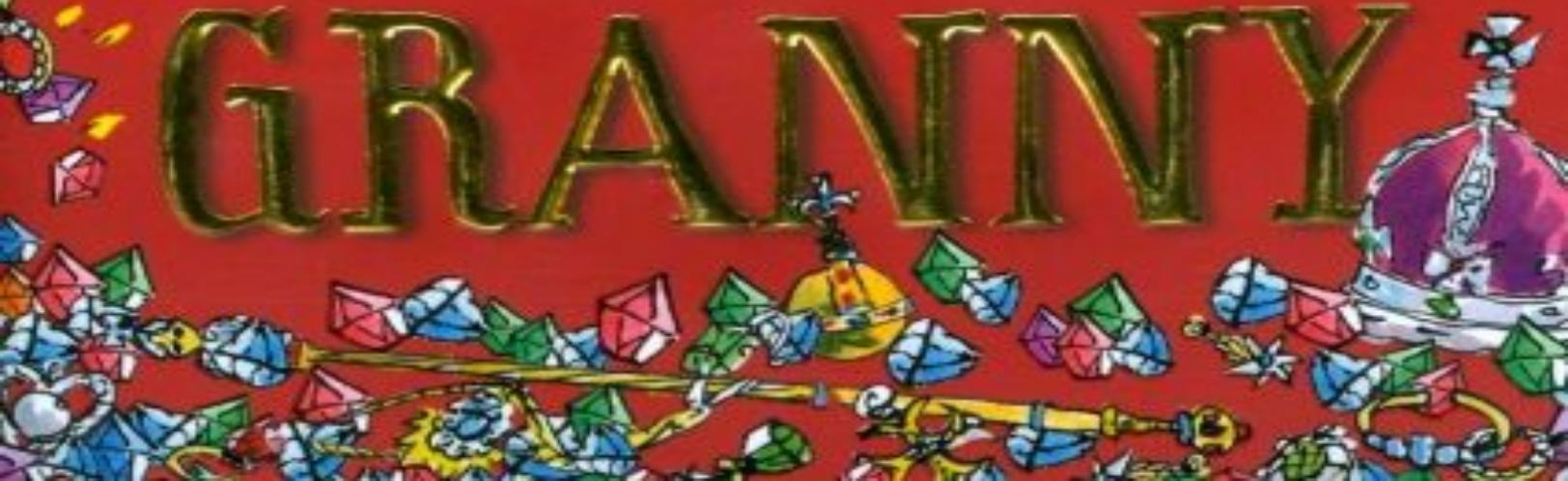


David Williams



GANGSTA
GRANNY



11

Cheesy Beans and Sausage

Ben sped home on his bike, not even noticing his burning legs and aching chest. He was going so fast he thought the police might give him a speeding ticket. As the wheels raced round so did his mind.

Could his boring old granny really be a gangsta?!

A Gangsta Granny?!

That must be why she liked books about gangstas so much – she was one!

He slid through the back door just as the familiar *Strictly Stars Dancing* theme tune blasted out from the living room. He had made it home just in time.

But as Ben was about to disappear upstairs and pretend he had been in his bedroom doing his homework, Mum burst into the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” she asked suspiciously. “You look very sweaty.”

“Oh, nothing,” said Ben, feeling very sweaty.

“Look at you,” she continued, as she approached him. “You are sweating like a pig.”

Ben had seen a few pigs in his life and none of them had been sweating. In fact, pig fans everywhere will tell you that pigs don’t even have sweat glands, so they can’t sweat.

Wow, this book is actually really educational.

“I’m not sweating,” Ben protested. Being accused of sweating made him sweat even more.

“You *are* sweating. Have you been out running?”

“No,” replied a now very sweaty Ben.

“Ben, don’t lie to me, I’m your mother,” she said, pointing at herself, a false nail flying off into the air in the process.

Her false nails came off a lot. Once Ben had even found one in his microwaveable paella Bolognese.

“If you haven’t been out running, Ben, then why are you sweating?”

