

The Love Bomb

Ben had spent the whole of Sunday morning being measured up by Mum for his dance outfit. She had stayed up through the night, sketching possible designs.

Under duress, he was forced to choose one, and pointed a limp finger at the one that he thought was the least hideous.

Mum's hand-drawn options ranged all the way from the embarrassing to the humiliating...

There was:

The Woodland



Fruit Cocktail



Thunder and Lightning



Accident and Emergency



Ice and a Slice



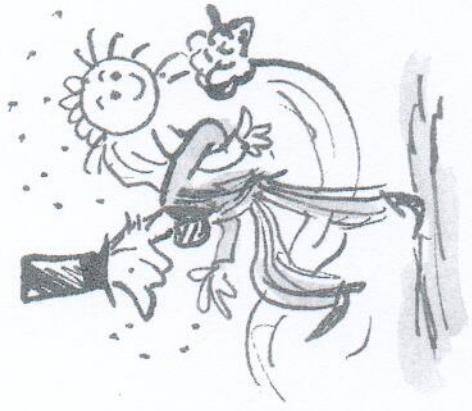
The Hedgerow and Badger



The Quality Street



Confetti



Eggs 'n' Bacon



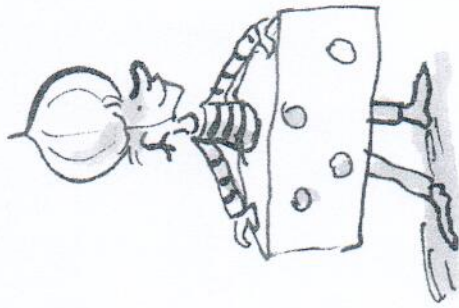
The Underwater World



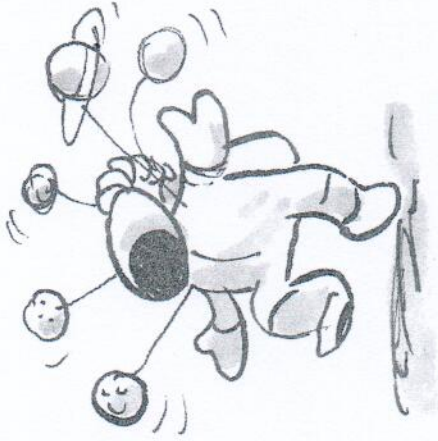
Burning Love



Cheese & Pickle



The Solar System



Piano Man



But the one that Ben thought was the *least* worst... was the Love Bomb:



"We will have to find you a nice young girl to partner with for the competition!" said Mum, excitedly, as she accidentally ran one of her fake nails under the sewing machine and it exploded.

Ben hadn't thought about dance partners. Not only was he going to have to dance, he was

going to have to dance with a girl! And not just any girl, but a revoltingly precocious sparkly fake-tanned leotard-wearing over-made-up one.

Ben was still at the age when he thought girls were as appealing as frogspawn.

"Oh, I'm just going to dance on my own," he spluttered.

"A solo piece!" exclaimed Mum. "How original!"

"In fact, I can't stand here talking all day. I'd better go and practise," said Ben, as he disappeared upstairs to his room. He shut the door, turned on his radio, and then climbed out of the window and raced over to Granny's bungalow on his bike.

"So, you were running off into the woods, when Lord Davenport started shooting at you..." Ben was eagerly prompting his granny.

But for the moment her mind looked blank.

"Was I?" said Granny, looking increasingly befuddled.

"That's where the story ended last night. You said you had snatched the ring from the Davenport's bedroom, and were running across the lawn when you heard shots..."

"Oh yes, yes," muttered Granny, her face suddenly illuminated.

Ben smiled broadly. He suddenly remembered how he had used to love his granny telling stories when he was younger, transporting him to a magical world. A world where you paint pictures in your mind that are more thrilling than all the movies or TV shows or video games in the universe.

Only a couple of weeks ago he had pretended to be asleep to stop her telling him a bedtime story. Clearly he'd forgotten how thrilling stories could be.

"I was running and running," continued Granny breathlessly, as if she was actually running, "and I heard a shot ring out. Then another. I knew from the sound that it was definitely a shotgun rather than a rifle—"

"What's the difference?" asked Ben.

"Well, a rifle shoots one bullet and is more accurate. But a shotgun sprays hundreds of little deadly balls of lead. Any idiot can hit you if they fire a shotgun in your direction."

"And did he?" said Ben. His smile had faded now. He was genuinely worried.

"Yes, but luckily I was far away by then so I was only grazed. I could hear the dogs barking too. They were hunting me; and I was only a small girl. If they had caught me, the hounds would have ripped me to shreds..."

