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Opening extract from

Born to Run

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"Best Mate for ever"

Part of Patrick's walk to school, to St Thomas' Junior School on Porthcressa Road was along the canal, past the brown sauce factory which somehow smelled both sweet and sour at the same time. That walk along the canal where the barges chugged by, where the ducks dipped and drank, was the only part of going to school that Patrick looked forward to at all. There was so much he was dreading. He sat there on his bed and thought about the school day ahead of him, wishing he didn't have to live through it. The radio was burbling downstairs as it always was,

and his dad had burnt the toast, again.

Patrick thought of Mr Butterworth, his teacher and football coach, whose literacy homework – that stupid story about someone you meet standing in a shopping queue – he still hadn't finished, and who this time was bound to make him stay in after lunch and finish it. That meant that the head teacher, Mrs Brightwell, would probably find him there, and so he'd be in double trouble. She was always on at Patrick about being untidy or running in the corridors, or day-dreaming or using what she called 'lazy words', such as 'cool' or 'wicked', or worst of all, 'whatever'.

If she ever heard anyone saying 'whatever' she'd practically explode, especially if you shrugged your shoulders at the same time. The trouble was that just at the moment and for no good reason, 'whatever' happened to be Patrick's favourite word. He knew it irritated his mum and dad as well, knew how much Mrs Brightwell

hated it, but the word would just pop out as if it had a mind of its own, and with it came a shrug. There was nothing he could do to stop himself, and of course all too often Mrs Brightwell would be right there, and she'd blow up. After it was over, everyone would turn round and laugh at him. That was what Patrick dreaded most about school, being laughed at.

He dreaded Jimmy Rington too, Jimbo to his friends, and Patrick wasn't one of them, not since the day before when he'd let in *that* goal, the goal that had lost the cup final against Burbage School. It hadn't been Patrick's fault, not entirely. It was the kestrel's fault as well. The thing was, he'd been watching for the kestrel on and off for days. The bird was roosting high up on the chimney of the brown sauce factory. Patrick loved to see him come swooping down and hover there over the long grass at the edge of the playing field. Patrick could have watched him all day and

every day. Once he'd caught sight of the kestrel he couldn't take his eyes off him. It wasn't his fault that he came gliding over the football pitch at just the same moment the Burbage centre forward let fly with a speculative long range shot that Patrick should easily have saved.

There was all the sudden shouting, as the ball rocketed past him into the net, and he was left diving after it despairingly, ending up flat on his face in the mud. When he looked up, there were Jimmy Rington and the others running towards him, yelling and screaming: "Loser! Loser!" Mr Butterworth said it wasn't the end of the world, but to Patrick it certainly felt like it. So Patrick had a lot of worrying to do that morning.

He was late down to breakfast as a result. He barely had time to feed Swimsy, his goldfish, and shovel down his Cocopops, before his mum was kissing him goodbye on top of his head as she passed by behind him, talking as she went, not to

him at all, but to Patrick's dad, about not forgetting to get the car serviced. Then she was out of the door and gone. Minutes later Patrick was being hustled into the car, and his dad was telling him to be careful crossing the road by the school, to wait until the lollipop man said he could cross – this was what he said every morning.

Patrick was dropped off by the bridge as usual, and found himself alone at last and walking along the canal. Suddenly it didn't matter any more about Jimmy Rington or the goal he'd let in, or saying 'whatever' or Mrs Brightwell's volcanic temper tantrums. He breathed in the sweet and sour smell of the brown sauce factory. It was strange, he loved the smell, but hated the taste of the actual sauce. Shading his eyes against the sun, he looked up at the chimney to see if his kestrel was there. He wasn't, but Patrick didn't mind, because there were some ducks cruising past him, and another nearby with his bottom in

the air, and that always made him smile. A moorhen scurried across the towpath in front of him and disappeared into the long grass.

He hitched up his school bag and felt suddenly all bright and breezy, until he saw the swan some distance ahead of him, standing there on the towpath, looking at him, waiting for him. That worried him, because Patrick knew this swan, knew him all too well. They had met once before. It looked like the same one who had blocked his path on the way to school only a couple of weeks ago. He'd come running at Patrick wings



outstretched, neck lowered to attack and hissing like a hundred snakes. Patrick had had to run into the undergrowth to escape him and had fallen into a patch of nettles. So Patrick did not like this swan, not one bit. Yet somehow he was going to have to get past him – it was the only way to get to school, and he had to get to school. The question was how to do it.

Patrick stood there eyeing the swan, just hoping that sooner rather than later the swan would decide it was time to go back into the water. But the swan stayed steadfastly where he was, glaring darkly at him, his great black feet planted firmly on the towpath. He was showing no signs of moving anywhere.

