

Grown-ups can't Be Friends With Dragons

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For my parents, who gave me
a truly magical childhood.

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.”

Brian 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.

*

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 ainer. 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.

Dragon

Despite Emily's prediction, Dad didn't kill him; he just looked very disappointed and sad. He did ground him though.

The next day, Miss Neale spoke gently to Brian about what had happened, and he told her he was sorry. She made him look at her and she held his hands as she spoke to him. He could smell her perfume; it reminded him of something from so long ago he couldn't quite tell what it was, but somehow it made him feel warm and cosy even though he was being told off.

After school, it was his dad who picked him up. Brian caught that familiar whiff which told him he had been to the pub. He was a tall man, and though he put his hand affectionately on Brian's shoulder, he didn't say much to him, and Brian felt it was best to keep quiet too.

After tea, Dad left for work while Emily was still washing up, and a short while later, Brian heard Mark's motorbike pulling up outside. After a while, Emily and Mark went upstairs. Brian could hear them laughing in Emily's room, but he knew they wanted to be on their own. He was bored of the TV, so he put his dad's old torch in his coat pocket and

sneaked out of the back door. He didn't care about being grounded. Maybe Mark would come looking for him on his motorbike later.

The harbour was quiet, and it was just starting to get dark. There were two fishing boats tied to the big stone sea-wall that curved round the harbour. The wall had two different levels you could walk on, and it was wide enough for small vans to park on it while the fishermen loaded or unloaded their boats. There were a few small, white houses where the wall began. And a pub. Brian's dad liked to go in there a lot, but it made Brian feel uneasy. He wasn't sure why.

He was eager to get to his cave. In his cave, no-one could upset him. No-one even knew it existed. He went across the empty car park and climbed over the rocks to the little shale beach. It was already quite dark inside the cave now. He got the torch out, pleased with himself for thinking to bring it this time, and climbed up to the high place at the back. Even though the rock was damp and cold, he still felt strangely snug, comforted by the darkness and the sound of the waves and a distant memory of perfect happiness. He drew himself playing football with Gary, one of the popular boys in his class.

The wind was making its funny noises just like before. It sounded as if it was singing in the dark place behind him. He listened.

And then it said his name. Just like before, the

voice was friendly and welcoming and musical, and he listened for it to call him again.

“Brian... Brian,” the wind’s voice sang gently.

“Hello?” He said, excited.

“Brian...”

He shone his torch around. He could not see very much. He shook the torch but the batteries must have been running out.

“Hello?” he said, a bit louder than before. “Where are you?”

“Brian,” the strange, calm voice said, and it gave him a warm feeling of comfort. He turned and shone the torch behind where he was sitting. He could see nothing but rock, but that was where the voice was coming from. The cave floor sloped upwards in big lumps, until it met the jagged roof.

He climbed until he found himself in a space that he hadn’t noticed before, high up and right at the back where the cave was utterly dark. The rock glistened as he waved the thin torch beam over it. The voice called him on, and he noticed a patch in the rock which stayed black even when he shone the torch right at it. He waved his hand in it and found it was a gap, big enough for him to get into. Assuming it must lead somewhere, he swung himself round so his feet were in the gap, and lowered himself until he could feel solid rock under his foot. He slid himself down onto a small ledge, and clambered further down over bumpy rock, until

he was in what seemed to be a tunnel.

He was on a smooth, flat floor. Down here, the walls of the tunnel were different from the cave walls. The tunnel's walls, and the floor, were straight and flat, like inside a building. Not at all like the wobbly, sloping, curving walls of the cave. But they had amazing patterns on them. He realised this was strange, but he didn't feel scared. He felt excited, and *welcome*, as if this was somewhere he was *supposed* to be. Swirls and spirals and strange shapes made up the patterns, and he stood there and looked closely at them for ages.

Then the voice called him again. He'd almost forgotten about it, but, excited again, he hurried on towards it. The tunnel started to slope downwards now. He kept stopping to look at the patterns. He touched them, they were raised and bumpy like the paint on Mark's jacket.

There were some big, knobbly, pointed mounds on the floor with water dripping on them from above. They didn't look like part of the tunnel. The tunnel was flat and square, as if someone had built it, but these were more like something that had grown, like upside down icicles. Some of them were nearly as tall as him, and wide as the tree in the playground. Brian remembered Miss Neale telling them that lumps like that often grew inside caves, sometimes from the floor and sometimes from the ceiling. The torch beam flickered a bit. He hoped it

wasn't going to stop working.

Then he felt the tunnel around him change. He couldn't see the walls anymore, and the air felt cooler. Even with the torch he could hardly see anything except the floor, but somehow he could tell he had come into a very big, wide space, like inside a church perhaps. This place smelt different. Cleaner, not so much like the sea. And the voice kept calling him.

