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Opening extract from
We Can Be Heroes

Written by
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Published by
Egmont Books Ltd

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CATHERINE BRUTON

**WE CAN BE
HEROES**

EGMONT

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We bring stories to life

We Can Be Heroes

First published in Great Britain 2011
by Egmont UK Limited
239 Kensington High Street
London W8 6SA

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Inside illustrations copyright © 2011 David Shephard

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ISBN 978 1 4052 5652 0

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

www.egmont.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the
British Library

Typeset by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by the CPI Group

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*For Jonny, Joe-Joe and Elsie Maudie,
and all our lovely grandparents,
with love xx*

A FEW THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

My dad was killed in the 9/11 attacks in New York. I was only two at the time so I don't really remember him much, although when people ask, I say I do. People ask about my dad a lot. I usually respond with a shrug or by looking at my shoes. But no one seems to mind: it's OK if I'm rude or even a bit weird at times, because I'm the boy whose dad died on 9/11.

But the stuff in this book is not about that. It's about the summer my mum went away; the summer that me and Jed and Priti tried to catch a suicide bomber and prevent an honour killing; the summer that Stevie Sanders disappeared and we caused a race riot. It's about how we built a tree house and joined the bomb squad; how I found my dad and Jed lost his; and how we both lost our mums then found them again.

So it's not really about 9/11, but then again none of those things would have happened if it hadn't been for that day. So I guess it's all back to front. Sort of . . .

JULY 13TH

THINGS I'D LIKE TO KNOW ABOUT MY DAD

1. Who was his favourite *Star Wars* character? Was he a fan of the Dark Side? Darth Vader or Maul? Young Obi Wan or old?
2. If he could choose for England to win the World Cup or for Aston Villa to win the treble, which would he go for?
3. Who did he think was the greatest ever Sports Personality of the Year?
4. Could he light a fire by rubbing sticks together?
5. What was his record for keepy-uppies?
6. Was he a morning person or an evening person?
7. Would he have been good cop or bad cop? (Mum says she gets tired of trying to be both.)
8. What did he smell like and what did it feel like to hug him?
9. What did he think about me?
10. I can't think of another one, which is pretty rubbish. You'd think I'd have loads and loads of questions

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about my dad since I hardly remember him at all and he died in such tragic circumstances, but I can't even think of ten. What does that say about me exactly?



This used to be my dad's room. When he was a kid, he shared it with his brother, Ian. They stuck the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling, and the Smurf stickers all over the window frame. On the shelf are some trophies my dad won – chess champion, Under 12 Most Improved Player, that sort of thing. And on the wall is a second place pennant he once won in a rowing regatta, covering up a doodle on the wallpaper. So maybe he liked drawing, like me.

I'm going to be sleeping here, just like last time. And, just like last time, I don't know how long I'll be staying, and it's not worth asking Granny and Grandad because they don't know either.

So I'm sitting on the windowsill, drawing cartoons. That's what I do when stuff like this happens: I draw

things. Doodles, mainly, and cartoons, whatever comes into my head. I don't know why, but it sort of helps. First I doodle the birds on the telephone wires. I draw them with mobile phones held up to their beaks, then I draw phone numbers circling their heads, spinning round them till they go goggle-eyed. Then I start to draw a girl with the phone, but she ends up looking like my mum so I stop because I don't want to think about my mum.

I put down my pencil, run my finger over my dad's faded Smurf stickers and stare out of the window.

Downstairs I can hear my grandparents talking.

'How was she?' That's my granny.

'The same as last time,' Grandad replies.

Which doesn't tell me anything I don't already know.

I pick up my pencil and look out of the window again for something else to draw.

The cul-de-sac is empty except for the little chav kid (that's what my grandad calls her, but I think her real name is Stevie) riding a pink bicycle with tassels on the handlebars round and round her driveway. She's been there for ages, all on her own. I draw a

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picture of her – a cartoon girl with big Bambi eyes and a tiny body in outsized shoes. I make it look like she’s riding her bike through a twister in the sky – just like the witch in *The Wizard of Oz* – then I draw things whirling and twirling around her: a washing machine, a pair of wellies, *click-clackety* knitting needles, a hula-hooping cow, a fish bowl on a piano.

I glance over at the house opposite. My grandad says an Asian family have moved in. Most of the neighbours on the cul-de-sac are as old as my grandparents, except the Sanders (Stevie’s family) next door and now the Asian kids in the house opposite.

I’m just wondering whether any of the kids are my sort of age when the door of the Asian House (Grandad again) opens and out comes the oddest-looking girl I’ve ever seen.

