THE HUMILIATIONS OF WELTON BLAKE

ALEX WHEATLE

Barrington Stoke

For all those comic writers of The Beano, Whizzer and Chips, The Dandy *and* Shoot! *who kept this young boy's spirits up when it was most needed*

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CHAPTER 1

The Worst Day in the History of Everything

It was one of those days when everything went madly wrong. One of those unlucky days when the forecast was for Tornado Bad Luck to come your way with hailstones the size of basketballs.

It all started in the morning. I woke up and found my mobile phone had died. It refused to charge. No matter what buttons I pressed, it wouldn't switch on. Not even a flicker. Not even a small white dot in the middle of the screen. I took out the SIM card and put it back fifteen times. Sweet diddly nothing.

I should've taken that as a sign that my day wasn't gonna be blessed. I should've faked a brain-ache and stayed in bed. But, oh no, I didn't

do that. I swung my toes out of bed and planted them on the floor.

I dragged myself to the kitchen. Ever since I'd started secondary school, I had to make my own breakfast. I had my regular two slices of toast and a glass of mango juice. Then I grabbed a fistful of peanuts from a bag I'd bought the evening before. Mum was going on about her boyfriend visiting later on. I didn't give her twittering too much attention.

At the breakfast table I tried switching my phone on again and … nothing. Not even a slight vibration. How was I going to text the great love of my life, Carmella McKenzie? Even worse, how was she gonna text me? It'd taken me four months to build up the courage to chat to her. I'm talking about the kind of bravery like Luke Skywalker stepping out in front of Kylo Ren's space fleet with just his lightsaber.

Carmella was one of the most delicious-looking females in the school. No, delete that. She was *the* A-plus, top-rated girl in the school. Skin the colour of caramel, deep brown chestnut eyes, cute gold stud in her nose and a smile wider than the Millennium Falcon.

After school yesterday, I don't know what got into me. There Carmella was at the bus stop. Alone. She had her headphones on. She was bobbing her head to her music. There weren't any of her friends in sight to boy-block me. It was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. I took a deep breath. *This is the moment*, I told myself.

I took in a lungful of air and stepped up to her, Jedi-style. I slowed down when I was about ten paces away. Now was the time to deliver my cool walk. I'd been practising it on the balcony of our block of flats. There was a kind of bounce and a dip to the walk. My body leaned to the right. I hadn't worked out exactly what to do with my arms, so I decided to swing them with my left shoulder higher than the other. The movement strained my neck and my side, but it was for a most important cause.

"Hi, Carmella," I said.

"Hi, Blakey," she replied. I normally didn't love being called Blakey, but Carmella could get away with it because she was super-pretty. "What's happening?"

I tried to look as cool as possible. I put on my best pose. It hurt my back, but it had to be done.

"You all right, Welton?" she asked. She looked proper worried, like a really sweet nurse caring for a cancer patient who only had three minutes to live. I couldn't believe she'd called me Welton.

"Do you …" I started. "There … There's this film. Yes, there's this film that's showing in the cinema. You know, the one in the Orchard shopping centre … the cinema there. Films show there. In the afternoon and evenings."

"I know where the cinema is, Welton. I was born in these ends."

There was this tiny percentage of a smile starting at the corners of Carmella's mouth. Mr Mountjoy, my hairy Maths teacher, would call it about 2 per cent. At that moment I rated my chances of going to the movies with Carmella McKenzie at less than 0.011 per cent. By now, my back was really hurting from my pose.

"Can … can I take you to see a film?"

My legs turned to pasta as I waited for Carmella's answer. I started to sweat like a Sumo wrestler in a sauna. My heart started to sprint like a Jamaican relay-runner.

"Yeah, all right," she said. "Call me to tell me what day, what time the film starts and where to link."

"I … yes, of course I'll call you. Thanks so much … I haven't got your number. I need your number to call you. You know. Otherwise I can't call you. This is soooo wicked! Thanks so much for saying yes."

She smiled. This time it was about 30 per cent. My heart stopped vibrating inside my throat. I wiped the sweat from my forehead. My palm couldn't have been wetter if I'd dipped it in a lake during a monsoon.

We swapped numbers. My brain was rushed with pictures. Sydney Harbour as the clock ticked to 12.01 a.m. on New Year's Day. The Olympics closing ceremony. The whole of Middle Earth bowing to four hobbits. Luke Skywalker, Han Solo and Chewbacca receiving their gongs from Princess Leia in *Episode IV*.

I had got over one of my worst fears and asked a girl out. But now, a day later, my phone had deleted itself. *How am I gonna link with Carmella and set a time for our date?* It was the worst crisis I had ever had in my life. Well,

maybe not the worst. Dad leaving home for another woman might have topped it. I could still remember finding Mum in the early hours of the morning curled up in a corner of the kitchen. She'd been crying lakes. It'd taken me the length of a *Star Wars* boxset to persuade Mum to go to her bed.

