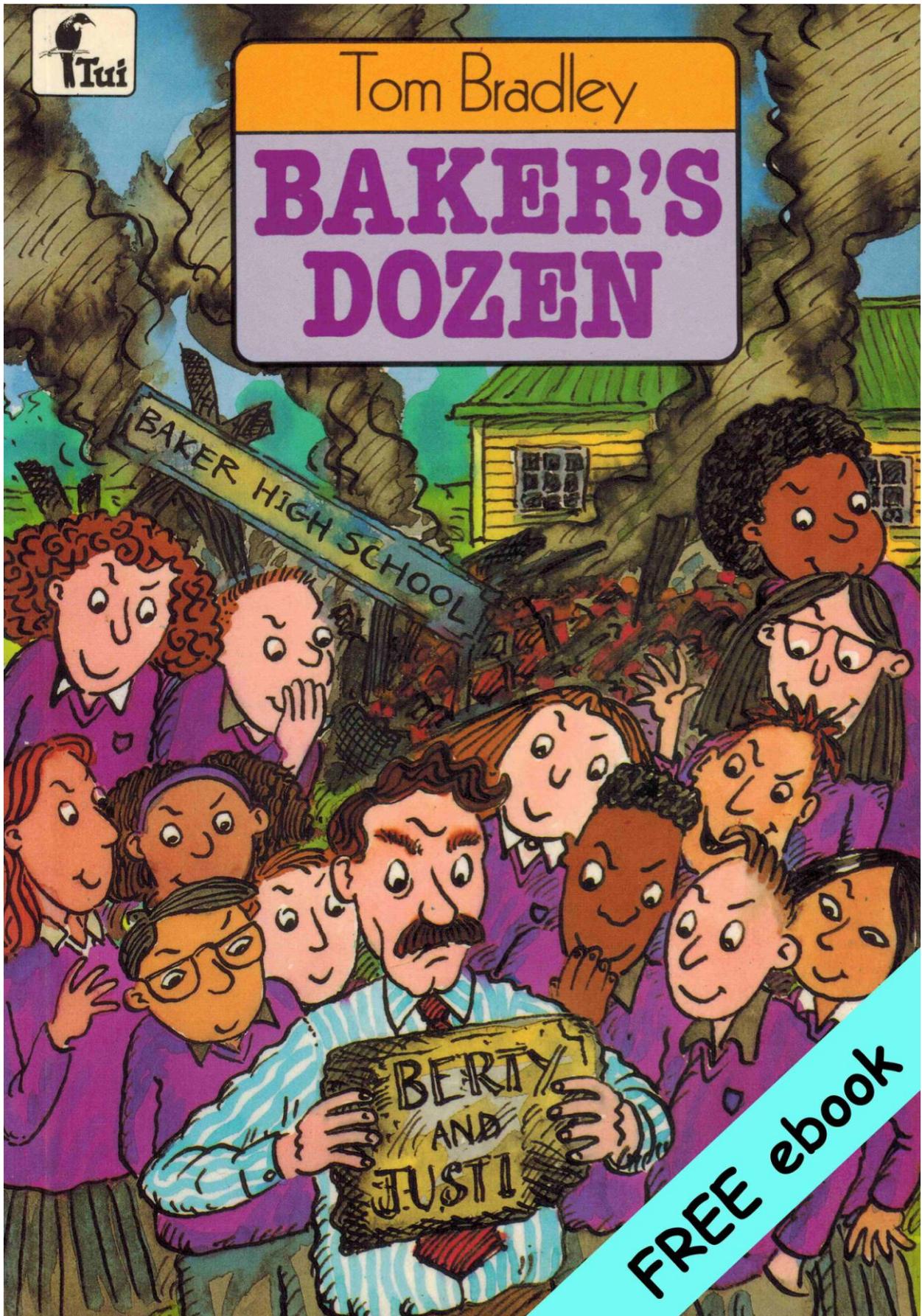




Tom Bradley

BAKER'S DOZEN



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What the critics said about ‘Baker’s Dozen’

- “*These unerringly shaped and disciplined tales are generally funny and often bizarre but they reveal a shrewd knowledge of the teenage psyche*” (NZ Herald)
- “*Hilarious short stories ... the same elements that appeal to Paul Jennings’ fans - a quirky sense of humour and a twist in the tail*” (Nelson Evening Mail)
- “*[Bradley] seems to have the measure of what constitutes a readable story for young people ... simple language, lively and witty*” (New and Notable)

What this story is about

LIBERTY and JUSTICE said the school motto before a few of the letters got charred in a fire.

To try and rekindle some school spirit, Parmesan J. Ribbitt, Principal of Baker High School, invited his pupils to write the stories that make up this collection.

Some are spooky, others are fairly wicked, but they are, according to Mr Ribbitt, the best of a rather *unsavoury* lot...

Caution: These weird school tales may be true

... FROM THE PRINCIPAL'S DESK

The publication of this book of short stories marks an exciting day for Baker High School, coming as it does at the end of a very tragic few months. A time in which we were saddened to see our beloved gymnasium bite the dust - literally.

Fortunately, it happened in the middle of the night so no one was injured, but who would have suspected that wonderful old building was riddled with termites and about to collapse? Or that sparks from the power lines would ignite the old workout mats and reduce the whole building to a pile of ashes?

But one thing survived to inspire us all - the charred remains of the plaque that hung on the wall, spelling out for each new generation our proud school motto: LIBERTY AND JUSTICE. (It has been pointed out to me that since the edges got charred the plaque now reads: BERTY AND JUSTI, but the *idea* is still sound.)

And it is the Baker spirit for survival that has led to this book, the proceeds from which will go to the gymnasium rebuilding fund.

I started the project by asking every pupil to contribute one true story. From the hundreds I received, I then rejected everything that was too bloodthirsty, unsavoury or otherwise unsuitable.

As that left me without *any* stories at all, I re-examined the pile and came up with the following thirteen - hence the name of this collection: *Baker's Dozen*.

Because of the personal, and rather embarrassing nature of the stories, the writers (boys and girls) will remain anonymous. I've also changed the names of characters where necessary to protect the innocent... and the guilty. When you read them, you'll understand why.

Some stories I find hard to believe. Some I don't want to believe. But it's all in a good cause.

Happy reading!

Parmesan J. Ribbitt

Parmesan J. Ribbitt, Principal

Rubbed Out

This is what I told the police...

I found it in the gutter on my way to school. A bright and shiny eraser. I thought it was a piece of candy that some animal had peed on. If it had been, I'd have taken it to school and given it to my 'favourite' teacher, Thumper Thompson.

Being a junk collector, I dropped it into my pocket and promptly forgot about it. (I did that once with a bar of chocolate. Wow, did I hear about it when Mum washed my jeans!)

My best subject is art. I'm not only good at it, I'm fast. But Thumper hates me. Maybe it's because I don't like rugby and he coaches our school's top team, the First XV.

The day I found the eraser, Thumper had set up a bowl of flowers for us to sketch. Said he'd be back in 20 minutes and we'd better be finished.

My first attempt was fast enough, but it wasn't quite right. Then I remembered the eraser I'd found. The red flower seemed too big so I rubbed it out. When I looked up, I noticed the *real* red flower had lost its head. Good. It now looked just like the one in my sketch.

But the rest of it still needed work so I decided to start again. Normally, I'd grab another bit of paper, but this was my last sheet so I erased the whole sketch. I heard gasps around me and looked up. The flowers and bowl had all disappeared.

Just then, Thumper returned and started yelling at us. He's got a rotten temper. And when he gets mad, his enormous handlebar moustache quivers.

I couldn't believe all the fuss. It was *only* a bowl of flowers. You'd think someone had robbed a bank.

Of course no one knew where the flowers had gone, but Thumper decided I looked guilty. Detention, every day, until the flowers and bowl were returned.

How unfair is that? I don't mind being punished for what I do, but I was innocent! Or was I?

That night, I lay in bed trying to unravel the mystery. It had all started when I used the eraser. I decided to experiment.

In my cupboard, I had a dumb-looking hat I'd bought for the beach. Made me look like a seagull was perched on my head. I threw the hat on the bed and drew a lightning sketch of it.

Then I tried the eraser. Whatever I erased from the sketch, disappeared! In two or three swishes, bye-bye birdie hat.

Anything I could draw, I could destroy! Which gave me real power.

On Friday, the whole school got a couple of hours off to watch the First XV play Kingston College. We hadn't beaten them in 10 years. Didn't worry me. But it worried Thumper.

It was the big blot on his coaching career. The rumour was that Thumper would be relegated to mowing the grass and painting goalposts if we lost this one.

As Kingston kicked off, only half my mind was on the rugby. Somehow, I had to persuade Thumper to cancel my detention. But how?

Within minutes, Baker High was trailing. Kingston had a great fullback. He could kick goals from anywhere.

I got an idea as half-time sounded. I ran to the sideline and grabbed Thumper's arm. He scowled when he saw who it was.

'I can win this game for you,' I whispered.

'You?'

'I can fix their fullback.'

'How? Cut off his legs?'

'Something like that. But there's a trade-off. I want out of detention.'

I could see the mad gleam in his eyes and the twitch of his moustache. Probably thought I was mad, but he had too much resting on the game to argue. He was desperate to win. He nodded.

'It's a deal,' said Thumper. 'But your plan had better work.'

I raced back to my locker and grabbed a notebook and pencil. The second half had just started when I got back to the field. The Kingston fullback was getting ready to kick for goal. I did a quick sketch.

He hit the ball perfectly and it headed straight for the middle of our uprights. With two swishes of the eraser, I rubbed out what I'd sketched. The rugby ball vanished!

The referee couldn't believe it. Nor could the touch judges. But the rules were clear. The ball hadn't gone over. No goal.

Of course no one could actually find the ball, so another one had to be used to restart the game. Five times in the second half, the Kingston fullback kicked for goal. Five times the ball disappeared into thin air.

The teams were now down to their last ball, but we were closing the gap. Then, right on full time, with Baker High finally in the lead by one point, Kingston got a penalty.

If their fullback kicked it, they'd win!

And I couldn't 'lose' their last ball or the game would be called off. I'd have to try something else.

I whipped off another sketch. As the fullback ran in to kick, I erased his boot. His feet, now wearing only socks, sent the ball bouncing along the ground.

We'd won! Or should I say, the eraser had won.

As I fought my way to the sideline, I saw Thumper surrounded by people wanting to shake his hand. He was a hero.

I pushed through and reminded him of his promise.

'What promise?' he snarled. 'Go and do your detention!'

How ungrateful was that? If it wasn't for me, Baker High would have lost the game! I pulled out my notebook and sketched his face, complete with whiskers. Then I used the eraser. Half

his moustache disappeared.

People started to laugh. Thumper stopped and touched his top lip. He spun around and saw me.

'You!' he screamed. 'Stop.'

I tried to run, but I was laughing too hard. Thumper grabbed me by the scruff of the neck. As he did, he saw the eraser, and my notebook with the sketch of his face.