He could hear echoes of his footsteps now. They sounded as though they were coming from a long way off. The smooth floor sloped sideways here; it was like walking on the side of a hill and he slipped over once or twice. In the torch beam, he could just about make out water at the bottom of the slope. Slowly, straining his eyes, he crossed the cavern. And he came to the wall at the far side. He could see more swirly patterns in the torch light. He stayed close to the wall, and walked up the slope, towards the voice.

There was a small, black space part way up the wall, like a window or an entrance to something. More of the knobbly things—stalagmites, he remembered now—blocked the entrance a bit, and the voice was coming from inside it. He climbed up and squeezed through the gaps into the hole. It was like a small cave, quite dry, and cold.

“Hello!” The voice was friendly, and it was very close. He shone the torch around, and this time the

beam glowed back at him from two curved, glassy objects, round, and roughly the size of large pebbles. They were right in front of him, and he realised they were eyes. He could hardly see the creature they belonged to at all; just the wide, dark, unblinking eyes, and he wasn't scared. He was just... interested, and excited.

"Hello?" he said, sitting down and looking at the eyes. As he shone the torch closer and around them he could see what looked like soft, white skin, but the torch beam was too weak to cut through the thick blackness of this place. Whatever this creature was though, it didn't seem to be very big, and Brian knew straight away that it was not going to hurt him. He also realised now that this was all very strange.

"Woah!" he said, peering closer. "What are you?"

"I am..." the voice said, but it stopped, as if it didn't know the answer to the question. "Something hurts," it said then. "It's too..."

"Are you injured? Do you need help?" Brian was suddenly worried. Had this creature called him here to help it? He angled the torch's feeble glow at the creature and tried to see what was wrong. He now saw there were strange tubes and pipes all around it, he could vaguely make out that the creature was loosely wrapped in them.

"...Too bright," the creature said, a note of pain in its voice, and Brian realised it was referring to the torch.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, and switched it off. Now he was sitting there in that tiny, dark alcove at the back of a huge underground cavern, in total darkness. In fact, it wasn't just dark, it was a thick, cold blackness that it almost made his eyes hurt, so he shut them, and that seemed to soothe them.

“Thank you,” the creature said.

“It's okay, I didn't mean to hurt your eyes.”

“I know.”

Brian didn't know what to say then. Somehow, just being here felt right, and even though the rock he was sitting on was cold, this tiny little hole in the cavern wall felt cosy.

“So, what *are* you?” Brian asked again. “Why are you here?”

“I'm...” said the creature. “I'm...” Brian waited, like Miss Neale did for him when he was trying to read a difficult word in his reading book. “I'm... I don't know. I don't... know.”

“You don't know who you are?” Brian asked, surprised, and then thought that might have been rude, so said, “It doesn't matter. Maybe I can help you.” He thought for a moment, and then said, “Maybe you're a cat. Or a dog.” It made sense to him that someone's pet might have wandered in here and got itself stuck. But, at the same time, he could see this was clearly no ordinary animal and he was embarrassed for having made such a stupid suggestion. The creature said nothing. Perhaps it

was thinking about it. “Do you need me to get you out?” Brian said.

“No,” the creature replied. “This is where I live. This is where I have always lived.”

Brian suddenly knew what it was, though it didn’t quite look like pictures he’d seen. Especially the one on Mark’s jacket. “You’re a sort of dragon aren’t you?” he said. “Dragons live in caves by the sea! Like in that song we sing at school.”

“Maybe that’s what I am,” the creature said.

“I think you are a dragon,” he said. “Are you sure you don’t need me to help you get out? Are you stuck?”

The creature seemed to laugh.

“Why are you laughing?” Brian said.

“You are asking me if I need help. But *you* called to *me* for help.”

Now Brian was really confused. “I didn’t call you. I don’t need help with anything. Except my spelling and reading sometimes, but Miss Neale helps me with that. *You* called *me*. That’s why I came.”

The creature didn’t say anything for a while. Brian thought perhaps he was thinking about something. Then the creature said, “I have been here so long I have forgotten myself.”

“Forgotten yourself?”

“It was as if I had drifted away. I have had no thoughts for a very long time. I have known only darkness and emptiness.”

“Do you mean you’ve been asleep?”

“Yes, sort of. For a very long time.” He said lots of other strange things too, and Brian didn’t really understand what he meant. He just liked listening to him. His voice was like music, like the violins they listened to on the stereo in assembly. After a while, Brian realised the dragon wasn’t talking anymore. His words seemed to have turned into a tune.

“What are you singing?” Brian asked.

“A song. I can remember songs. Would you like to hear more?”

