

WOULD THE REAL
STANLEY
CARROT



PLEASE
STAND
UP?

'LAUGH-OUT-LOUD FUNNY'

ROB STEVENS

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ROB STEVENS

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For Clare, Dylan and Charlie

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1

Thin ribbons of smoke curl up from the thirteen candles on the cake, which is iced in black and white hexagons.

'Make a wish,' says Mum.

I smile because I know making a wish is supposed to be fun. The trouble is, I've made the same wish every year for as long as I can remember and it hasn't come true yet. I wonder if I might have more luck wishing for something different. It's not as if everything else is perfect. Far from it. Everyone is watching as I close my eyes and think about other stuff I could wish for.

The first thing that comes into my head is to wish I wasn't always last to be chosen when we're picking teams for a kick about. The other day in PE I was the last kid left standing as usual and Damian Cook was so desperate not to have me on his side that he practically begged Melanie Peters to join in.

'I can't play football,' she moaned.

'Oh, come on - you'll get the hang of it,' Damian said.

'I don't mean I can't play cos it's difficult,' Melanie replied, rolling her eyes. 'I can't play cos my leg's broken, isn't it?' She knocked her plaster cast with her crutch for emphasis.

'Oh, right.' Damian looked thoughtful for a moment.

'Couldn't you just go in goal?'

Melanie wrinkled her nose and shook her head.

'All right, I'll have Stanley Carrot,' Damian sighed.

That's not my real name, by the way. It's actually Stanley Harris, but everyone calls me Carrot - for obvious reasons.

Who am I kidding? I'm never going to be good at physical stuff (the birthday fairy can't work miracles, right?) but I even get teased about the stuff I am good at. I'm not being big-headed but I have quite a good vocabulary for my age and my brain stores up all sorts of facts and statistics that I hear on the radio or read in the paper. Dad calls me a walking encyclopaedia. I'm OK at art and I'm quite good at poetry - I won a national competition last month for a poem called 'The Beach'. If I was living in Renaissance Italy I'd be, like, the most popular kid in school. But these days it's just so much cooler to be able to pull a wicked wheelee than it is to describe a stormy seascape in rhyming verse.

'So come on, then,' Dad urges. 'What did you wish for?'

I open my eyes, give him a crooked 'it's a secret' smile.

'Are you OK?' Mum asks.

'Yeah, I'm fine. Why?'

'You looked like you were having some sort of turn.'

'I said I'm fine,' I say, trying not to sound defensive - but sounding really defensive.

This happens a lot. My face often *feels* like it's doing one thing (a secretive smile, for instance) but it actually looks like I'm doing something else (like having a fit).

'Who wants a piece, then?' my mum asks, plucking the candles from the icing.

'Yes please, love,' says Dad, smiling broadly. My dad is a mechanic at a garage up the road. He has short dark hair and always looks like he needs a shave. His eyes sparkle as Mum hands him a thick wedge of sponge, which he feeds hungrily into his mouth. 'Delicious!' he announces, unaware that he has a blob of cream on the end of his nose. 'I think we should have cake for breakfast every day.'

'Yay - can we?' cheers Bruno, my seven-year-old brother.

‘No we can’t!’ Mum says sternly, but with a smile. ‘Today’s an exception because it’s Stanley’s birthday and I’m working this evening.’

‘What, you’re working this evening?’ asks Bruno.

‘That’s right.’

‘Are you, Mummy?’ demands Bruno. ‘This evening?’

‘Yes, angel, I’m working this evening.’ Mum turns to my nan, who is sitting in an armchair right in front of the telly. ‘Any cake for you, Mam?’

‘Just a very, very small slice for me,’ says Nan. *Daybreak* is on and she has spent the last twenty minutes being rude about the presenters. Mum lays the knife on the icing, indicating where she’s going to cut it. ‘How’s that?’

‘A bit bigger than that, Pam. I want to be able to taste it.’

Mum adjusts the position of the knife.

‘Bit bigger,’ Nan urges. ‘Bigger... bigger, tiny bit bigger. Lovely.’

Mum plunges the blade through the soft icing, slicing off a wedge of cake bigger than the one Dad has polished off.

‘Goodness me, Pam,’ Nan laughs, hefting the slab onto her lap. ‘Anyone would think you’re trying to fatten me up.’

