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Opening extract from

Ketchup Clouds

Written by

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1 Fiction Road

Bath

August 1st

Dear Mr S Harris,

Ignore the blob of red in the top left corner. It's jam not blood, though I don't think I need to tell you the difference. It wasn't your wife's jam the police found on your shoe.

The jam in the corner's from my sandwich. Homemade raspberry. Gran made it. She's been dead seven years and making that jam was the last thing she did. Sort of. If you ignore the weeks she spent in hospital attached to one of those heart things that goes *beep beep* if you're lucky or *beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep* if you're not. That was the sound echoing round the hospital room seven years ago. *Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep*. My little sister was born six months later and Dad named her after Gran. Dorothy Constance. When Dad stopped grieving, he decided to shorten it. My sister is small and round so we ended up calling her Dot.

My other sister, Soph, is ten. They've both got long blonde hair and green eyes and pointy noses, but Soph is tall and thin and darker skinned, like Dot's been rolled out and crisped in the oven for ten minutes. I'm different. Brown hair. Brown eyes. Medium height. Medium weight. Ordinary, I suppose. To look at me, you'd never guess my secret.

I struggled to eat the sandwich in the end. The jam wasn't off or anything because it lasts for years in sterilised jars. At least that's what Dad says when Mum turns up her nose. It's pointy too. Her hair's the same colour as my sisters' but shorter and a bit wavy. Dad's is more like mine except with grey bits above his ears, and he's got this thing called heterochromia, which means one eye's brown but the other's lighter. Blue if it's bright outside, grey if it's overcast. The sky in a socket, I once said, and Dad got these dimples right in the middle of his cheeks, and I don't know if any of this really matters but I suppose it's good to give you a picture of my family before I tell you what I came in here to say.

Because I am going to say it. I'm not sitting in this shed for the fun of it. It's bloody freezing and Mum would kill me if she knew I was out of bed but it's a good place to write this letter, hidden away behind some trees. Don't ask me what type but they've got big leaves that are rustling in the breeze. *Shhhhwiiishhh*. Actually that sounds nothing like them.

There's jam on my fingers so the pen's sticky. I bet the cats' whiskers are too. Lloyd and Webber meowed as if they couldn't quite believe their luck that the sky was raining sandwiches when I chucked it over the hedge. I

wasn't hungry anymore. In actual fact I never was, and if I'm being honest I only made the sandwich in the first place to put off starting this letter. No offence or anything, Mr Harris. It's just difficult. And I'm tired. I haven't really slept since May 1st.

There's no danger of me dropping off in here. The box of tiles is digging into my thighs and a draught is blowing through a gap underneath the shed door. I need to get a move on because just my luck the torch is running out of battery. I tried holding it between my teeth but my jaw started to ache so now it's balancing near a spider web on the windowsill. I don't normally sit in the shed, especially not at 2am, but tonight the voice in my head is louder than ever before. The images are more real and my pulse is racing racing racing, and I bet if my heart was attached to one of those hospital things, all the fast thumping would break it.

When I got out of bed, my pyjama top was sticking to my back and my mouth was drier than probably a desert. That's when I put your name and address in my dressing-gown pocket and tiptoed outside, and now I'm here face to face with all this blank paper, determined to tell you my secret but not sure how to say it.

Tongue tied doesn't exist in writing, but if it did, like if my hand was a great big tongue, honest truth it would be all tangled up in one of those complicated knots that only Scouts know. Scouts and also that man off BBC2, you know the one with wild hair who does survival programmes and ends up in the middle of the jungle sleeping up a tree and eating snakes for dinner? Now I come to think of it, you probably have no idea what I'm

talking about. Do you have TV on Death Row and if so do you watch British shows or just American ones?

I guess questions are pointless. Even if you wanted to write back, the address at the top of this letter is false. There's no Fiction Road in England, so Mr Harris don't go thinking you can break out of prison and turn up out of the blue on my doorstep because you hitched a ride from Texas and you're looking for a girl called – well, let's pretend my name is Zoe.

I got your contact details off a Death Row website and I found the website because of a nun, and that's not a sentence I ever thought I'd write, but then my life isn't exactly turning out the way I'd imagined. There was a picture of you looking friendly for someone in an orange jumpsuit with a shaved head, thick glasses and a scar down one cheek. Yours wasn't the only profile I clicked on. There are hundreds of criminals who want pen pals. Hundreds. But you stood out. All that stuff about your family disowning you so you haven't had any post for eleven entire years. All that stuff about your guilt.