Ben had to think fast. The *Strictly Stars Dancing* theme tune was coming to an end.

“I was dancing!” he blurted out.

“Dancing?” Mum didn’t look convinced. Ben was no Flavio Flavioli. And of course he hated ballroom dancing.

“Yes, well, I have changed my mind about ballroom dancing. I love it!”

“But you said you hated it,” shot back an increasingly suspicious Mum. “Many many many times. Only the other week you said that you would rather ‘eat your own bogeys than watch that rubbish’. Hearing you say that was like a dagger through my heart!”

Mum was becoming visibly upset at the memory.

“I’m sorry, Mum, I really am.”

Ben reached out a hand to comfort her and another false nail fell on to the floor. “But now I love it, honestly. I was just watching *Strictly* through the crack in the door, and copying all the moves.”

Mum beamed with pride. She looked as if her whole life suddenly had meaning. Her face turned strangely happy yet sad, as if this was destiny.

“Do you want to be a...” She took a deep breath, “...professional dancer?”

“Where’s my Cheesy Beans and Sausage, wife?!” called Dad from the living room.

“Shut your face, Pete!” Mum’s eyes were wet with tears of joy.

She hadn’t cried so much since Flavio was kicked out of the show in week two last year. Flavio had been forced to partner Dame Rachel Prejudice, who was so podgy all he could do was drag her around the floor.

“Well...erm...aah...” Ben desperately searched for a way to get out of this one. “...yeah.”

That really wasn’t it.

“Yes! I knew it!” cried Mum. “Pete, come in here a moment. Ben has got something he needs to tell you.”

Dad trudged in wearily. "What is it, Ben? You're not joining the circus, are you? My word, you are sweaty."

"No, Pete," said Mum, slowly and deliberately as if she was about to read out the name of a winner at an awards ceremony. "Ben doesn't want to be a silly old plumber any more –"

"Thank goodness for that," said Dad.

"He wants to be..." Mum looked at her son. "Tell him, Ben."

Ben opened his mouth, but before he could say anything Mum chimed in. "Ben wants to be a ballroom dancer!"

"Oh, there is a God!" exclaimed Dad. He looked up at the nicotine-stained ceiling as if he might catch a glimpse of the divine one.

"He was just practising in the kitchen," jabbered Mum excitedly. "Copying all the moves from the show..."

Dad looked into his son's eyes and shook his hand manfully. "That's wonderful news, my boy! Your mum and me haven't achieved much in our lives. What with Mum being a nail polisher –"

"I am a nail technician, Pete!" corrected Mum scornfully. "There is a world of difference, Pete, you do know that..."

"Nail technician. Sorry. And me being just a boring old security guard because I was too fat for the police. The most excitement I've had all year was when I stopped a man in a wheelchair speeding out of the store with a tin of custard concealed under his blanket. But you becoming a ballroom dancer, well...this...this is the greatest thing that's ever happened to us."

"The very greatest!" said Mum.

"The very very greatest," agreed Dad.

"Really it's the very very very greatest," said Mum.

"Let's just agree it's extremely great," said Dad, irritated. "Only, I warn you, boy, it's not going to be easy. If you train eight hours a day every day for the next twenty years, you might just get on the TV show."

"Maybe he can do the American version!" exclaimed Mum. "Oh Pete, just imagine, our boy a huge star in America!"

"Well, let's not jump the gun, wife. He's not won the British one yet. Right now we have to think about entering him for a junior competition."

“You’re right, Pete. Gail told me there’s one in the town hall just before Christmas.”

“Crack open the sparkling wine, wife! Our son is going to be a cha-cha-cha champion!”

A naughty word exploded in Ben’s head.

How on earth was he going to get out of this?!