‘I’ll cut you a smaller piece if it’s too big,’ Mum smiles and reaches for Nan’s plate.

‘No, no, don’t worry,’ says Nan, tugging the plate from Mum’s grasp. ‘I’ll try and force it down.’

Everyone tucks in quietly.

‘Anyone for more?’ Mum asks at last. ‘Chloe?’

For the first time since she arrived, my cousin Chloe looks up from her mobile phone, her top lip curled in an expression of mild annoyance. ‘What?’

‘Pardon,’ Mum smiles.

‘I said *what?*’ Chloe says, raising her voice.

Mum and Dad exchange a glance. Mum takes a breath and smiles. ‘Would you like another slice of cake?’

‘No thanks, Auntie Pam. I’m going in a sec, aren’t I?’ Chloe is tapping her bright pink nails on the sofa’s padded

leather arm. 'I'm meeting Aggie in a minute to catch the bus to school, yeah?'

Chloe only came round to give me my present: the new Jay-Z album. She's sixteen but could pass for twenty easily. I find myself marvelling at how she's changed since she was my age. Three years ago she was polite and plain and spent her spare time swimming and playing tennis. Now she is moody in make-up and spends her time on Facebook or 'chillin' out'.

'Who's Aggie?' Dad asks.

'She's my NBF, yeah?'

'Your National Banking Federation?' Dad feigns confusion.

'That's funny, Uncle Rick,' Chloe says, without a flicker of a smile. 'It means New Best Friend. Her name's Agatha Macey, all right?'

Agatha Macey is the coolest girl in school by a hundred miles. She is head girl, captain of hockey and always plays the lead role in the school musicals. Oh yeah, and all the boys fancy her... I mean, the older boys. I wonder idly if she might invite me to hang out with them some time.

'And before you get any ideas,' Chloe says, pointing a pink talon at me, 'NO - you can't hang out with us. Ever.'

'I never said a word,' I reply, but I can feel my cheeks getting hot.

'Anyway, I gotta scoot, yeah?' Chloe stands and tugs at the bottom of her grey miniskirt. 'Thanks for the juice, Auntie Pam. Happy Birthday, Stan-the-man.'

'Thanks for the CD,' I say. 'See you at school.'

'Not if I see you first.'

I laugh and Chloe nods, then she's gone.

'So, do you like your cake?' Mum asks.

'I chose it,' Bruno says proudly. 'It's a football.'

'No way!' I try and look amazed. 'I thought it was a giant black-and-white planet?'

'No,' Bruno insists. 'It's a football, isn't it, Daddy?'

'You bet,' Dad laughs.

'If I had a wish I'd wish I could play for Man United,' Bruno announces. 'I want to be a striker and score in the World Cup Final. Will I get money if I'm a footballer?'

'Just a bit,' Dad laughs. 'You'll get more money for one match than I'll make in ten years, probably.'

'I'll buy us a new house with a playroom and a big garden, and—' Bruno pauses as if dreaming up the most amazing feature he can imagine. 'My own room so I don't have to share with Stanley.'

'Good,' I say. 'Anyway, *I'm* sharing with you. That was my room for years before you came along, so—'

'OK, Stanley,' Mum says calmly. 'Bruno was only saying it'd be nice to have his own room.'

'You can have a big new room too,' Bruno says to me, beaming a gappy smile.

'See,' says Mum. 'That's really nice of you, Bruno. What do you say, Stanley?'

'Er, thank you for being so generous with your imaginary fortune,' I say. But my sarcasm is lost on my brother, who is mentally arranging the toys in his make-believe bedroom.

Mum frowns at me and I raise my eyebrows as if to say 'What?' But I might actually be saying 'I don't believe it' or 'Where's my school bag?' for all I know.

I'm not sure what Bruno said that annoyed me anyway. Maybe the suggestion our bedroom is rightfully his touched a nerve. Or I might have been jealous because the idea of him playing professional football one day isn't that ridiculous. He's already training at the Reading Football Academy once a week.

Mum and Dad are both football fanatics - they met at a burger stand at Stamford Bridge - and they're really proud of Bruno. He gets his sporting talent from Dad, who played semi-professionally while he was doing his apprenticeship.