She’s about ten, I reckon, maybe eleven. Skin the colour of toffee, massive bunches attached to the sides of her head with frilly pink things that make her look like a poodle. She’s wearing her school uniform so I guess her school hasn’t broken up yet either. I suppose I should be pleased that I’m missing the last week of

term, but I'm not – not really. On top of her school uniform, the bunchy girl is wearing this red tutu thing, and on her feet she has trainers that, from the way she's zooming around, I guess must have wheels in them. They're bright pink and look very new.

She looks up, sees me in the window and ignores me. Then she wheelies up and down her drive, twirling in neat circles before coming to a stop in front of her doorway with a little flourish – like she's an Olympic gymnast or a figure skater or something. Stevie stops to watch her, but the bunchy girl just ignores her too and keeps on wheelie-ing.

I draw a cartoon of a wheelie-wearing superheroine – giant bunches flying, the wheels in her heels going at the speed of light, whizzing past Stevie on her flying bike and the hula-hooping cow and the upside-down fish-bowl piano.

And then, suddenly, the wheelie girl stops, tips back on her heels, hands on hips, and stares up at the window where I'm sitting. Stares right at me. And waves.

* * *

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Five minutes later, the wheelie girl is standing on my grandparents' doorstep, resting back on her wheelie heels in a way that makes her whole body tilt slightly backwards. She's checking me out.

'I'm Priti,' she says, looking at my granny and deliberately ignoring me. 'Although my big sister says I'm not. Pretty that is. She reckons we should swap names, but she's dead vain and totally into herself, so she would say that, wouldn't she? Anyway, my mum says I should ask your boy if he wants to hang out.'

I don't say anything.

Granny smiles. 'Well, I think you are *very* pretty,' she says. 'And very kind to ask Ben to play. What do you think, Ben?'

I should say that I'm tired (because wheelie girl is obviously way younger than me – and a girl) but I don't. Instead, I go really red and suddenly can't say anything at all.

'Can't he talk?' Priti asks, giving me a funny look. She clearly thinks I'm some sort of weirdo.

'He's just had a difficult day,' says Granny gently.

‘What do you say, Ben? Do you want to “hang out” with Priti?’

I shrug my shoulders. (I can feel my face turning the colour of a pickled beetroot now.)

‘Well, that looks like a yes to me, Priti,’ says Granny brightly.

My heart sinks. I know she’s trying to help, but this was not the answer I wanted.

Priti grins from ear to ear.

I imagine doodling a Cheshire cat with a face like Priti and giant bunches for ears. Wearing pink wheelie shoes.

Priti whizzes off down Granny’s path, leaving me to follow behind.

‘So what do you want to do then?’ she says, when I finally catch up with her.

I shrug.

We both look around the cul-de-sac. Little Stevie’s fallen off her pink bike and is crying. I wonder if we ought to go over and help her, but her mum leans out of the window and screams at her to shut up and get inside right now. Stevie gets up and hobbles back

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in, leaving the pink bike abandoned on the pavement. She has blood coming out of her knee and her face is streaked with tears. Once she's gone, there's not much else to see.

Priti turns and looks at me with her nose screwed up and says, 'You *can* talk, can't you?'

'Yeah!' I say, my face getting hot again. 'I'm not stupid.'

'Good, I was beginning to worry. You talk funny though. Where you from anyway?'

'Somerset,' I say.

'Never heard of it. That's the country, right?'

I nod.

'That explains why you talk funny.'

'Except I don't,' I say.

'Yes you do. You say "oi" instead of I.'

'I do not!'

'You just did. You sound like a farmer.'

I want to tell her that she speaks through her nose only she doesn't give me the chance.

'Why you here then?'

'I'm staying with my grandparents.'

‘Yeah, I got that. But why?’

‘Does there have to be a reason?’

‘No, but there is, isn’t there? I can tell.’

I just shrug because I don’t want to talk about it, but Priti isn’t taking the hint. ‘What is it? Did your mum and dad get divorced? Or is it swine flu? Or foot and mouth or whatever it is you have in the country?’

‘No, it’s nothing like that.’

‘So there is something!’ she says. ‘I knew it. You can always tell.’

‘How’s that exactly?’ I say.

I imagine doodling a giant cartoon piano descending from the sky and landing on her head.

Crash! Tinkle! Tinkle!

‘You’ve got the look of one of those dog-is-for-life-not-just-for-Christmas mutts,’ she says.

