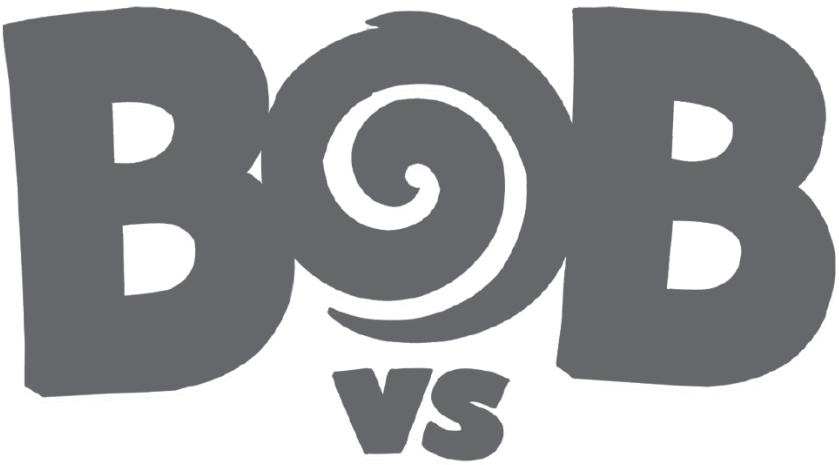


THE TROUSERS OF DOOM

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For John and Ciro

We're still time travelling, boys

'Artificial intelligence will be the best or worst thing ever for humanity.'

– Elon Musk. Inventor and occasional world's richest person.

THE PRESENT BREAKFAST TIME



A NOT-SO-SMART SPEAKER. WE DO NOT WANT SARDINES. AN EMPTY PIGGY BANK. EGGS LIKE CONKERS.

When I walk into the kitchen on Monday morning, yawning and hungry, Dad is arguing with IDA. Again.

Zem gives his tail a lazy wag and looks up at me with his sad brown eyes. Although, to be fair, Zem's eyes *always* look sad. Even when he isn't. When you feed him, tickle his tummy, throw his favourite ball or feed him scraps of chicken (his absolute favourite) – it's Zem with the sad eyes. They're the only ones he's got.

I stroke his head. 'Is Dad being grumpy again?'

Zem makes a low grumble which I take to be yes.

It's been going on for days, this aggravation between Dad and IDA. Dad raising his voice, calling her names, threatening to do her serious and permanent damage. IDA, I should mention, is not a person. I know it sounds like a granny's name, or maybe a sweet next-door neighbour who brings cake round, but – you have to trust me on this – Dad is not in the habit of threatening old ladies with violence.

IDA is a device.

Hence her name being in all capitals. They stand for Intelligent Domestic Appliance. Which is just a fancy way of saying smart speaker. Except – from what I've seen in the couple of weeks since Dad brought her home – IDA is a long way from intelligent.

Dad is standing at the sink, washing dishes and elbow deep in a bowl of soapy water.

'IDA,' says Dad. 'Play. Music. By. Queen.' And his voice gets a little louder, a little more angry, with each word.



IDA plays a short musical *Bing-bong-a-bing* and says, 'Sure. How many sardines would you like to buy?'

'Gahhh!' shouts Dad, throwing his hands and a shower of soap bubbles into the air. 'I do not want sardines. I want music!'

Bing-bong-a-bing! 'You want sardines and muesli. No problem.'

'I'll give you a problem!' Day says. 'I'll give you a serious problem if you carry on like –'

Zem gets to his feet, trots across the kitchen and noses his way through the dog flap and into the garden, where it's more peaceful.

'Morning, Dad,' I say, flopping into a chair at the table.

Dad turns from the sink, drying his hands on the front of his trousers. 'Oh, morning, Bob. Didn't hear you come downstairs.'

'Probably because you've been arguing with IDA again.'

‘Wish I’d never bought it,’ Dad says. ‘Worse than useless. I’d be better talking to the wall. At least the wall would just ignore me, instead of trying to get me to buy tins of small oily fish.’

My tummy rumbles in response to this.

‘Right,’ says Dad, ‘I suppose you’ll be wanting breakfast?’

‘I’ll get myself some choco-flakes,’ I tell him.

‘Ah,’ says Dad. ‘Afraid I just had the last of those. Should have got down here quicker.’

I would have done, but I’ve spent at least ten minutes colouring my school trousers in.

‘Fine, I’ll have toast.’

‘Bread’s mouldy,’ says Dad. ‘That’s why I had the choco-flakes. Sorry.’

I suppose I should explain that thing about colouring my trousers in. You see, when I first got these trousers – about half a year ago – they were too long. ‘You’ll grow into them,’ Dad said, and he tucked three centimetres

of each leg up inside itself and stitched it in place with black thread. Perfect. Then – as predicted – I grew. And for quite a while now my trousers have been climbing up my shins – 'ankle flappers' my best friend Malcolm Schnitzel calls them. The Schnitz isn't trying to be mean when he says this, but it does make me feel a bit self-conscious.

So this morning, I unpicked the stitching and let the extra three centimetres of leg down. But here's the problem – after half a year of washing and ironing, the crease where my trousers used to be tucked up has faded to a thin line of washed-out grey. It's like one of those marks that some parents draw on the door frame to show how much you've grown. Except this line is on my trousers.

What I really need is a new pair, but these aren't even a year old and I'd feel bad asking. So while I was using a black felt-tipped pen to colour over the grey line, Dad was eating the last bowl of choco-flakes. I tell

you – it's not easy being a kid.