Not that I believe in God, but I went to confession to get rid of my guilt after triple-checking on Wikipedia that the priest wouldn't be able to say anything to the police. But when I sat down in the booth and saw his silhouette through the grille, I couldn't speak. There I was about to confess to a man who'd never done anything wrong in his life, except for maybe having an extra sip of Communion wine on a bad day. Unless he was one of those priests who fiddle with children, in which case he would have known all about sin, but I couldn't be sure so I didn't risk it.

You're much safer. And you sort of remind me of Harry Potter to be honest. I can't remember when the first book came out, if it was before or after your murder trial, but anyway in case you're confused Harry Potter has a scar and glasses and you have a scar and glasses and he never got any post either. But then all of a sudden he received a mysterious letter saying he was a wizard and his life was miraculously transformed.

Now you're probably reading this in your cell wondering, 'Am *I* about to be told *I* have magical powers?' and if the website is anything to go by, I bet you're imagining healing every single one of those stab wounds in your wife. Well, sorry to disappoint you and all that, but I'm just an ordinary teenage girl not the Headmaster of a School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Trust me, though, if this biro was a wand then I'd give you the magic to bring your wife right back to life, because that is something we have in common.

I know what it's like.

Mine wasn't a woman. Mine was a boy. And I killed him, three months ago exactly.

Do you want to know the worst thing? I got away with it. No one's found out that I'm responsible. No one has a clue and I'm walking round like that boy, Scot Free, saying all the right things and doing all the right stuff, but inside I'm sort of screaming. I daren't tell Mum or Dad or my sisters because I don't want to be disowned and I don't want to go to prison even though I deserve it. So you see Mr Harris, I'm less brave than you, so don't feel

too bad when you go for the lethal injection, which I wouldn't worry about because when my dog was put to sleep it really did look peaceful. The website says you'll never forgive yourself, but at least now you know there are people in the world far worse than you. You had the guts to own up to your mistake, but I'm too much of a coward even to reveal my real identity in a letter.

So yeah, you can call me Zoe. And let's pretend I live in the west of England, I don't know, somewhere near Bath, which is an old city with ancient buildings and lots of tourists at the weekend taking pictures of the bridge. Everything else I'll write will be the truth.

From,

Zoe

1 Fiction Road

Bath

August 12th

Dear Mr Harris,

If you've opened this letter I guess it means you're interested in what I have to say. That's nice but I'm not taking it as too much of a compliment because let's be honest you must be bored in that cell with nothing to do except your poems, which by the way are really good, especially the sonnet about lethal injections. I read them on your profile and the one about the theatre made me sad. I bet you had no idea when Dorothy followed the yellow brick road that in forty-eight hours you were going to commit murder.

Funny I can write that almost without blinking. It would be different if I hadn't done it too. Before, I might not have touched you with a barge pole, but now we're in the same boat. Exactly the same boat. You killed someone you were supposed to love and I killed someone I was supposed to love and we both understand the pain and the fear and the sadness and the guilt and

the hundred other feelings that don't even have a name in all of the English language.

Everyone thinks I'm grieving so they don't ask too many questions when I turn up looking pale and thin with bags under my eyes, my hair hanging in greasy clumps. The other day Mum forced me to get it cut. In the salon I stared at the customers wondering how many of them had skeletons in the closet because the nun said no one's perfect and everyone's got good and bad inside them. Everyone. Even people you don't expect to have a dark side e.g. Barack Obama and Blue Peter presenters. I try to remember that when the guilt gets bad enough to stop me from sleeping. It didn't work tonight so here I am again and it's just as cold but this time I've used Dad's old jacket to cover the gap underneath the shed door.

I can't remember the nun's name but she had one of those raisin-faces you could still imagine as a grape because somewhere underneath the wrinkles there was something beautiful. She came into my school a week before the summer holidays to tell us about capital punishment. When she spoke, it was in this quiet voice that wobbled round the edges, but everyone paid absolute attention. Even Adam. Normally he pushes back his chair and throws pen lids at the girls' heads, but on that day we could take down our hoods because no one was doing anything they shouldn't, and we all gawped at this old lady as she told us about her work to abolish the death penalty.

She'd done a lot. Petitions and protests and articles in newspapers and letters to criminals, who'd written back and confided all sorts. 'Like their crimes and stuff?'

someone asked. The nun nodded. 'Sometimes. Everyone needs to be heard.'