Patrick was still wondering what to do, when out of the corner of his eye he saw something floating out in the middle of the canal. It was bright green and looked plastic – a sack of some kind. He probably wouldn't have paid it any

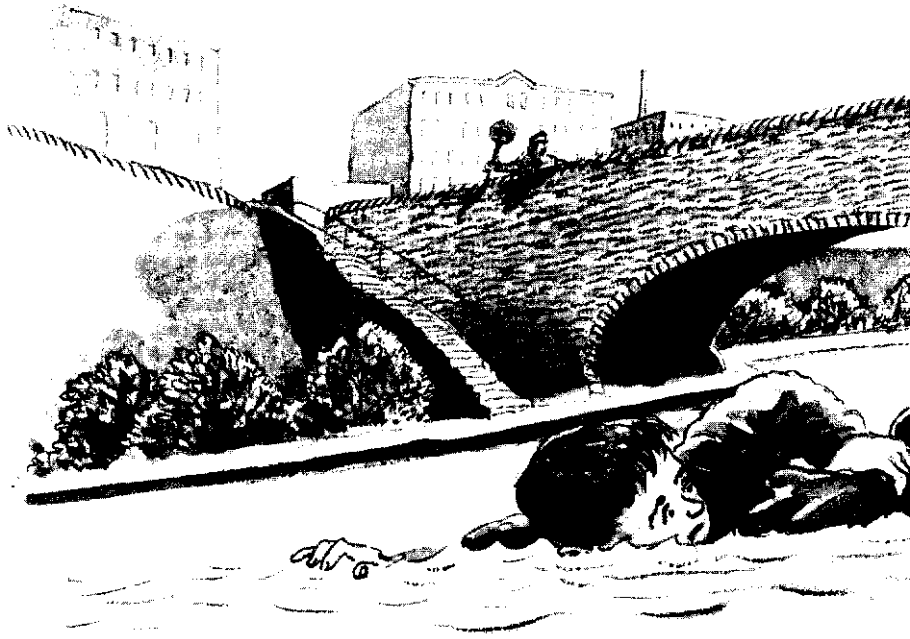
more attention – a sack's not that interesting, after all – if he hadn't heard the squeaking. It sounded as if it was coming from the sack itself, and that didn't make sense.

Patrick thought at first it might have been the piping of ducklings or moorhen chicks – he'd heard them often enough on the canal. But then he remembered that there weren't any chicks around, not any more, because it was autumn. The whole place was carpeted with yellow leaves, gold leaves, red leaves. They were all around his feet. Spring and summer were over. No, it really had to be the sack itself that was squeaking.

It was still early in the morning and Patrick's brain must have been working very slowly, because several moments passed before he realised that there was something alive inside the sack, and even then it wasn't only the squeaking that convinced him. The sack, he noticed, wasn't

just drifting gently along like everything else, the leaves, the sticks, all the other flotsam in the canal. It was turning of its own accord, as if it was being propelled from the inside. There was definitely something inside it, and whatever it was seemed to be struggling against the side of the plastic sack, kicking at it, trying to escape from it and squeaking and squealing in terror. He had no idea what it might be, only that it was alive and in danger of drowning. The canal wasn't that wide. It was dirty but it wasn't wide. He could do it.

Patrick didn't think about it any more. He shrugged off his school bag and leaped into the canal. He knew he was a good enough swimmer, so he wasn't worried about drowning, only about getting cold and wet. He didn't want the canal water in his mouth either, so he kept it tight shut. Just a few quick strokes out into the canal and he'd grabbed the sack, turned, and



was swimming back again. Suddenly the bank seemed a long way away, but he got there.

Climbing out was the most difficult part because his clothes were heavy and clinging, and



the sack was slippery in his hands, difficult to hold on to. He felt suddenly very weak, felt the cold of the water chilling him to the bone. But with one huge effort he heaved himself up,

enough to hook one leg up, on to the bank, and then he was out. Standing there, dripping from everywhere, he untied the sack and opened it. There were five puppies inside, leggy, gangly looking creatures, skeletal almost, all of them trembling with cold and crawling over one another, squirming to get out, mouths open and squeaking frantically. They were like no puppies Patrick had ever seen before.



He had two choices, and he knew neither of them were any good. He could go home at once

and leave the puppies in his bedroom – he had a key, he could easily let himself into the flat. There'd be no one home, but at least they'd be warm there. This way he could change his wet clothes too. He could feed them when he got back after school. The trouble was that it would take for ever to get there and back, and by the time he got to school he'd be so late that Mrs Brightwell would probably have one of her eruptions and he'd be in detention for a week, and she'd be bound to send him home with another cross letter for his mum and dad.

She certainly wouldn't believe his excuse: "Please Mrs Brightwell, sorry I'm late, but I had to jump into the canal on the way to school to rescue some puppies." If he didn't have the puppies with him, and he'd already changed into dry clothes, she'd be bound to think he was making the whole thing up. She hated excuses anyway, especially incredible ones. She'd go ballistic.

