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Opening extract from

A Boy Called Hope

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To Millie, with all my love.

For you I'd travel 238, 857 miles to the moon.



I'm Dan Hope, and deep inside my head I keep a list of things I want to come true. For example: I want my sister, Ninja Grace, to go to university at the North Pole and only come back once a year for twenty-four hours. I want to help Sherlock Holmes solve his most daring mystery yet. And if it could be a zombie mystery, all the more exciting. I want to be the first eleven-year-old to land on the moon. When I get there I want to say, "One small step for boy, one giant headache for his mother." I want my dog to stop eating planets and throwing them up on the carpet. And finally, the biggest dream of all,

I want my dad to love me.

The last one is the most difficult to achieve, even harder than persuading my mum to let me travel approximately 238,857 miles to the moon. To be honest, I'd been getting along without him. Not that it was easy living without a dad, but I'd managed to keep my feelings squashed inside, until today. Today, everything changes.

I'm on the sofa eating a peanut butter sandwich when it happens. Dad appears on my TV screen, right under my nose, right in my living room, where he hasn't been for years. At first the sandwich attaches itself to the roof of my mouth. That's what I love about peanut butter. It's so sticky it's a wonder they don't put it in tubes and sell it as glue. I have to do tongue gymnastics to stop myself choking. Already this isn't turning out like a normal Monday evening in Paradise.

If I could, I would switch Dad off. Flick the button, say goodbye, let him dissolve into blackness. But there's something wrong about making your dad invisible without asking his permission. As if he can read my thoughts, Dad looks up at me, holds my gaze and nods. To say this is a surprise is an understatement. I don't mind admitting my shock soon changes into something else, a sort of stunned delight at seeing Dad back at 10 Paradise Parade

where he belongs. Okay, so there is the small matter of him being a TV presenter and there being a glass screen between us that wasn't there before. But it's still so amazing that I smile. It is, I believe with all certainty, the smile of a boy whose dad is back in his life. Actually, it's the smile of a boy whose teeth are glued together with peanut butter.

When Ninja Grace wanders into the living room and glances at the TV screen, her mouth assumes a stunned-goldfish position. "Dad", she bubbles, "is on our TV."

Someone give my sixteen-year-old sister a medal.

"What kind of fresh hell is this?" Ninja Grace says. "There should be an eleventh commandment for dads: Thou shalt not walk out on your family and then turn up four years later in a glamorous TV job. This is all kinds of wrong."

How can it be wrong? I blink back my confusion. Even Moses would be happy that Dad is back in our lives. Surely it's epic. All right, it's not exactly how we imagined welcoming him home. No fairy cakes, the rainbow-coloured hundreds and thousands bleeding into vanilla frosting, and no writing his name out in sparklers. But he's still under our noses and we can see him every day. Must-watch TV, that's what it is. Ninja Grace is out of her tiny mind if she doesn't realize how brilliant this could be for us.

In fact, this is the best thing that's happened to me since Mum bought me a mossy-green skateboard with high-performance bearings.

"Not pleased to see him then?" I ask.

A string of saliva stretches inside Ninja Grace's mouth. "One taxi straight to the nuthouse for Daniel Hope, if he thinks our dad being on TV is a good thing," she says. The string snaps.



Ninja Grace wasn't always Ninja Grace, by the way. Once upon a time she was as normal as a sister could be. But all that changed when she turned thirteen. That's when she turned into a *word ninja*. By the way, a word ninja is someone who uses words as a weapon. Whatever you say, the word ninja will hit back at you with their insult arrows. Think you're smart? Think again, because a word ninja will wound you instantly with their cutting remarks. That is exactly what Grace Hope turned into when she became a teenager, and that is exactly why Ninja Grace is screaming at me now.

"That man is dead to this family."

Word ninja fires a dagger at my back!

"And you'd better accept it if you know what's good for you."

Ninja Grace is shooting from the lip.

But whatever the ninja says, this time it will not be enough to stop me thinking that this is brilliant. If Dad has been catapulted to fame, then his children will be famous too. The kids at school will beg for my autograph. From this day forward I'll be a star at Our Lady of the Portal School. I can see it all now: I'll have my own web page. I'll go super viral. Perhaps I'll have my own newspaper. *The Son*, I'll call it. The boys will ask me to be the captain of the football team and the girls will write *Mrs Dan Hope* in their notebooks. What's more, the dinner ladies will put extra helpings of chips 'n' curry on my plate and I'll say I couldn't possibly eat that much and they'll say I can because they love watching my famous dad on TV. (I think this is what Mum calls "to curry favour".)

To be honest, Dad always wanted to be on the telly so I guess it shouldn't have been that much of a surprise. Interviewing, dealing with the public and talking – he was good at the lot. Mind you, we didn't think he'd ever leave his job as a journalist on the local newspaper. How wrong we were. Fast-forward four years, job and children left behind and – wham – hello, star TV man.

