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Opening extract from

The Grunts All at Sea

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Published by

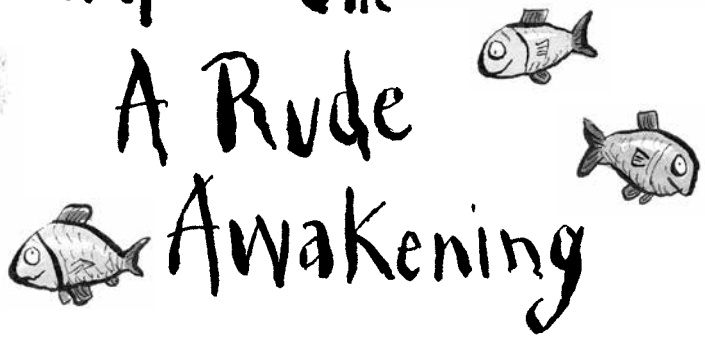
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Chapter One
A Rude Awakening



"Argh!" cried Mr Grunt, sitting bolt upright in bed.

"What is it?" groaned a dopey Mrs Grunt, rolling away from her husband and pulling their itchy bedclothes high over her head. This uncovered Mr Grunt's knobbly feet, waking a single earwig dozing between his toes.

"Someone's stolen all the light bulbs!" Mr Grunt wailed. "We have a thief in the house!"

By "house" Mr Grunt meant the extraordinary caravan he and his father, Old

Mr Grunt, had made which was now parked up in the overgrown grounds of crumbling Bigg Manor, a very big house with very few people in it.

"We don't *have* any light bulbs, you goosegog," Mrs Grunt muttered from beneath the covers.

"Spell it!" Mr Grunt blurted out, which seemed to take both of them by surprise.

Mrs Grunt threw back the bedclothes and sat bolt upright next to him. "What?" she said.

"Spell 'goosegog'," he demanded. "New rule. We can only call each other things we can spell."

"You just made that up!" harrumphed Mrs Grunt.

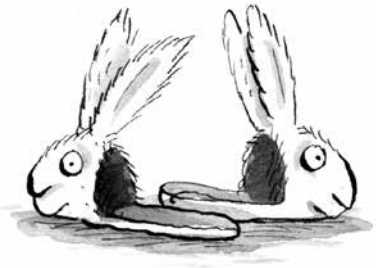


"It's still a rule."

"Well, it's a stupid one."

"But a rule's a rule, whether you like it or

not, trout-bag."



"Says WHO?" demanded Mrs Grunt.

"Says me, and I'm bigger than you and I'm wearing pyjamas," said Mr Grunt. "So what I say goes."

"Then you won't be saying much from now on, will you?" snorted Mrs Grunt.

"How d'you mean?"

"If *you* have to be able to spell it."

"HA!" said Mr Grunt.

Mrs Grunt glared at him with her bloodshot eyes, not that he could see her. "That's spelled H-A," he added helpfully.

Mrs Grunt was wishing that she knew how to spell goosegog. She was pretty sure it had lots of "g"s in it. "I'm not playing your silly game, you old boot!" she bellowed, her yellow and green teeth rattling in her impressively

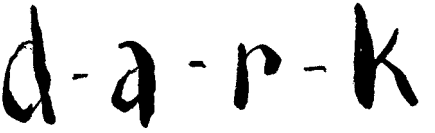
ugly head.

"This is no time to argue," said Mr Grunt, stretching his arms out in front of him like a sleepwalker. "We've got to find out who stole all the light."

"Haven't you worked it out yet?" Mrs Grunt laughed.

"Worked *what* out?" said Mr Grunt, because he really wanted to know.

You think you know the answer, don't you, dear reader? You think the reason why Mr Grunt couldn't see is because it was the middle of the night, or something, and therefore too dark – spelled d-a-r-k – to see.



But that would make Mr Grunt an idiot, wouldn't it?

And, anyway, you would be wrong. So *there*.

