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Opening extract from

Grown-ups Can't be Friends with Dragons

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The Chrysalis

"What is it?" Brian asked.

"It's a baby butterfly, stupid."

"It don't look much like a butterfly to me," Brian said, peering at the little black thing. It looked a bit like a slug but was hard and shiny. It was in a flat glass dish on the 'interest table' just outside the classroom door. It was almost the end of school, and a few of the children had stopped to look at the thing when they were collecting their bags and lunch boxes. Brian pushed it round the dish with his finger.

"Leave it alone now," Terry said. "Stop touching it, Brian." He grabbed Brian's arm. "Leave off, it's mine, I found it."

"I was only looking," Brian objected crossly.

"You were touching it," Terry said. "You're not allowed to touch it."

Brain scowled and felt anger burning inside him. "It's not a butterfly," he snapped. "You're just lying. Where's its wings? It doesn't even move."

"So? Didn't you listen? Miss said it's asleep inside a chrysalis. It's changing."

"Miss is stupid then," Brian blurted. The other

children gasped.

"I'm telling Miss you called her stupid," Terry said. "Stinky Brian. You stink." Some of the other children, who had gathered nearby to watch the showdown, laughed.

"No I don't."

"Yes you do." Terry was talking in a whisper now in case any of the teachers were nearby. "I'm gonna tell Miss what you called her and she's gonna throw you out and we won't have to put up with your stink anymore!"

Brian couldn't stop himself doing what he did next. He hardly even knew he was doing it. It was as if the anger inside him had taken control of his arm, and he thumped his fist down on the chrysalis as hard as he could. It felt weird: solid, and a bit soft. It crunched. The chrysalis stuck to his hand at first, then it fell back into the dish with a clicky noise. It had split open. It looked like a rose bud which had been trodden on. Thin bits like leaves poked out of the splits in its sides. Terry shouted. Roger, who was standing nearby, began to cry, as usual, even though it was nothing to do with him.

Brian felt his face burning, and his eyes began to sting. He hated Terry. He hated school.

He ran.

He dodged past Miss as she emerged from the classroom. He slammed through the doors and

charged across the playground. It was nearly the end of school and parents were already gathering at the gate. It was a warm September day.

Emily was there waiting for him. She had a cigarette in her hand. She had her school jumper tied around her waist and her school tie tied around her arm. She always sneaked out of school early to come and collect Brian, but he wished she wouldn't. He ran right past her, ignoring her shouts. She even tried to chase him, but the heel of one of her shoes broke and she swore loudly.

Brian didn't want to go home. So he kept on running, down the hill, towards the harbour.

Brian's Secret

Brian ran down the steep cliff road towards the harbour. He could smell the sea and hear the gulls crying overhead. But he hated them, and he hated everything. It was a long way and his legs started to hurt, but he hated them too and the pain felt good. He found himself going faster than he ever could on flat ground and started to feel out of control. His feet slapped the tarmac noisily and painfully and he felt that any minute now his legs would give way. But he didn't care. He just kept running.

Eventually, the road levelled out and came to an end at the car park in front of a row of stone cottages. There were a couple of boats moored against the harbour wall, bobbing gently on the waves, and as usual, all he could smell was fish.

Exhausted, he had to stop running now, and he made his way across the car park, kicking the stones as he went. It was always cooler down here in the harbour than up on top of the cliffs where the school and his house were. The car park ended where a long rocky rise stretched out from the bottom of the cliff like a wall, across the end of the car park, and into the sea. Brian was a good climber.

He clambered onto the sharp rocks, jumping the rock-pools and the dangerous gaps, over the rise and down the other side to the little shale beach there. Looking up, Brian could see the grass on the cliffs above, blowing in the wind. It made him feel very small, and very alone. But he liked it here. He had a vague memory of being here with his mum, a long time ago. He walked around on the beach and then sat down and dug a hole. He listened to the water hitting the rocks, and tried to remember what his mum looked like. There were a couple of photos of her around the house, but they were just pictures. When he actually tried to remember her, when he tried to picture her here on the beach with him that day, he couldn't see her, and he couldn't hear her voice either.

There was a cave at the other side of the beach. It was dark and cold and lonely. And it was Brian's cave. In fact, this was Brian's beach. No-one else even knew about this place, as far as he could tell. Only him, and this was where he came when he hated the world and everyone in it, including himself. He didn't always go straight into the cave. Sometimes he'd sit on the wet shale, digging, or throwing stones into the sea, or just listening to the waves and letting his own breathing fall into their rhythm, until he wasn't angry any more, just empty. Sometimes though, the beach wasn't quite far

enough away from the rest of the world. That's when he wanted to be in the cave.