But I couldn't log on to my parents' issues right now. I had to use my Jedi powers to clear away Carmella's boy-blocking friends, step up to her and tell her my plans for our date.

CHAPTER 2

School

As I headed out, Mum said that I should get home on time so that I didn't miss the breaking news she had to tell me. I wasn't really listening. After every twenty words that Mum said, I replied all right or OK. In between those words I nodded. If I kept to that, she wouldn't pull me around to face her and ask, *Are you listening to me, Welton?* It was one of those dumb questions that parents asked. I mean, I was never going to say no.

I reached school, Monks Orchard High, about five minutes before lessons started. I searched for Carmella. Couldn't find her. The peanuts I had eaten earlier were causing my insides some grief, but there was no time to think about that before my first lesson – Maths.

My Maths teacher, Mr Mountjoy, was simply the hairiest man in the history of the galaxy. He was like a walking jungle. One time he stopped to look at my work and pressed his hand on my exercise book. I swear there were fungi, toadstools, Amazonian bushes, apple orchards and banana leaves growing out of his skin. And the stench coming from his armpits wasn't exactly fresh. His nose hair was gross. I wouldn't be kidding if I said that Tarzan and his pet chimp could have swung on those things.

I took a desk by the window that overlooked the playground. I glanced through the glass every now and again to see if Carmella might be arriving late. What would happen if she was sick and out of action for the coming week? Would our date still be on?

Maybe she'd got ill on purpose? Maybe she'd had second thoughts. That must be it. After she'd said yes, she must've gone home and had a long think about the situation. *I said yes to go to the movies with Welton Blake? Are you sick, Carmella?* she would've asked herself. And now she couldn't come to school because the thought of it made her ill.

I was trying to work out what b and d were, and wondering what's the point of algebra, when I glanced out of the window again and spotted Carmella. She had this casual stride. Her hair was in a ponytail. Her caramel skin was glowing with pure niceness in the morning sun. She seemed to be happy about something.

Without realising it, I was smiling. Man! She was the main reason why school was bearable. If everything went to plan, I could soon be sitting next to Carmella with my arm around her watching a movie.

But wait! Carmella was walking across the playground with someone. She was with another bruv. I had never seen him before. He looked ripped enough to join the cast of *Fast & Furious*. I hated him instantly. I felt my heartbeat in my throat. The inside of my head was bubbling like my mum's casserole. Carmella and Muscle Freak stopped. She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. I wanted to scream like Darth Vader at the end of *Revenge of the Sith*. Something was starting to move about in my chest. I hoped I wasn't about to give birth like that poor guy in the first *Alien* film.

"Welton Blake!" Mr Mountjoy yelled at me. "Is your exercise book stuck to the window?"

"No, sir," I replied.

"Then turn around and pay attention to the book on your desk!"

He started walking towards me.

Oh no.

Mr Mountjoy knelt down so his head was the same height as mine. He was wearing a white shirt and a yellow tie. His dandruff was as thick as the falling snow in Christmas movies. My stomach wanted my legs to run away.

"Do you understand what I have been telling you?" Mountjoy asked.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Then get on with it!"

He walked away. Thank the Jedi stars for that.

But suddenly I felt sick. Something horrible was moving around in my throat. Mashed peanuts. Up and down it went. Down and up. Up and down. The combination of seeing Carmella

hugging and kissing another guy together with Mountjoy's stench proved too much. Something surged within me.

Past experience told me that when you felt sick you made sure that you didn't get any of it over you when it came. So I stood up, leaned forward and puked over the girl sitting in front of me. Karen Francis. She had this lovely long ginger hair … or she *did* have lovely long ginger hair. Her blouse and blazer were always spotless … until now.

Karen got up from her chair all stiff, like a zombie in a bad horror film. Her blazer, collar and lovely mane of ginger hair were decorated with partly digested peanuts, bits of toast and last night's dinner – cheese and bacon flan, cabbage and potato salad. Her face slowly changed from one of disbelief into one of rage, Terminator-style. I wasn't sure why I didn't run like a rebel spacecraft being chased by Darth Vader's imperial fleet.

"WELTON BLAKE!" Karen screamed.

She launched herself at me, punching and kicking me until I fell off my chair. Mr Mountjoy

didn't save me until after Karen had taken off her blazer and rubbed my face in it.

I got to my feet groggily. Bits of my own sick were on my tongue, in my nostrils and all over my face. It was the most dreadful thing I had ever tasted – even worse than the soggy cardboard I'd eaten for a dare the year before. Laughter was all around me. Karen Francis stormed out of the classroom swearing some words I'd never heard of.

"Get yourself cleaned up!" Mr Mountjoy shouted at me.

Roars of laughter filled my ears. These weren't chuckles or giggles. This was the kind of laughing that made people cry, lose control of their legs and wet themselves.