He snatched them out of my hand.

I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen. With a few quick strokes, he rubbed out the sketch.

For the first time, I noticed how wide Thumper's shoulders really were – especially without his head.

White Magic

'Look at my stupid brother,' said Fiona.

'He's running as fast as he can,' said Jenny.

'He's pathetic.'

'Why?'

'Anyone who's into sport or exercise is pathetic.'

Jenny glanced at her overweight, unfit friend. 'You sure it's not the other way around?'

Fiona ignored the jibe, took another gulp of lemonade, and bit into her candy bar. 'He's a loser. Always has been.'

It was sports week at Baker High. The three of them were in the same house and chasing every point they could. As Fiona and Jenny watched, Billy staggered home in fourth place.

'Sorry,' he gasped, collapsing at his sister's feet.

'Sorry isn't good enough,' said Fiona. 'Nor is fourth.'

'What did you expect?' asked Billy.

'I expected you to at least try.'

'You can talk,' he told his sister. 'I don't see *you* doing anything to help us win the cup. Except eat. And that doesn't count.'

He dragged himself to his feet. 'Give me a drink.'

'Get lost, loser.'

'Come on, Fiona, give him a break,' said Jenny.

'Good idea,' said Fiona. 'How about both his legs? The way he ran today, it wouldn't even slow him down.'

Jenny pulled her friend out of earshot. 'Abusing Billy won't help.'

'It's making *me* feel better.'

'That's more than all that junk food will do. You'll eat yourself to death.'

'Don't start that again! I get enough lectures at home.'

'Well, stop picking on Billy. He's our only hope in the cross-country tomorrow.'

'We wouldn't have needed him if Damien hadn't got caught.'

Damien had been our cross-country star, till he got expelled for using drugs. Cocaine, according to the rumours that raced around the school.

But you know what rumours are like. They don't even have to be true for some people to believe them.

'Forget Damien,' Jenny told her friend.

'And forget Billy. If you're waiting for my little brother to win the cup for us, you'd better give up now.'

'But Billy *could* win it.'

'Sure. And diets could work!' Fiona finished her candy bar defiantly and shoved the

wrapper in her pocket. 'He's washed up. You saw how he ran today.'

'Yes,' said Jenny, 'but he used to be good. Very good.'

'And I used to be skinny.'

'You've got a bad attitude.'

'Says who?' snarled Fiona.

'Says me.'

'Some friend you are.'

'You know it's true.'

'So?'

'So, you're too hard on yourself and on Billy. You both believe you're losers and that makes it come true. With a bit of encouragement, Billy could win that race.'

Fiona burst out laughing. 'Even you can't work miracles, *Mizz Brains*.'

'Don't you believe it. I bet I could make something in the lab to help Billy run faster.'

'Bet you couldn't.'

'You're on.'

'OK. Cash,' said Fiona. 'Enough for a week's worth of candy bars.'

Jenny laughed. 'No one's that rich.'

'Very funny. Of course, if you *can't* do it...?'

'Okay', said Fiona. 'Bring Billy to the lab after school.'

'Come on, loser,' Fiona said to Billy as he walked towards the school gate.

'Get lost. I'm going home.'

'Oh no, you're not,' she said, grabbing his arm with one hand, a candy bar in the other.

'You're going to win me a lot of candy.'

'Then give me that one.'

'No way,' said Fiona. 'It's my last one.'

'Halves, then.'

'I can't spare any.'

'You're so big you could spare a couple of *tonnes*.'

Fiona tightened her grip. 'If there wasn't so much at stake, little brother, I'd punch you in the nose.'

She propelled Billy to the science lab. 'If you breathe a word about this to anyone, you're dead.'

Inside the lab, Jenny waited. She'd assembled a bench full of burners, vials, and tubes.

'What are you doing?' asked Billy.

'Making a magic potion to strengthen your muscles and put fire in your belly for tomorrow's race. One swig and you'll be Superman.'

Fiona giggled. 'Two swigs and you'll be Wonder Woman.'

'No way,' said Billy, heading for the door.

Jenny cut him off. 'Ignore your sister. She wants you to lose.'

'He's had plenty of practice,' said Fiona.

Billy looked worried. 'What if they do a drugs test after the race?'

'They do that in the Olympics,' said Jenny, 'not the school cross-country.'

As Billy and Fiona watched, Jenny took a pinch of white powder and dropped it into a container.

'White magic,' said Jenny.

The potion frothed and fizzed, lapping over the sides of the bowl.

'This'll need to brew overnight, Billy. I'll give you some tomorrow just before the race starts.'

As Billy left the lab, Fiona turned to her friend.

'Is that white powder what I think it is?' she asked.

'What do you think it is?'

'Cocaine.'

Jenny grinned as she added some more to the mixture.

'Ask me no questions,' she told Fiona, 'and I'll tell you no lies.'

No one expected Billy to finish the race in the top 20 and he knew it. He looked around nervously as he took a swig of the potion.

'Tastes awful!'

'It'll probably give you the trots,' said Fiona, laughing. 'Before you even get out of the school gates.'

'Magic potions always taste awful,' Jenny told him, 'but it'll give you super-human strength. Your legs will be like springs driving you to the front and keeping you there. Can you feel it working yet?'

Billy looked uncertain. 'I dunno. Don't think so.'

'And it won't work,' said Fiona turning to Jenny. 'Do you want to pay me now?'

Jenny checked her watch. 'It takes up to 30 seconds to *really* work. Stand by, Billy. Counting down and ... three, two, one!'

Billy jumped. 'Yes! I can feel it!'

'Take another swig,' said Jenny. 'That'll double the effect.'

Billy was now almost jumping out of his skin. 'I'm gonna run the race of my life.'

As the pack left the school grounds heading for the hills, Billy was right up with the leaders.

The crowd's disbelief turned to wonder an hour later as Billy led the pack home.

He hit the school gates at full speed for the final circuit of the grounds, waving his arms in the air in triumph.

Jenny turned to Fiona. 'You lost, so pay up.'

Fiona handed over the money and stormed off.

'Stop sulking,' Jenny told Fiona as the bell signalled the end of the last period. 'It was a fair bet.'

'How can you call it fair? You drugged him.'

'I did *what*?'

'Put cocaine in the drink.'

'Do you *really* believe...?'

'I want to try it,' said Fiona. 'What you gave Billy. That white magic stuff.'

'Why? You're not planning to run a cross-country, are you?'

'Don't be stupid. It helped Billy run fast so maybe it'll help me lose weight.'

'Fiona, I think...'

'I hate looking like this, but I can't lose weight by myself.'

Jenny saw the tears in Fiona's eyes. 'All right. But it's our secret. Promise?'

The tears disappeared. 'I promise.'

'Come on, then. Let's go to the lab and I'll whip up another brew.'

'I've heard cocaine kills your appetite,' said Fiona.

Jenny stopped. 'Let's get something straight. I never said it was cocaine.'

'Then what was the white powder?'

'I can't tell you. If I did, it might lose some of its magic.'

'What will it do for me?'

'Well...,' said Jenny, 'it'll take away your cravings for chocolate and sugary junk food. You'll love fruit and vegetables. All the healthy stuff.'

'What about exercise? Will I have more energy?'

'Billy did.'

'Will I shrink into size eight jeans?'

'Never in a million years, but you'll still look great.'

'Wow,' said Fiona. 'What about my school work?'

'It'll help with that, too. You'll go from a D+ to a B+ student. It won't happen overnight, but it will happen.'

A look of panic crossed Fiona's face. 'But what if you run out of white magic before I get there?'

'Unlikely,' said Jenny.

And if she did, Jenny knew she could always pick up more baking soda at the supermarket.

Blackboarded

Nigel couldn't help it. He was small for his age and had that sort of face. Whenever a teacher wanted something done, he got the job.

The rest of the class were used to it. They felt sorry for Nigel. Everyone, that is, except Freddy. He hated Nigel. Didn't need an excuse to beat him up at least once a day. It was never a fair fight, but that's the way Freddy liked it.

That day was the same as any other. 'I need someone to clean the blackboard,' said Mr Marsh. 'Thank you, Nigel.'

'Teacher's pet,' sneered Freddy. 'I'll get you again later.'

Nigel shuddered as he moved to the front and grabbed the duster. He still hurt from the last beating.

The blackboard was new. So was the whole classroom. A single prefabricated unit, trucked-in to cope with overcrowding.

As Nigel wiped the surface, he noticed it was shinier than any blackboard he'd ever seen. Like a mirror, only transparent. He was sure if he pushed his nose up close, he'd be able to see right through it.

'Come on, Nigel,' said the teacher, 'don't take all day.'

Nigel realised he'd stopped rubbing. This was one weird blackboard. It needed investigating.

'Mr Marsh,' said Nigel as the class filed out at the end of the period, 'can I come back later and give that board a good clean?'

'But you did an excellent job, Nigel.'

'These new boards need an extra hard rub.'

'I can't say I've ever...'

'I'll come back after school,' said Nigel.

It was exactly 4.31pm when Nigel slipped back into the deserted classroom. He rubbed his new bruises. It wasn't fair. Freddy needed to be beaten up by somebody bigger. Then he'd realise it wasn't much fun.

The late-afternoon sun was shining directly onto the board. Nigel took a deep breath and pushed his face hard up against it. He was right. There was definitely something behind it! He pushed harder.

It suddenly gave way and his nose sank in, jamming his face up against the surface. Startled, Nigel tried to pull back, but his nose was stuck. It wouldn't budge.

He put both hands on the board and tried to shove himself away. But instead of pulling free, his hands sank in. He was trapped!

With no way back, he'd have to keep going. Nigel counted to three and plunged straight

through the blackboard, falling flat on his face!

Gradually, his eyes adjusted to the dimness. Where was he? The blackboard was attached to a blank wall of the prefab. He should have landed outside on the grass.

Instead, he could just make out some kind of handle. He turned it.

With a creak of rusty hinges, a big wooden door swung inwards. He could see a dimly lit tunnel with wooden flares jutting out of slimy walls.

As Nigel stepped forward to investigate, the door swung closed behind him. He spun around and rattled the handle, but it wouldn't move.

Reluctantly, he headed down the tunnel which twisted and turned and seemed to go on forever. Nigel glanced at his watch. He must have broken it when he fell. It had stopped at 4.32pm.

He could feel his heart thumping. Or was it something else? The tunnel wall had started to vibrate and he could hear distant rumbling sounds. Voices.

People! He'd even be glad to see Freddy.

Nigel broke into a run. He wasn't going to spend a minute more than he had to in this place. He sprinted to the bend in the tunnel just ahead, burst around it - and stopped in his tracks.

He was standing on a ledge, high above an enormous cave. It was brighter than anything he'd ever seen.

A hideous monster filled most of the space. It stood five storeys high and reminded Nigel of his science teacher when she got angry. The monster had two heads!

Each head had its own voice. One was pitched so low, the walls vibrated. The other voice was so high, it pierced Nigel's ears like a dentist's drill.