Ben gasped in horror. "So how did you get away?" he asked.

"I took a chance. I couldn't outrun the dogs through the forest. The fastest runner in the world couldn't. But I knew the woods really well. I used to play in them for hours with my brothers and sisters. I knew if I could just get across the stream, then the dogs would lose the scent."

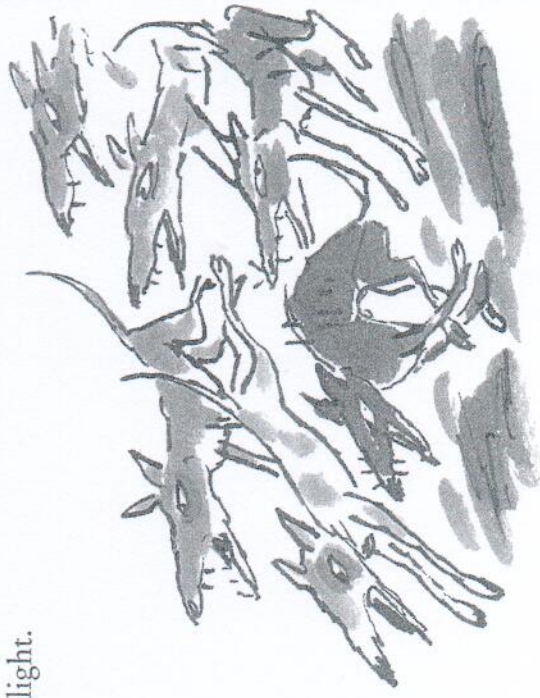
"How come?"

"Dogs can't follow a scent across water. And there was a great oak tree just on the other side of the stream. If I climbed that tree, I might be safe."

Ben couldn't imagine his granny climbing stairs, let alone a tree. She had lived in her bungalow ever since he could remember.

"More shots rang out through the darkness as I ran towards the stream," continued the old lady. "And I stumbled in the gloom of the forest. I tripped on a tree root and fell face first in the mud. Scrambling to my feet, I turned round to see an army of men on horseback led by Lord

Davenport. They were carrying flaming torches and holding shotguns. The whole forest was lit up with the fire from the torches. I jumped into the stream. It was around this time of year, in the depth of winter and the water was icy. The cold shocked me and I could hardly breathe. I clapped my hand over my mouth to stifle a scream. I could hear the dogs getting nearer and nearer, barking and barking. There must have been dozens of them. I looked behind me and I could see their sharp teeth gleaming in the moonlight.



"Well, no one got a good enough look at me, so Davenport had his men search everywhere in the village. Every cottage was turned upside down to look for the ring."

"Didn't you say anything?"

"I wanted to. I felt so guilty. But I knew if I owned up I would be in deep trouble. Lord Davenport would have had me publicly flogged in the village square."

"So what did you do?"

"I... swallowed it."

Ben couldn't believe his ears. "The ring, Granny? You swallowed the ring?"

"I thought it was the best way to hide it. In my stomach. A few days later it came out when I went to the toilet."

"That must have been painful!" said Ben, his bum wincing at the thought. Passing a big diamond ring out of his bottom didn't sound

"So I waded across the stream and started climbing the tree. My hands were muddy, and my legs and feet were wet, and I kept slipping down the trunk. I frantically rubbed my hands on my nightshirt and began to climb again. I scrambled to the very top of the tree and stayed as still as I could. I heard the dogs and the army of Davenport's men follow the stream down to a different part of the forest. The dogs' ferocious barks became distant and after a while the torches were just specks in the distance. I was safe. I shivered up that tree for hours. I waited until dawn, slid down the tree, and made my way back to our cottage. I crept into bed and lay there for a few moments before the sun rose."

Ben could picture everything she described perfectly in his mind. Granny had him utterly spellbound.

"Did they come looking for you?" he asked.

in any way enjoyable.

"It was painful. Excruciating, in fact." Granny grimaced. "The good thing was that our cottage had been searched already from top to bottom – not *my* bottom – the bottom of the cottage, I mean..." Ben chuckled. "...and Davenport's men had moved on to searching the next village. So one night I went off into the woods and hid the ring. I placed it where no one would ever look; under a rock in the stream."

"Clever!" said Ben.

"But that ring was only the first of many, Ben. Stealing it had been the biggest thrill of my life. And as I lay in bed each night, all I dreamed about was stealing more and more diamonds. That ring was just the beginning..." continued Granny in a low whisper, staring deep into Ben's innocent young eyes, "...of a lifetime of crime."