Bruno has got Dad's eyes - bright blue and keen - and he has Mum's easy smile with a dimple in the right cheek.

He's got her silly sense of humour and her temper too. They both lose it if they think they're being laughed at.

I've never met my real parents so I don't know who I get my eyes or my smile from.

'So what did you wish for, Stan?' Dad asks again.

'If I tell you, it won't come true,' I say.

But deep down I already know it won't come true.

The letterbox clatters and Bruno runs out to the hall, scampering back a moment later and handing me a red envelope. I don't recognise the handwriting and I can feel my pulse quicken. I tell myself it's not from her, but as I slide my finger under the flap I secretly hope that it is.

'You haven't got time for that now, Stan,' says Dad, plucking the envelope from my grasp. 'Come and see your present.'

Receiving presents always fills me with dread. Everyone's waiting to see my reaction, but I know the harder I try to look pleased, the more likely I am to look terrified or confused or something. Dad ushers me to the side door, his strong hands resting on my shoulders.

'Close your eyes,' Mum says, her voice shrill with excitement.

I oblige and hear someone unlocking and opening the door. It's spring, but the morning air is cool and feels like a soothing flannel on my face. I feel Bruno nudging his way in front, slipping his little hand into mine.

'Wow!' he says. 'That's wicked.'

Mum almost purrs with pleasure at Bruno's reaction and I feel the pressure to match it with my own.

'Open your eyes,' says Dad.

I take a deep breath and do as I'm told.

I recognise the object in front of me, but it's so unexpected that it takes a moment to register. Stretching my lips apart I bare my teeth, bunching my cheeks up.

'Well?' says Mum, her word almost surfing on a giggle.

‘What do you think?’ Dad prompts, squeezing my shoulders.

‘Wow,’ I say, stalling. ‘It’s ... I’m ... this is so, so, *unexpected*.’

I turn to my parents who are both bursting with joy. I try desperately to muster something appropriate to say.

‘Honestly,’ I say, my face locked in this *happy* expression. ‘You really shouldn’t have.’

‘It looks a bit small,’ says Nan. ‘Isn’t it a bit small, Pam?’

‘They’re supposed to be like that, aren’t they, Stanley?’

I nod my head a little too quickly.

‘But he’s already got a perfectly good bike,’ says Nan.

‘Nan’s right,’ I want to yell, but I continue grinning instead.

‘It’s not just a bike, though,’ says Dad, patting the ridiculously low saddle. ‘It’s a *BMX*.’

‘We know everyone hangs out at the skate park after school,’ says Mum. ‘And we didn’t want you feeling left out.’

Dad hands me a matt black skate-style helmet. ‘Now you can show those kids what you’re made of.’

‘Are you going to ride it to school this morning?’

‘Course he is,’ Dad laughs before I can think of a good reason not to.

Ten minutes later everyone is crammed into the side doorway watching me. My schoolbag feels like it weighs a ton on my back as I clip the helmet’s strap under my chin.

‘Get on it, then,’ Mum urges.

‘You’ve seen me ride a bike before.’

‘OK, let’s give the boy some space,’ Dad says. ‘We’ll watch from the kitchen window.’

They shuffle inside and the side door closes. I size up the bike for a moment then grab the handlebars, wondering if my parents have any idea what makes me tick. I wheel my brand-new BMX down the path onto the driveway where I stop and get on. The saddle is so low my knees are up by

my elbows. My head is below the level of the open kitchen window and I hear my parents talking.

‘Do you think he likes it?’ Mum asks.

‘Why wouldn’t he?’ says Dad.

‘Did you see the look on his face, though? He looked really... unhappy.’

‘Stan always looks unhappy. And now he’s a teenager it’s only going to get worse. Don’t worry, though, the grumpy, surly, awkward stage only lasts another seven years or so. By the time he’s in his twenties he’ll be an absolute delight.’

‘And there I was thinking having kids was easy.’

I roll my BMX away from the window until my parents come into view. Seeing me, they both smile and wave enthusiastically and I give them a thumbs up, put my right foot on the pedal and push off. I freewheel for a couple of metres, but when I start to pedal my left knee comes up and knocks into my elbow. Swerving violently, I bounce across the rockery, through a fern plant, before emerging unsteadily onto the pavement.