He left his hole and walked over to it. The cliffs towered over him and he felt himself disappear into the cave's cold darkness. The bumpy, rock floor rose out of the shale and sloped up towards the back where it was almost too dark to see, but Brian wasn't scared. He wiped his nose on his sleeve, making more 'snail trails' for Emily to moan about.

He went further in, climbing up towards the back of the cave.

Somewhere, the wind whistled through cracks and nooks. It almost sounded like someone whispering his name, welcoming him in.

He found the smooth dent in the rock where he always sat. Further back, the cave got really dark and he couldn't see where it ended. He'd sometimes wondered what was back there. One day, he would have to bring a torch down and find out.

He felt about in the dark space beside him, and found the old box of crayons he kept hidden there. Even this far into the cave, there was still enough light to see by, once his eyes adjusted, and he took a few moments to run his fingers over the drawings he'd already done on the rocky wall. They weren't very good, in fact he couldn't even tell what some of them were anymore, partly because the crayon had faded and worn away, and partly because he'd done

some of them when he was younger, when he was in the lower juniors at school. Drawings he'd thought were really good back then just looked like scribbles now to his more grown up eyes.

Most of them were drawings of himself with his mum, and that's what he decided to draw today. He knew from the photos that her hair was long and wavy and she sometimes wore a yellow jumper, so that's how he drew her.

Then, he decided to add his dad too. He was much bigger than his mum. Tall and strong. He made them both have smiles. When he thought about his mum, he imagined her smiling, but it didn't look quite right seeing a smile on his dad's face. He liked it though. Lastly, he even drew Emily.

He looked at the finished drawing, and nodded.

Then he heard that noise again. The one that almost sounded like his name. It was clearer this time. It didn't quite sound like a voice, but it didn't quite sound like the wind or the sea either. It was like soft, gentle music with some deep, louder instrument over the top, and it seemed to be coming from the back of the cave.

He stared into the darkness for some time, not moving, not thinking, just waiting. He was beginning to feel cold now and something dripped on his hair. But the voice was gone, and Brian suddenly realised how hungry he was.

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Brian stepped over the big pair of motorcycle boots and the scratched, white helmet. At least that means Mark's here, he thought as he quietly pushed the back door closed. In the kitchen, Emily had been pulling socks and pants from the washing machine and hanging them on the airer. She stopped and put her hands on her hips, and glared at him. "Where the hell have you been, Brian, you stupid little—" Brian felt his face going red. Emily always got like this when Brian had run away. He could hear the TV in the front room. Mark was probably there with his feet on the coffee table, and Brian wanted to go through and see him. Mark was never angry with him, even when he'd run away from Emily.

"I was just about to call the police!" Emily was almost yelling now and Brian wished she'd just shut up. "Your teacher wanted me to call the police," she added. "She must think I'm completely useless. She'll probably report us to Social Services or something. Dad'll kill you when he gets in. You'll be grounded for a month," she snapped, and Brian felt as if he was going to explode. At least Dad was working nights, which meant he wouldn't be back until the morning. Brian looked up at Emily and hoped she wouldn't notice the tears which were stinging his eyes. But then Emily couldn't talk anymore because she was starting to cry. She bent

down and hugged him, and the burning anger in his stomach flowed away. He knew he should apologise now, and he wanted to, but somehow, he couldn't. He couldn't even return her hug. She stank of cigarettes. "Do you know the worry you've caused?" She stood up again, her chin crumpling, and Brian looked at her, guiltily. There were dark bits on her cheeks where her makeup had run. Brian knew it was his fault; Emily hadn't done anything to deserve this. He felt sick again, but in a different way this time; it wasn't anger anymore, just a horrible feeling, and he didn't know what to say.

"Well, where have you been?" she asked, calmer now. Brian didn't want to tell her. She asked again, and he shrugged, but he didn't mean it rudely. "Don't shrug at me! Where've you been?"

"I dunno," he said quietly. The cave was his secret.

"Oh, I give up," Emily sighed. "I really do. I give up. Don't blame me if you get taken into care, Bri," she said, but then she started crying again. She pressed her face into the rag in her hand, realised it was her dad's pants, and slammed them down crossly on the work top. Brian suddenly felt he was going to laugh, but he wasn't ready to be friendly yet. So he turned away and went into the front room.