‘At least I don’t have hair like a poodle,’ I mutter. She ignores me.

‘You’ve got OK clothes,’ she says, then adds, ‘although they don’t really suit you.’

‘Thanks a lot,’ I say, trying to sound sarcastic, but not really succeeding.

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She's probably right though. Most of my clothes are hand-me-downs from my too-cool-for-school cousin Jed. His mum always passes things on to my mum. Or at least she used to, until last year. And Jed mostly wears labels and I'm not exactly a label person. Which Priti can obviously tell.

'Does your mum buy stuff for you?' she asks.

'No!' I say quickly.

'Mine tries to, but I don't let her,' she says. 'She's an academic so she's got no sense of style. Obviously.'

'What's an academic?' I say, glancing at what Priti is wearing.

'A professor thingy. She works at the university and thinks fashion is a feminist issue.'

'Right,' I say, even though I've got no idea what she's talking about.

'So this is about your mum then,' she says.

'What is?'

'The "Ben's had a difficult day" bit. The reason you're here. I'm right, aren't I?'

'My mum's sick, OK? She had to go to hospital. Happy now?'

‘Happy would be weird,’ says Priti solemnly. Then she grins. ‘But it’s always nice to be right!’ She tips back on her wheelie shoes. ‘We could take turns on my skateboard if you like?’

As Priti prepares for launch, I fish my notebook out of my pocket and doodle a superheroine with bunches somersaulting through the air on giant wheelie shoes surrounded by a swirl of exclamation marks and asterisks.

Then Priti takes off and suddenly she’s in the air for real. Then she lands bum down on the tarmac.

For a moment, I think she’s going to cry, but instead she starts laughing. ‘Too many wheels,’ she says, kicking off her shoes and going at it again with just her socks on. This time she clears the ramp and lands easily.

‘I’m eleven and a quarter,’ she says as she lands. ‘How old are you?’

‘Twelve,’ I say, ‘and eight months.’

‘You’re pretty short for your age,’ she says, standing in front of me in her white socks on the hot, dirty

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tarmac. ‘Bet I’m nearly as tall as you.’

‘Only cos you’re standing on your tiptoes.’

She glances down at her feet – she doesn’t seem that bothered about the state of her socks – and shrugs.

‘What’re you drawing?’ she asks, staring down at my notepad.

‘You,’ I say.

‘Oh.’ She twists herself to take a look. ‘Cool! I look like a midget Lara Croft.’

‘With a tutu and bunches,’ I say.

‘You’re well good.’

‘Thanks.’

‘My mum would say that drawing cartoons offers you an escape from your troubled existence.’

‘I don’t have a troubled existence.’

‘If you say so.’ She shrugs again. ‘Your turn,’ she says, handing me the skateboard. ‘You can do it, can’t you?’

‘Course I can,’ I say, taking the board from her. She raises one eyebrow (which I know from trying it is harder than it looks) and folds her arms. I can tell she’s waiting for me to mess up.

Luckily, I actually can skateboard, though not as

well as Priti. I clear the ramp and land a little awkwardly on the other side.

‘Not bad,’ she says as I hand back the skateboard. ‘And I’ve just figured out why you’re here.’

‘I told you why.’

‘Yeah, but then I thought, if his mum’s so ill, why isn’t he with his dad? And I figured that your dad could be an international spy or an Arctic explorer or a contestant on a reality TV programme, or maybe just divorced or in a coma or something boring like that. But then I remembered.’

I look down, knowing what’s coming.

‘I remembered that my brother said that he heard my mum say to my dad that the pink bike kid’s mum said to her that your gran’s boy was killed on September 11th,’ she says, without taking a breath. ‘And that must be your dad, right?’

I nod.

She pauses for the briefest of seconds. ‘So what does that mean anyway?’

I look up. ‘Have you never heard of September 11th?’ I ask.

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‘Nope!’ She shakes her head and her bunches flap around like giant dog’s ears.

‘But everyone’s heard of September 11th!’ I say, trying to work out if she’s lying. ‘Don’t they do it in your school?’

‘Is it a “racially sensitive” topic?’ asks Priti, picking sticky tarmac off the bottom of her sock.

‘I guess,’ I say.

‘Cos our teachers generally steer clear of those.’

‘Why?’

‘High ratio of Asian pupils of immigrant backgrounds to white teachers of newly qualified teacher status,’ she says quickly, sounding like she’s quoting something she read in a newspaper. ‘My mum reckons all our teachers are “white and green” – that means newly qualified, not really green, like aliens. That would be cool too, but you probably couldn’t mess them around so much. Anyway, Mum reckons they’re all frightened of saying something racially offensive. That’s why they keep things pretty much uncontroversial. Personally, I think it’s a shame because informed discussion is a valuable

educational tool, but what can you do?’