That's when I had the idea, right there in the middle of the R.E. classroom as the nun said a load more things I can't even remember. When I got home, I ran upstairs to the study without taking off my shoes even though Mum had just bought beige carpets. I turned on the computer and found a Death Row website, ticking the box that said *Yes, I am eighteen.* My lie didn't shut down the computer or set off an alarm. It took me straight to the database of criminals who want pen pals and there you were, Mr Harris, second man from the left on the third row of the fourth page, as if you were waiting to hear my story.

PART ONE

Not the most original of titles but this is real life not fiction, a bit of a departure for me. Normally I write fantasy and in case you're wondering my best ever story is *Bizzle the Bazzlebog* featuring a blue furry creature who lives in a tin of baked beans at the back of a family's food cupboard. He's been there for years, but then one day a boy called Mod (real name Dom, but he's into mirror images) fancies beans on toast so he opens the tin and turns it upside down and Bizzle plops out onto a microwaveable dish.

Now Mr Harris I have no idea how long you've been writing poems but I've wanted to be an author ever since I read *The Famous Five* when I had to do my first book review at primary school. 4.5 out of 5 I gave it because

the adventure was good and they found the treasure in the end but this character called George who was a borderline transvestite kept talking to her dog so I knocked off half a star for being unrealistic.

A load of stars are shining through the window now and every single one is full and bright. Maybe the aliens are giving Earth a brilliant review, which just goes to show how much they know. It's so still outside, as if the world's holding its breath waiting for me to get on with the story, and probably you are too so here goes.

It all started a year ago with an unexpected phone call. For a whole week last August, I'd been plucking up the courage to ask Mum if I could go to a house party on Saturday night. This house party wasn't just any house party but Max Morgan's house party, and everyone was invited to mark the end of the summer because we were due back in school a couple of days later. Unfortunately the chances of Mum agreeing to let me go were less than 1% because back then she never let me do anything, not even shopping in town with Lauren because she was worried about me being abducted and also about my homework.

There was no skiving off in our house because Mum quit her job as a solicitor when Dot was little. She was a sickly baby, always in and out of hospital, so I guess it was a full-time job to look after her. Mum was there when I woke up to ask what lessons I had that day, and she was there when I got home to supervise the work I had to do that night. The rest of the time she did chores. Because of its size, it was hard to keep the house spick never mind span, but Mum managed by sticking to a strict timetable.

Even when she watched the news she folded the laundry and paired the socks and when she was supposed to be relaxing in the bath she wiped the taps with a flannel to make them shine. She cooked a lot as well, always with the best ingredients. The eggs had to be free range and the vegetables had to be organic and the cow had to have lived in the Garden of Eden or somewhere with no pollution and no chemicals so the meat wasn't contaminated with anything that could make us ill.

Mr Harris I hope you don't mind but I Googled your mum (without any luck) to find out if she was strict, making you try hard at school and be polite to your elders and stay out of trouble and eat all your greens. I hope not. It would be a shame to think you spent your teenage years munching broccoli now you're locked up in a cell with no freedom to speak of. I hope you had some crazy times like sprinting naked through a neighbour's garden for a dare, which is what happened at Lauren's fourteenth birthday party after I'd gone home early. When Lauren told me about it at school, as per usual I put on my unimpressed face to show I was too mature for such things. But when my History teacher asked us to stop whispering and look at the worksheet, I didn't see the Jews, just all these boobs boinging in the moonlight.

I was sick of missing out. Sick of listening to their stories. And jealous, really jealous, that I didn't have a few of my own. So when I was invited to Max's party, I made up my mind to ask Mum in a way that would make it impossible for her to refuse.

On Saturday morning I lay in bed trying to work out how to word the question before my shift at the library where

I stack shelves for £3.50 an hour. That's when the phone started ringing. I could tell from Dad's voice it was serious so I climbed out of bed and went downstairs in my dressing-gown, the exact same one I'm wearing right now, which fyi has red and black flowers and lace around the cuffs. A moment later, Dad was jumping into the BMW without even having breakfast and Mum was chasing after him onto the drive in an apron and yellow washing-up gloves.

'There's no need to rush off,' she said and Mr Harris now we're getting into the proper conversations I think I'll set them out properly to make them easier for you to read. Of course I don't remember every single thing that everyone said so I'll paraphrase a bit and also miss out any of the boring stuff i.e. anything about the weather.