Nigel saw two mouths with teeth the size of petrol pumps. As the monster opened them, red saliva spurted out and ran over its fat lips and dribbled down its double chins.

The monster was stirring a bubbling cauldron. As Nigel watched, it reached down and plucked two wriggling creatures from the mixture.

'Yum!' the voices shrieked as the monster dropped a victim into each mouth, chewed fiercely, then spat.

A sneaker flew across the cave. Then another. Then two more. T-shirts. Jeans.

Satisfied, the monster swallowed. It lifted its heads, let out a twin belch, and spotted Nigel.

'Supper!' the voices screamed, octaves apart.

Out of the corner of his eye, Nigel caught another movement. Hundreds of giant bats hung from the ceiling above his head.

Now, with blood-curdling squeals, they plunged towards the ledge where he stood.

He'd seen enough!

With a silent scream, Nigel raced into the passage, back the way he'd come. His heart

pounding madly as he heard the bats give chase.

On and on he ran, the bats getting closer with every second. He *had* to reach the door!

Nigel raced around the last bend and there it was. He threw himself at the handle. Then he remembered. The door had jammed! That's why he'd gone down the tunnel in the first place.

He tugged and clawed at the handle. Nothing. Desperately, Nigel pushed down as hard as he could, throwing his shoulder against the door. It was enough!

He crashed into the space behind the blackboard, spun around and slammed the heavy wooden door closed behind him.

Like demented bombers, the bats hurled themselves at the door which buckled and twisted under their crazed assault. A plank splintered, then another.

With a crash, the door burst inwards and a flood of black terror poured through.

Screaming silently, Nigel turned and dived at the back of the blackboard...

The caretaker found him lying in a heap at the front of the classroom. 'What are you doing here?'

Nigel jumped to his feet. 'You'll never believe what happened ...'

'You took 40 winks, that's what.'

'No, I was cleaning the blackboard and...'

Nigel stopped and looked at the shiny surface. He put his hand out to touch it, but then stopped himself and shuddered when he remembered what was on the other side.

He glanced at his watch. It was working again and said 4.35pm. The whole adventure had taken less than five minutes in real time.

Before the caretaker could say anything else, Nigel raced out of the classroom and headed for home, an idea forming in his mind.

The next day, Mr Marsh did what he always did.

'I need someone to clean the blackboard. Nigel?'

'Not today, Mr Marsh.'

'Why not?'

'Because Freddy wants a turn.'

'No way,' said Freddy.

'Good idea, Nigel.' Mr Marsh handed the duster to Freddy.

'The light's better after school for cleaning the blackboard, Mr Marsh,' said Nigel. 'About 4.30pm.'

Before Freddy could protest, Mr Marsh agreed. 'Excellent idea. Freddy, come back later.'

'This time I'll kill you,' Freddy snarled at Nigel.

Nigel only grinned. Freddy the bully was about to meet his match.

'These new boards are hard to clean,' said Nigel. 'You have to press really hard, Freddy. Really, really hard.'

Speechless

I couldn't believe it. I was doing it again and I'd sworn I wouldn't. I'd promised myself I'd die first.

So much for promises.

Hadn't I learned *anything* the first time?

Hadn't I experienced enough pain and misery to last me a lifetime?

I gazed out over the audience. I couldn't see a thing. It was all a thick fog. Like the first time. A tragic repeat of history. My eyelids wouldn't open properly. They seemed coated with glue. So did my throat. My mind was blank.

Then I remembered. I *hadn't* volunteered this time.

The Principal had insisted.

'It's important for the younger pupils to have positive role models,' Mr Ribbitt told me that day in his office, 'and you're already a hero in this school.'

I'd guessed what was coming and tried to cut him off. 'Look, I'm good at sport, yeah, but not this.'

'This isn't like you, Vince,' said Ribbitt. 'Don't tell me you're scared?'

I avoided his eyes and looked down at my shoes.

'Of course you're not scared,' he said, answering his own question and getting it wrong.

'Who could forget your courage in that game against Kingston?' he said. 'Bandaged up, ignoring the pain, running the length of the field to score that wonderful try?'

'That was easy compared to this.'

'This is important, Vince.'

'Ask someone else.'

'I'm asking you. No, I'm telling you. End of discussion.'

He must have seen the look on my face because he sat back in his chair and gave me a thin smile.

'Vince, I'm not asking you to do a song and dance. It's only a simple 10 to 15 minute speech at our final assembly.'

'But I hate speaking in public.'

He started to laugh. 'You aren't the only one. Do you know most people rank speaking in public as their number one fear? Death only comes in at number three. Can you believe that?'

'I can believe it all right,' I said. 'I'd rather die.'

'But surely you've done it before?'

'Once.' I didn't elaborate. I'd been 10 years old. Another town. Another world.

I wasn't keen about speaking in public even then, but I was a promising footballer, bigger than most of the kids, and I didn't want to be called a chicken.

The speech contest was in the school hall. I'd written out my speech word for word. It filled

several pages.

Halfway through it, I was sweating. It was harder than any football game I'd ever played. I stood close to the microphone so I'd be heard at the back. It wasn't the greatest speech in the world, but it sure was loud.

At the bottom of page three, I'd written, *one more page*.

The end was in sight. I breathed a sigh of relief. But where was the last page? It had gone. Vanished!

I stopped and cleared my throat. Desperately, I grabbed page three and repeated the last couple of paragraphs while I tried to think. How did the speech end? I hadn't actually written it! I'd copied the whole thing out of a book.

I didn't have a clue how it finished!

I could hear the other kids start to cough and snicker. And then they started to laugh. The laughter got louder. And louder.

I tried to ad-lib some sort of intelligent ending, but my mind was turning to mush while the rest of me was turning to jelly.

The air suddenly became thick, like glue, filling my mouth, my nose, my eyes. I was blind, choking, gagging. I felt as though I'd been punched in the stomach.

Big, tough me reduced to a quivering wreck. Stumbling, mumbling.

I was desperate to get off the stage, away from the kids laughing themselves silly at my expense.

I turned to flee, but forgot the microphone cord at my feet. My left foot caught it and I took a crashing dive into the wings.

No one took me seriously after that. They started calling me *Stumble-Mumble The Clown*. Even on the football field, people would laugh at me. It was awful. My family moved at the end of the year. Thank goodness.

I'd left all that behind. A new beginning. A new town, new school, and new friends. No one from my past to embarrass me. No reputation to live down.

Now my new life was about to be blown away because I'd let the Principal push me into making this stupid speech!

I'd been planning to come back to school for one more year. That would be impossible now. I wondered if I might even have to leave the country to escape this latest shame.

Because this time, it was even worse. The same glue-like blindness hit me before I'd even got to the third word.

'Good evening...' was all I managed then froze.

My throat closed up. I stood rooted to the spot. My stomach was crushing my spine. I was ready to vomit.

I pushed myself. Like that try against Kingston. 'I'd rather be on a rugby field any day than

up here...'

Attempt at humour. Stupid. No one would laugh at a line like that. I'd dropped the ball before I'd even got started.

I coughed a gluey, sticky cough. There was only one solution. I pushed even harder.

'In fact, I'd rather be *anywhere* else...'

No good. Cut the jokes, Vince. Get on with it. But could I?

The memories from the first time came flooding back like a giant wave that threatened to sweep me away. The lost page. Turning to jelly. Tripping over the microphone cord.

I felt as though I'd already played two games of rugby, back to back. Water poured from my armpits. I was history. The kids who thought I was a hero would know the truth. I was a coward. A gutless chicken.

Then I heard it. A voice. Distant. Faint. But it was *my* voice, slowly picking up the thread of my speech. Getting stronger with every word.

I had at least learned *one* lesson and now my notes were securely stapled together. But how could I read if I couldn't even see the words?

The words!

This time, I'd written my own speech. In longhand, over and over. Mouthing every syllable as I went. Making sure I understood it. Drilling it into my brain.

And now my subconscious was taking over!

What was it called? Muscle memory? That was it! Like a move on a football field you'd practised so often, you did it without thinking.

My words were now tumbling out, like passes along a backline. All I had to do was catch them, pass them along, catch them, pass them along. Let them float. Keep the conscious mind out of it.

Don't try - just let it happen!

'And finally...' I was up to the 20 metre line now and sprinting for the posts. But what had I said? Had I recited the speech I'd written, or had I jumbled it up with the other one from long ago?

Had I been talking nonsense? Worse still, had I insulted the school? Cursed the Principal?

Too late to worry. I dived across the line. 'Thank you, fellow pupils, ladies and gentlemen.'

It was over, done, completed. I stood, shaking, drained, numb. My sight was coming back. I coughed and the last of the glue slipped down my throat.

Through the haze I could see a friendly face, smiling, welcoming. Its owner was clapping, quietly but firmly. She led the audience to its feet, pitching the cat off her lap as she did so.

Mum!

She took two steps across the tiny kitchen and hit the switch on the electric kettle.

'Very good, son. By tomorrow night, you'll be perfect. While I make us a cup of coffee, why

don't you do the whole thing for me again? Maybe a bit slower this time, and with a bit more feeling...'

Thumbs Up

These days my cousin Harry always wears a glove on his right hand. He doesn't like to talk about what happened. I'm the only one he's ever told and he made me promise I'd never tell another soul.

But I kept my fingers crossed behind my back when I made that promise, so I don't feel bad about telling you.

Anyway, it all began because Harry hated vegetables. My Aunt Audrey thought they were good for him. Every night at dinner, she piled Harry's plate with boiled carrots or spinach or peas. Sometimes, all at once.

Aunt Audrey would stand over him till my cousin ate everything and Harry would drag it out as long as he could. One little nibble at a time. It was a battle every night. Aunt Audrey would stamp her foot and yell. Harry would sulk and suck his thumb.

Harry had always sucked his thumb. When he was little, Aunt Audrey put mustard on his fingers, but he just licked it off. Then she made him wear woollen mittens, taped tightly to his wrists. Harry chewed through the wool.

Aunt Audrey gave up on the thumb sucking, but she wasn't going to back down on the vegetables.

One day she read a magazine article by a so-called expert on fussy eaters. The expert said the best way to change people like Harry was to bribe them. Trade the unwanted food for something they loved. Aunt Audrey tried it. Cousin Harry got one square of chocolate for every mouthful of vegetables.

It worked! Harry would suck the chocolate until it was slippery and slimy, then he'd take a mouthful of vegetables. He'd close his eyes and feel the chocolate coating the carrots, soaking the spinach, penetrating the peas. Then he'd tip his head back and the whole slushy mixture would slide down his throat and into his stomach.

And there was another bonus for Aunt Audrey. Harry stopped sulking. And he stopped sucking his thumb.

Unfortunately, the next week, Aunt Audrey read a follow-up story that said the magazine article by the so-called expert had been an April Fool's joke. It was meant to be funny.

Aunt Audrey didn't laugh. She was furious. That night Harry got the biggest plate of mixed vegetables he'd ever seen - and no chocolate.

He was too shocked to sulk. What could he do? He'd be there till breakfast eating this lot. And the taste!