‘I see,’ I say.

‘So are you going to tell me what’s so special about this September 11th thing or not?’ says Priti, still picking at her socks.

Actually, I’d rather not, but I take a deep breath and do anyway. ‘These men flew their aeroplanes into some tower blocks in America and knocked them over. Loads of people were killed.’ Then I add, ‘Including my dad.’

I imagine drawing cartoon aeroplanes flying into cartoon tower blocks. Cartoon flames and speech bubbles filled with *AAAAAAAAAAAAAHs*.

‘Oh, you mean 9/11,’ she says, looking up. ‘You should have said.’

I stare at her. ‘Um, I did.’

‘Yeah, well, everyone’s heard of 9/11,’ she says. Like I was the one who’d said I didn’t know.

‘I told you they had,’ I say.

‘And you reckon your dad was one of the ones that died?’

In my head I’m drawing cartoon flames coming

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from the tower blocks. Stick men jumping through the air, falling.

‘I don’t *reckon*,’ I say. ‘He was.’

I grab the skateboard and take off in the direction of the ramp. This time I don’t quite make it and my ankle twists painfully as I hit the tarmac. I want to cry out, but I don’t.

‘You are so making this up,’ I hear Priti saying.

‘You were the one who said your brother heard it from your mum or whoever,’ I say, getting up and trying not to show how much my ankle hurts.

‘Yeah, well, your granny must have made it up in that case.’

‘Why would she do that?’ I shove the board in her direction.

‘I dunno. To get free meals-on-wheels? To have something to talk about with her pals at bingo? To get herself through to the next round on *The X Factor*? How should I know?’

‘Well, she didn’t,’ I say.

‘I mean, you don’t exactly look like someone whose dad got killed by terrorists, do you?’

‘What am I supposed to look like then?’

‘I dunno – just different.’

I glance down at my shoes. Imagine doodling sad faces on the toe of each one.

‘Would it be better if I had a leg missing or a big sign on my head saying *9/11 Boy* or something?’ I say.

‘All right. No need to get upset just cos I don’t believe you! Which I don’t by the way.’

‘I’m not getting upset,’ I say. ‘It’s not my fault that you’re too young to remember it.’

‘I so am not!’ says Priti. One of her bunches has come loose and is hanging much lower than the other so it makes her look lopsided. ‘My dad says I’ve got a memory like an elephant, and that’s pretty big.’

Even though I’m fairly sure that elephants have small memories, I don’t argue with her; I just say, ‘I’m going in.’

Most people, when they find out about my dad, are super nice to me in a way that’s really creepy. Even my friends go all weird on me every September, like I’ve got a contagious disease or something. But no one has ever accused me of

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making it up before. And it's really annoying.

Priti jumps to her feet. 'Don't go,' she says. 'If you go in my mum'll make me do my homework. She's dead hot on that sort of thing.'

Part of me wants to go back inside just to get her in trouble. But then I glance back at my grandparents' house and I can see my grandad sitting in his favourite armchair watching daytime TV and eating ginger biscuits. My granny's probably in the kitchen, fixing tea and worrying. And I realise I don't want to go back inside, not just yet.

'If you stay, I won't ask you any more about what happened with your mum, or about your dad . . . or your Twin Towers fantasy,' Priti says in this super-nice voice.

I look at her. She looks at me.

'AND I'll tell you a secret! A BIG one!'

I glance back at the house again. I don't want her to think I'm a pushover.

'OK,' I say with a shrug.

So she does.

'My brothers are going to kill my sister,' Priti

whispers, squatting down dead close to me, like she's my girlfriend or something.

I give her a look. 'That's the secret?'

'Yup,' she says. 'Good, innit?'

I stare at her again. 'Yeah, right!' I say.

'They are!' she says. 'It's going to be an honour killing.'

'What's that anyway?'

'It's when they kill her because she's got a boyfriend.'

'My mum's got a boyfriend,' I say. 'He's called Gary.' An image of my mum laughing with Gary flashes through my mind. I push it to one side. 'So are they going to kill her too?'

'Don't be stupid. My sister is, like, sixteen. And anyway, it's a Muslim thing.'

'Are you a Muslim then?'

In my head I draw Priti in one of those giant burkhas, her wheelie shoes peeping out of the bottom.

