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Opening extract from

Keep the Faith

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DECEMBER

MONDAY 26TH DECEMBER

I can't wait for the New Year to begin. This is the year I will take action and use my intelligence and initiative to follow my dreams. For example, today I have pursued my ambition of being warm and cosy in this draughty old house by using my skills to build an igloo out of duvets.

Of course, like many truly brilliant people, I am held back by non-believers. Lots of the world's most successful types have suffered abuse and hardship, setbacks and ridicule. I know just how they feel: my parents won't buy me a laptop. I told them quite frankly that their Christmas gifts will not help make me an international success. My hippy mother said, 'I want you to spend less time hooked up to something electronic and more time communicating with your family.'

'If I had a laptop, I could message you all.'

She scowled at me in a way that I think is pretty aggressive coming from someone who wants to save newt habitats.

Anyway, I actually did spend several minutes of yesterday communicating with my family. Even my slimy little brother who I usually avoid speaking to. I gifted Sam with several expressions of good cheer. I said, 'This is a traditional Christmas Chinese burn,' and, 'What sort of rubbish present do you call this?' That kind of thing. There were

also some instructions about fetching me the chocolates and altering the volume of the TV. I hope he was grateful for my festive friendliness. I'm not planning on speaking to him for the rest of the year.

Granny came over for Christmas dinner, which was quite a lot of work. Obviously, I didn't do any actual cooking, but just being in the same room as Granny is quite tiring. She's always throwing herself about and babbling on about her latest boyfriend when really she's at an age where it would be more appropriate if she just sat in a corner handing out sweets and money while wearing a skirt that actually covered her wrinkly knees. The energy I spent blocking out her singing and dancing to 'Santa Baby' left me utterly washed out. Which means I will have to leave working towards my other dreams for another day. For now, I'll stay in my igloo and catch up on some texting while eating the candy canes from Sam's stocking.

TUESDAY 27TH DECEMBER

All this Christmas business of communicating and loving and giving and not karate-chopping your family has been distracting me from what is really important in life: how incredibly popular I am with the boys.

At the after-show party for the Christmas choir concert I had a good time chatting to my hilarious friend, Ethan, and then I had a spectacular time snogging gorgeous Finn. I'm sort of sure that Ethan asked me to Ryan's New Year party and I am totally sure that Finn sent me a text asking me to the same party.

I have no idea where that leaves me.

I replied to Finn and said I would love to go with him, but I can't exactly remember what I said to Ethan as I wasn't completely listening to him when he was talking . . . I think it might have been, 'Mmm.' That's not really a yes, is it?

LATER

I rang my bestie Megs.

When she picked up, I said, 'Could you stop selfishly being at your cousins' house?'

'Hello, Faith. Happy Christmas to you too. I had a lovely day. Oh yes, some ace presents, how sweet of you to ask.'

I allowed her to blabber on. Part of being a good friend is listening to your mates' nonsense. I let her go on for several sentences and I hardly yawned at all. Eventually, I interrupted to say, 'Can we get back to me? I need to know when you're coming home.'

'Why? Can't you live without me?'

'It's more that when you spend a few days away from me you start getting out of hand.'

'I'm coming back tomorrow.'

'Great. Make sure you get an early start because I'm expecting you at my house by lunchtime.'

WEDNESDAY 28TH DECEMBER

Megs finally showed up around three. Even though she was late, I couldn't help smothering her with kisses. I hate it when she goes away. 'I've missed you!' I said, squeezing her round the middle.

'Get off, you gigantic potato head!'

Which I took to mean that she had missed me too.

'That's enough of your sweet talk,' I said. 'Let's get down to business. As you know, we're here to discuss what I should do about me accidentally having two dates to Ryan's party.'

I may have turned a few pirouettes at this point.

Megs tutted. 'Faith, I don't think that you're taking this seriously.'

'Yes I am. I'm completely serious. It is a very serious business when all the boys around you fall helplessly in love with you.'

And then I did a somersault on my bed.

'Faith!'

'What? That was a *serious* somersault. I thought

that it might dislodge some good ideas from my brain.'

Megs flicked at my duvet. 'I think that all it's dislodged is some dandruff.'

Which was rude, but I have to make allowances for her. She was probably lashing out because she's so jealous.

So I only kicked her in the shins a little bit.