'What's going on?' I asked, standing in the porch probably with my face looking worried.

'At least have a slice of toast, Simon.'

Dad shook his head. 'We've got to go now. We don't know how long he's got.'

'We?' Mum asked.

'You're coming too, aren't you?'

'Let's think about this a minute . . .'

'He might not have a minute! We need to get going.'

'If you feel you have to go, I'm not going to stop you, but I'm staying here. You know how I feel about—'

'What's going on?' I said again. Louder this time. My face probably more worried. Not that my parents noticed.

Dad rubbed his temples, his fingers making circles in the patches of grey hair. 'What do I say to him after all this time?'

Mum grimaced. 'I've no idea.'

'Who're you talking about?' I asked.

'Do you think he'll even let me into his room?' Dad went on.

'By the sound of it, he'll be in no fit state to know if you're there or not,' Mum said.

'Who won't?' I asked, stepping onto the drive.

'Slippers!' Mum called.

I stepped back into the porch and wiped my feet on the mat. 'Will someone tell me what's going on?'

There was a pause. A long one.

'It's Grandpa,' Dad said.

'He's had a stroke,' Mum said.

'Oh,' I said.

It wasn't the most sympathetic reaction but in my defence I hadn't seen Grandpa for years. I remember being jealous of the wafer Dad received during Communion when Mum stopped us going up to the altar at Grandpa's church. And I remember playing with the hymn book, trying to snap it shut on Soph's fingers, humming the *Jaws* theme tune as Grandpa frowned. He had this big garden with huge sunflowers and once I built a den in his garage and he gave me a bottle of flat lemonade to serve to my dolls. But then one day there was an argument and we never visited him again and I'm not sure what happened but I do know we left Grandpa's without even having lunch. My stomach was rumbling so for once we were allowed to eat at McDonalds and Mum

was too distracted to stop me ordering a Big Mac and extra large fries.

'You're really going to stay here?' Dad said.

Mum adjusted the washing-up gloves on her hands. 'Who else is going to look after the girls?'

'Me!' I said suddenly, because a plan had popped into my mind. 'I can do it.'

Mum frowned. 'I don't think so.'

'She's old enough,' Dad said.

'But what if something goes wrong?'

Dad held up his phone. 'I've got this.'

'I don't know . . .' Mum bit the inside of her cheek and stared at me. 'What about your shift at the library?'

I shrugged. 'I'll just ring and explain there's a family emergency.'

'There you go,' Dad said. 'Sorted.'

A bird flew onto the car bonnet. A song thrush. We watched it for a moment because it had a worm dangling from its beak, and then Dad looked at Mum and Mum looked at Dad and the bird fluttered off as I crossed my fingers behind my back.

'Listen, I really think I'm better off staying with the girls,' Mum muttered, without much conviction. 'Soph's got to practise her piano scales and I wouldn't mind helping Dot with her—'

'Don't use them as an excuse, Jane!' Dad said, banging his fist on his thigh. 'It's obvious you don't want to come. At least have the guts to admit it.'

'Fine! But it goes both ways, Simon. We both know your dad won't want me there.'

'He'll be in no fit state to know if you're there or not!' Dad replied, looking Mum straight in the eye. It was

a clever tactic to repeat her words, and she knew it. With a defeated sigh, she turned towards the house, taking off the gloves.

'Have it your way, but I tell you now, I'm not going anywhere near his room,' she said before disappearing through the front door.

Dad gritted his teeth, checking his watch. I walked over to the car, my fingers still crossed behind my back.

'So, do you think you'll be at the hospital for a while then?'

Dad scratched the back of his neck and sighed. 'Probably.'

I smiled my most helpful smile. 'Well, don't worry about us. We'll be fine.'

'Thanks, pet.'

'And I just won't go to the party if you're not back in time. It doesn't matter. I mean, Lauren will be disappointed, but she'll get over it.' I said it just like that – so off-the-cuff, Dad might think Mum had already agreed. He beeped the horn to tell her to hurry up.

'When does this party start?'

'Eight,' I replied, my voice a little higher than normal.

'We should be back by then . . . hope so, anyway. I'll give you a lift if you want.'

'Brilliant,' I said, trying not to grin as I ran back inside the house.