“Yes please,” he said.

Brian always liked singing at school, but the dragon’s singing was different. It didn’t really have words, just a strange, winding, twisting tune. It seemed as though the creature had lots of voices, like a choir, and each voice sang a slightly different tune. Brian was transfixed. It was the most beautiful music he’d ever heard, and it reminded him of something. It reminded him of the patterns on the tunnel walls he’d seen earlier. The lines and shapes seemed to wind around each other in the same way as the dragon’s many voices did. Then, something else came into his head. It was like a cross between sound and colour and smell. It was like flute music, but also like a firework display, and the smell of flowers and rain. The song just came straight into his head. He wasn’t hearing it with his ears. It was like a dream. The song had no words, it just had

tunes, feelings, colours, smells, tastes. It was beautiful, but it was also sad in places. There were brightly coloured patches of happiness and the taste of apple, and then deep blue and purple sadness which smelled like wet roads in summer. Then a feeling of gladness, and the smell of freshly cut grass and the taste of cake.

Brian began to dream. Slowly, the dragon's strange song changed and began to make different shapes in his mind. Weird shapes at first, but then they started to look like real things. He could see sunshine; he could feel cool wind. He could smell mud and grass and trees. Then he felt there was something near him... an animal. More than one, in fact. Something fat and round and pink. He thought it might be other dragons. But they were blurry, and distant. And then the song was over and the strange dream finished. He was sitting in darkness again.

"There are many more songs," said the dragon, and it was only then that Brian realised the dragon's voice came straight into his mind, just like the song had done. And that's how he was speaking to the dragon too: not by using his mouth, but by *thinking*. It seemed so natural and so easy he had not even realised he was doing it, until now.

"Your song made me see things," he told Dragon with his thinking-voice. "It was like being in another place. Did we go to another place?"

"I... don't know. I think so. I could hear someone

calling me, like you did.”

“I told you before, *you* called *me*!”

“Maybe we called each other. But someone else is calling too. They were in that other place, where my song took us. But I am... too weak to take us there.”

“Who was it? Who was calling us?” Brian was desperate to go back there and find out who was calling.

“I don’t know.”

“And what were those pink things? Were they dragons, like you?”

“No. I don’t think there are any other... dragons,” the creature said slowly, as if it was trying out the word ‘dragon’ to see how it felt.

They talked more about what they had seen, and Brian asked the dragon lots of questions, but he didn’t know many answers.

Later, Brian said, “I know a song too.”

“Then sing it for me,” said the dragon.

“Okay.” Brian knew he was bad at singing, but somehow he felt that it didn’t matter, the dragon would like it anyway. It was his favourite song, it was about a boy who meets a dragon in a cave, just like he had. He forgot some of the words, and he didn’t think he got the tune quite right. He could only remember the first two verses. When he’d finished, Dragon said, “That was wonderful. I have never heard anything like it.”

“It’s my favourite,” Brian said. “Miss Neale says

it's a sad song, but I can't remember the last bit."

"Who is Miss Neale?"

"She's my teacher."

"Teacher..." said the dragon thoughtfully.

"Yes. She's nice."

"Where does Miss Neale live? Out there? Past the cave?"

"Yes."

"Are there lots of other people like you?"

"Well, I haven't really got any friends."

"Just Miss Neale?"

"Oh, she's not my friend, she's my teacher. Have you got any friends?"

"I did have, but they've all gone now," said the dragon, and Brian suddenly felt a powerful sadness filling him, as if he was sharing the dragon's sorrow. He found himself breathing deeply, and he wiped a warm tear from his eye. He didn't know what to say. The poor dragon. Alone. How many friends had it once had? Where had they all gone? He knew it wouldn't be right to ask that now though. He wanted to make the dragon feel better, not worse. At last, he said, "Well... I'll be your friend."

"That sounds good," said the dragon.

For a while, they sat there in silence. Even though Brian couldn't see the dragon, or hear it, somehow he could feel it there beside him, and for now, that was enough. But, after a while, Brian started to feel cold. Also, he wasn't sure how long he'd been out,

and he was hoping to slip back into the house before Emily and Mark realised he'd gone. "I've got to go home now," he said. "Sorry. I'll come back again though, Dragon." He reached into the darkness and stroked the creature's skin. It was cold and lumpy and smelled of seaweed and sand. Or maybe that was just the smell of the cave. Dragon's strange body seemed to ripple. Brian switched the torch on, but kept the light away from the dragon's eyes.

Brian quickly wriggled between the stalagmites. "Bye, Dragon," he said. As he emerged from the cave a few minutes later, it occurred to him that even Terry didn't have a friend like this. No-one had a friend like Dragon, except the boy in the song, but that was just a story, for children.