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opening extract from

Jake's Tower

written by

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I found a secret place today. It was by accident. I was racing out of the house, running as fast as I could, anything to get away, and I got through the hole in the fence at the end of the lane, just above the railway line.

I wriggled through the bushes, and then I fell into it. Right in. Splat.

It's a good place. There are two huge square blocks, chunks of concrete, with a bit of space between. Not more than a metre and a half, I'd say. The blocks must have been there for ages because plants and creepers have grown up all over and round them. The creepers stretch over between the blocks to make a kind of roof. Once I've crawled inside it's like being in a little house. My house.

I could clean this place up and make it better. I could get a bit of plastic sheeting to put under the creepers to make a watertight roof. I could sleep here then if I had to. If it comes to that.

I'd get started today if I could, but I can't do much because of my arm. The bruise is going to be the biggest I've ever had, I think. I'm not sure. It's hard to tell with bruises.

The one on my back after Christmas might have been bigger, but you can't tell when they're on your back because you can't see them properly. This one's

coming up blue now, then it'll go purple with yellow bits in it. He never does them on my face in case someone sees.

The bruise is on my right arm, but I can do things with my left. I can pick things up. I could pick up sticks and things if I wanted to, but I don't. Not today.

She used to shout at him when he got going, when things started to get really bad. She doesn't now. She doesn't look at my bruises, either. She just goes quiet if she sees them, and her eyes slide away.

It's like when you smell something bad and you turn your head away because you don't want to know about it.

I get scared, often, in case it's not my bruises that make her look away. In case it's me. That's why I don't say much in front of her any more. I don't show her what he's done to me.

It's good that I've found this place. I can come here and make my plans. I can do my thinking in here, and be safe.

My main plan for the future is my dream house. It's going to be very tall and thin, a tower, really. There's going to be a moat all the way around it, and the only way over it is by a drawbridge that's pulled up all the time, except when I want to get across myself.

There'll be a lift in the tower to whiz me up to the top. My room will be up there. It's totally safe. There's no way anyone can get to me. No way at all.

There'll be a window with a lookout place on it, like a balcony. I'll have a telescope out there, on the balcony, and I'll be able to see for miles and miles.

Keep a check to see if anyone's coming near, in case I have to take precautions. And just in case, just supposing I need it, I'll have one of those huge, great balloons tied up to the balcony, the ones you can go in, with a basket underneath. And if I really have to, I'll get in the basket, and untie the rope, and float away. No one could get me then.

But I wouldn't ever need to. I wouldn't have to worry, because of the moat and the drawbridge. And even if he did get across somehow, I'd fix it so the lift wouldn't go down for him. It would be my lift, just obeying me. Voice activated, or something.

'Little bastard', he called me, when he pulled me out from under my bed this morning. 'Dirty, sneaky, snivelling little rat.'

I wouldn't even hear him in my tower, however loud he shouted. I'd just be too high up.

A bird was singing in the lane when I came back from my secret place today.

I don't worry about that kind of thing usually, but the song went right through me. Directly into my head. I looked up, and there he was, sitting on the top of the tallest tree, and I thought, Good for you. You're all right up there.

Maybe I was there too long, though, looking up into the tree. I should have looked round anyway, before I dived in through the hole in the fence, to make sure no one was there. But I didn't, and there was someone. He was a boy from my school.

I saw him too late, when I'd already bent down. I moved back again, of course. Pretended I'd only been looking at something through the chain link, but he

gave me a funny look. I think he knew that I was hiding something. He must have known. He'll have worked out that there was a hole in the fence, and he'll know I was about to go in there.

What if he does a bit of snooping round? What if he comes in here and finds my secret place?

There's a spider in here. A really big one. I don't mind him. He doesn't bother me, and I don't bother him. I quite like him, actually, because he's making a gigantic web. He'd done all the spokes out from the middle before I got here and now he's filling it in with the cross pieces. Backwards and forwards he goes.

I've been watching the spider and thinking about Kieran. That's the name of the boy I saw just now. He's in one of the other classes in my year, so I don't know him very well. I'm not sure what he's like, if he's one of those teasing ones, or a quiet sort of person like me.

I don't know if spiders make good pets. You couldn't tame them, I shouldn't think, and they're not exactly cuddly, are they? Not like Paws. She was good, my guinea pig was. Her nose twitched and she was warm. The softest thing you could imagine.

He should never have done that, picking up her cage and throwing it out of the door. I thought she was OK. She seemed it, that day and the day after, but the day after that she was dead. Stiff and cold and looking small, as if she'd shrunk or something. Paws.

'Don't you bring all your dirty animals in here again,' he said, and when I couldn't stop crying he belted me so hard I fell on to the table and broke my arm.

'Playing football,' she said to the doctor, when she took me off to Casualty. 'You know what boys are like at that age.'

