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Opening extract from
**Alex, the Dog and the
Unopenable Door**

Written by
Ross Montgomery

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Ross Montgomery

Alex, the Dog
and Unopenable Door



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Alex, the Dog and Unopenable Door

Prologue

Cloisters Boarding School for Boys
Annual Essay Writing Competition

Subject: A Great Day in the History of the Cusp
(Minimum 200 words)
NAME: Alex Jennings
AGE: 12 (nearly)

The 1000th Anniversary of the Order of the Sword and Torch was a momentous day indeed for history. Lots of days are important in history for lots of different reasons. Some are important because of great deeds that have been committed on those historic days. But the day of the 1000th Anniversary of the Order of the Sword and Torch was most especially important. This was because it was the day that the world's biggest dog and the world's smallest

dog finally met each other, at the Grand Expedition Centre, which is of course located in the Cusp.

The world's biggest dog was a Great Dane called Gibson, who was 107 cm tall, or 42 inches, which is about as big as a 42-inch television screen. Great Danes are seriously massive, I saw one once that no jokes I could have ridden like a horse. The world's smallest dog was a toy Chihuahua called Boo Boo, who unlike Gibson was only 10.16 cm tall. I deduce that he could have fitted inside Gibson's head, even though I don't think that is really possible. Maths is not my strength.

Here is an artistic interpretation of that fateful event:

The glorious meeting was part of a series of events to celebrate the day that the Order was first formed, and its members left the Cusp and set out to explore the land that lies beyond the invisible boundary surrounding the Forbidden Land. It was their solemn oath that not one of them would rest until they had finally discovered what mysteries lay at the very centre of the unexplored region,

and returned to the Cusp as heroes.

The reason why these two fine specimens were brought together at the Cusp was to symbolise the fact that, unlike people, dogs can somehow cross the boundary and walk over the 'Forbidden Land' without anything trying to push them back out.

No one really knows why this is and we can't ask the dogs (see my earlier point). But this is not why I think it was a great day in history.

The reason why I think that this was a great day in history is as follows. Some people think cats are better than dogs and I have no real opinion on the matter but if you really honestly think that cats are better than dogs then there is probably something seriously wrong with you.

Allow me to make another point. There are 73 different breeds of cats, British Shorthair, Ragdoll, etc. etc. etc., although some say there are over 80. Quite frankly I couldn't care less. Put cats in a line-up and they all look like this:

[a/w 2]

That's right – exactly the same. The fur changes and some have longer hair and maybe bigger or smaller ears but that's it, they still look like cats. This is because the family name for the domestic cat is *Felis catus*. They all come from the same family and so it makes sense they would all look very much the same. You can't help looking like your family, even if you don't want to. Everyone says I look like my dad.

But dogs are also all in the same family, *Canis lupus familiaris*. Look it up if you don't believe me. The Kennel Club says there are over 150 different breeds but that's a bit of a misunderestimation as it doesn't include mongrels, who some believe can often be even more delightful than their pedigree brethren (myself included). But do dogs all look the same? Do they squat. Gibson and Boo Boo don't look anything like each other. And they're not the only ones – observe this particular line-up:

[a/w 3]

The Sheepdog, the Dachshund, the Pointer, the Poodle, to name only four, all look completely different. Even though they're in the same family. They could almost be completely different animals. And I don't know about you but I think that is quite something.

And here's where I get to my point. When Gibson the Great Dane finally met Boo Boo the toy Chihuahua in the Cusp on that fateful day, and they saw how different they both were, did they *know* that each other was a dog like them? Or did they think they were both something else? Perhaps an even better question is, when dogs look at us, do they see us as people or some other type of dog?

And in conclusion in a nutshell to sum it all up that is why the 1000th Anniversary of the Order of the Sword and Torch was indeed a momentous day in history.

WORD COUNT: 763 words

GRADE: F

COMMENTS:

Alex, there is no such word as 'misunderestimation'.

And for the last time, you were not asked to provide illustrations.

— Mrs Beaumont

Part One

The Outskirts

1

The morning sunlight shone onto Cloisters Boarding School for Boys. It shone as best it could, but it was no use. No amount of sunlight could disguise the coldness that clung to its black bricks like ancient robes. The sun might as well have shone on a gravestone.