Mark, Emily's boyfriend, was slumped in the big

chair, his feet on the coffee table as usual. He had long hair that was tied back in a ponytail, and a couple of big shiny earrings in one ear. Without turning his eyes from the TV, he said, "Guess you're in trouble then, mate." Mark was nearly always at Brian's house. Sometimes he even slept there, but Brian wasn't allowed to tell his dad that. "Went looking all over for you, you know."

"On your motorbike?" Brian asked, wondering if he'd missed the chance of a ride. Emily wouldn't ever let Mark take him for a ride on his motorbike, but it would be different if Mark found him somewhere on his own and had to bring him back.

"Yes, mate. Down the harbour, then up on the estates. Where were you this time?"

Brian walked over to him.

"What you watching?" he asked as the sound of gun fire exploded from the TV. Mark liked scary films, and Brian didn't want to look.

"Em was worried sick, Bri. She nearly called the Old Bill." Brian wondered what would have happened if she did. Would he get put in prison? Or maybe he'd get taken to live with a different family like Emily often said. He didn't really want to leave Emily, Mark and his dad, but he daydreamed sometimes about living in a big house with a different family. Perhaps he could even have a brother or sister his own age. A dog. A mum!

"I knew you'd come back when you were ready though, Bri," Mark said, his eyes still fixed on the burbling TV behind Brian.

"What you watching?" Brian asked again. He sat on the sofa and watched two men charging headlong down an alleyway between dark buildings.

"Oh, a movie, it's not really for children though," he said. For a moment, it seemed as though Mark was more interested in his film than in Brian, but just as Brian was trying to think of something to say, Mark reached over and rubbed his strong hand all over Brian's head. Brian laughed and curled away, batting Mark's hand, and Mark said, "Oh, it's like that is it? Come on then, squirt!" and got up from his chair. He leaned over and pretended to try and slap Brian's cheek. Brian parried the attack, but wasn't ready for Mark's other hand which caught him a playful blow across the head. Brian laughed and complained at the same time, and Mark suddenly whirled round and got Brian into a headlock, shoving his face into the sofa cushions. Brian wriggled, but Mark was strong, and all Brian could do was to free his face from the cushion and look instead at the pictures on Mark's leather jacket. He loved the smell of it, and the way it felt cold against his hot face. Mark manoeuvred himself so that he was sitting on the sofa and could carry on watching the film whilst keeping Brian playfully

pinned down.

"Ooh, good bit coming up, Bri," he taunted, knowing Brian couldn't see the screen. "Ooh, it's amazing, you've never seen anything like it!" Brian couldn't help laughing. Mark's grip wasn't tight, but he was happy to lie there pretending he couldn't move.

"Mark!" Emily snapped as she came into the front room. "What do you think you're doing? He can't watch this."

"I don't think he can see it, Em," Mark said.

"No, but... it's not the point," she objected. "Turn it off."

From his uncomfortable position, Brian made a feeble attempt to free himself, but succeeded only in pressing his face deeper into a fold of Mark's jacket where it was dark and cold, just like in his cave. He felt Emily drop herself onto the sofa beside him.

"Alright," Mark said, and Brian could tell he had leaned over and kissed her. Then the TV's frightening sounds stopped suddenly and became the evening news instead. "You phoned his teacher to say he's back?"

Emily sighed. "I'll do it in a bit." Brian imagined her arms folded and her face scowling. "He hates me, Mark," she said. There was a silence, and Brian knew he should tell her that wasn't true, but he didn't. "So where did you go then?" she asked Brian,

but Brian didn't reply. "See?" Emily said to Mark, who seemed just as engrossed in the news as he had been in his film. "Mark!"

"Yes, love?" Mark said softly. But Emily just let out a moan and stomped back out to the kitchen.

Eventually, Mark released Brian from his headlock, and Brian slumped beside him, gazing at the pictures on his leather jacket. It was covered in them. Mark painted the pictures himself. Brian loved the wizard on the back with magic lights coming out of his fingers, but he couldn't see that at the moment. On one shoulder was a dragon, delicately painted in white, the black leather showing through for the shadows. The eyes were dark, but two glinting points of light made them look real.

Mark was always adding to the pictures, changing them or removing them and painting new ones. There'd been a dolphin there for a while. Mark said he'd done it for Emily, because she loves dolphins. The picture reminded Brian of a sad story Emily had told him once about a dolphin becoming lost. It was true, and had happened years ago, before Brian was born. It had swum into the harbour and couldn't find its way back to its family and friends. Fishermen, and some scientists, had tried to help it, but the poor thing didn't understand. In the end, it had died. On days like today, when he was in trouble

and the whole world seemed angry with him, he often found himself thinking about the poor, lonely dolphin, all lost.