But on the way home from the hospital, she bought me a bag of sweets, and we sat on the top of the bus, and she put her arm round me, carefully, so as not to hurt mine, and she cried and cried (a good thing the bus was empty), and said she was sorry, and she'd never let him touch me again. I cried too, as a matter of fact.

School doesn't bother me most of the time. I just go there and do what I'm supposed to do and mind my own business. Keep myself to myself. Mrs McLeish doesn't notice me if I'm quiet and sit at the back. I don't listen half the time, except sometimes, like the other day, when she was reading a poem.

I learned the last bit straight off. She didn't need to say it twice.

'The silver apples of the moon.
The golden apples of the sun.'

I don't know what it means, but it doesn't matter. I just like the words. That poem made me think that maybe I ought to have a bit of garden round my tower house. The moat would make it like a sort of island, and I could make the whole thing bigger and plant some trees in it.

Not big trees. Not so that he could climb up them and get to my balcony. Just little ones with fruit on them. Silver apples shining in the night and golden apples for the day. Nice to eat too, more like peaches than apples, with juice that runs everywhere.

Just for me. And maybe for the spider.

A train's coming. I can see the people as clear as anything as it goes past. They can't see me, though, hidden in my secret place. I can sit here and look out and watch the world go by.

That's what I like best. I'm safe and no one can see me. I can watch the world go by.

She's going to have a baby! She didn't tell me herself. I found out because I heard them after I'd gone to bed. She was crying.

'I don't want this sodding baby!' she kept saying. 'I'm going to get rid of it. You can't stop me.'

I didn't want to hear her saying that. I stuck my head under the cover and tried to think about my silver apple tree, but I couldn't help listening.

He was being really nice to her, the way he is sometimes. The way he is even to me, sometimes.

'No,' he kept saying, all soft and sweet. 'Come on. You don't mean that. Think of it, Marie, a little baby! We'll be a proper family. It's all I ever wanted, a family of my own, like I never had.'

'You'll go for him,' she said, 'like you go for Jake. Look how you broke his arm. I should have chucked you out straight away for that. And for what you do to me.'

His voice went so low I couldn't hear what he said next, except for a few words.

'My temper,' he said. 'Don't know what comes over me. I promise. Never again.'

A baby! Could be a boy or a girl. A brother or a sister.

It made me scared, though, the thought of a baby.

Scared me to death. I was so scared I got out of bed, even though I know the floorboards creak. If he hears me move around after I'm supposed to be in bed, he's in my room like a flash beating the daylights out of me. But I needed something.

OK, I know it's soft, a boy of my age wanting a baby's toy, especially when its beak started coming off years ago, and one of its feet is lost. But I did want it. I keep Ducky hidden most of the time so he won't find it. If he did he'd sneer at me and throw it out. So I only fetch Ducky out from the back of my drawer when I really, really need him.

I managed it all right. I crossed the room, opened the drawer, got Ducky out, shut the drawer and started back. I had to freeze halfway to my bed, because their voices suddenly stopped, and I thought he must be about to roar in and grab Ducky and murder me, but they went on talking after a bit. I was shaking from head to foot.

'It's OK, Ducky,' I kept whispering. 'I won't let him hurt you.'

And then I thought, I'll be saying that to a real live baby soon, and the scared feeling got so bad I started shivering all over, and when I got into bed I squeezed poor old Ducky so tight I was afraid his stuffing would pop out.

She never talks about my dad.

'He was only sixteen,' she says, if ever I ask. 'Who knows anything about anything when they're only sixteen?'

She's wrong about that. I won't be sixteen for

years and years, but I know more than I want to already.

'So what happened to him, then?' I say, pressing her a bit.

'I've told you a dozen times. He joined up, didn't he? Went into the army. Got sent off abroad somewhere. And there's no use your asking me where, because I don't know, and anyway it wouldn't do you any good because he's got another family now.'

I don't like it when she says that, but I go on anyway.

'What do you mean, another family? How many kids?'

She gets mad at me then.

'How should I know? I haven't seen him since the day you were born.'

'Tell me about it. Go on, Mum. Please.'

'I've told you, hundreds of times. He came into the ward—'

'Did he look at me straight off, or later?'

'Then. Straight off. He put that fluffy duck into your cot. Then he says his mum's made him promise he won't see me any more, and he didn't mean for it to happen, and we'd split up before I even knew I was pregnant, and anyway he was off to become a soldier.'

'Then he picked me up and gave me a cuddle.'

'Yes, he did. Looked as if he was going to start crying, and rushed off. That's all. You know it is.'

'No. You've left out the letter.'

'What letter? Oh, that. When you were six. It came from Germany. Jake, give over. I've told you all this, hundreds of times.'

'Tell me again, then.'

'He wrote and said he thought about you a lot—'

'All the time, that's what he said.'