12

The Love Bomb

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

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

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



There was:

The Woodland



Fruit Cocktail



Thunder and Lightning



Accident and Emergency



Ice and a Slice



The Hedgerow and Badger



The Quality Street



Eggs 'n' Bacon



Confetti



The Underwater World



Burning Love



Cheese & Pickle



The Solar System



Piano Man



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



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

Ben hadn’t thought about dance partners. Not only was he going to have to dance, he was going to have to dance with a girl! And not just any

girl, but a revoltingly precocious sparkly fake-tanned leotard-wearing over-made-up one.

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

“Oh, I’m just going to dance on my own,” he spluttered.

“A solo piece!” exclaimed Mum. “How original!”

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



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

But for the moment her mind looked blank.

“Was I?” said Granny, looking increasingly-befuddled.

“That’s where the story ended last night. You said you had snatched the ring from the Davenports’ bedroom, and were running across the lawn when you heard shots...”

“Oh yes, yes,” muttered Granny, her face suddenly illuminated.

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

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

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

“What’s the difference?” asked Ben.

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

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

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

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

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

“How come?”

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

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

“More shots rang out through the darkness as I ran towards the stream,” continued the old lady. “And I stumbled in the gloom of the forest. I tripped on a tree root and fell face first in the mud. Scrambling to my feet, I turned round to see an army of men on horseback led by Lord Davenport. They were carrying flaming torches and holding shotguns. The whole forest was lit up with the fire from the torches. I jumped into the stream. It was around this time of year; in the depth of winter and the water was icy. The cold shocked me and I could hardly breathe. I clapped my hand over my mouth to stifle a scream. I could hear the dogs getting nearer and nearer, barking and barking. There must have been dozens of them. I looked behind me and I could see their sharp teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

“So I waded across the stream and started climbing the tree. My hands were muddy, and my legs and feet were wet, and I kept slipping down the trunk. I frantically rubbed my hands on my nightshirt and began to climb again. I scrambled to the very top of the tree and stayed as still as I could. I heard the dogs and the army of Davenport’s men follow the stream down to a different part of the forest. The dogs’ ferocious barks became distant and after a while the torches were just specks in the distance. I was safe. I shivered up that tree for hours. I waited until dawn, slid down the

tree, and made my way back to our cottage. I crept into bed and lay there for a few moments before the sun rose.”

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

“Did they come looking for you?” he asked.

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

“Didn’t you say anything?”

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

“So what did you do?”

“I...swallowed it.”

Ben couldn’t believe his ears. “The ring, Granny? You swallowed the ring?”

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

“That must have been painful!” said Ben, his bum wincing at the thought. Passing a big diamond ring out of his bottom didn’t sound in any way enjoyable.

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

“Clever!” said Ben.

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

13

A Lifetime of Crime

Hours passed in what seemed like minutes, as Granny told her grandson how she had stolen every one of the dazzling items spread out on the living-room floor.

The huge tiara had belonged to the wife of the President of the United States of America, the First Lady. Granny told Ben how, over fifty years earlier, she had sailed all the way to America on a cruise liner to steal it from the White House in Washington. And that whilst sailing back home she had robbed every rich lady on the ship of her jewels! How she was caught red-handed by the captain of the ship and escaped by diving overboard and swimming the last few miles of the Atlantic Ocean back to England with all of the jewelry hidden in her knickers.

Granny told Ben that the sparkling emerald earrings that had been in her little bungalow for decades were worth over a million pounds each. They had once belonged to the wife of an enormously wealthy Indian maharajah; a maharani. The old lady recounted how she enlisted the help of a herd of elephants to steal them. She had coaxed the elephants to stand on top of each other to form a giant ladder so she could scale the wall of the fort in India where the earrings were kept in the royal bedchamber.

The most amazing tale of all was of how she stole the enormous deep blue diamond and sapphire brooch that sat sparkling on her worn living-room carpet. She told Ben that it had once belonged to the last Empress of Russia, who ruled with her husband the Tsar before the communist revolution of 1917. It had for many years been under bulletproof glass at the Hermitage museum in St Petersburg, guarded twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year by a platoon of fearsome Russian soldiers.