"Shall I tell you why you think it's so dark, husband dearest?" said Mrs Grunt, barely able to contain her glee.

"Go on, wife," said Mr Grunt suspiciously.

"Your eyes," said Mrs Grunt.

"What about my eyes?" Mr Grunt demanded.

"They're *closed*."

Mr Grunt opened his eyes and blinked in the morning light.

"Oh yes," he said, seeming both relieved and satisfied. Then, moments later, he seemed angry again. "Why didn't you tell me before?" he demanded. "Why were you keeping it a secret from me?"

Now, Mrs Grunt could have said, "Well, you were the ninny with your eyes closed; why didn't you think of opening them?" but



what she in fact said was: “Well, you keep secrets from ME.”

Mr Grunt threw back the covers on his side of the bed, swung his legs over the edge and stood up, narrowly avoiding a cluster of melons on the floor. (More about those later.)

“ARRRRRGHHHH!” he cried, like a man who’d just trodden on a stuffed hedgehog – called Sharpie – with his bare feet. (This was precisely because, gentle reader, he HAD just trodden on a stuffed hedgehog – called Sharpie – with his bare feet.)

He reached down, grabbed Sharpie in one hand – *ouch!* – and threw him/it across the crammed bedroom of their caravan with all his not inconsiderable might.



Fortunately for Mrs Grunt – because it was her turn to make breakfast – she had, moments earlier, reached for a frying pan she'd been soaking overnight in a large washing-up bowl full of water beneath the bed (to save space).

She'd just sat up again, dripping frying pan in hand, when Sharpie had come hurtling through the air in her general direction, though she wasn't the intended target. Mr Grunt had been angry with the stuffed, dead hedgehog, not with her.

Raising her hands to defend herself, she found herself to be already holding an ideal flying-hedgehog-repellent, and batted Sharpie aside with the frying pan, like a tennis player would swat aside an easy ball.



The hedgehog shot through the open bedroom window before you could say, “Look out below!”

Both Mr and Mrs Grunt watched it go in silent amazement.

The silence was broken by an “Ow!”

Mr Grunt, massaging one of his hurty, Sharpie-pricked feet, took two hops over to the window and looked out.

He saw Sack, the (former) gardener of Bigg Manor, rubbing his head. Former means “no longer”, so Sack was no longer looking after the acres and acres of land surrounding the huge, crumbling house.



Mr Grunt laughed and pointed. (He loved to laugh and point at people less fortunate than himself.)

"What is it, husband?" said Mrs Grunt from the bed. She was busy drying the frying pan with a corner of the itchy blanket.

"Sharpie hit Sack!" he said.

Mrs Grunt gave a hideous grin. "Serves him right!" she said.

Mr Grunt had no idea whether she was referring to the hedgehog or the former gardener. What's more, he didn't care. He had other things on his mind.

Mrs Grunt had been right. He *did* keep secrets from her. And one such secret was a secret meeting he had to attend (in secret) later that day.



Mr Grunt found himself sitting in the middle

of a round tent – where he'd been told to sit – with light streaming down on him, like a spotlight, from a hole in the roof directly above him.

"Why can't I sit somewhere else?" he grumbled to the only other person in the tent. Although Mr Grunt was directly facing the man, who was also sitting cross-legged and on the rug, the bright sunlight made it impossible for Mr Grunt to see his face, hidden in the shadows.

He assumed that this was probably because the man must be really ugly. Not everyone could be beautiful like his Mrs Grunt.

He grinned at the thought of her, adding a worrying-looking smirk to his already worrying-looking face.

He sniffed the air with flaring nostrils. And dropped the smile.





"This tent smells," said Mr Grunt, which was true. It *did* smell (though a more polite person might have chosen not to mention it).

"The walls are made from animal skins," said the man in the shadows, his voice barely above a whisper. "They have a particular smell."

"A particularly *dreadful* smell," said Mr Grunt. He breathed in deeply, then wished that he hadn't. The smell wasn't as disgusting as Mrs Grunt's breath – few things were – but it was pretty rank, in his opinion. Considering most of his meals were made from roadkill – animals scraped off the road having been killed by traffic and left on the tarmac for a couple of days – this was a bit rich coming from him, but that's Mr Grunt for you.