'And he wanted to know about you, and he'd got a wife, and a baby on the way and he wanted me to write and tell him how you were.'

'So you did.'

'Yes, I bloody well did. Asked him for some money too, the cheeky sod. They earn a fortune in the army.'

'But he didn't write back.'

'No. He didn't write back.'

I think I might have a special place on my island for my dad, in case he ever comes to see me. He might. It could happen.

He must know where to find us because of the letters. He sent his to her in a roundabout way through someone they'd known at school. They both grew up in this town, though he lived on the other side, I think. She never said.

My dad's room will be at the bottom of the tower. It ought to be the kind of place soldiers like, with a couple of crossed flags stuck up on the wall and a few old guns on wheels like in the castle we went to on our school trip last term.

Maybe he wouldn't like that, though. Maybe he's fed up with the army. I think he must be, because I'm sure I'm like him and the army wouldn't do for me at all. No way. Not in a month of Sundays. Being a soldier means being yelled at all the time, and put in the glasshouse when there's a fight. And you have to be ready to kill people. I don't want to kill anyone or hurt anyone. Not ever.

My dad's room will be very nice, with two really comfortable chairs, one for him and one for me, and a massive TV, and shelves stacked with videos, and a cupboard between us with a little handset thing you can press to make whatever you want to eat or drink pop up. You want crisps? You just press the crisp logo and out shoots a bag of crisps. He'd really like that.

There'd be a big window on one side, that you could slide back so that you could smell the silver and golden apple trees outside. Because they'd have a wonderful smell, like a perfume, the best you've ever smelled. And the apples would spin like strobes and the sparkly light would flash into the room and make everything look as if it was dancing.

He won't want to be a slob all the time, though, my dad won't, because he's really fit, being a soldier, so I'd better have a football place where we can play football together. I'd have to make the island bigger, but I could do that. Push it out beyond the apple trees. We'd have a proper goal, why not? and take it in turns to shoot.

He'd be brilliant at it and he'd give me loads of tips and I'd get brilliant at it too.

I don't suppose he'd want to come all that often to my island as he's got this other kid, and maybe more by now. They wouldn't be allowed to come. Not till I got to know them, anyway.

I'd keep a lookout from my tower for my dad. It could work on an infra-red system, picking up his shape. Or perhaps he'd have a remote control thing in his pocket to warn me he was coming. The minute

I got the signal, I'd whiz down from my tower in the lift, and let the drawbridge down for him.

I wouldn't have to be in my tower at all while he was on the island, because he'd protect me if Steve came. He wouldn't let Steve come anywhere near.

Steve would be terrified of my dad. His face would go white and his voice would croak and his heart would thump and his hands would go wet and his knees would knock just like mine do when he starts to go for me. He'd turn round and make a dash for it.

You wouldn't see him for dust. He'd be over the hills and far away. He'd be out of it, and good riddance. That's what would happen if Steve tried to get on to my island when my dad was there.

In the army they have to bivouac when they get stuck out in the open and can't get back in for the night. I saw a programme about it. They dig holes in the ground and get in there. Foxholes, they call them. They put branches over the top for camouflage and then they get in and hide inside.

Usually there's two people in a foxhole, but I don't want anyone else in mine. No way.

I wouldn't fight anyone who came. I'd just go away and plan how to get them out. I'd wait till they'd gone, then come back in myself. I'm patient. That's my way. Cunning.

If Kieran comes through the fence and pokes around here he'll find my secret place at once. He'll get through the hole and walk down the path my feet have made and he'll fall right into it, just like I did.

There's a problem here. I've got to think my way

round it. I've got to make sure my secret place stays mine.

My dad, being a soldier, would make an ambush, I suppose. Booby-trap the place like they did in the olden days. Dig a big pit with spikes in the bottom, or have a snare to catch someone by the leg, or use a trip wire that would release a catch and make a rock come smashing down on their head.

I don't know how to do all that and, anyway, what if I hurt someone? The only person I want to hurt is Steve, but if he fell into my trap he'd climb straight out, being so big and strong, and then he'd come right on and kill me. Really kill me.

There's no point in trying to get Steve. The best thing would be for him to go away, right away. Just go away and leave us alone and never come back. Not ever.

Watching the spider gave me the answer. He was mending a hole in his web, and that made me think of the chain link fence. I whizzed back up to the hole, looked carefully up and down the lane and stepped out. Then I stood back and ran my eyes along the whole fence.

A decoy, I thought. That's what I need.

There was another place a bit further on where the fence was broken too. It just needed a bit of work to make a proper hole that you could get through.

It didn't take more than five minutes. I opened up the second place a bit, got inside and trampled around. Not much. I didn't want loads of people to see and get in and start running about all over the railway bank. I made it look so that if Kieran came back he'd think that's what I'd been so interested in.