I glance over my shoulder and see Mum looking alarmed, clutching Dad’s arm. I give her a confident wave, then wobble round the corner and out of sight.

The combination of the BMX’s seat position and its low gear means that my knees are pumping furiously up to my chin. I feel like a clown pedalling his tiny trike as I weave along. I manage to blend in with the rest of the school-run traffic for about ninety seconds, then I hear someone shout and I know I’m in trouble.

2

'Oi, look at that! Looks like Carrot's got some new wheels.'

I recognise Sean Terry's voice immediately. I keep pedalling with my head down, on the off chance he's spotted someone else with ginger hair who coincidentally also has a new bike. My hopes are dashed when someone pulls up next to me and shoves my shoulder.

What little control I have of my BMX disappears and I career into the hedgerow before sprawling across the pavement, one pedal biting painfully into my shin. I get to my feet and find myself surrounded by four snarling kids standing astride their bikes.

'That was a nasty wipeout, Carrot,' says Sean, whose fleshy features and chunky pink arms remind me of a piglet. 'You OK?'

I can feel blood trickling down my leg. 'I'm fine,' I say.

'What do you call that stunt, anyway? The Hedge-cutter?' Without looking round I know this nasal sneer belongs to Brandon O'Neil. He is tall and wiry with grey skin and dark circles under his eyes. A few years ago our mums were friends and made us play together. He taught me to play Swingball in his garden and I used to think he was all right.

I study Sean's other cronies as they make a show of laughing. They're all in Year Ten and I've never had a conversation with any of them - unless them calling me names counts as conversation. Sean does most of the

talking while the others shadow. I see them loitering in corridors or huddled by the bike racks, looking for someone to mock or a game to spoil. After school they're always in the skate park on their bikes, circling lazily like sharks waiting to pick off the weakest seal.

'It wasn't a stunt,' I say quietly, almost to myself. 'You pushed me off.'

Sean's mouth twists and he grabs the front of my coat. 'You'd better be careful what you accuse me of, Carrot. People might get the wrong idea about me ...'

'Get off,' I mutter.

'What was that, Carrot?' Sean demands, his lower jaw jutting forwards.

'Nothing.'

'Speak up, Carrot,' he leers at his mates. 'We can't hear you.'

'Nothing,' I repeat - a little louder.

Sean looks admiringly at my bike. 'I saw your new BMX and I said to Brandon, I said, "Looks like Gingernut wants to join our gang." So I caught you up to give you a high five. But I missed.'

More chuckles from the other goons.

'You're in a gang?' I say. I don't usually risk engaging Sean in conversation, but curiosity gets the better of me. 'What's it called?'

'We're the, er, Springdown ...' Sean's forehead puckers.

'Gang?' I suggest.

'Yeah. We're the Springdown Gang,' he says, adding unnecessarily, 'Because we live on the Springdown Estate, yeah?'

'Simple,' I say, adding quickly, 'I mean, it's good - simple is good.'

'I suppose you'd think up some poncey rhyming name being a girly poetry writer.'

'A poem doesn't have to rhyme,' I say.

'How's this for a rhyme? Shut it, you muppet.'

'Close.' I smile.

Sean's grip on my coat tightens and he yanks me forwards. This is how our meetings usually go. He picks on me about something, I try to be nice him and he roughs me up anyway.

But this time Sean Terry doesn't thump me. He says nothing for a moment as if he's considering his next move. Then he lets go of my coat.

'Who bought your bike for you?'

'My mum and dad.'

'Really?' Sean's mouth curls into a devilish smirk and something illuminates his eyes. 'Your *mum* and *dad*?'

The strange emphasis he puts on the words makes me feel suddenly nauseous. I realise with sickening horror that he knows my secret. I was teased about being adopted at my last school, but since we moved I've been able to keep it quiet. How has Sean Terry, of all people, managed to dig up my dirt?

'Uh-huh,' I say.

I immediately suspect Brandon. His mum knew my mum way back so it makes sense she'd know - and him too. He's probably known since we shared a paddling pool, but why would he suddenly start blabbing about it now? I look at him accusingly but his cold eyes seem to smirk back.

Sean casts his eyes round his mates as if to say, 'Get a load of this, lads.' They all grin like a pack of hungry hyenas. 'So when you say *mum*,' he continues, 'what exactly do you mean?'