This theft had required the most elaborate plan of all. Granny had hidden in an ancient suit of armour in the museum, which dated back hundreds of years to the time of Catherine the Great. Each time the soldiers looked the other way, she would edge forward in the metal suit a few millimetres, until she got close enough to the brooch. It took her a week.

“What, like Granny’s Footsteps?” asked Ben.

“Exactly, young man!” she replied. “Then I smashed the glass with the silver axe I was holding and grabbed the brooch.”

“How did you escape, Granny?”

“That’s a good question...now, how did I escape?” Granny looked flummoxed. “Sorry, it’s my age, boy. I forget things.”

Ben smiled supportively. “That’s OK, Granny.”

Soon the old lady’s memory seemed to come back into focus. “Oh yes, I remember,” she continued. “I ran outside into the courtyard of the museum, leapt into the barrel of a huge cannon and then fired myself to safety!”

Ben pictured this for a moment: his granny, in deepest darkest Russia, flying through the air in an ancient suit of armour. It was hard to believe, but how else could this little old lady come to have such an astonishing collection of priceless gems?

Ben loved Granny’s daring tales. At home, Ben had never had stories read or told to him. His parents always just switched on the television and slumped down on the sofa when they got home from work. Hearing the old lady talk was so exciting Ben wished he could move in with her. He could listen to Granny all day.

“There can’t be a jewel in the world you haven’t stolen!” said Ben.

“Oh yes there is, young man. Hang on, what’s that?”

“What’s what?” said Ben.

Granny was pointing behind Ben’s head, an expression of horror on her face. “It’s...It’s...”

“*What?*” said Ben, not daring to turn around and see what she was pointing at. A shiver ran down his spine.

“Whatever you do,” said Granny, “don’t turn round...”

14

Nosy Neighbour

Ben couldn't help himself, and his eyes darted towards the window. For a brief moment he saw a dark figure wearing a strange hat peer through the dirty glass, and then quickly disappear out of view.

"There was a man peering in at the window," said Ben breathlessly.

"I know," said Granny. "I told you not to look."

"Shall I go out and see who it was?" said Ben, trying to hide the fact that he was more than a little frightened. Really, he wanted Granny to go out and see who it was.

"I bet it was my nosy neighbour, Mr Parker. He lives at number seven, he always wears a pork-pie hat, and he keeps spying on me."

"Why?" asked Ben.

Granny shrugged. "I don't know. I imagine he has a rather cold head, or something."

"What?" said Ben. "Oh. No, not his hat. I mean, why does he keep spying on you?"

"He's a retired Major, and now he runs the Neighbourhood Watch scheme in Grey Close."

"What's Neighbourhood Watch?" asked Ben.

"It's a group of local people who keep an eye out for burglars. But Mr Parker just uses it as an excuse to spy on everyone, the nosy old git. I often come back from the supermarket with my bag of cabbages and see he's hiding behind his net curtains spying on me with a pair of binoculars."

"Is he suspicious about you?" said Ben, more than a little panicked. He didn't want to be thrown in jail for aiding and abetting a criminal. He didn't really know what 'abetting' meant, actually, but he knew it was a crime, and he knew he was too young for prison.

“He is suspicious about everyone. We have to keep an eye out for him, young lad. The man is a menace.”

Ben went over to the window and peered out. He couldn't see anyone.

*BBBBBRRRRRRRRRIIIIIIIIIINNNNN
NNNGGGGGGGGGGGG!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

Ben's heart missed a beat. It was only the doorbell, but if they let Mr Parker inside he would see all the evidence the police would need to send Ben and his granny straight to prison.

“Don't answer it!” said Ben, as he ran to the middle of the room and started stuffing all the jewels back in the tin, as quickly as he could.

“What do you mean, don't answer it?! He knows I am at home. He just saw us through the window. You answer the door and I will hide the jewels.”

“Me?”

“Yes you! Hurry!”

*BBBBBBBBBBRRRRRRRRRRRRRIIIIIII
IIIIINNNNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGG
GGGG!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

This ring was more insistent. Mr Parker had left his finger on the buzzer for even longer. Ben took a deep breath and walked calmly through the hall to the front door.