Megs said, 'I'm not jealous. I've got a boyfriend. All you've got is two invitations to a party and we're not even sure if one of them actually happened.'

'What do you mean you're not jealous? Who said you were jealous? I never said that.'

'No, but you've been singing "Megs is a green-eyed monster".'

I hadn't realised that I was doing that out loud. Just goes to show that I still haven't got my mouth fully under control. How can I be expected to snog with these disobedient lips?

'Sorry,' I said. 'You should ignore the things that come out of my mouth that I don't mean to say.'

'How am I supposed to know which ones they are?'

I shrugged. 'Just assume that I don't mean anything that makes you mad.'

Megs blew out a long breath. 'What are you going to do then? Who do you want to go to the party with?'

I threw myself back on the bed. 'Finn, of course.'

'Why?'

'Because he's gorgeous!'

Megs pursed her lips. 'You used to think Ethan was fit.'

'He is, but not like Finn. Come on! You stared at Finn the first time you met him.'

'Maybe. I'm not that keen on him now. I think he loves himself a bit. I don't like people who know how good-looking they are.'

'He can't help being good-looking and I don't think he's vain about it.'

'Do you know who's not vain and also a good laugh? Ethan.'

I realised what Megs was trying to do. 'Does this have anything to do with Ethan being your boyfriend's best friend? Are you trying to persuade me to go out with Ethan so that we can go on dates with you and Cameron? Can you not bear to be separated from me?' I put her in a headlock and ruffled her hair.

'Yep,' she said in a slightly gaspy voice. 'I just can't get enough of this.'

I let her go. 'I really like Ethan. I just like Finn more.'

'Are you sure he really likes you? He's always chatting up girls.'

'That's just talking. He's friendly. That's why I like him.'

'Yeah, that and his cheekbones.'

I bashed her with my pillow. 'I would like to let Ethan down gently and go to the party with the cheekbones; do you think you could support me in that decision?'

'If that's what you want.'

So we ate Sam's chocolate Santa while we tried to think of what I could do about my excess boy problem. I'd only got halfway through a leg when Megs said, 'Why don't I just tell Cam to tell Ethan that you're going with Finn? Problem solved and we don't have to worry about you speaking to anyone and messing things up.'

It did seem to sort things out, but I couldn't help being a bit disappointed. I don't know why. Obviously, I hadn't been enjoying agonising over two lovely boys who both seem to find me irresistible. And clearly Finn is my number-one choice to go to the party with.

Isn't he?

'So now can we talk about something more important?' Megs said. 'What are we going to wear to the party?'

'I suppose,' I said. 'But we might have to go over the nightmare of Ethan and Finn both adoring me one more time later.'

Megs made a harrumphing noise, which I took to mean she was looking forward to it.

THURSDAY 29TH DECEMBER

Today Megs, Lily, Angharad and I went into town to go sales shopping for new clothes for Ryan's party. I got up incredibly early (10 a.m.) so that we'd have plenty of time. As I was fuelling up on Pop-Tarts and Sam's box of Celebrations, Mum started delivering her speech on the evils of chain stores. She said, 'You've just been given lots of lovely things for Christmas, Faith. I don't understand why you need to go pouring more money into the big companies' pockets.'

'I'm helping the economy,' I said.

Mum sighed. 'You're such a capitalist. Wouldn't you rather use your money responsibly by buying ethically sourced products? We've got some lovely things in the shop at the moment.'

I know the sort of thing they sell in the shop Mum manages. It's all hand-carved this and yak wool that. I would not describe any of it as lovely.

'I *will* be using my money responsibly,' I said. 'Imagine what would happen if I stopped shopping. If Topshop and New Look had to close down, there would be hundreds of skinny girls out of a job and they're not qualified to do anything else. They wouldn't last a week on the streets! They've got no body fat!'

Mum shook her head.

'Now if you'd like to make a donation to my charitable shopping trip then I'll be on my way.'

When we got into town, it was heaving with people.

'Why are they here?' Megs asked.

'Maybe they want to buy stuff too?' Angharad suggested. Angharad has both the nature and the stature of a kitten. She's tiny and always thinks the best of people, even the ones that are clearly idiots because they're annoying me.

'None of them can be doing anything as important as finding an outfit for Ryan's party so they should all have some consideration and go home,' Megs said, elbowing an old man out of the way.

