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opening extract from

Buster Bayliss: Custardfinger

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1. TUBA TROUBLE

"And now," said Mr Fossilthwaite, the headmaster of Crisp Street Middle School, "we're going to round off this morning's assembly with a very special treat."

‘Hmfffghmmf!’ spluttered Buster Bayliss. “Zzzzzzzzzzz,” said all the other pupils and teachers, slumped in their uncomfortable plastic seats.

It’s quite difficult to send people to sleep when they’re being made to sit on bum-numbing chairs which were probably designed as instruments of torture for a medieval dungeon (and then turned down by the torturers for being too cruel) but Mr Fossilthwaite always seemed to manage it. At nine o’clock each Monday morning the whole school would troop into the hall and sit down. At one minute past nine they were all still wiggling about trying to get comfortable. By two minutes past, heads were nodding, eyelids were drooping, open mouths were dripping dribble on to school jumpers and even the teachers were starting to yawn.

Today, they were all in for a rude awakening.

“As you know,” the headmaster burbled on, “Thursday night is Parents’ Evening, and we very much hope that all your mums and dads will be coming along to have a look round the school and find out a bit about what you’ve all been getting up to this term. . .” (He hesitated for a moment, as if it had just occurred to him that most of the mums and dads would be better off not knowing.) “Er. . . As a way of showing them some of the work of the

school," he went on, "I'm afraid there will be a special performance by our very own School Orchestra!"

"Zzzzzzzzzzz . . . whassat?" said his audience, waking up and looking at one another in alarm. "Did he say School Orchestra?"

"Gnnnfffffhmmfhehehehh," went Buster, quivering with poorly muffled laughter near the back of the hall.

"The orchestra have been working very hard this term," Mr Fossilthwaite burred, "and they've learned a brand new piece of music to play on Parents' Evening. We're very . . . er . . . privileged to be able to finish our assembly with a special sneak preview. . ." (He quickly fumbled in the pocket of his tweed jacket for some earplugs.) "Let's have a big round of applause for Miss Taylor and the School Orchestra, who are going to play us Wolfram Von Agasplatt's Tuba Concerto in G Flat!"

"Aaaaaaaaargh!" whimpered all the children, wide awake by now, and a few of the more highly strung teachers looked as if they might make a break for the exits. The School Orchestra wasn't something you wanted to hear early on a Monday morning. Or late on a Monday morning. Or on any other morning or afternoon or evening ever.

Try imagining a herd of angry woolly mammoths

emptying a skip-load of old tin baths off the top of a multi-storey car park. Noisy, isn't it? But compared with the sound the Crisp Street School Orchestra made, it's a soothing little lullaby.

For the poor pupils and teachers packed into the school hall that morning, there was no escape. The curtains behind Mr Fossilthwaite swooshed open to reveal Miss Taylor, the music teacher, beaming happily as she raised her baton to begin the concert. On three rows of seats at the back of the stage the School Orchestra crouched, ready to begin the torture; hammers were poised over glockenspiels, fingers curled over the air-holes of recorders and right in the middle of the front row Buster's fake cousin Polly Hodge took a deep breath and put her lips to the mouth-piece of her enormous tuba.

"Oh nooooooooo!" whispered the orchestra's victims, clamping their hands over their ears or wrapping jumpers round their heads.

"Hmfghahah!" Buster cackled wickedly. He knew what was going to happen next.

Polly's mum, Fake Auntie Pauline, was Buster's mum's best friend, and when they went round to her house for tea the day before she had insisted on telling them all about how well Polly's tuba lessons were going, and playing them a CD of Agasplatt's Tuba Concerto. It started off with a tinkle on the

glockenspiel, followed by a long, lingering toot on the tuba. That was what Buster was waiting for. Unlike everyone around him, he was looking forward to it.

Miss Taylor waved her baton.

Tinkle, went the glockenspiel.

Polly puffed into the tuba with all her might. Her round face turned pink, then red, then purple with the effort.

No sound came out at all.

The rest of the orchestra watched her worriedly, but everyone else in the hall looked quite relieved. Maybe this was going to be one of those modern bits of music which are just made up of silence! Even the School Orchestra couldn't get one of *those* out of tune.*

"Fgggnnnnnnnurrffff!" spluttered Buster, enjoying every minute.

"Hurrrrrnnnnffffffffff!" went Polly, blowing harder than she'd ever blown in her life.

And suddenly the tuba belched out a great strangulated raspberry and the hall filled with snow. Up out of the instrument's round brass bell came a blustering blizzard of whirling white, blotting out the stage completely and then swirling out across the front rows of the audience, white flakes doing dizzy little dances in the glow of the neon lights.

* Well, not too badly...

Miss Taylor screamed, the orchestra gasped, and everyone else cheered, realizing the concert would have to be cancelled. A few people sneezed, too, because as the snowstorm started to settle it turned out not to be snow at all, but feathers; hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of little white feathers.



As for Buster, he just cackled.

Up on the stage, Polly threw down her tuba and stormed off, and the rest of the orchestra went with her. Miss Taylor glared down angrily at the sea of happy, feather-speckled faces in the hall. She didn't know who was responsible for this feather-related outrage, but she could guess. It was probably the same person who had got jam on her xylophones. The same person who had accidentally sat on her second-best violin. The same person who had once tried to tunnel his way out of her room in the middle of a music lesson.