'Yep,' she says, tugging at her bunches until one ends up slightly higher than the other. 'I know it's a bit confusing because I've got a Hindu name – apparently there was a big row about it at the time, but my mum

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loved it and her great-great-grandma was half Hindu or something. And it's not like we're dead religious anyway, so I don't know what the big problem was – except Priti is a hard name to live up to, you know!

She looks at me like I'm expected to say something here, but I don't. She tuts loudly.

I look over at Stevie's house. She's waving to us from her bedroom window. She's wearing her pyjamas and holding a princess doll. I wave back. Priti doesn't.

'So what makes you think they're going to kill your sister?' I ask. 'Did they tell you?'

'No, but she's got this totally unsuitable boyfriend called Tyreese. Now *there's* a stupid name! Anyway, I'm the only one who knows about him and I have to keep it a secret or she'll be dead!' Priti tries to sound really serious, but she can't stop grinning. 'Zara let me have some of her lipstick and a packet of cigarettes if I promised not to tell because it's a matter of life and death.'

'Why doesn't she just break up with him if it's so dangerous?' I say.

'She reckons she's in love with him.'

‘Is she?’

‘No way! She’s too in love with herself.’

‘So has she got some kind of death wish then?’

‘Nah, she just reckons she’s being cool and rebellious. Combination of having an overachieving mother and watching too much *Hollyoaks*.’

‘And they’ll definitely really kill her if they find out?’ I say, still unconvinced.

‘They might just send her to Pakistan and force her to marry some old bloke. Or they might kill her. Depends, I s’pose.’

‘On what?’

‘Dunno.’ Priti shrugs. ‘Want some bubblegum?’

She passes me a bit of gum, pink like her shoes. We sit and chew for a bit and she picks more bits of tarmac off her socks. ‘Won’t your mum mind?’ I ask, pointing to her socks.

‘She’s going to be well mad. My dad says the sooner they can pack me off to Pakistan and get *me* married to some poor fool the better. He reckons he’s joking, but I know better. Dads!’ she says.

And the way she says it reminds me of the way my

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grandad said ‘Asians!’ earlier and that makes me smile – because it’s hard to imagine anyone who is *less* like my grandad than Priti.

At bedtime, I ask Granny how long I’ll be staying, but she doesn’t really give me an answer. I know it’s going to be a while because, if it was only for a day or so, I’d have been sent to Grandma’s (Mum’s mum, who lives near to us, but she’s got arthritis and has to have help with cooking and washing and stuff) or to stay with a friend. My mum doesn’t like troubling Rita and Barry (that’s Granny and Grandad) unless she has to. She says it’s because of the distance, but I know that’s not the real reason.

‘Let’s not worry about how long you’ll be staying for the moment,’ Granny says. ‘Let’s just concentrate on having a nice time while we’ve got you.’

‘Can I call Mum later?’ I ask. I know what the answer will be.

‘Maybe tomorrow,’ she says.

‘Right.’

After she’s gone, I draw a cartoon of Priti on her

skateboard, being chased by two balaclava-wearing assassins, also on skateboards, waving giant swords. Then I draw me, dressed as a commando, taking out the assassins with a flying karate kick.

Kerpow!

THINGS PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW ABOUT MY DAD DYING IN 9/11

1. What was he doing in New York that meant he happened to be there on that day? (He was at a meeting in the World Trade Center.)
2. Did he make any phone calls before he died? What did he say and did we keep any messages he left? (No. Nothing. No.)
3. Have I been to Ground Zero (the place where the Twin Towers used to be) to see where it happened? (No.)
4. Which tower was he in and what floor and did anyone on that floor escape? (Tower One. 102nd floor. No.)
5. Why haven't I seen any TV footage of what

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- happened? (I have actually. My mum just tells people I haven't because she always turns off the TV when it comes on, but I've seen clips and it wasn't so bad watching as I thought it would be.)
6. Did they ever find any bits of him and what did we do with them? (No, so nothing – obviously.)
 7. What do I think about the people who did it? (I'm not sure – which I don't think is the right answer.)
 8. What would I do if I ever met the people who did it? (Which is a silly question because they're dead anyway.)
 9. Do I miss having a dad? (I always say yes, but I don't remember having one, so I don't really.)
 10. What do me and my mum do on September 11th each year? (I get the day off school, and we pretend to do nothing much and just have a 'normal' day, which actually means doing stuff like blackberry picking and building papier-mâché volcanoes – things we never normally do. Then Mum tries to talk about it, gets upset, I change the subject, we do normal stuff some more. That's about it.)