I say nothing.

'Cos my mum is the woman who grew me in her belly and gave birth to me. Is that what your mum did?'

My eyes are fixed on the ground. Sean sniggers and starts to circle me on his bike, his round face split like a Halloween pumpkin.

'I heard that your *real* mum took one look at your ugly ginger mug and gave you away to the first person stupid

enough to have you,' he says. 'Why hasn't your pretend mum sent you back, that's what I don't understand? If I ordered a tin of brown paint and it turned out to be bright orange I'd be straight back to the shop. Oh, wait ... maybe she tried and they wouldn't have it.'

I stare at my feet through a liquid film, not daring to blink in case a tear drips onto the pavement.

Sean adopts a high-pitched voice. 'Excuse me, I'd like a refund please. Yes, I ordered something in brown or blond but this one's a horrible ginger colour. Plus, it's big and chubby like a marshmallow and it can't do anything - it can't even kick a football and it's got no friends. A receipt? No, I haven't got the receipt any more ... Can't I just exchange it, then - you know, for something less ugly... You mean I have to *keep* it? But it's rubbish! I demand to see the manager!'

'Come on, Sean,' says Brandon, smiling. 'Let's split.'

Sean and his mates mount their bikes and cycle round me, cackling.

One at a time the boys peel away and head for school, laughing as they weave down the road. Just before he rounds the corner, Brandon turns and yells something. His words are like a blade in my chest. It's just a casual insult, but unknowingly his final word sums up the feelings I have pushed down into the pit of my stomach for years.

'See you around,' he calls. '*Reject.*'

3

Before the bell goes school is like a lawless town. Hugging the edge of the corridor, I keep my head down as I march to my classroom. I skirt round a bunch of girls talking about last night's TV and dodge a couple of Year Ten boys wrestling outside the bogs. Someone shouts, 'Oi, Carrot!' but I don't look up.

As I pass the science lab I catch sight of two girls coming my way. One is walking stiffly, her head held to one side so that her bleached hair falls across one eye. The other girl seems to glide. Her shiny black hair swings gently as she walks.

I realise I have stopped. The blonde girl's eyes fill with panic.

'Hi, Chloe,' I say as they approach.

My cousin gives me a panicky look like, 'What do you think you're doing?' In a split second she weighs up her options. I guess she wants to ignore me but she's worried that might make her look totally mean.

'Hi, Stan,' she says quietly without moving her lips.

The girls breeze past me and I hear Agatha Macey say, 'Who's that?'

'No one,' Chloe says. 'Just my cousin Stan.'

'*That's* Stan?' Agatha Macey glances over her shoulder at me.

I spread the fingers on one hand to say 'Hi' but she's already turned back.

Outside my classroom I pause and take a deep breath, then push open the door. I make my way to my desk, ignoring a ball of paper that bounces off my head. A bunch of kids laugh.

As I take my seat Eddie Jones says, 'All right, Stanley.'

He's the captain of the school rugby and cricket teams - one of life's golden boys. I don't want to be rude, but anything I say will probably come out sounding stupid. I sort of grunt in reply and pull some books out of my bag without meeting his eye.

The drill of the bell is met with groans but I'm relieved because it's time for the teachers to impose some sort of law and order. Mr Potter's entry is accompanied by scraping sounds as chairs are shunted towards desks.

'OK, listen up, gang.' Mr Potter is rolling back his sleeves as he talks. 'I just want to quickly tell you about an exciting event that's coming up. You've all heard about the terrible suffering after the earthquake in Asia? Well, the Entz Committee has decided to do something to raise money for the ongoing relief effort. So in four weeks' time, for one night only, we will be putting on a spectacular show called *Tomlinswood's Got Talent*.'

A ripple of groans goes round the room.

'Come on, guys,' Mr Potter urges. 'This is exciting stuff. All your friends and family can come along and you can have your moment in the spotlight to show off whatever talent you have. Lots of the kids in Years Ten and Eleven will be signing up but we'd really like to see some strong talent from Year Eight.'

Stu Walters calls out, 'Are you going to perform, sir?' and a few kids snigger.

'Actually, I am,' Mr Potter smiles. 'A few of us teachers have formed a band and I am on lead vocals.'

'What's the band called, sir?'