Or he could go straight to school all wet and smelly from the canal, only a little bit late and carrying the puppies with him. At least she'd have to believe his story then, wouldn't she? But then he thought of what Jimmy Rington would say when he walked into school all dripping and sodden, how everyone would laugh at him. They'd never let him forget it, that was for sure. And then there was that swan he had to get by, still there blocking his path, still glaring at him.

In the end it was Mr Boots, the lollipop man, who made up Patrick's mind for him. Patrick was standing there, numb with cold, still wondering what he should do, when he saw Mr Boots come hurrying along the towpath, lollipop stick in his hand, his white coat flying. Patrick had never much liked Mr Boots. He wasn't called "Bossy Boots" for nothing. He was a bit full of himself, a bit puffed up and pompous. And there was something about him Patrick had never quite

trusted. He was a bit of a phoney, Patrick thought. But all the same he was glad to see him now.

Mr Boots arrived breathless. For a while he could only speak in gasps. "You jumped in!" he spluttered. "Whatever d'you want to go and do that for?"

By way of an answer Patrick showed him what he had in his sack. Mr Boots bent over to look. Then he was spluttering again. "Blow me down! Puppies, greyhound puppies they are. Little beauties!" He looked up at Patrick. "You could have drowned yourself, doing that. Look at you, you're soaked to the skin. You'll catch your death standing here. Best get you into school and fast. I'm telling you, when Mrs Brightwell hears about this... You come along with me. Here, you can take my lollipop stick if you like, and I'll carry your school bag and the puppies."

As the two of them hurried along the towpath a barge came chuntering past. "Been in for a bit

of a dip, have you, son?" laughed the man at the wheel. But Patrick paid him no attention – he had his eye on that swan. He felt a little more confident though, because he had the lollipop stick to wave now. As it turned out he didn't need it. The swan moved aside as they came hurrying towards him and swam out into the canal, riding the wake of the barge. Then they were up the steps from the towpath and across the road into the school playground.

Patrick knew he was already late the moment he walked through the door. There was no one about. They'd all be in assembly by now. He'd be in really big trouble. He felt like running off home there and then. But he couldn't, because Mr Boots had him firmly by the hand and was walking him down the corridor towards the hall. He could hear Mrs Brightwell's voice now. She was making one of her important announcements, and by the sound of her she was in full flow and

already cross about something. *Not a good moment to interrupt her*, Patrick thought. Mr Boots stopped at the door to straighten his tie and smooth down his hair – he didn't have much of it, but what he had he liked to keep immaculate. Then, clearing his throat, he threw open the double doors, and in they went.

Everyone turned and gawped. Up on the platform Mrs Brightwell stopped in mid-sentence. A deep hush fell around them as they walked the entire length of the hall up towards Mrs Brightwell. Every step Patrick took seemed to squelch louder than the one before, and all the way the puppies in the sack were squealing and squeaking.

Mrs Brightwell did not look at all pleased. "Mr Boots," she said, "what is this? Why is Patrick standing there dripping all over my assembly hall? What on earth has happened?"

"Actually, it's a bit of a long story, Mrs Brightwell." Mr Boots sounded typically self-important. "You had

to see it to believe it. There I am, just minding my own business on the crossing outside the school, when I hear this splash. So I look over the bridge, and what do I see? Only young Patrick here in the canal swimming like a fish. Well of course I think he's fallen in, and he's drowning. So I start running, don't I? I mean I've got to save him, haven't I? But then I see he's not drowning at all. He's got hold of this sack and he's swimming like billy-o for the bank. And I'm thinking to myself: *You're off your tiny rocker, my son, taking a dip in that filthy old canal just to fetch out a dirty old plastic sack*. Luckily for young Patrick here I was on hand to help him out, cos he



wouldn't have made it on his own, that's for sure."

You fibber! Patrick thought. *You great big fibber!* But he didn't say anything.

Mr Boots hadn't finished yet. He was enjoying his moment in the limelight. "So Patrick's standing there now on the bank, all shivering and shaking, and that's when I have a little look inside the sack, don't I? And what do I find? It's full of puppies, that's what, five of the little beggars, and if I'm not mistaken, which I'm not, they're greyhounds, about seven weeks old by the look of them. We've got brindles in there, blacks and a fawn one too. I go down the greyhound track from time to time, so I know my greyhounds. I'm what you might call a greyhound connoisseur. They're lovely pups too, fine dogs. And young Patrick here jumped in the canal and saved them. I saw him with my own eyes. He's a bleeding hero, if you ask me – 'scuse my French, Mrs Brightwell – but that's what he is, a bleeding hero."

Patrick had never heard such a depth of silence as he heard in that hall when Bossy Boots had finished. Then one of the puppies squeaked, and suddenly they were all at it, a whole chorus of squealing, yelping puppies. "Aaah, sweet," said someone. Someone else started giggling, and soon there was laughter and clapping too, rippling round the hall. Within moments the assembly hall was loud with cheering and whooping – one or two were yelping like puppies.