'Got any bacon?' I ask. 'Sausages?'

'Nuh-uh.'

'Porridge?'

'All out.'

'Fruit.'

Dad shakes his head. 'I really need to go to the shops. Boil you an egg?'

Whether you ask for hard boiled or soft, Dad's eggs always come out the same: hard as conkers. And the yolk – I don't know how he manages it – turns into a kind of thick brown powder that sucks all the wetness out of your mouth.

'Maybe I'll just have a glass of water,' I say. 'I'm not that hungry.'

'Nonsense,' says Dad. 'I'll do you a couple of eggs. And I reckon, if I cut around the mould, I could probably make a toastie soldier or two.'

He puts two eggs in a pan, fills it with water and

places it over a burning ring on the cooker. 'Hard or soft?' he asks.

As if it makes any difference.

'Hard,' I say. Because, let's face it, that's what I'm going to get.

Dad takes a deep breath, as if he is about to try to perform a difficult or unpleasant task. 'IDA,' he says, 'set a timer for six minutes.'

IDA *Bing-bong-a-bings*. 'Play music by Sid Vicious? Sure.'

'No!' shouts Dad. 'Minutes. Six. Minutes.'

'You would like me to buy mince, no prob—'

Dad's head snaps round towards IDA. 'STOP! IDA. Just . . . stop.'

'Sure,' says IDA. 'I'll just stop then.' And – I might be imagining it – but IDA sounds a little sulky.

Bing-bong-a-bing.

'It must have a bug,' says Dad.

'Who? IDA?'

‘Yeah, some sort of glitch in the software. I don’t really understand it. But one thing’s for certain – we’re not in danger of intelligent machines taking over anytime in the near future. Now, what was I doing?’

‘Eggs,’ I remind him.

‘Right. Hard boiled times two, coming up.’ Dad starts opening and closing drawers and cupboards. ‘Seen the egg timer anywhere?’

‘Er . . .’

Dad turns to me. ‘“Er”? What do you mean, “Er”?’

‘Er, I borrowed it,’ I tell him. ‘For science homework. And anyway, it’s not like it works properly.’

‘It times,’ Dad says. ‘What else do you eggspect of it? Get it? Egg-spect.’

I sigh. ‘I get it. But it doesn’t ping.’

‘What doesn’t?’

‘The egg timer. It’s meant to ping when the time’s up. But it just ticks until it stops. Which is why, whenever you use it, you burn whatever it is you’re cooking.’

Dad looks a little hurt by this.

'Maybe,' he says, 'the reason I occasionally *slightly* overcook things is because I'm so busy cleaning your dishes, washing your clothes, ironing your clothes, putting your clothes away, making your bed, hoovering and dusting, cleaning up Zem's poos from the garden, holding down a job, paying the bills, buying food and cooking it for you?'

I consider pointing out that Dad hasn't been doing particularly well on the food-buying front but decide now is not the time.

'Sorry,' I say.

'Hmm,' says Dad. 'Well, I think it's about time you did a little more around the house.'

'But I tidied my room last month. *And* I put a new toilet roll on the holder yesterday.'

'Throwing everything into your wardrobe is not tidying, Bob. And keeping your own bottom clean is the least I'd expect of a twelve-year-old.' Dad shrugs and

sighs. ‘When I was your age, I got up at six thirty three mornings a week to do a paper round – even in winter. And I still did my fair share of chores.’

The worst thing about all of this is that Dad’s right. He does do a lot for me. Doubly so since we lost Mum.

‘Sorry,’ I say again. ‘I’ll do more.’

‘I’ll tell you what,’ says Dad. ‘From now on, you can *earn* your pocket money.’

Earn?

I don’t even say it out loud, but Dad sees the question in my eyes.

‘Yes, earn. You want money; you do jobs. Simple.’

This is a *disaster*.

I open my mouth to say something – about how unfair this is – but then a thought occurs to me. *Maybe this isn’t such a disaster after all.*

I emptied my piggy bank last weekend and spent the contents on a pair of new drumsticks, a milkshake and a clockwork frog, but I’d completely forgotten it’s

Father's Day on Sunday. I get my pocket money on a Saturday, but it's not much and it was looking like I was going to have to give Dad my clockwork frog, which wouldn't be ideal. But now, if I do enough jobs, I might be able to earn enough to get him something special.

If wasn't for the actual jobs, it would be perfect.

'I'll start tonight,' I say to Dad.

He tilts his head as if checking whether I'm serious or not.

'Thank you, Bob. And listen – I don't mean to nag but . . . well, it's good for you to take some responsibility now and then.'

I suppose I could point out that I recently saved the world from a zombie apocalypse. And that I think that showed more than a little responsibility. But that would involve telling Dad I'm a time traveller, and I'm not ready to do that just yet. Especially when I only have ten minutes before I have to leave for school.

So instead of telling Dad about my zombie-fighting

exploits in the year 2043, I pick up a tea towel and begin drying dishes. Dad joins me at the sink to finish the washing up. He blows a handful of soap bubbles at me, so I flick him on the bum with my tea towel. And then it's basically just a washing-up fight.

By the time we're finished, my hair is soaked and Dad has a soap-bubble beard that makes him look like a pirate. It's still clinging to his chin when he serves up my boiled eggs and a couple of very skinny toastie soldiers.

Sure enough, when I crack open the eggs, they're as hard as rubber balls and every bit as tasty.