Chocolate-coated vegetables had been wonderful. Harry closed his eyes and wished hard. Very hard. When he opened his eyes, the vegetables were still there.

Reluctantly, he popped a piece of carrot into his mouth. Amazingly, it tasted like chocolate! He tried a few peas. Same again. A forkful of spinach. Chocolate heaven!

If anything, the vegetables were even tastier than before. They didn't taste as if they were coated with chocolate. They tasted as if they were *made* of chocolate.

This needed investigating. He turned his head and coughed, spitting a pea into his shirt pocket.

Dinner was over in a world-record 10 minutes. Aunt Audrey couldn't believe it. She'd been prepared for an all-night sitting.

Harry dashed to his room and examined the pea under his reading lamp. He poked it with his finger. It had gone soft in his pocket so it was easy to squeeze.

No doubt about it. This was pure chocolate. He licked the sticky mess off his hand. Delicious.

Rummaging in his trousers he found a piece of re-cycled chewing gum. He popped it into his mouth and bit down on it. Pure chocolate. He ate a cracker biscuit and an apple. Same result.

He even sneaked an onion out of the kitchen and sank his teeth into it. The piece in his mouth turned to chocolate. The rest stayed onion.

It was a miracle!

And it worked on anything. While he was doing his homework, he started daydreaming and chewing the end of his pencil.

It tasted so good, he ate his pen as well, plus an old maths assignment book, complete with binder.

The next morning Harry ate a breakfast of chocolate porridge, sprinkled with chocolate sugar, and topped with chocolate milk.

For lunch he ate a chocolate filled roll. Then, as he was still hungry, he ate his chocolate lunch box as well.

Harry was in paradise. Life was perfect. Everything he put into his mouth turned to chocolate. Harry decided he could live like this for the rest of his life!

After a few days, though, chocolate lost its appeal. By the end of the month, Harry would have killed for a regular juicy hamburger. He even went out and bought one, but it turned to chocolate in his mouth.

That night, Aunt Audrey noticed a change in Harry. It took him over an hour to eat his dinner.

That was also the night Harry had the weird dream. The whole world was made of chocolate. Chocolate trees, houses, schools, bikes, cars.

Even his mother was made of chocolate. She'd cooked him a huge plate of chocolate vegetables and was standing over him, making him eat them.

The plate was bigger than a football field. And Harry's legs were tied to the chair so he couldn't escape. He was trapped. Helpless.

'No!' he yelled in his dream. 'You can't make me. I won't eat them. I won't. I won't. I'll sulk! That's what I'll do. I'll sulk!'

At that moment, Harry woke up. He could taste chocolate in his mouth. And it wasn't his imagination. He could feel it under his tongue. He sat up in bed and spat the piece of chocolate into his hand.

His hand...

He'd been sucking his thumb!

Fly On The Wall

I stared at my chemistry book and it stared right back. Could have been written in ancient Egyptian for all the sense it made. And exams were only a week away.

I shook my head to clear the fog from my brain. Then I heard it. Sounded like a chain-saw as it lurched around my room, ricocheting off the walls, banging into everything. An enormous, ugly blowfly.

I grabbed the can of fly spray I kept by my bed and pressed the nozzle. It fizzed. Empty.

Maybe I wouldn't need it. The fly was already in trouble, weaving around like a drunk. It spluttered up to the ceiling and landed, right above my head.

'One more sound out of you and you're history,' I threatened.

I plunged back into my chemistry book. I studied the text carefully, then turned the page and tackled the questions. Nothing.

'Come on,' I muttered aloud. 'Question one. Any fool should know this.'

'Most fools do,' came a wheezy voice from right above my head.

I stared up at the blowfly. 'No one asked you!'

When you start talking to flies, you know you're in trouble. I reread the question. Nothing came.

'Oxygen, you twit,' rasped the voice.

I flicked back a page. Oxygen was right. But flies don't talk. Something must have sunk into my brain, after all.

Feeling more positive, I tried question two. Nothing.

'Nitrogen, thicko,' came the voice again.

It gave me such a shock, I jumped up. 'Imagination or not, fly, you're history.'

I'd have to be careful. Fly *poop* on the ceiling was one thing, but not splattered blowflies. I'd give the fly a sharp whack to stun it, then finish it off when it dropped to the floor.

I rolled up a comic book and climbed onto my chair. The fly gazed at me. Slowly I lifted my arm towards the ceiling.

A quick flick of my wrist and the fly would drop like a stone.

'Listen, stupid,' said the fly, his breath coming in bursts. 'I'm too... tired to argue, but tell me one thing. What's the answer... to question three?'

'Any idiot knows that.'

'You don't.'

'I do, too.'

'Then what is it?' he demanded.

'Shut up, will ya? Flies can't talk.'

'But this one knows what CO₂ is.'

'So do I, but tell me anyway.'

'Carbon dioxide. Go on, check. See if I'm right.'

I lowered the rolled-up comic and climbed down from my chair. He was right. Three out of three.

'Are you still going to zap me?' asked the fly, 'or can I come down? This ceiling's revolting. It's covered in fly dirt.'

I nodded. The fly dropped off the ceiling and spiralled down, landing heavily on my alarm clock.

I could see his problem. 'What's wrong with your wing?'

'Arthritis.'

'Is that why you didn't try and escape?'

'I couldn't. I'd run out of puff. Too old and creaky to play chase.'

I felt sorry for him. 'Can I do anything to help?'

'I thought you'd never ask,' said the fly. 'I'd love a cup of hot chocolate. Made with milk, not water.'

Marvin adored hot chocolate. That's what I ended up calling him. Marvin. I made him a bed out of a cereal box and lined it with sheepskin - I'd heard it was good for arthritis. He was grateful.

As I got to know him better, I told him my troubles. My bad marks at school. How I couldn't remember anything.

Marvin didn't have that problem. He might have been ancient, but his mind was still bright. And he had a photographic memory. One glance at something and it was there forever. Like a video camera in his head with instant-replay.

One day, I sneaked Marvin into class, hidden in my jersey. As a self-confessed nosey parker, he couldn't resist poking into everything. Hanging off the ceiling or scuttling up and down the walls in his funny, lop-sided way.

While Marvin cruised, I suffered. Mid-term exams were now only 24 hours away. I was desperately trying to cram, but it wasn't working.

That night, Marvin and I were both exhausted. His arthritis was playing up. I decided to make him a special hot chocolate to cheer him up.

'Full cream milk,' I told him. 'Not low fat.'

'Stop treating me like a baby,' he grumbled, as I tucked him into his sheepskin bed, but I knew he liked all the fussing.

As I approached the kitchen, I heard the whoosh, whoosh of an aerosol can. Dad had watered the garden and flushed out some mosquitoes. Mum was on the attack with the fly spray.

'Stop!' I yelled, grabbing the can off her. 'You've got to be careful with this stuff.' I glanced at the label.

It said: KILL EVERY PEST IN YOUR HOUSE WITH JUST A FEW SQUIRTS.

Marvin!

I could smell the fly spray rising as I rushed upstairs.

'Marvin! Speak to me!'

His speech was slurred. 'Boy, that full cream milk's got more kick than a cow.'

There was no time for explanations. I scooped him up, thrust him into my pocket and clambered out the bedroom window and down the drainpipe.

I laid him gently on the grass. 'Do you want mouth-to-mouth resuscitation?'

'With those lips?' he gasped. 'You'd swallow me.'

'How're you feeling?'

'Hung-over, but I'll live. That's twice you've saved my life. I owe you.'

Later that night, when Marvin was feeling better, and I'd hidden every can of fly spray in the house, we settled down to cram for my first exam.

To be honest, he crammed while I turned the pages. I could almost hear the little video camera in his head whirring, recording every page.

The next day, I hid Marvin under my shirt collar and smuggled him into the exam. When I was seated, he casually crawled up and sat on top of my ear.

'You may start now,' said the teacher.

I turned over the exam papers and read the first question. My brain turned to pea soup.

'Don't worry,' said Marvin, 'it's all here somewhere.'

He hit the mental "search" button in his head.

'Found it, page 56,' he said and rattled off the answer.

'Slow down,' I hissed at him after 15 minutes. 'I'm getting writer's cramp.'

Linda, who was sitting across from me looked up. Using sign language, she told me there was a fly sitting on my ear.

I pretended to shoo it away. Marvin got the hint and scurried around to the other side.

We got to the last question. Marvin was puzzled. He couldn't remember seeing the answer when we'd crammed. I must have skipped a page.

I started to panic, but Marvin kept his cool. 'Who's the brightest kid in this class?' he whispered.

I pointed to Linda and Marvin flew over and perched on her shoulder. I could see what he was doing. Recording her answers.

Linda suddenly noticed him, stifled a scream, and swatted at Marvin with her pen. She missed, but flicked ink all over the boy next to her.

Marvin thought it was a great joke as he buzzed back with Linda's answer. 'I wish I was in this class,' he told me. 'I could beat her. No sweat.'

I wasn't surprised the next day when I was summoned to the Principal's office.

I should have improved my marks slowly. I was in for the third degree now from Mr Ribbitt on how I'd beaten the system.

It wasn't as bad as I'd expected. The teacher had only reported the ink throwing. No evidence of anyone cheating.

Mr Ribbitt was curious. 'What's your secret?' he asked me.

'Cramming,' I explained.

'Well, you've certainly been doing something right. Whatever it is, keep it up, boy.'

'No more D's,' I told him. 'From now on it's all A+.'

The Principal chuckled. 'You've fooled us all up to now by acting a bit slow, but you're really quite smart. Proves my old saying, "you can't judge a book by its cover".'

Old Ribbitt was famous for his silly sayings.

'Yes,' he said, 'no flies on you.'

I struggled not to laugh. Marvin struggled as well. I could feel him shaking inside my shirt.

When I looked it up later I found the saying referred to an animal that moved too fast for flies to land on them. When I told Marvin, he laughed so hard he spilled his chocolate milk all over his sheepskin.

By the end of the year, with Marvin on board, I was moving *really* fast.

An academic star, top of the class, and held up for all to admire as an example of how to succeed by hard work and application.

'No flies on that boy,' became the Principal's favourite expression.

Marvin went everywhere with me. Still as nosey as ever. And putting on weight.

'No more hot chocolates,' I'd threaten him.

'No more help at school,' was his standard threat in response.

'But you're getting fat. You weigh a tonne. When you climb up to whisper to me, the top of my ear sags. And I have to carry you everywhere. I'll bet you've forgotten how to fly.'

He'd always prove me wrong with a gentle buzz around the room. But he was having trouble flying straight and getting slower by the day.

Prize-giving night arrived. I suggested Marvin stay home with a hot chocolate and have a well earned rest. He wouldn't hear of it.

'I'll be there if it's the last thing I do. I've never won anything in my life. At my age, I may not get another chance.'

He laughed when he said it, but I knew it was true. Marvin was the one who deserved the certificate I was about to receive.

The hall was full. Mum and Dad were there, and all my friends. Marvin was riding in his favourite spot, inside my collar.