The view from the front gates didn't exactly leave the best impression on newcomers. The first thing they'd see would of course be the gates, wrought iron and rusted. The plaque on the bars was the only part that was ever cleaned nowadays. Its words gleamed to a high sheen in the sunlight:

*** CLOISTERS ***

A BOARDING SCHOOL FOR BOYS
BUILT BY THE ESTEEMED MEMBERS

OF
THE ORDER OF THE SWORD AND TORCH
IN ITS 500TH GLORIOUS YEAR,
.
.
.
FOR THE PURPOSES OF EDUCATING THE YOUNG
IN THEIR SACRED RESPONSIBILITY:
.
.
.
TO STEP BEYOND THE CUSP
AND
FINALLY TRIUMPH OVER
THE FORBIDDEN LAND

The plaque was a grim reminder of how many years had passed since the school was first built. Back then, the Outskirts had been filled with towns and villages, but they had long ago been abandoned. Except for the barbed-wire fences lining the horizon, where the secretive world of the Cusp was hidden from view, and where the outermost edges of the Forbidden Land finally began, the school was the only sign of life for miles around.

You could forgive those standing at the wrought-iron gates for imagining that the black and crumbling building ahead had been long abandoned too. With nothing else but barren fields to look at, visitors would have no choice but to stare at the grand entranceway lying at the base

of the tallest tower before them. It was a miserable sight. No matter how many times you stood before the tower, it always looked like it was plummeting down on top of you.

Matthew was no exception. It didn't help matters that he was an hour late for his first day at school, and that he was soaked to the skin in old ditchwater. And it certainly didn't help that he was wearing a blazer two sizes too big for him.

Or that he was supposed to be starting as the new Headmaster.

'Hello?' he called out, banging his briefcase against the railings. 'Er . . . can someone let me in, please?'

Silence. He wiped his mud-smeared glasses with a baggy sleeve.

'Anyone?'

A woman appeared at the grand black entranceway. Her hair was in a neat bob, and she was wearing a bright pink jacket that boasted a truly awe-inspiring pair of shoulder pads. She didn't look very pleased to see him. Even from down at the gates Matthew was certain he could see her nostrils flaring.

'Good morning, Mrs Beaumont,' he called up, giving a meek wave.

'More like "good afternoon", Matthew!' she said furiously. She marched down the steps towards him, pulling a set of keys from out her pocket. 'Where on *earth* have

you been?’

‘Sorry Mrs Beaumont,’ he mumbled. ‘I got lost in the Outskirts.’

The woman stared at him in disbelief.

‘*The Outskirts?*’ she gasped. ‘You went through the Outskirts on foot? For heaven’s sake, Matthew, that’s nearly twenty miles! I suggest you get yourself a bike, and in future come along the ditches . . .’

‘I did,’ said Matthew.

Mrs Beaumont threw open the gate, and thinned her eyes suspiciously.

‘*Really,*’ she said. ‘Then where’s your bike?’

‘In a ditch,’ said Matthew. He held up a plastic bag filled with sodden clothes. ‘A farmer lent me the blazer. I had to get changed in a bush.’

Mrs Beaumont gave him a glare of intense disapproval.

‘Matthew,’ she said calmly. ‘This cannot happen again. The new Headmaster of Cloisters cannot be an hour late.’

‘I know, Mrs Beaumont,’ he said apologetically. ‘But it wasn’t my fault, honestly! I was cycling as fast as I could to get here, and then this girl just ran out in front of me and I tried to swerve and . . .’

‘Stop talking, Matthew,’ sighed Mrs Beaumont. ‘Look up there for me, please.’

She pointed to the top of the tallest tower. Matthew turned around without protest and squinted his eyes

against the harsh morning sun.

On the roof of the belfry stood a stone statue, at least twice his size. It was a knight in full armour. In one hand it held up a great flaming torch. The other thrust forward an enormous sword, its point aimed towards the horizon. From that height, you could almost see beyond the barbed-wire fencing that cut through the countryside and make out the distant boundary that separated the Outskirts from the Forbidden Land. In Matthew's day children used to sneak up onto the belfry roof in break times to see if they could make out of the mythical world that lay across the boundary, fooling themselves into believing that they might even see all the way to the centre – the place where no man had ever set foot, or even laid eyes upon.

Matthew doubted the boys cared about that sort of thing nowadays. If they did sneak up the tower, it was probably to catch a glimpse of what lay immediately past the fences: to the giant ring of the Cusp, whose watch-towers and security perimeters surrounded the Forbidden Land and prevented anyone from going within even a mile of the boundary. No one knew what went on there – probably not even the statue. Matthew looked closely at it. Its head had long since fallen off, and had been replaced by a weathervane.