"Buster Bayliss!"

Near the back of the hall, Buster did his not-very-good best to stop sniggering and look innocent. "What?" he asked.

It wasn't really Buster's fault. The temptation had just been too great to resist. If you'd been at your fake auntie's house for tea, and had just been made to sit through a whole CD of Wolfram Von Agasplatt's Tuba Concerto, you'd probably have felt like a bit of light relief too. And if you'd happened to notice that your fake auntie had left a big old goose-down quilt folded up on top of the wheelie bin for the dustmen to take away, wouldn't it have put ideas into your head?



Buster had left Polly and the grown-ups talking and slipped out into the hall, where Polly's tuba waited, ready for the next morning's assembly. He took it out of its case and dragged it into the front garden where the wheelie bin stood, and then carefully scooped as many handfuls of feathers as he could from inside the quilt and packed them down into the tuba's innards, squidding them in tightly so that they didn't show and wouldn't come out until Polly blew really hard.

Of course, quite a lot of feathers escaped during the process, and when Fake Auntie Pauline came to wave Buster and his mum off at the front door a little later the garden looked like Santa's grotto, but she hadn't guessed that Buster was to blame. "Vandals!" she said crossly. "Quilt-ripping hooligans! I don't know what the neighbourhood is coming to!"

"Or maybe it was a fox," said Buster's mum.

"Gnrffffherherher!" said Buster.

Unfortunately, he couldn't really explain all that to a grown-up, so when he was dragged into the headmaster's office after assembly and Mr Fossilthwaite asked him why he had played such a silly practical joke he just looked down at his trainers and mumbled, "Don't know."

"Oh well," said Mr Fossilthwaite happily, "that's all

right then. No harm done, eh? Now, don't do it again. Off you go!" He was just as relieved as everybody else that he hadn't had to sit through Agasplatt's Tuba Concerto, and he had secretly been wondering about giving this intelligent young Bayliss some sort of medal.

Unfortunately, Miss Taylor was also in the office (it was she who had dragged Buster there, using his left ear as a handle). She was still very angry at having the orchestra's performance ruined, and she wasn't prepared to see the Phantom Tuba Stuffer of Crisp Street let off so lightly. "Just a minute, Headmaster!" she cried, grabbing Buster by his other ear as he headed for the door and swinging him round to face Mr Fossilthwaite again. "Surely you're not going to let this little barbarian get off without some sort of punishment?"

Mr Fossilthwaite looked nervously at the music teacher. He wondered if he should tell her that there were still rather a lot of feathers clinging to her hair and clothes, but decided it might not be a good idea. "What did you have in mind?"

"I thought we could have him torn apart by wild horses?"

"I don't think that's allowed, Miss Taylor. Anyway, we haven't got any wild horses."



"Oh. Well then, what about tying him up in a sack and throwing him into the River Smog?"

"Again, Miss Taylor, not strictly allowed. The Parent Teachers Association tends to frown on that sort of thing, you know."

"Really?" Miss Taylor frowned, dislodging a feather that had been stuck to her right eyebrow. "Honestly, no wonder children these days are so ill-behaved! Whatever happened to good old-fashioned discipline? Still, I insist you do something to punish this miscreant."

"Er . . . detention?" suggested Mr Fossilthwaite amiably.

"Pah!" cried the music teacher. "This is Buster Bayliss! He laughs in the face of detention! What we need is a punishment so excruciating that Buster will never, ever, ever want to pull a trick like this again!"

Mr Fossilthwaite thought about suggesting that Buster should sit in on all the School Orchestra rehearsals till the end of term, but then thought better of it.

"Um, such as?" he asked.

Miss Taylor leaned close to Buster, and there was an evil gleam behind her glasses as she prepared to reveal her fearful revenge. "Make him work on the school magazine!" she snarled.

Buster looked at Mr Fossilthwaite. Mr Fossilthwaite looked back at Buster. If they had been cartoon characters there would have been little clouds full of question marks above their heads.

"What school magazine?" they asked.

"The school magazine!" shouted Miss Taylor. "You know, *Crisp Street Confidential*. It comes out once a month. Miss Brown's the teacher in charge, but Polly Hodge is the editor. She spends half her lunch times working on it, and frankly it's a waste of good tuba-practising time. What she needs is a little helper. A little helper like *Buster*!"

Mr Fossilthwaite looked uncertain. This sounded more like a punishment for Miss Brown and Polly than for Buster. But that gleam was back behind Miss Taylor's glasses, and if there was one thing he had learned in all his years of headmastering it was Never Argue With An Angry Music Teacher. "Very well," he said. "Buster, you'll report to Miss Brown's room as soon as you've had your lunch."

"But, but, but, but, but!" stuttered Buster. "But that's in lunch hour! I've got important things to do in the playground! People to see! Games to play! Ben and Tundi have challenged 3a to a game of Busterball and I'm their star striker!"

Miss Taylor smiled coldly. "Well," she gloated, "you should have thought of that before you started packing feathers into other people's tubas, shouldn't you? Hmmmmmmffffggggnffffhhahaha-hahahah!"