When my name was read out, I bounded up on stage. I'd succeeded! I was a *winner!*

My rolled-up certificate was sitting on the table. As I shook hands with Mr Ribbitt, I felt

Marvin wriggle out from under my collar. The nosey parker couldn't resist.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted him, as he plopped down on the rolled-up certificate and crawled inside. I couldn't complain. He'd earned the right to read it first.

The Principal let go of my hand and reached down to pick up the certificate. The sudden movement startled Marvin who beat a quick retreat for the safety of my shirt collar.

But Marvin's arthritic wing, his age and too many hot chocolates had finally caught up with him. Like an unguided missile, he came in low and off course.

As Marvin crash-landed on my arm, Mr Ribbitt's hand flashed.

Marvin got his certificate.

A direct hit!

The Principal smiled at me. 'As I keep saying, "no flies on you!"'

No Surrender

Larry peers over the top of the trench. 'Ready, aim, fire!'

'Right on target,' yells Dobbo as their last mortar shell scores a direct hit.

'Keep your head down or you'll lose it,' says Larry. 'Report on our casualties.'

'Five injured,' says Dobbo. A groan drifts across their fortified position. 'Make that six.'

'Look. Out there,' says Larry, peering through the smoke and haze. 'It's Craig. He's been hit. I'm going to get him.'

'It's suicide,' says Dobbo. 'What about the land mines and barbed wire?'

'We need a diversion. Any tanks left?'

'Knocked out in the last barrage.'

'Help! Help!' screams Craig as a mortar shell explodes nearby.

'Get the rocket launcher,' says Larry.

Dobbo is back in a second with the murderous weapon.

'Aim off to the right,' says Larry. 'That disabled armoured car. They've got a machine gun nest behind it. See if you can knock it out.'

He helps Dobbo steady the launcher on his shoulder. 'This is our last rocket. Make it count.'

Larry shoves the projectile into the tube and jumps to one side. With a whoosh, the mini-missile takes off, zeroing in on the crippled armoured vehicle. With a thunderous explosion, it blows apart, silencing the machine gun.

'Cover me,' yells Larry, throwing his rifle to Dobbo and crawling out of the trench.

The smoke on the battlefield is getting worse by the second and the noise is deafening.

Progress is slow as Larry hacks his way through the barbed wire and twisted metal, trying desperately not to step on a land mine.

All the time, enemy bullets whistle overhead.

Dobbo is returning the enemy fire as best he can, but their ammo stocks are low.

If something doesn't happen soon, they'll have to surrender!

But first Larry has to get his wounded friend, now only metres away. 'Hang on, Craig.'

'I knew you'd come for me.'

Larry drops onto his stomach and wriggles closer, stretching out a hand to grab Craig's belt. 'You, me, Dobbo. We stick together. That's what friends are for. Grit your teeth. I'll have to drag you back.'

'Where is Dobbo?'

'Back in the trench. Giving us covering fire.'

'I can only hear a rifle.'

'That's all we've got left.'

'What about the missiles, tanks, hand grenades, machine guns...'

'All gone.'

'Then we're finished. Leave me out here.'

'We can't let you fall into enemy hands. They're animals.'

Slowly, metre by metre, Larry drags his fallen comrade back to the trench.

As they reach safety, an amplified voice booms out across the battlefield.

'Surrender! We know you're out of ammunition.'

'Not quite,' says Dobbo, as he pokes up his head and fires off a shot.

'Don't be stupid,' shouts the voice. 'Give up while you can. You'll be treated fairly.'

'We'd be signing our death warrants,' Dobbo tells the other two.

'Keep shooting,' says Larry, wrapping a bandage around Craig's head.

'Bad news,' says Dobbo. 'That was our last bullet.'

Larry frowns as he wipes the sweat from his forehead. 'Don't tell *them* that.'

'You have 10 seconds to surrender,' booms the voice of the enemy, 'or we'll come over there and get you.'

'We need more time,' Larry shouts back. 'To patch up the wounded.'

'Don't bother,' says the voice. 'We take no wounded prisoners.'

Craig shivers.

The loudspeaker crackles again. 'If you do not surrender immediately, we will come and get you. And we will show no mercy.'

'They never do,' says Dobbo.

'It's over,' says Craig.

'Not quite.' Larry glances around. 'I think I see an escape route. Get ready to jump.'

A grin crosses Dobbo's face. 'What have we got to lose?'

Craig starts to shake. 'I can't do it.'

'Don't give up now,' says Dobbo. 'It's our only chance.'

'We'll all jump together,' says Larry.

There's a squeal of brakes, a hiss of air.

Larry, Dobbo and Craig tumble out together and hit the ground running, the enemy close behind.

'Kids today,' mutters the old man as he closes the doors behind them.

'In my day, we behaved ourselves on the school bus!'

Sandwiched In

My Mum makes the worst sandwiches in the world. I should know. I've carried them to school since I was little. Mind you, I'm not exactly big now.

Mum can't understand why. She thinks the thousands of sandwiches she's made over the years should have made me grow tall and strong. My theory is that if I'd eaten even half of them, I'd be dead by now.

Some people have problems seeing, some have problems hearing. Mum has problems tasting. Which becomes an even bigger problem when I tell you her great joy in life is making sandwiches.

With her lack of taste, anything and everything goes between slices of bread and into my school lunch. Mum thinks if *she* likes something, then everybody must like it.

Dad's no fool. After he married Mum, he went to a doctor and got a letter saying he was allergic to wheat. Mum switched to rye bread so Dad got another letter saying he was allergic to rye.

It took 30 different breads, and 30 doctor's letters, before Mum gave up on Dad and turned her full attention on me. Being an only child, there was no one else to take the heat.

I begged Dad to take me to his doctor so he could find the same allergies in me, but he refused. Said it would blow his cover. Claimed it was essential that one of us survived to warn the world. Told me it might as well be him.

Other kids who don't like their sandwiches can always trade. Believe me, not many kids want to trade anything for a boiled liver and cabbage sandwich. It's Mum's favourite and top of my hate list. It not only tastes revolting, it stinks.

I soon found the best way to deal with Mum's sandwiches was to throw them in the rubbish bin. That meant I had nothing to trade, but I made a deal with Dad. In return for my continued silence on his allergy scam, he secretly increased my allowance. From then on, I bought my lunch.

Some days, as I tucked into a potato-topped pie, or some equally tasty morsel, I felt a flutter of guilt about what I was doing. An extra cream bun always calmed the flutter.

That particular Monday morning, Mum was very excited. She'd discovered a new brand of bread and gone straight out and bought a loaf. To me, bread is bread. To Mum, it's a mystical experience.

The new loaf was called *Crinkly Crust* because the outside looked like corrugated iron. The TV commercial showed a hundred loaves of crinkly bread dancing across the screen singing the *Crinkly Crust* slogan – "You'll get more sandwiches out of every loaf".

Some people will believe anything. Mum's one of them. She floated home from the supermarket.

The first thing I did when I left the house that Monday was open my satchel and sniff. Sure

enough, boiled liver and cabbage. I carefully removed the red and white striped paper bag which contained the offending object.

The label on the bag said *Karl's Kandy*. Mum's into re-cycling. I slowly unrolled the top and peered in.

Having a new loaf to play with must have gone to Mum's head! Instead of several small sandwiches, she'd made one jumbo special. *Five* slices of *Crinkly Crust* bread with alternating layers of boiled liver and cabbage.

I closed the bag and stuffed it back into my satchel as the school bus chugged around the corner. I'd have to dump the giant sandwich at school.

The bus pulled up at the school gate, and I shouldered my way off. I heard Mac, behind me, sniffing.

'You guessed it,' I told him. My sandwiches were legends in their own bread. 'Wanna trade?'

Mac pulled a face at the thought. His mother made sandwiches with things like honey, or luncheon sausage, or cheese. Never all on the same day, and never all in the same sandwich.

As we headed for the assembly hall, I took the foul-smelling package out of my school backpack. The juice from the liver and cabbage had seeped through the red and white recycled paper bag, making a soggy halo around the words *Karl's Kandy*.

I threw an impressive one-handed basketball shot towards the nearest rubbish bin.

'Bullseye,' I yelled as the bag and contents found their mark.

I felt in my pocket to double-check I had money for lunch. Mac looked envious. He never bought his lunch.

'Something different for me today,' I told him. 'A hot dog and an apple pie.'

Mac suddenly stopped and turned back. 'I think I've left my homework on the bus. I'll see you in class.'

First period was English. My brain was still wrapped around thoughts of lunchtime treats as I walked into the classroom with everyone else and headed for my regular desk.

As I got to it, I stopped. There, on the seat, was a red and white paper bag. I picked it up and unrolled the top. Inside was my boiled liver and cabbage sandwich.

I spun around to Mac who always sat behind me. 'Very funny.'

Mac stared back with a blank look. 'What's funny?'

'This,' I said, waving the sandwich under his nose. 'You didn't leave your homework on the bus. You went back to get my lunch out of the bin.'

Mac still played dumb. 'I *did* leave my homework on the bus. I swear to you, Greg, I didn't touch your lunch. But someone did.'

I followed his gaze down to the floor. There, by my foot, was another red and white paper bag. As the teacher entered the room, I snatched up the second bag and compared it with the

first.

They were identical, even down to the soggy stains. Mum must have packed *two* lunches. Not like her to make mistakes.

I stuffed them both in my backpack. It had to be Mac's idea of a joke. I'd show him. I wouldn't say another word about it. I'd dump both sandwiches before the next class and pretend nothing had happened.

I'd have to do it then. If I left it too long, they'd stink out the classroom.

Getting rid of the sandwiches was easy. When the bell sounded for the end of period, I was out the door while Mac was still packing up. Checking to see he wasn't following me, I ran around the side of the building where I couldn't be seen.

In front of me was a fence, separating the school grounds from a steep gully. With two quick throws, I heaved both sandwiches as far as I could and watched them plummet down. Let Mac try and retrieve *those*.

Chuckling to myself, I set off for my next class, Biology. Mac gave me a funny look as I entered the room. I ignored him.

But I couldn't ignore what I saw on the seat. *Four* bags of boiled liver and cabbage sandwiches, all in identical red and white *Karl's Kandy* bags.

I swivelled around to look at Mac, but he was busy talking. Why wasn't he waiting for my reaction? That's half the fun. But Mac didn't seem interested. In fact, no one did.

The teacher was late arriving so that gave me the chance I was looking for. I'd put a stop to this practical joke once and for all!

While everyone was still talking, I scooped up the four red and white bags and slipped out of the room. I broke into a run.

From the class window, I'd spotted a rubbish truck, collecting from houses near the school. As the truck rolled slowly down the street, I jogged alongside, keeping pace.

The rubbish collectors took no notice. Except for the four paper bags in my hand, I could have been out on a training run.

As the rubbish was emptied into the back of the truck, a heavy steel roller moved backwards and forwards crushing everything flat.

Waiting for just the right moment, I threw the sandwiches into the truck and watched them disappear under the roller.