'The problem with shopping is that there's a lot of shop and I'm only one girl,' I said. 'If I was magic, I'd command the best possible outfit to come flying out to me now and then I wouldn't have to spend three hours looking for it.'

Actually, it took five hours in the end. But I have definitely bought the best miniskirt that ever existed.

LATER

I tried to explain my skirt-finding triumph to Mum, but she was unmoved. I'll remind her of this the

next time she tells me that I don't share my life with her.

FRIDAY 30TH DECEMBER

We went to Granny's house for lunch. I say 'lunch', but there was just a lot of cold turkey and pickle and crackers and cheese and mince pies and nuts and jelly sweets. I don't call that lunch. That's a snack at best.

'What have you been up to, Faith?' Granny asked.

'Not much.' I don't know why we have to spend so much time with Granny over Christmas. All this family time gets in the way of the true meaning of Christmas, i.e. eating chocolate with my friends.

'Don't you want to know what I've been up to?' Granny asked.

'Is it something gross like rubbing moustaches with one of your ancient boyfriends?' I picked up the glass bowl of Quality Street from the coffee table.

'Faith! I haven't got a moustache.'

'Not yet,' I said.

Granny leant over and snatched the bowl out of my lap.

'If you want me to keep quiet, you should probably leave those there,' I said, grabbing a purple one as she whisked them away.

But Granny didn't care about me going hungry. She put the Quality Street on the highest shelf and said, 'I went to a lovely party at Max's house.' As if I was interested. 'He gave me this!' She opened a drawer in her dresser and pulled out a mobile phone. It was still in its box.

'Aren't you going to open it?' I asked.

'I thought I'd wait for your father,' she said, jerking her head towards Dad who had already fallen into a half-coma in front of the TV. 'I don't want to give myself an electric shock.'

I snorted. 'Why do you think Dad knows anything about mobile phones?'

'Well, he had a walkie-talkie that time he worked in the warehouse, didn't he?'

'It's not the same thing, Granny.'

'It's similar.'

'Not really.'

'Perhaps I'll ask the man in the hardware shop then.'

Dad looked up from the TV. 'Ask Faith,' he said. 'Her phone spends so much time in her hand, sometimes I think she'll grow skin round it.'

'But she's a child!' Granny said. 'She shouldn't be operating machinery. What about the radiation waves?'

My whole family decided to ignore this remark. I don't know why Mum worries about whether

we're close enough. We're clearly of one mind when it comes to Granny's lunacy.

I took the phone out of the box and tried to get Granny started.

By teatime, we'd only got as far as texting.

'But why isn't there a button for every letter?' Granny moaned.

'There are on some phones,' I explained in an extremely patient way, 'but the buttons are titchy and it would annoy you.' A lot of things annoy Granny.

'Why can't they be big then?' she asked. 'Like a computer.'

'You wouldn't want to carry that around in your handbag, would you?'

'Oh, I don't think I'll take it out,' Granny said. 'I don't want to lose it. I think I'll just keep it in its box.'

I banged my head against the coffee table. 'It's a *mobile*,' I said. 'You're supposed to take it out. That's the point.'

Granny shook her head. 'I'm not sure I could walk and talk at the same time,' she said as she walked towards me.

I rolled my eyes. 'I know that multitasking is a bit tricky for your generation.'

Granny stuck her tongue out. 'I can do these things at the same time,' and she jammed a

New Berry Fruit in her mouth with one hand and smacked me round the head with the other.

By the time we got home, I was shattered. Educating old people is tiring. I won't be giving any more of the elderly lessons in modern living. Their brains are not compatible with the technology.

SATURDAY 31ST DECEMBER

I stayed in bed for as long as possible this morning. Dad came barging in at midday and asked me why I was still under the duvet.

I said, 'I'm conserving energy for tonight.'

'You've spent so much time in that bed this holidays that you ought to have saved enough energy to run a marathon and power a fridge on wheels to keep your Lucozade in.'

'Marathon runners don't drink Lucozade,' I said.

'That's not really the point I'm making.'

'Isn't it? Have you thought about some kind of flash cards? I think they'd help with letting us poor normal people understand what's going on in your crazy head.'

I haven't got any more time to write down the rest of Dad's random dribblings. I'm going round to Megs's house with Ang and Lily so we can all get ready for Ryan's party together, and I've got to pack up my stuff. I might have to borrow Mum's wheelie suitcase for my make-up.