'That man', said Mrs Beaumont solemnly, 'symbolises

what this school was built for. A purpose greater than either of us, one that a huge number have worked and died for. A purpose that was born over a thousand years ago – one your father has dedicated his entire life to, Matthew. To educate young minds in discovering what lies beyond the Cusp, and to finally find a way to the centre of the Forbidden Land – no matter what it takes.’

Matthew had heard the speech a hundred times before. They were the words with which his father began his own speech each year at the annual Cloisters assembly. They had also been used, word for word, at the beginning of their annual man-to-man talk. This one even had its own personalised ending. *Being Headmaster of Cloisters is not simply a job, Matthew*, his father would say, placing a hand on his shoulder, *it is a responsibility. A heavy one to bear. And one day, Matthew, it will be your turn.*

‘Do you understand, Matthew?’ said Mrs Beaumont.

Matthew nodded. ‘Of course, Mrs Beaumont. It won’t happen again.’

Mrs Beaumont spun on her heel, and strode back through the enormous doorway. Matthew scampered after her, his shoes squelching loudly on the grey stones. He glanced around nervously. The corridor inside was wide, and cold.

‘Wow,’ said Matthew, glancing round him. ‘It looks . . . exactly the same as when I was here, Mrs Beaumont.’

'Your father has kept things in fine form these last forty years,' she said proudly, marching ahead. 'How is he? Improving, I hope?'

'Er . . .' said Matthew. 'Yes, I suppose. Far too slowly for him. Can't get out the hospital quickly enough.'

'I'm sure you'll do an admirable job while he's away,' said Mrs Beaumont, although Matthew sensed she didn't really mean it. 'Especially now the First Day Festivities are in full swing.'

'Ah, yes,' said Matthew warmly. 'First Day Festivities. I remember them well.'

'Nothing out of the ordinary this year,' said Mrs Beaumont, weaving through the corridors. 'Somebody tried to set fire to the cricket pavilion, as usual.'

'Ah yes, a classic,' said Matthew.

'And Laurence Davy was caught trying to break into staff cars with a coathanger. Again.'

'Oh,' said Matthew. 'That's a new one . . .'

'And we've had to send Jeremy Butterworth to his dorm for bucketing Alex Jennings.'

'Erm . . .' said Matthew.

'It's when you make someone hold a bucket of water against the ceiling with a long pole,' Mrs Beaumont explained. 'One move, and you drop the bucket. Poor Alex was stuck in the Chapel all night. Ten hours! The organist found him honking for help this morning. They'd

glued a French horn to his lips, you see. You'll be pleased to know we've confiscated the horn.'

Matthew gulped. 'Well, maybe things have changed a little since my day . . .'

'Indeed, Matthew,' said Mrs Beaumont. 'The boys nowadays take to criminality like ducks to water. You have to *punish* the badness out of them.'

'Blimey,' said Matthew. 'And to think I brought muffins in for them.' He pulled a small bag of slightly squashed clingfilmed blobs from his pocket. 'Do you want one, by the way? They've got linseeds in them.'

Mrs Beaumont ignored him. She stopped outside a familiar door and turned back to face him.

'The Headmaster's office,' she said. 'Your office now, of course.'

Matthew gulped. 'Of course.'

'Oh, and Matthew,' she said. 'One final word of advice.'

She took a step towards him. Matthew fought the desire to take a step backwards.

'You must make it your own. You have to set an example, right away. Strike hard, and fast. No mercy. One sign of weakness, and the whole system falls apart. Do you understand?'

Matthew nodded silently.

'Good luck,' said Mrs Beaumont.

A bell suddenly rang out, high and shrill and piercing.

Matthew's eyes widened.

'First break – already?' he cried. 'Good grief . . . I have to get changed! They can't see me like this . . . !'

Mrs Beaumont had already disappeared. Matthew was alone in the shadow of the doorway. He took a breath, and stepped inside.

The office was exactly as his father had left it. Behind the old wooden desk stood his armchair, turned to the wall, as rigid as a coffin and the colour of a sickly toad. Above it, an enormous portrait of a stern-looking man hung at an angle, looming over the room. From the doorway it almost seemed as if he was glaring down at you, which was of course the exact intention. Matthew looked back up at the familiar cold eyes of his father.

"One day, Matthew, it will be your turn," he sighed. ". . . And I hope you won't let me down like you normally do."

'Who are you talking to?' said a voice.

'Aaaargh!' said Matthew, leaping several feet in the air.

The sickly-green armchair spun round. Seated inside it was a small boy. Matthew clutched at his chest, his heart thumping. The boy smiled eagerly, and looked Matthew up and down.

'You must be lost,' he said. 'This is the Headmaster's office, and between you and me you don't really look like a Headmaster.'