'Hey! What do you think you're doing?' yelled one of the rubbish collectors. 'That's our job!'

I didn't stop to argue, but sprinted back to class. The teacher frowned at me, but didn't say anything. She'd only just arrived herself.

I felt very pleased with my effort. I tuned out the teacher's lecture on the reproductive cycle of the frog, complete with pictures. Instead, I sat back and thought long and hard about lunch.

I was lounging back in my seat, still day-dreaming about a hot dog and apple pie, when I

spotted a flash of red under my desk. I looked down and snapped back to reality.

Eight identical, stained, red and white *Karl's Kandy* paper bags sat in a neat pile at my feet. I didn't have to open them. My sensitive nose told me all I needed to know. But Mum had only bought one loaf!

I looked around, desperately. The girl sitting next to me had a plastic bag poking out the top of her satchel. I tapped her arm and signalled that I wanted to borrow it.

She passed it across without taking her eyes off the dissected frog which was now in several bits.

I had several bits of my own to attend to. Jumbo sized bits with crinkly crusts. After Biology, there was a 15 minute recess. If I worked quickly, I'd just have enough time.

Anticipating the bell, I crammed the eight sandwiches into the plastic bag. Holding it tightly in one hand and my backpack in the other, I hit the corridor, running. Out of the building and across the football field to the caretaker's shed which was always unlocked during the day.

On the wall hung the key to the furnace room next door, which was strictly out of bounds. I ignored the key and, grabbing a shovel, dashed outside and plunged into the bush behind the shed.

I dug quickly. The hole was soon three or four times bigger than it needed to be, but I wanted to make sure. When I was satisfied, I took the eight sandwiches out of the plastic bag and placed them at the bottom of the hole.

Then I shovelled the dirt back in and finished it off by dragging several large stones on top. It looked like a grave.

I wiped my forehead. I was sweating. Grabbing my backpack, I put the shovel back in the shed. I detoured around the area where my classmates hung out during recess and headed for my locker where I kept a can of soft drink for emergencies. This was an emergency!

The thought of a drink made me think of food. In my mind I could see hot dogs and apple pies. And maybe some cream buns as well. Why not?

I turned the key in the lock and threw open the door and suddenly I could also see sandwiches. But not in my mind.

Real sandwiches!

Sixteen red and white paper bags stared back at me. I snatched the can of drink, threw the plastic bag and backpack in the locker, and slammed the door.

My brain was spinning and my head hurt. Sweat poured down my face and body. Trying not to draw attention to myself, I headed for the toilet and locked myself in a cubicle until I heard the bell sound for the end of recess.

I waited another five minutes. I wanted to be sure everyone was back in class before I came out. My earlier panic had given way to a new determination. I'd fought Mum's sandwiches all my life, and beaten them. This was the same old battle, only the stakes were higher.

I thought I felt a cold wind swirl up the corridor as I approached my locker, but I could have been imagining it. My nerves were now as steady as my hands as I reopened the locker and stuffed the 16 sandwich packs into the plastic bag.

I left my backpack where it was. I thought about leaving a note saying Mac could have it if I didn't return, but he already had a better backpack than me so there didn't seem much point.

I knew what I had to do. Although it was out of bounds, the furnace room held the answer.

This time, I took a different route and cut through the bush to get to the caretaker's shed. The caretaker was nowhere to be seen. I grabbed the key to the furnace room and went in.

The heat hit me as I stepped through the door. The giant incinerator took all the school's rubbish and hardly ever got cold. Today it was red hot.

I shuddered as I realised what I was about to do. Using fireproof gloves I found hanging on a nail, I seized the furnace handle and dragged the heavy door open. Flames flicked out at me.

Without wasting a second, I threw the plastic bag full of sandwiches into the furnace and shoved the door closed. The smell of burning liver and cabbage and bread filled the air.

'Wow!' I yelled above the noise of the flames. 'Toasted sandwiches.'

'Wow!' I yelled again, this time in pain, as a hand grabbed my ear.

The caretaker didn't believe my story. Nor did Principal Ribbitt. Can you blame them?

That afternoon as I trudged up the path at home, I felt like a washed-out wreck. My brain was numb, my eyes were stinging, and my whole body reeked of liver and cabbage toasted sandwiches.

I threw open the back door. Mum was out. There was a plastic bag lying on the floor. I picked it up.

It was the crumpled up wrapper off the *Crinkly Crust* loaf. I smoothed it out and read the slogan printed on it – "You'll get more sandwiches out of every loaf".

For once, an honest advertising slogan!

Then I spotted the note Mum had left for me on the kitchen table. The first bit said...

"Greg, just popped out to pick up more of that delicious Crinkly Crust bread. You must be starving..."

I stopped reading and scratched my head. I was starving. In all the excitement, I hadn't eaten a thing all day. But how did Mum know?

My stomach rumbled. I headed straight for the fridge and opened the door.

There, on the shelf, was a red and white paper bag with the label, *Karl's Kandy*.

The name had a soggy halo around it and the smell was unmistakable.

I read the rest of Mum's note.

"Not like you to leave your lunch at home like you did today. Never mind. You can take it to school tomorrow. I think liver and cabbage sandwiches are even nicer on the second day. Don't you?"

Against The Tide

Jimmy raced around the corner of the bike-shed and threw himself flat against the wall, his chest pounding. Two against one. Not fair. Not what they had in mind for him.

'Where did he go?' yelled Murray, screaming to a halt.

Brian raced up. Tough, hard, uncompromising. 'We'll find him.'

The two prefects gazed around.

'But we've only got 15 minutes to get him back,' said Murray. 'After that, it'll be too late.'

'No one's ever got out of it before.'

'What if he can't?'

'Can't what?'

'You know.'

'He'll soon learn.'

They'd chased the smaller boy halfway across town. All because Jimmy had said no.

Brian had yelled at him. Said it was an order. Told him to take off his shirt.

Jimmy had refused and when Murray tried to rip it off him, he'd bolted.

He'd taken every shortcut he knew, ducking in and out of backyards, across lawns, anything to throw off his trackers. The prefects had chased him in Brian's car, with Murray as spotter, hanging out the window.

Jimmy had headed back to school. He realised, now, that was a mistake.

Brian and Murray were searching through the rubbish bins. They'd see him any second. He took a deep breath and made another run for it.

'There he goes,' yelled Murray.

'You follow him,' said Brian. 'Steer him towards D Block. I'll cut around the back.'

D Block. The loneliest outpost on the school grounds. This time it was Murray who did the zigging and zagging, cutting off any other escape route.

Sweat ran down Jimmy's face and dripped onto his shirt.

'Give up,' Murray yelled after him.

Unthinkable. Not with those two goons. D Block loomed. Jimmy dashed straight for the nearest entrance. His only hope was to find a teacher.

No one would start ripping off his clothes if there was a teacher around.

Jimmy ran down the D Block corridor, past the lockers, glancing desperately into every classroom as he went. The first room was empty. So was the second. And the third. All of them empty!

What a fool he'd been. Of course all the classrooms were deserted. The whole school was deserted. That's why Brian and Murray were chasing him.

Jimmy raced towards the farthest exit with Murray in hot pursuit. The door was closed, but he threw his weight against the locking bar and the door burst outwards. Jimmy burst out with it.

Straight into Brian's arms!

'Got ya!'

'Let me go!'

Murray arrived a split-second later and grabbed his legs. They stretched Jimmy out like a hammock.

'Give in?' snarled Brian.

'No!' Jimmy yelled and his screams echoed around D Block, but there was no one else to hear them.

Murray tucked Jimmy's legs under one arm while he checked his watch. 'Ten minutes.'

Brian glared down at the prisoner. 'I'll give you one more chance. Will you come peacefully?'

'I'd die first!'

'We'll have to carry the little toad,' Brian told Murray, as Jimmy wriggled and squirmed.

Brian had left his car near the school gate for a quick getaway. They bundled Jimmy into the back seat and, while Murray held him in a headlock, Brian took off with a squeal of rubber.

'Five minutes,' warned Murray from the back seat.

Brian told Jimmy, 'No arguments this time. Get your shirt off.'

'Make me!' yelled Jimmy. Murray accepted the invitation, lunged for the shirt and managed to rip off the collar.

Brian took the next corner on two wheels and screamed to a halt outside a large building.

The quick stop caught Jimmy off balance. He fell forward and whacked his head. He was groggy as his captors pulled him from the car.

The rest of his shirt came off, followed by his shoes, as he was dragged into the building.

Suddenly, the trio burst through an inner door and the light got brighter. Jimmy felt his socks vanish and then heard Brian's urgent whisper as they set him on his feet.

'Get your trousers off. Now!'

Reluctantly, Jimmy's hands reached for his zipper. In a matter of seconds, he was naked except for his boxer shorts.

His two captors pushed him forward.

'Up there,' ordered Murray.

Jimmy did as he was told, but it wasn't over yet.

'Sorry, kid,' said Brian. 'We didn't want to do it the hard way, but you left us no choice.'

There was a gunshot!

'No!' screamed Jimmy as he began to sway. He had to stay on his feet.

Brian saw what was happening, raced forward and gave him a shove. Jimmy's yell was swallowed by the water.

'He won't try that again,' said Murray as Jimmy bobbed to the surface.

Brian nodded. 'The little toad should have realised. When the school has a swimming carnival, *everyone* competes.'

'Maybe he'll do better in the backstroke,' said Murray.

Timeless

The sign on the front read: DON'T TOUCH. My brother Denny couldn't resist.

He was having a bad week. He'd borrowed Dad's electric shaver without asking and dropped it. Dad was furious.

It wasn't as if Denny had anything to shave. Only a soft fuzz on his cheeks which Dad called 'bum-fluff.'

Being a typical thick boy, Denny thought shaving might speed up the hair growth. He should have asked me. That only works on girls' legs.

Anyway, Dad said Denny's beard would grow in its own time, and you can't hurry time.

Sometimes I wish I *could* speed up time, although adults would hate it. Mum and Dad say they don't know where time goes *now*. For them, every year seems to go faster than the last.

Of course, parents don't have to sit through Badger's history lessons which take *forever*. Denny's in my class, too, even though he's older than me. He got held back a year. We both think history's an A Grade bore. A Plus since Badger arrived.

Badger's a strange little man. He wears funny half-glasses and a permanent frown. A beaten-up old clock stands on the floor in the corner of his classroom. That's where the DON'T TOUCH sign is.

Every history lesson, I tick off the minutes on the big clock, hoping for once it'll run fast. It never does. Badger's clock and the school bell are always on time.

One day, Denny came up with a surprisingly good idea. He'd sneak into Badger's room before the lesson and adjust the clock to run fast. Badger would think the school bell was broken and let us out early.

I told Denny to go for it. Why not? *He'd* get into trouble - not me.

Next day, during a practice fire drill, Denny sneaked into Badger's room. Opening a panel on the clock, he found what he was looking for. A lever, with a small sign that read: TURN TO THE RIGHT TO SPEED UP - TURN TO THE LEFT TO SLOW DOWN.