He opened it.

Outside stood a man in a very silly hat. Don't believe me? This is how silly his hat was:



“Yes?” said Ben in a squeaky high voice. “Can I help you?”
Mr Parker put his foot inside the bungalow so the front door couldn’t be closed on him.

“Who are you?” he barked, nasally.

He had a very big nose, which made him seem even nosier than he was, and he already seemed extremely nosy. Because he had a big nose he

also had a very nasal voice, which made everything he said, however serious, seem a little bit absurd. But his eyes shone red like a demon.

“I am Granny’s friend,” spluttered Ben. *Why did I say that?* he thought. In truth, he was in a terrible panic, and his tongue was running away with him.

“Friend?” snarled Mr Parker, pushing open the front door. He was stronger than Ben, and soon forced his way inside.

“I mean grandson, Mr Parker, sir...” said Ben, retreating back towards the living room.

“Why are you lying to me?” he said, taking several paces forward as Ben took several paces back. It was if they were dancing the tango.

“I am not lying!” cried Ben.

They reached the living-room door.

“You can’t go in there!” yelled Ben, thinking of the jewels still scattered all over the carpet.

“Why not?”

“Erm...umm...Because Granny is doing her naked yoga!”

Ben needed a dramatic excuse to stop Mr Parker barging through the door and seeing the jewels. He was pretty sure he had hit the jackpot as Mr Parker paused and furrowed his brow.

Sadly, the nosy neighbour was not convinced.

“Naked yoga?! A likely story! I need to talk to your grandmother right away. Now get out of my way, you nasty little worm of a boy!” he said as he shoved the boy aside and opened the living-room door.

Granny must have heard Ben through the door because when Mr Parker burst into the room she was standing in her bra and knickers in a tree pose.



“Mr Parker, do you mind?” said Granny, in mock horror that he had seen her in a state of undress.

Mr Parker’s eyes spun around the room. He didn’t know where to look, so he fixed his glare on the now bare carpet. “Excuse me, Madam, but I need to ask you, where are those jewels I saw a moment ago?”

Ben spied the Silver Jubilee biscuit tin poking out from behind the sofa. Surreptitiously he edged it out of view with his foot.

“What jewels, Mr Parker? Have you been spying on me again?” demanded Granny, still in her underwear.

“Well, I, err...” he spluttered. “I had good reason. I was suspicious when I saw a young gentleman enter your property. I thought he might be a burglar.”

“I let him in through the front door.”

“He might have been a very charming burglar. He might have weaselled his way into your confidence.”

“He’s my grandson. He stays every Friday night.”

“Ah!” said Mr Parker, triumphantly. “But it’s not Friday night! So you can see why my suspicions were raised. And as head of Grey Close’s Neighbourhood Watch I must report anything suspicious I see to the police.”

“I’ve got a good mind to report you to the police, Mr Parker!” said Ben.

Granny looked at him curiously.

“Whatever for?” said the man. His eyes narrowed. They were now so red it was like there was a fire in his brain.

“For spying on old ladies in their underwear!” said Ben triumphantly. Granny winked at Ben.

“She was fully clothed when I looked through the window...” protested Mr Parker.

“That’s what they all say!” said Granny. “Now get out of my house before you are arrested for being a Peeping Tom!”

“You’ve not heard the last of me. Good day!” said Mr Parker. With that, he spun on his heels and left the room. Granny and Ben heard the front door slam behind him and they ran over to the window and watched him scuttle back to his bungalow.

“I think we frightened him off,” said Ben.

“But he’ll be back,” said Granny. “We have to be very careful.”

“Yes,” said Ben, more than a little alarmed. “We’d better hide this tin somewhere else.”

Granny thought for a moment. “Yes, I’ll put it under the floorboards.”

“OK,” said Ben. “But first...”

“Yes, Ben?”

“You might want to get dressed.”