"HA!" he said. (He'd recently started saying "HA!" a lot and really liked it.) His

bottom was already getting numb from sitting awkwardly, so he shifted his weight around a bit. “You could do with some more furniture in this smell-trap, you know,” he added.

Mr Grunt found that he’d somehow got his clothes in a bit of a tangle and, yanking his sleeveless sweater out from under his bottom, managed to knock over a small, three-legged table with his elbow.

“You could do with more furniture but not so many *silly little tables*!” he snapped.

The man in the shadows gave a little cough. One of those coughs which wasn’t really a proper cough at all but more of a “shall-we-get-down-to-business?” signal. “Shall we get down to business?” he said in that whispery voice of his. (I told you.)

“Ah yes, business,” said Mr Grunt.

What had brought Mr Grunt to the tent was

a message: a message that had reached him in most unusual circumstances. The week before, he'd woken up and found it pinned to his chest (well, to his pyjama jacket).

He knew at once that Mrs Grunt hadn't put it there. If it had been Mrs Grunt, she'd probably have ended up pinning *him* with the safety pin in the process. And then there was the safety pin itself. Unlike the gnarled old ones in her sewing basket, or the pair she sometimes wore as earrings – when she wasn't wearing ones



made from washers – this safety pin was new and SHINY. This was a *quality* safety pin.

Someone must have walked through the grounds of Bigg Manor, climbed into their



caravan, up the stairs, stepped over their sort-of-son Sunny, sleeping on the landing, and crept into their bedroom without waking them, which was quite an achievement. All the more so when you consider that Mrs Grunt nearly *always* left Sharpie lying around, like an unintended booby trap of prickles for unsuspecting feet, and you know what trouble *that* could cause.

As for the unsigned message itself, it was written on expensive paper and – although it was in BLOCK CAPITALS – it didn't look as if it'd been written by someone losing a fight with a pen. No, this message clearly wasn't from Mrs Grunt.

In brown ink on cream-coloured paper, it asked Mr Grunt to come to Gilligan's Field at 1.00pm on Thursday, but that wasn't the part that interested Mr Grunt.

It said that he was to tell no one and to come alone, but that didn't interest him much either.

But then he came to the part where it said that there would be silver coins involved. And that *did* interest him . . .

. . . so, of course, Mr Grunt told no one – because that meant that he wouldn't have to SHARE the silver coins – and, when Thursday came, he wobbled away on his trusty, rusty bike and went to Gilligan's Field at around



about one-ish, where he came across the big, round, domed tent.

"I need you to deliver a POGI for me," said the man in the shadows, making the word rhyme with "bogey".

"Right," said Mr Grunt. He had no idea who the man was or what a POGI was but didn't want to ask in case the answer the man gave was a bit boring. He wasn't interested in the details. He was only really interested in the silver coins.



Don't get me wrong. Mr Grunt wasn't one of those people whose life was all about money.

He wasn't interested in flash cars or the latest gadgets. But Mr Grunt had plans. And these plans would be helped along with some silver coins in his (rather holey) pocket.

So if Mister Hiding-in-the-Shadows wanted him to deliver a POGI then he'd deliver a POGI. Full stop.

"There are a number of people who want to get their hands on the POGI for themselves, so it's your job to deliver him as discreetly as possible," said the man.

"*Him?*" said Mr Grunt, raising an eyebrow. "The POGI is a *him* and not an *it*?" He hadn't been paying too much attention, but enough to hear a "him" when someone said it . . . or, to be more accurate, said *"him"*.

"The POGI is a Person Of Great Importance," said the shadow man with a sigh. "That's what POGI stands for, and your



– er – *challenge* is simply to get him from A to B."