Denny's not the brightest boy and he gets confused by left and right. I've tried showing him how the back of his left hand with the thumb sticking out looks like a capital "L", but it doesn't help. He wasn't around when they gave out brains.

So he did the only thing he could when he saw those instructions. He took a guess, gave the lever a nudge, closed the panel, and got out of there fast.

Did it work? Let me tell you, that was the longest history lesson I've ever sat through. Or wriggled through. It seemed to take forever. I looked across at Denny, but he just shrugged.

As always, the school bell rang as Badger's clock struck 3pm. I checked my watch. It was three o'clock all right. So much for little brother's scheme.

On the way home, I quizzed Denny about the clock. He swore black and blue he'd adjusted the time, even though he couldn't remember which way he'd pushed the lever.

That night, it seemed to take ages for the sun to set. Mum and Dad watched the TV news. That seemed to go on a lot longer as well.

Then Dad remarked how much he'd got done that afternoon. Mum said the same. They both wished they had that much time every day.

Next morning at school everything seemed to be running slow. All my friends complained how bored they were. They dragged themselves around from one class to the next. It was the longest day I could remember.

By that night I was getting suspicious. Mum and Dad said they'd got more done that day than they normally did in a week.

I went looking for Denny. I found him in front of the bathroom mirror. He looked very unhappy. Reckoned he had less facial hair than ever.

I told him he'd mucked up the clock, but I might be able to save him. He started to argue, but I gave him my "if you want a job done properly, give it to a girl" speech. That always shuts him up.

Next morning, we arrived at school before everyone else. Our luck was in. Badger's classroom was unlocked.

Denny opened the panel on the clock and showed me the lever, and the sign that read: TURN TO THE RIGHT TO SPEED UP - TURN TO THE LEFT TO SLOW DOWN. Sure enough, Denny had turned it to the left.

Badger's clock was making the universe run slow!

I was glad Denny hadn't turned the lever any further or we'd have turned into statues. All I had to do was pull the lever to the middle and everything would be back to normal.

If I didn't, every teenager in the world would die of boredom!

Just then I glimpsed someone walking towards the classroom. Badger!

I grabbed the lever and tugged, but it wouldn't budge. Denny tried to help, but, being my brother, started pulling against me. Badger's footsteps were getting closer!

Desperately, I shoved Denny away and heaved on the lever with all my might. It started to move slowly, then suddenly loosened up.

I couldn't stop. I fell back, dragging the lever with me across to the right. Frantically, I tried to push it back to the middle, but it had jammed hard-right and wasn't about to move.

But we had to move, and quick! I slammed the panel on the clock closed and Denny and I dived for our desks.

Badger entered the room to find two keen students doing some early morning study. I don't think he believed us, but he couldn't think of a more sinister reason for us to be there.

Now, Mum and Dad reckon the days go faster than ever. For me, they still can't go fast enough.

But Denny's shaving twice a day!

Dinner With Uncle Charlie

Our house used to be *really* crowded. There was Dad and Mum and Mum's Uncle Charlie, and me, Christine. Also Slipper our Parrot, and Kate the cat from next door, who always hung around the place.

It got even more crowded when Dad's mum arrived from the old country and sort of took over the house. Mum had a full time job so she didn't mind. Dad said it kept Grandma young.

I didn't mind having Grandma there, either, but Uncle Charlie hated it. He and Grandma took an instant dislike to each other. Always bickering and arguing. Made the place feel like a real zoo.

The only thing everyone agreed on was Grandma's home-made sausages. They were delicious. All sorts of stuff went into them. Grandma never wasted a thing.

That's because she grew up poor. When Grandma was my age, there was a war on and people starved. They had to eat whatever they could find to stay alive. It was a long time ago, but Grandma never forgot it.

She always lectured us about waste, especially Uncle Charlie. She called him a fat pig and said her whole family could have survived for a month on what he ate in a day.

Uncle Charlie treated it all as a big joke. Called her a silly old goat and laughed in her face.

Uncle Charlie didn't have much else to laugh about. Not since the heart attack. Spent his days hanging around the house, squabbling with Grandma.

One morning, I walked into the lounge to find Slipper, the parrot, dead in his cage. I was upset, but I was also late for school. Dad and Mum had already gone to work. Uncle Charlie was still in bed.

Grandma says she'd take care of it.

I had such a busy day at school, I forgot about Slipper until dinner that night.

'Sad about Slipper,' I said, digging into Grandma's chicken casserole with the super-thick gravy.

'Happens to all of us, Christine,' said Dad, digging around in the casserole dish. 'What did you do with the body?'

'Grandma took care of it,' I told him.

'Doesn't she always?' said Dad.

Grandma just nodded.

Dad kept fishing. 'Bingo,' he cried, hooking a plump drumstick.

I was still hungry so I went hunting too, stirring the gravy and dredging the bottom of the dish. My fork hit something.

I speared it and dragged it to the surface. It was the smallest drumstick I'd ever seen.

Uncle Charlie turned to Grandma. 'So that's what you did with Slipper!'

With a squeal, I dropped the drumstick back in the gravy. Uncle Charlie swooped on it.

'Yum, yum. Parrot,' he cried, crunching on the small drumstick. 'My favourite.'

Mum and Dad ignored him and kept eating. Grandma was livid. I was ready to throw up.

'What's wrong with you?' Uncle Charlie demanded. 'One dead bird's no different from another.'

'Grandma?' I looked at her, pleadingly. 'You didn't...'

'The man is an idiot!' Grandma snapped in an accent thicker than the gravy. 'I told you, Christine, I took care of it. You know, during the war...'

'Mama,' Dad began, 'not while we're eating.'

Grandma cut him off. 'When I was a young girl...' and she was off on another of her horror stories.

It was my job to clear the table. I waited for Grandma to take a breath, then rushed the casserole dish out to the kitchen. As I flushed the gravy and bones down the waste disposal, I searched for anything else that looked like Slipper. Nothing.

Despite Uncle Charlie, Grandma was always keen to try new recipes. One night she produced a rabbit stew.

Since the fiasco with the chicken casserole, Uncle Charlie had behaved himself. I knew it couldn't last.

'What's new around here?' I asked, trying to get some normal family conversation going.

Mum spooned some stew onto Dad's plate. 'Did you tell Christine about the accident?'

'What accident?' I asked, helping myself to the stew. I tasted it. It was delicious.

'The cat from next door,' said Dad.

'Kate? What happened to her?'

'She was run over and killed,' Mum explained. 'Right outside our front door. Lucky Grandma was here. She took care of it.'

'What did you do with Kate's body, Gran?' I asked, without thinking.

It was Uncle Charlie's cue. 'Probably put it in this stew,' he said. 'Like the parrot. Anything that dies round here finishes up on the table.'

Grandma looked ready to punch him, but Uncle Charlie was warming up.

'I was right,' he said, giving his food a stir. 'I've got a tail here. And an eye.' He looked at me. 'What have you got?'

I forced myself to look down at my plate. My imagination went wild as Kate's ghostly image peered back at me with a one-eyed grin.

Everyone, except Uncle Charlie, had stopped eating. 'If there's anything left of the cat,' he told Grandma as he slurped the stew, 'make some more of your sausages. Haven't had any for ages.'

After dinner, I was careful to flush every bit of left-over stew down the waste disposal. Grandma's home-made sausages were my all-time favorites, but I didn't want Kate turning up

in my lunch box.

After that I made excuses to skip dinner for a few days and lived on pizzas and takeaways, but my weekly allowance money soon ran out.

Uncle Charlie welcomed me back with a story about a local dog that had gone missing. Grandma was furious, but he just chuckled as I struggled with my steak.

Then, one day, Mum and Dad went out of town on business. I came home late from hockey practice and dashed in the front door just as Grandma was serving up dinner.

I slid into my seat at the table, my mouth watering. There in front of me was a huge plate of Grandma's home-made sausages!

'Thanks, Gran,' I told her as I piled four of them onto my plate. 'Mum and Dad don't know what they're missing.'

I bit into the first sausage. It was unlike anything I'd ever tasted. Then I noticed Grandma wasn't eating.

'What's wrong?' I asked her between bites.

'Sad news, Christine,' she told me. 'But you must not worry. I have taken care of everything.'

I was only half listening. 'Uncle Charlie'll eat the rest of these sausages if we don't,' I told her.

I wiped my mouth on my napkin and looked around. 'Where *is* Uncle Charlie, anyway?' Grandma reached out her fork and speared a sausage.

'Uncle Charlie died this morning.'

Double Trouble

'One week and only four wishes, that's it,' said the genie.

'But I thought genies granted endless wishes with no time limit.'

'You've been reading too many fairy stories. The number of wishes and how long they're valid depends on the model.'

'Genies come in different models? Like cars?'

'Of course, you silly girl. This is the consumer age. People want choice. You can get a "10 wish, one month" model, a "15 wish, six month" model, or the "top of the line" genie with unlimited wishes and no time limit.'

'You sound like a car dealer. How come *your* offer isn't as good?'

'I'm the no-frills model. Pre-owned. Ex-rental.'

'But you *are* a genie?'

The figure who'd just popped out of the bottle stretched and sighed. 'What do I look like? Darth Vader?'

I scratched my nose as I thought about it. With the size of my hooter, it gave me plenty of time to think.

'So I get four wishes, but only one week to wish them in?'

'That's what I said.'

I wasn't taking any chances. I'd been with Dad when he'd bought our last car. There's always a catch.

Nobody finds magic bottles on beaches. And nobody unscrews the top to find a genie inside. I mean, Aladdin's a movie... isn't it?

The genie, seeing the look on my face, shook his head from side to side. 'Kids.'

'I'm not a kid, I'm a teenager.'

'You're a doubting Thomas.'

'My name's Gabrielle.'

'Known to your friends as Gabby.'

'How do you know that?'

'I'm not just a wish machine. I've done my homework.'

'You *knew* I'd find your bottle on the beach?'

'I knew one of you would.'

'Who else could have found it?'

'Sandi.'

Sandi! I almost fell over with shock. Sandi! This expandable little know-it-all knew about my worst enemy.

Sandi was in my class at school. She made my life hell. Tall, skinny, smart, popular with the boys. Everything I wasn't.

'Okay, genie, here's a test of your powers. My first wish. Zap Sandi. Wipe her off the face of the planet. Obliterate her.'

'Sorry,' said the genie.

'What do you mean, sorry?'

'You can only wish for yourself.'

'Where does it say that?'

'In the fine print.'

'I *knew* there had to be a catch.'

He handed me the bottle. 'Just read it.'

I scanned the label. 'I don't believe this.'

'It's true.'

'Double?'

'Don't blame me,' said the genie. 'I'm just doing my job.'

'You mean anything I wish for, Sandi gets double?'

'Is she your worst enemy?'

'The worst of the worst of the worst!'

'Then she gets double. Of course, you don't *have* to make any wishes. It's not compulsory.'