It's the leaving-your-children-behind bit that hurts the most. I was only seven when Dad walked out. The day started like any other but ended up with me sitting at the top of the stairs with Grace. She was twelve and still normal in those days. Drawers were banging in the kitchen and I remember thinking Mum must be angry. I didn't want to eat the dinner she was cooking if she was so mad about it. It had to be cottage pie. Cottage pie always made me angry too because the mince was full of rubbery bits that bounced off my teeth. Grace said the correct name for the rubbery bits was gristle. There was this *doof-doof* sound and a noise like someone whistling through a blade of grass. Grace looked at me and said she didn't really think this was about cottages or gristle. Dad was trying to calm Mum down but really he was cranking her up. Over and over again, Mum said she was very upset about The Other Woman.

In the end I thought they were talking a foreign language because Grace said, "It's all Greek to me." And my bum was so numb that I knew if I didn't move I'd never be able to straighten up or walk like I wasn't a baboon. But Grace said I couldn't leave, as it was getting exciting because Dad was talking about going on a whole new adventure while Mum was shouting about playing around. Grace said this was great news because it would mean fun for us all.

Maybe we'd be going on a family holiday. Only then Dad was shouting about being on his own and I wasn't sure that it sounded like the sort of laugh-a-minute holiday I wanted. Not once did he mention caravans or candyfloss. Or even us.

I didn't hear what Dad said next because his voice was flat and there was a thump that sounded like a big ham dropping on the kitchen table. Mum was crying and the drone of it went up and down as if she was single-handedly flying a light aircraft. Mum shouted that she was sick of his extra-curricular activities and Dad said he couldn't take it any more and he'd had enough of her histrionics. (When I pressed her on the matter, Grace whispered that histrionics was a subject at school.)

At that moment the kitchen door flew open and Grace slithered snake-style on her belly towards her bedroom so she wasn't spotted by Dad. But me, I couldn't move. Dad opened the front door and let it slam behind him. The daffodils on the wallpaper vibrated with the force.

I returned to my bedroom, glad the whole thing was over. I vowed I'd never eat a cottage pie, speak a foreign language, study histrionics or walk like a baboon. (Well, maybe I'd walk like a baboon because that could be kind of funny.) But after that evening, things went a bit weird.

We weren't allowed to get chips from the local chip shop, The Frying Squad, any more. According to Grace, who had sussed out the whole thing, Dad had run off with the woman who worked there. Busty Babs was her name and Grace said luring men in with fried spuds was her game. Grace said Dad had "had his chips" and that was that. I argued that I'd had my chips from there too. Grace said my chips weren't his chips and Dad wasn't coming back. In fact, he was gone for ever. I shrugged, because at seven years old I thought for ever would last a week or a month.

How wrong I was.

For ever did mean for ever.

On the outside I might look like any other eleven-year-old boy. But on the inside, I'm full of bright ideas. At Our Lady of the Portal School they do not recognize this amazing ability I have, which is a shame. Then again, I hide it well because that way I can continue thinking my bright ideas while my teacher, Mrs Parfitt, is boring everyone with maths. On this very day, the day after seeing Dad on the telly, and while Mrs Parfitt is attempting to get into the *Guinness World Records* for the largest amount of waffling one human being can do on the subject

of BODMAS, I am finalizing a cunning plan. Seeing Dad on the TV was incredible but now I want more. While Mrs Parfitt babbles on about brackets, orders, division, multiplication, addition and subtraction, I think about how much I want Dad to talk to me and how I'm going to make it happen.

"Pssst," whispers Jo Bister. "I've got a new saint relic in my collection. It's the best one ever. You've got to see it to believe it."

I shrug. "I thought the deal with saints is you don't have to see them to believe them."

Jo mumbles that I think I'm so clever. Which, technically, I am. "This bit of fabric," she says, keeping an eye on Mrs Parfitt, "swiped the feet of someone who touched the feet of someone else who kissed the feet on the statue of Saint Christina the Astonishing."

You cannot give an answer back to a person who thinks they have a hotline to God. You may try but you will fail. What you will do is go along with them and pretend you are as loopy as they are. This method has worked for me for many years. Ever since reception, Jo Bister and I have been friends. In those days she was interested in finger-painting the walls with snot and I was into grabbing her plaited hair and shouting "Gee-up", pretending she was a show pony. I sort of wish she was still digging out

bogeys instead of all this religious stuff. She says these relics help her to be a better person. In fact, she even brushes her teeth in holy water because she says it means every word that escapes her lips will be a kind one.

By the way, that's total rubbish. Yesterday, she said I had a spot that resembled Mount Vesuvius. Holy water didn't make her say that. I might add that Jo still has freakishly long hair, despite me tugging on it when we were five. She says she won't ever cut it because there is a lot of superpower in hair, just ask Samson. (Our neighbour has a dog called Samson, but I don't think she's talking about him because his only superpower is yapping.)

My second friend at Our Lady of the Portal is Christopher. He's new to the area and only joined the school at the beginning of September. When he arrived, the teacher asked him where he came from and he laughed and said the Emerald Isle. Mrs Parfitt's eyes looked like someone had lit a match behind them, and she set a globe of the world on her desk before telling the class that the Emerald Isle was the third largest island in Europe and approximately 6.3 million people lived there. She called Christopher up to the front of the classroom and asked him to point out the Emerald Isle. Christopher said he didn't think the Emerald Isle

was on this globe because it was just the nickname for the Ireland housing estate, ten minutes' walk from school.

