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Opening extract from

Geek Girl

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geek/gi:k/h noun informal, chiefly N. Amer.

1 an unfashionable or socially inept person.

2 an obsessive enthusiast.

3 a person who feels the need to look up the word 'geek' in the dictionary.

DERIVATIVES ***geeky*** adjective.

ORIGIN from the related English dialect word *geck* 'fool'.

1

My name is Harriet Manners, and I am a geek.

I know I'm a geek because I've just looked it up in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I drew a little tick next to all the symptoms I recognise, and I appear to have them all. Which – and I should be perfectly honest here – hasn't come as an enormous surprise. The fact that I have an *Oxford English Dictionary* on my bedside table anyway should have been one clue. That I keep a Natural History Museum pencil and ruler next to it so that I can neatly underline interesting entries should have been another.

Oh, and then there's the word **GEEK**, drawn in red marker pen on the outside pocket of my school satchel. That was done yesterday.

I didn't do it, obviously. If I *did* decide to deface my own property, I'd choose a poignant line from a really good book, or an interesting fact not many people know. And I definitely wouldn't do it in red. I'd do it in



black, or blue, or perhaps green. I'm not a big fan of the colour red, even if it *is* the longest wavelength of light discernible by the human eye.

To be absolutely candid with you, I don't actually know *who* decided to write on my bag – although I have my suspicions – but I can tell you that their writing is almost illegible. They clearly weren't listening during our English lesson last week when we were told that handwriting is a very important Expression of the Self. Which is quite lucky because if I can just find a similar shade of pen, I might be able to slip in the letter *R* in between *G* and *E*. I can pretend that it's a reference to my interest in ancient history and feta cheese.

I prefer Cheddar, but nobody has to know that.

Anyway, the point is: as my satchel, the anonymous vandal and the *Oxford English Dictionary* appear to agree with each other, I can only conclude that I am, in fact, a geek.

Did you know that in the old days the word 'geek' was used to describe a carnival performer who bit the head off a live chicken or snake or bat as part of their stage act?

Exactly. Only a geek would know a thing like that.

I think it's what they call ironic.

2

Now that you know who I am, you're going to want to know where I am and what I'm doing, right? Character, action and location: that's what makes a story. I read it in a book called *What Makes a Story*, written by a man who hasn't got any stories at the moment, but knows exactly how he'll tell them when he eventually does.

So.

It's currently December, I'm in bed – tucked under about fourteen covers – and I'm not doing anything at all apart from getting warmer by the second. In fact, I don't want to alarm you or anything, but I think I might be really sick. My hands are clammy, my stomach's churning and I'm *significantly* paler than I was ten minutes ago. Plus, there's what can only be described as a sort of… *rash* on my face. Little red spots scattered at totally random and not at *all* symmetrical points on my cheeks and forehead. With a big one on my chin. And one just next to my left ear.



I take another look in the little hand-held mirror on my bedside table, and then sigh as loudly as I can. There's no doubt about it: I'm clearly very ill. It would be wrong to risk spreading this dangerous infection to other, possibly less hardy, immune systems. I shall just have to battle through this illness alone.

All day. Without going anywhere at all.

Sniffling, I shuffle under my duvets a little further and look at my clock on the opposite wall (it's very clever: all the numbers are painted at the bottom as if they've just fallen down, although this does mean that when I'm in a hurry, I have to sort of guess what the time is). Then I close my eyes and mentally count:

10, 9, 8, *7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2…*

At which point, absolutely on cue as always, the door opens and the room explodes: hair and handbag and coat and arms everywhere. Like a sort of girl bomb. And there, as if by very punctual magic, is Nat.

Nat – for the record – is my Best Friend, and we are so utterly in tune that it's like we have one brain, divided into two pieces at birth. Or (more likely) two brains, entwined shortly afterwards. Although we didn't meet until we were five years old, so obviously I'm speaking *metaphorically* or we'd both be dead.

What I'm trying to say is: we're close. We're

harmonised. We're one and the same. We're like a perfect stream of consciousness, with never a cross word between us. We work with perfect, unquestioning synergy. Like two dolphins that jump at exactly the same time and pass the ball to each other at Sea World.

Anyway. Nat takes one step into the room, looks at me, and then stops and puts her hands on her hips.

"Good morning," I croak from under the covers, and then I start coughing violently. Human coughs release air at roughly 60mph, and without being vain, I'd like to think that mine reaches 65mph or 70mph minimum.

"Don't even *think* about it," Nat snaps.

I stop coughing and look at her with my roundest, most confused eyes. "Hmmm?" I say innocently. And then I start coughing again.

"I mean it. Don't even think about thinking about it."

I have *no* idea what she's talking about. The fever must be making my brain swell.

"Nat," I say feebly, closing my eyes and pressing my hand against my head. I'm a shell of the person I used to be. A husk. "I have bad news." I open one eye and take a peek round the room. Nat still has her hands on her hips.

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"Let me guess," she says in a dry voice. "You're sick."

I give a weak but courageous smile: the sort Jane gives Lizzie in *Pride and Prejudice* when she's bedridden with a really bad cold, but is being very brave about it. "You know me so well," I say affectionately. "It's like we have one mind, Nat."

"And you're out of it if you think I'm not about to drag you out of bed by your feet." Nat takes a few steps towards me. "Also, I want my lipstick back," she adds.

I clear my throat. "Lipstick?"

"The one you've dotted all over your face."

I open my mouth and then shut it again. "It's not lipstick," I say in a small voice. "It's a dangerous infection."

"Then your dangerous infection is glittery, Harriet, and just so happens to match my new shoes perfectly."

I shift a little bit further down the bed so that only my eyes are visible. "Infections are very advanced these days," I say with as much dignity as I can muster. "They are sometimes extremely light-reflective."

"Featuring small flecks of gold?"

I raise my chin defiantly. "Sometimes."

Nat's nose twitches and she rolls her eyes. "Right.

And your face is producing white talcum powder, is it?"

I sniff quickly. Oh, *sugar cookies.* "It's important to keep sick people dry," I say as airily as I can. "Dampness can allow bacteria to develop."

Nat sighs again. "Get out of bed, Harriet."

"But—"

"Get out of bed."

"Nat, I…"

"Out. Now."

I look down at the duvets in a panic. "But I'm not ready! I'm in my pyjamas!" I'm going to give it one last desperate shot. "Nat," I say, changing tack and using my most serious, profound voice. "You don't understand. How will you feel if you're wrong? How will you *live* with yourself? I might be *dying*."

"Actually, you're right," Nat agrees, taking another two steps towards me. "You are. I'm literally seconds away from killing you, Harriet Manners. And if that happens, I'll live with myself just fine. Now get out of bed, you little faker."

And, before I can protect myself, Nat lunges suddenly towards me and tugs the covers away.

There's a long silence.

"Oh, *Harriet*," Nat eventually says in a sad and

simultaneously triumphant voice.

Because I'm lying in bed, fully dressed, with my shoes on. And in one hand is a box of talcum powder; in the other is a bright red lipstick.