'Don't be stupid,' I said. 'Would *you* let a magic genie drop into your lap and not wish for something?'

'I see what you mean.'

In all the excitement, I'd forgotten how late it was. I checked my watch. It had stopped again.

'Genie, I'll start small. I want a new watch.'

The genie just looked at me.

'Come on,' I told him. 'A new watch.'

'Are you sure? That uses up a whole wish.'

'Of course, if you can't do it...'

'Skeptic,' he muttered and raised his arms to the sky. Lightning flashed. Thunder crashed.

The earth shook.

'I only wanted a watch, not an all day ride at Disneyland.'

'Sorry,' he said. 'I've been in that bottle so long it was good to have a stretch.'

'Where's the watch?' I asked.

'Oh, that? You're wearing it.'

I checked my wrist. Sure enough, my old watch had vanished. The new one was stunning. Gold, encrusted with diamonds and sapphires.

'Sure beats my old digital.'

'Sandi will love it, too,' said the genie, picking up his bottle. 'Let's go.'

'Go where?'

'Back to your place. You're not going to leave me on this dark and lonely beach, are you?'

'After what you've just given Sandi, maybe I should.'

'Let's get this right,' said the genie. 'Not what *I*'ve given Sandi. What *you*'ve given Sandi. You get what you wish for. But she gets two of them.'

That little know-all genie was right.

Sandi rushed up to me next day during lunch break.

'Hey, Hooter.' Sandi took great delight in reminding me that I had a huge nose, that she was the fairest one of all, and I was the ugly duckling.

'Look at this,' she said, beaming, holding out her wrist.

'Very nice,' I muttered. Gold with diamonds and sapphires. 'Just like mine.'

The grin left her face as I pulled up my sleeve.

She responded by pulling up her other sleeve. 'But I've got one for each arm.'

That night, I pulled the genie bottle out of my drawer and unscrewed the top.

'Nice watch,' said the genie as he floated out and sat on my bed.

'And Sandi's got *two* of them! Are you sure you can't kill her?'

'Only with kindness.'

The run-in with Sandi had made me so mad, I hadn't eaten all day. Now I was home, I was suddenly starving.

'Was that an earthquake?' asked the genie.

'It's my stomach rumbling. I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse.'

'I'm a vegetarian myself,' said the genie, 'but if you insist...'

He raised his arms to the sky, but I leapt at him and we both tumbled to the ground.

'I don't want a horse to eat, you dummy.'

'Then be careful what you say. It sounded like a wish to me. I can't read your mind. Would you rather have a pizza?'

'Not your way. I've only got three wishes left.'

'As long as you remember to use them up before Saturday night.'

Saturday. The school ball. And I didn't have a date.

'Genie, what if I asked you to make me beautiful?'

He scratched his head. 'Would you really want that? Sandi would become twice as beautiful.'

'I couldn't bear it. I've got a better idea. Wish number two. My own Prince Charming. Some super-hunk footballer from school.'

The next day, someone from the rugby team asked me to go with him to the school ball.

I played hard to get for about 10 seconds and then said, yes. How could I refuse? He was one of three brothers, identical to look at, and all built like muscular Greek gods with faces to

match.

Just then, Sandi walked by with the other *two* muscular brothers in tow.

'Decisions, decisions,' she said as she passed us. 'I can't choose between them. I'll just have to let *both* of them take me to the ball.'

'I didn't say it was fair,' said the genie when I yelled at him that night. 'Forget about Sandi. You've got two more wishes. Enjoy them.'

'A sports car.'

'Are you sure? It's your third wish. You'll only have one left.'

'I know what I'm doing. I want the fanciest sports car you can conjure up.'

The next day, I pulled up at the school gates in a hot, shiny red machine. You needed sunglasses to even look at it.

I sat there, basking in the envy of my friends. Even my new Prince Charming was knocked out.

'Can I drive you to the ball in this?' he asked, his tongue hanging out as he drooled over the hot mag wheels.

'Maybe,' I told him.

Then Sandi drove up. In exactly the same car. Even *my* Prince Charming knew a better package when he saw one.

'You're with me!' I screamed as he started to wipe Sandi's windscreen.

'All right, all right,' he protested. 'Just looking.'

Sandi flashed him her biggest smile. 'You'll love the other one I've got at home. Exactly like this.'

I pressed my foot down hard on the accelerator to leave her in a cloud of dust and promptly stalled. By the time I got the car started, everyone had gone.

I was left alone in my gleaming machine, hating the world. And especially Sandi.

Saturday night arrived. The night of the school ball. The genie sat on my bed, looking at me as I adjusted my ball gown. I'd had it for ages. I'd thought of wishing for a beautiful new one, but couldn't stand the idea of turning up in the same dress as Sandi.

I wondered what she was doing at this moment. Probably tossing a coin to decide which of her two hunks she'd dance with first.

My date was due any minute. I applied the last dollop of powder to my nose. Suddenly I stopped.

'Genie?'

'Yes.'

'Everything you've said has come true. Watches, dates, cars.'

I heard the doorbell ring as I pictured Sandi's *two* super-hunks speeding to her place to collect her.

'I know what I want for my last wish!

'I hope it's a good one,' he told me.

I put down the powder and grinned.

'Sandi's going to love it! Genie... I want a new nose!'

The Addict

I'm a TV addict. So what? I *like* TV. And soon, I'm gonna watch even *more* TV 'cos I'm quitting school. When end of term rolls around, I'm gonna march out the front gate of Baker High for the last time with a rude farewell gesture to Old Man Ribbitt and the rest of them.

When I told Ribbitt my plans, he went bananas and tried to talk me out of it. Told me if I left without qualifications, I'd be condemned to spend the rest of my life unemployed.

Who cares? Sounds like heaven to me. Who wants to work when they can watch TV? I know what I'd rather do. Every chance I get. Today's no different.

I race into the house after school, throw my school backpack on the floor, and head for the living room. On the way, I pick up a few cans of coke, some large packets of chips, and a bag of salted peanuts. Enough to last me till dinner.

I flop down on my favourite seat, the lime green couch with the frilly orange cushions. Great colours. I hit the remote to turn on the giant flat-screen TV which fills half the living room wall.

'Don't bother me, world!' I yell at the top of my voice. 'I'm here for life!'

I don't have to yell. I'm alone in the house. The way I like it. Real addicts don't like company. Too many distractions.

I crack open the first can of drink and open a packet of chips.

The cartoon show is just starting. Reruns. I've seen them all a hundred times. I decide to doze for a minute so I'm fresh for the *Rocky Video* show on next.

I don't mean to brag, but I can doze off instantly. Watching TV is hard work. You're got to pace yourself. Bit of watching - bit of sleep. You have to sacrifice some shows for others when you're a serious addict. And I'm serious.

Like the pro I am, I'm asleep in two seconds flat. Instant dreams. In colour. This one's about my idol, Dread Nautilus, the heavy-metal rock star. Only a couple of years older than me, but already famous - and a billionaire.

He has his arm around my shoulder as he introduces me to a TV audience of millions as his 'good buddy, inspiration, and fellow star'.

Don't laugh. I *could* be a rock star. If I wanted to. I might one day. I could practice the guitar lying on the couch while I watch TV.

I snap out of the dream and there, on the giant screen, is the *real* Dread Nautilus. His thick black hair halfway down his back. Dressed in leather from head to toe.

He mimes his new single, 'Love is for losers'.

Lyrics that don't rhyme and two chords. It's great!

He's surrounded by screaming girls. He always is. They love him. He's in every teenage fan magazine and all the girls dream of catching him.

The song crashes out with a final tuneless chord. I doze off.

When I come to, my throat is dry. I reach for the open can of coke and find it's flat. Very flat. Not a bubble in sight. And the chips are soggy. Must have been in the cupboard awhile.

The *Rocky Video* show is still on. And there's Dread again. He's changed out of his leather outfit. But who's the little boy sitting next to him? And the woman?

His wife and son?

Gee, things happen fast in rock music. A few minutes ago he wasn't even married!

I crack another can of coke and drift back to sleep.

When I wake up, the *Rocky Video* show is still on. And my coke is flat again, but before I can get too upset, the voice on the screen announces a new Dread Nautilus single.

Another one? How does he find the time to have kids?

Dread bounces on stage and I blink. There's something different about him. What is it?

And then I realise. His hair! It's still halfway down his back, but it's thinner at the front. Maybe he wears a wig and it's slipped. He can't be going bald. He's only a couple of years older than me.

Must be married life.

I make a mental note not to get married and nod off.

This time I dream that Dread is having a hair transplant. They're taking it off his head and reattaching it all over his body. He looks like a monkey.

He turns to me, his 'good buddy', and suggests I have a transplant, too. A doctor comes towards me with a big needle. *Nooo*, I scream and wake up.

I'm hungry and reach for the salted peanuts. Ah. Nothing like salted peanuts. Crunching them between your teeth is one of life's joys.

The *Rocky Video* show is *still* on and there's this 10 year old dressed up like Dread Nautilus. He's jumping all over the screen, singing one of Dread's songs.

The voice-over says something about someone's son, but I don't catch it all. My coke is flat. I crack open another. I struggle to open it. The can must be faulty. I doze off.

I don't remember my dream, but when I wake up, the news is on. What a relief. I was beginning to think the *Rocky Video* show would go on forever!

The salted peanuts taste really stale. What's this world coming to? Whatever happened to consumer protection? There's a TV show about that. I decide that if I ever find time, I'll write in and complain about the food and drink that won't stay fresh.

I'm distracted by some kind of news item. The Prime Minister (never seen this guy before), is opening a new high school. Did the reporter say the new *Baker High*? Yes!

I know they need a new gym, but not a whole new school.

The reporter says the new school has been built on the site of the *original Baker High*.

Doesn't make sense. When did they knock down my old school? It was still there a few hours ago when I walked out of the gate for the last time.

I get tired trying to make sense of it and doze off again.

The *Rocky Video* show wakes me. What's it doing on *again*? I'm confused.

What are they putting in the salted peanuts these days?

Nothing to keep them fresh, obviously. I pop one in my mouth. Yuck. It tastes foul. Peanuts should get softer with time, not harder to chew.

I spit it out. It's covered in mould. I throw the bag down in disgust.

Then I see him again. My buddy, Dread Nautilus. On screen. Looking great, full head of thick black hair halfway down his back and dressed in leather from head to toe. Miming his new single, 'Love is for losers'.

Playing it twice in one day on the same show. Great!

And all those screaming girls.

As the song winds down, the camera cuts to a real old geezer tottering out onto the stage. What's he doing there? Who is he?

'That's the end of this Dread Nautilus Tribute Special,' he tells the TV audience. 'I'm just sorry Dad couldn't be here to see us play all his great old hits.'

I suddenly feel sick. I force myself to stand up. I've been lying down so long my knees are weak and I almost fall over. Holding onto the furniture, I stumble to the door and out into the hallway.

I glance in the mirror across on the far wall.

A bald old man with a toothless grin stares back at me.

I open my mouth and the old man in the mirror begins to scream.

The End