In the afternoon Mum rang to let us know that Grandpa was stable. In a hushed hospital voice, she said Dad was coping and could I take the sirloins out of the freezer for dinner and I smiled because steak just so happened to be my favourite. Everything was turning out perfectly so I

made myself an orange and lemonade with ice cubes that clinked against the glass. I spent the rest of the day in the garden, writing *Bizzle the Bazzlebog* in the sunshine and filling up the birdfeeder that hung from the branch of a tree near the back door. Birds zoomed towards it – a magpie that I saluted, a chaffinch landing on the ground and a swallow swooping over the flowerbed – and I watched them for ages, ridiculously happy, because birds are my thing and not to boast but I know pretty much every type in England.

In the garden there were hundreds of dandelions and I've drawn a picture of one in case you have different weeds or no weeds at all where you live. I imagine Texas to be dry, perhaps even a desert with mirages, and I bet you can see all this golden sand through your window and Mr Harris it must be torture unless you're not a fan of beaches.

[Hand drawn picture of dandelions (labelled 'yellow') – artwork to follow]

Plucking a fat dandelion, I twirled it between my fingers as I flopped onto the grass and put my feet on a plant pot. The sun in the sky was the exact same colour as the flower in my hand and the two were linked by a hot beam of yellow. A bond blazed between them, and so yeah it was probably just the start of sunburn on my knuckles, but for a moment it felt like me and the universe were connected in a giant join-the-dots puzzle. Everything had meaning and everything made sense, as if someone really was drawing my life by numbers.

Someone other than my little sister.

'Do you like it?'

Dot was standing over me in a pink dress with a puzzle book tucked underneath her elbow, signing because she's deaf. Born that way, in case you're wondering. I squinted at the picture. She'd joined the dots in the wrong order so the butterfly that was supposed to be soaring into the sky looked more like it was about to crash-land in the trees. I put the dandelion behind my ear.

'I love it.'

'More than you love chocolate?'

'More than that,' I signed.

'More than you love . . . ice cream?'

I pretended to think. 'Well, it depends what flavour.'

Dot dropped to her chubby knees. 'Strawberry?'

'Definitely more than that.'

'Banana?'

I shook my head. 'Definitely not.'

Dot started to giggle and leaned in close. 'But really more than banana?'

I kissed her nose. 'More than any flavour in the whole world.'

Dot threw the puzzle book onto the grass and sprawled next to me, her long hair blowing in the breeze.

'You've got a dandelion behind your ear.'

'I know.'

'Why?'

'They're my favourite flowers,' I lied.

'More than daffodils?'

'More than any flower in the entire universe,' I signed, shortcutting the questions as the front door opened and footsteps sounded in the hall. I sat up,

listening. Dot looked confused. 'Mum and Dad,' I explained.

Dot jumped to her feet, but something about my parents' voices made me grab her hand to stop her running into the kitchen. They were arguing, the sound drifting through the open window. Before they had chance to realise I was there, I ducked behind a bush, pulling Dot after me. She laughed, thinking it was some sort of game as I parted the leaves.

Mum banged a cup on the kitchen worktop. 'I can't believe you agreed to it!'

'What was I supposed to do?'

She jabbed the switch on the kettle. 'Talk about it with me! Discuss it!'

'How could I when you weren't even in the room?'

'That's no excuse.'

'He's their grandfather, Jane. He has a right to see them.'

'Don't give me that! They've had nothing to do with him for years.'

'All the more reason for them to spend time with him now, before it's too late.'

I watched Mum roll her eyes as I tried to keep hold of Dot, who was twisting and turning, trying to get free. Putting my hand over her mouth, I did a *shush* face with very stern eyebrows. In the kitchen, Mum grabbed a teaspoon out of the drawer, banging it shut with her hip.

'We made a decision about this years ago. Years. I'm not going back on it now just because your father's a little bit—'

'He's had a stroke!'

Mum flung the teaspoon into the cup. ‘That doesn’t change a thing! Not one thing! Whose side are you on?’

‘I don’t want there to be any sides, Jane. Not anymore. We’re a family.’

‘Try telling that to your—’ Mum started, but just at that moment, Dot bit my finger and broke free and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. She ran off as fast as she could and did two cartwheels on the lawn. Her dress fell round her shoulders, showing off her knickers, and she ended up in a big heap on the grass. As Mum and Dad stared out of the window, Dot picked a dandelion. Only this one was white. Fluffy. Full of those wispy things that look like dead fairies. The sun disappeared behind a cloud as Dot blew hard and the dandelion vanished, and Mr Harris I’m going to stop writing now because I’m tired plus I’ve got pins and needles in my left leg.

From,

Zoe