My plan was even better than I'd thought because there was nothing but thorns and nettles, jungles of them, between this new hole and my secret place. There was no way Kieran or anyone else could get to me if he came through here.

I slipped out again and went back to my hole. No one was around.

I'd got back in through the fence and was trying to camouflage the hole a bit when I heard Kieran coming. I knew it was him. Well, I knew it was a boy, anyway, because he was kicking a can down the lane in front of him. I didn't have time to move further back into my place, so I just froze and shut my eyes.

He was coming nearer and nearer, singing some tuneless song under his breath, dodging and kicking and chasing after his can.

And I was blasting him with thoughtwaves.

Go away, Kieran. I'm not here. No one's here. There's nothing to see, Kieran. Go on, little can. Roll away down the hill. Roll far away, little drinks can.

But it didn't. It rolled just past my hole and stopped, right up against the fence. I opened my eyes a crack and saw the sun glinting off it.

Then I saw Kieran's foot. My heart was pounding so hard I could hear it pumping in my ears, and my eyes were screwed up so tight they hurt. He stood there for about ten years, Kieran did.

What are you doing? I thought, not daring to open my eyes and look in case the movement caught his eye. Go on, Kieran. Please. Go away.

Next I heard the sound of paper tearing and something fluttered to the ground just the other side of the

chain link. I did look then. It was a Mars bar wrapper. Kieran was starting on a Mars bar.

My mouth watered so hard I had to swallow, and I thought he'd be sure to hear me, it sounded that loud, but he didn't. He poked out the can from beside the fence with his toe and gave it a kick and off he went, running after it down the lane, only he wasn't singing any more because his mouth was all stuck up with Mars bar.

He hadn't even looked at my decoy hole.

As soon as he'd gone I stood up and bolted for my secret place.

Thank you, God, I said. Thank you.

I sat down on the floor with my back against one of the blocks, and I felt safe.

'We'll get through all right,' I said to the spider. 'You and me. We'll do.'

'We're going to the zoo today,' Steve said. 'A family outing.'

He was in one his loud moods, his I'm-going-to-have-a-good-time-and-you-are-too moods. He's like that when he's with people from work, or down at the pub with her.

'The zoo!' she said, clapping her hands like a little girl.

I didn't dare say I didn't want to go. You don't, with Steve.

He made her put on her stretchy pink top and her tight jeans.

'You won't be able to wear these for much longer,' he said, patting her tummy.

She looked quite pleased. I bent down to do up my shoes.

'You can't go in those things. Not on a family outing,' he said, and I froze, ready to put my arm up to protect my head.

He didn't hit me, though. He handed me a shoebox instead.

'New trainers,' he said. 'Thought we'd smarten you up a bit.'

I put the trainers on. They were too small and pinched my toes.

'They'll stretch,' he said. 'Come on, or the place'll be closed before we get there.'

You can have a good time with Steve, once in a while, if nothing goes wrong and you're careful. It was OK at first, our day out at the zoo, in spite of my sore feet.

'Ice creams all round,' he said, as soon as we were in through the gate.

'Oh, I don't know,' she said. 'Ice cream might start me off feeling sick again.'

'Just try one, love,' he said. 'You've got to eat. You've got to keep your strength up.'

He went to the van and came back with three big ones. She took hers and smiled, but she was going pale.

We saw the elephant first. He was standing in a walled-in place, in the open air. There was a big ditch between us and him.

His ears were drooping and he stood with his trunk dangling down, touching the ground, quite still.

'Hey, big fella!' shouted Steve. 'Over here! Look

over here. You a statue, or what? Wave your trunk at Jake, why don't you?'

The elephant wasn't bothered. He moved his ears a bit and whisked something off his rump with the bushy bit on the end of his tail.

'Boring, isn't he?' said Steve. 'They're supposed to be clever, elephants are. You'd think they'd train them to do something. I've paid enough to get us in here.'

'I want to see the monkeys,' she said, clinging on to his arm.

She hadn't eaten her ice cream and melted bits were dribbling down the side.

'Here, watch what you're doing.' He was laughing at her. 'You'll get it all over me. You're not going to eat it, are you? Do you want it, Jake?'

I shook my head.

'You don't want to waste it.' He took it out of her hand and started slurping it up, making gloopy noises. I was starting to feel happy, almost.

Maybe he'll be different now, I thought. Maybe the baby coming has changed him.

'The monkeys are over there.' I ran ahead towards the cages up the hill, going carefully with my toes curled in because the trainers hurt, and then I called back to them over my shoulder, and at that moment I forgot everything bad and I felt free and safe.

There were some little brown monkeys in the first cage, chasing each other, just mucking about really, like a bunch of kids. They were so clever and funny, jumping around, making flying leaps, hanging from one arm and then the other, that you had to laugh. We all did.