turned up," I said, hoping my attempt to edge the conversation to the girl wouldn't look too obvious.

"Yeah but half of them were only there 'cause they got

the morning off school," Chloe said. She picked up the picture of her and Dad and stared at it.

I seized my opportunity.

"Yeah, like, there was one girl I've never even seen before," I said. "Blonde. Wearing this outsize overcoat?"

Chloe put down the photo. "You mean Eve? She's OK, actually. Only started this term."

"In your class?" I said, casually.

Chloe nodded.

That meant Eve must be sixteen, or nearly sixteen. Whichever – she was a whole school year above me.

"She was dead sweet when she found out about Dad," Chloe went on, "though I wouldn't have asked her to the funeral if I'd known she was going to bring her boyfriend."

"Oh?" I said innocently. "She's got a boyfriend already?"

"Only the hottest guy in his year. Ben – he plays for City Juniors."

"Oh."

There was a knock at the door. Without waiting for Chloe to reply, Mum walked in, carrying a cardboard box. A large, bulky envelope was balanced on top of the box.

"Oh good, you're both here," Mum said, sitting down on the end of the bed.

I glanced at Chloe, wondering if she was going to flip into a mood at Mum for barging in like that. But Chloe was staring at the box and the envelope. "What are they?" she said.

Mum pressed her lips together. Long pause. I started thinking about the girl again. Eve. It was the perfect name for her. Simple and sexy. The overcoat she'd been wearing kept pushing its way into my mind's eye. Her supposedly "hot" boyfriend's coat. How come he got to have her? Sometimes life really sucked.

"Luke?"

I focused on Mum. She was frowning gently at me.

I felt myself going red. "Sorry," I muttered. "What did you say?"

Mum sighed. I was suddenly aware of how tired she looked. "Dad left this for you." She pushed the cardboard box she'd been holding across the bed to me. I stared down at it, blinking hard.

"For me?" I said.

"Yeah, doof brain. For you." Chloe was next to me, the bulky envelope that Mum had been carrying in her lap. She pointed to it. "I got a letter."

"Dad started trying to write to you too, Luke," Mum said quickly. She tapped the lid of the box. "But in the end he thought what's in there might be more meaningful right

now.” She paused. “Everything you need for them is up in the loft. If you can’t set it up, Uncle Matt said he’d do it for you.”

“I’m sure I’ll be able to manage.” I stood up. I had no idea what was inside the box, but the last thing I wanted was Uncle Matt muscling in with his *now, son, do it like this* routine.

I carried the box back to my bedroom and pushed open the door with my feet.

I sat down on the bed, the cardboard box on my lap. What on earth was inside that Dad thought was so meaningful?

I lifted the lid. Inside the box was a row of twenty or so paper envelopes with black discs inside. I pulled one out. Then another. They were vinyl records. Old ones. The paper sleeves were all scuffed and dirty. I recognised less than half of the bands. Not surprising. The tracks were all dated from ages ago – the late Seventies and early Eighties.

These were Dad’s old singles. Records from when he was a teenager. My heart beat faster, and for the first time that day a huge sob rose up in my throat.

Was that all he thought of me?

Chloe gets a massive letter and I get palmed off with a bunch of ancient, crappy records. I pushed down the sob.

Dad wasn't worth crying over. I just had to accept it. He had no idea about my life.

No idea about me.

I put the box down on the floor and walked over to my window.

I wondered where Eve was. And what she was doing.