"Why can't you just put him on a bus?" said Mr Grunt. Then he remembered that he was being paid silver coins for this challenge, and he didn't want to talk himself out of a job. "I'm your man!" he blurted out, suddenly waving his arms around to show his enthusiasm. (He wasn't quite sure how arm-waving showed enthusiasm, but he was convinced that a *lack* of arm-waving would show a *lack* of enthusiasm, so wave his arms he did.)

There was a crash as he knocked something else over in the shadows.

"Good," said the man (ignoring the crash, and apparently impressed by the enthusiasm). "You are to get the POGI – alive and well – to a Mrs Bayliss by the twenty-fifth. You'll find all the information you need in here."



His hand appeared out of the shadows holding an envelope made of the same cream-coloured paper as the original message. Mr Grunt took it. “But be careful,” the man

continued. “Let me repeat, there are people who know that the POGI will be trying to get to Mrs Bayliss and they may very well try to snatch him . . . or worse.”

“Worse?” asked Mr Grunt.

The man gave another of his little non-cough coughs. “These people are the kind of people who, if they can’t get hold of the POGI for themselves, may very well make sure that no one else does either.”

“Oh,” said Mr Grunt, not too sure what that was supposed to mean. But he didn’t want to ask any more questions. He was getting bored with sitting cross-legged with a numb bum and the sun in his eyes. He *really* wanted to go.

Now the man in the shadows held out a second envelope. “This contains a photograph of the first half of the silver coins we promised

you, plus some extra cash – in notes – for expenses," he said. (Now, you and I know that there's a big difference between a *photograph* of lots of money and *actual* lots of money but – then again – there's a big difference between Mr Grunt and you and me.)



Mr Grunt took it gratefully in his grubby hands. "Right," he said. "I'll be off then." He struggled to his feet and walked over to the door – a flap in the tent – then stopped, turning back to face his shadowy employer. He thought he'd better say something upbeat and positive. "The smell," he said.

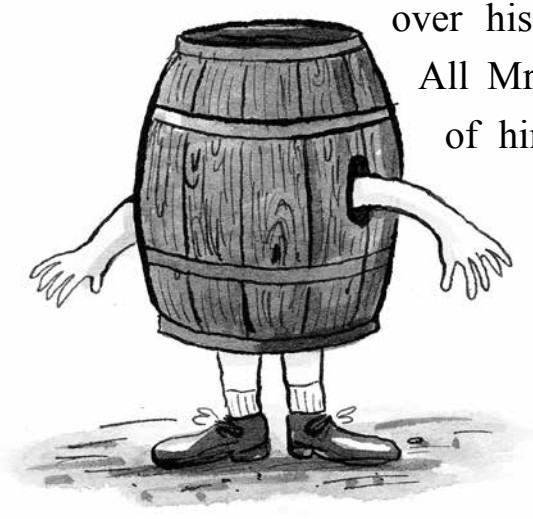
"Yes?" said the shadow man.

"You get used to it after a while."

"Yes," said the shadow man. "I suppose you do."

Mr Grunt lifted the flap and went outside. He strode across the grass towards the five-bar gate his bike was leaning against, busily stuffing the two envelopes into the waist of his trousers, held up by two belts sewn together.

He climbed back on his trusty, rusty bike and was just about to pedal home . . . when a small person waddled into his path. *Waddled* because he was wearing an upturned barrel over his head and body. All Mr Grunt could see of him were his arms sticking through a hole cut either side, and his legs and feet sticking out of the bottom.



You or I might have gasped at such a strange sight. Or raised an eyebrow, or thought, "Gosh!" Mr Grunt, on the other hand, hardly seemed surprised that the guy was WEARING A BARREL.

"You're the POGI?" Mr Grunt asked.

"POGI," the POGI replied.

It must be some kind of disguise, thought Mr Grunt.

He looked at the POGI and then at the front of his bike, then at the POGI again. He pointed to the handlebars. "Jump on," he said.

The POGI struggled up on to the bike, gripping the handlebars, and dangling his legs either side of the front wheel. Mr Grunt leaned to his left, to see past the barrel, and began to pedal.