At break I sidled up to Christopher, shook his hand and told him I welcomed anyone to the school who could make Mrs Parfitt go the colour of the skin under a picked scab. Christopher looked at me as if I was a two-headed alien and walked away. That was the beginning of our friendship though, and a few days later, when Jo was telling me about her plastic glow-in-the-dark statue of Our Lady of Knock, Christopher came over and said he enjoyed playing guitar. He was also a green belt in tae kwon do and had a hamster. When Jo asked the hamster's name, Christopher shouted, "Boo!" and Jo said a word that was anything but saintly and nearly fell backwards over the wall. Apparently, Boo was the hamster's name. Jo admitted that Saint Francis of Assisi would have loved the hamster, even if it had a stupid name. And I told her to shut up because the name Boo was far more astonishing than the name Saint Christina the Astonishing. Christopher said he wanted to know more about Jo's saints and asked her to go through the alphabet, naming a saint for every letter.

Jo thought about it for a moment and replied, "Is this a holy wind-up?"



The following day, like the prodigal father, Dad returns to the TV. "Hey, Dad," I announce. "I'm going to get in contact with you." But Dad acts as if he can't hear me so I pretend I am him, talking to me.

"Are you?" says Dad. I make my voice as deep as possible.

"Oh yes," I reply. "I've got this bright idea. You'll be impressed. In fact" – I lean towards the TV screen until my breath steams his face – "you'll want to get to know me all over again."

Dad pushes up his glasses then shuffles some papers on his desk. "Sounds exciting, Dan. When is it going to happen?"

I change my voice once more. "Don't be too impatient. Mum says good things come to those who wait." Then I say, "But it won't be long." I pick up a toy pirate that's sitting on the coffee table. "Before you know it we'll be sailing into an adventure together."

The living room door opens and Ninja Grace appears. "Are you talking to yourself?" She grunts as I put the pirate on top of a magazine.

"He's going to the island of um…Glamour," I say, "on the good ship *Fancy Celebrity Who I Don't Know The Name Of*."

"You're about to sail on the good ship *Psychiatrist*," Ninja Grace spits. When she turns towards the TV screen she makes a vacuum of her mouth, sucking all the air out of the room. "Watching Dad again? Quit torturing yourself. And before you get any ideas about telling people your dad is a celeb, don't bother. You wouldn't want them to think we're so boring he abandoned us for a better life."

I shrug. "He did, didn't he?"

"Oh yeah, but we don't need to broadcast the fact. You might be okay being labelled boring, but I don't want it. I told Mum he's on the telly and she says we should keep it to ourselves and get on with our own lives. We don't need his kind of fame and fortune, nor do we need to live in a big house."

I hadn't thought of that. Dad's house will be massive, like Buckingham Palace x 3, with hundreds of windows and a Union Jack stuttering in the wind. The flag will have his initials on it: MM, like the Queen is ER. Surrounding the house will be a huge wall with electronic gates, two roaring lions will guard the front door and there will be a lawn so heavily clipped it's like it's had a number two haircut. I'll have my own room in the Malcolm Maynard mansion and it will be the size of a football pitch and I'll be allowed to paint my walls purple because that's the colour of kings. Perhaps Dad will

have a snappy little dog to warn off intruders. It could be like Samson, Mrs Nunkoo's dog from number three. Samson looks like a cross between a shih-tzu and a poodle. I call it a shihtz-poo. Thinking about it, I'm not sure Dad would want one of those.

"Put Dad out of your head," says Grace, eyeballing me.

I pick up the pirate again. "I have no plans whatsoever," I say, manoeuvring the pirate to the edge of the coffee table. "If I had any thoughts of going on a quest, I have squashed them like a doubloon trampled under the foot of a one-eyed, overweight pirate with a parrot squawking, 'Pieces of eight!' in his ear. Nope, I would rather walk the plank than search for the treasure I desire."



"You're weird," replies Ninja Grace, prising the pirate from my fingers and throwing it onto the floor.

"Awww…you've thrown him into the Ocean of Swirly Carpet."

That evening, as I lie on the bed playing my guitar,

thoughts of Dad gallop through my mind. I've missed him. As my fingers find the strings, I think about how I need a dad in my life. It's as if, all those years ago, I planted a little Dad seed in my soul. I watered it and cared for it and suddenly, without me realizing, it has turned into a leafy tree. I hum softly. Mum would flip if she knew I was making plans to contact Dad, but that's because she's loved-up with the new boyfriend she met in June. Big Dave, he's called. He owns Kwik Kars and apparently their eyes met over the bonnet of our old Charade. The Charade has gone now but they've been together for six months. Music puddles into the dark corners of my bedroom and I play until my fingers ache and I have to stop.

"Dad," I whisper into the darkness.

"Yes, Dan," I reply in my gruffest voice.

"You still want me in your life, don't you? I mean, you wouldn't hurt me a second time, would you?"

Dad doesn't answer.

