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Opening extract from **Gangsta Granny**

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Cabbagey Water

“But Granny is sooooo boring,” said Ben. It was a cold Friday evening in November, and as usual he was slumped in the back of his mum and dad’s car. Once again he was on his way to stay the night at his dreaded granny’s house. “*All* old people are.”

“Don’t talk about your granny like that,” said Dad weakly, his fat stomach pushed up against the steering wheel of the family’s little brown car.

“I hate spending time with her,” protested Ben. “Her TV doesn’t work, all she wants to do is play Scrabble and she stinks of cabbage!”

“In fairness to the boy she does stink of cabbage,” agreed Mum, as she applied some last minute lip-liner.

“You’re not helping, wife,” muttered Dad. “At worst my mother has a very slight odour of boiled vegetables.”

“Can’t I come with you?” pleaded Ben. “I love ball-whatsit dancing,” he lied.

“It’s called ballroom dancing,” corrected Dad. “And you don’t love it. You said, and I quote, ‘I would rather eat my own bogeys than watch that rubbish’.”

Now, Ben’s mum and dad *loved* ballroom dancing. Sometimes Ben thought they loved it more than they loved him. There was a TV show on Saturday evenings that Mum and Dad never missed called *Strictly Stars Dancing*, where celebrities would be paired with professional ballroom dancers.

In fact, if there was a fire in their house, and Mum could only save either a sparkly gold tap-shoe once worn by Flavio Flavioli (the shiny, tanned dancer and heartbreaker from Italy who appeared on every series of the hit TV show) or her only child, Ben thought she would probably go for the shoe. Tonight, his mum and dad were going to an arena to see *Strictly Stars Dancing* live on stage.

“I don’t know why you don’t give up on this pipe dream of becoming a plumber, Ben, and think about dancing professionally,” said Mum, her lip-liner scrawling across her cheek as the car bounced over a particularly bumpy speed bump. Mum had a habit of applying make-up in the car, which meant she often arrived somewhere looking like a clown. “Maybe, just maybe, you could end up on *Strictly!*” added Mum excitedly.



“Because prancing around like that is stupid,” said Ben.

Mum whimpered a little, and reached for a tissue.

“You’re upsetting your mother. Now just be quiet please, Ben, there’s a good boy,” replied Dad firmly, as he turned up the volume on the

stereo. Inevitably, a *Strictly* CD was playing. *50 Golden Greats from the Hit TV Show* was emblazoned on the cover. Ben hated the CD, not least because he had heard it a million times. In fact, he had heard it so many times it was like torture.

Ben's mum worked at the local nail salon, 'Gail's Nails'. Because there weren't many customers, Mum and the other lady who worked there (unsurprisingly called Gail) spent most days doing each other's nails. Buffing, cleaning, trimming, moisturising, coating, sealing, polishing, filing, lacquering, extending and painting. They were doing things to each other's nails all day long (unless Flavio Flavioli was on daytime TV). That meant Mum would always come home with extremely long multi-coloured plastic extensions on the end of her fingers.

Ben's dad, meanwhile, worked as a security guard at the local supermarket. The highlight of his twenty-year career thus far was stopping an old man who had concealed two tubs of margarine down his trousers. Although Dad was now too fat to run after any robbers, he could certainly block their escape. Dad met Mum when he wrongly accused her of shoplifting a bag of crisps, and within a year they were married.

The car swung around the corner into Grey Close, where Granny's bungalow squatted. It was one of a whole row of sad little homes, mainly inhabited by old people.

The car came to a halt, and Ben slowly turned his head towards the bungalow. Looking expectantly out of the living-room window was Granny. Waiting. Waiting. She was always waiting by the window for him to arrive. *How*

long has she been there? thought Ben. *Since last week?*

Ben was her only grandchild and, as far as he knew, no one else ever came to visit.

Granny waved and gave Ben a little smile, which his grumpy face just about permitted him to reluctantly return.

“Right, one of us will pick you up tomorrow morning at around eleven,” said Dad, keeping the engine running.

“Can’t you make it ten?”

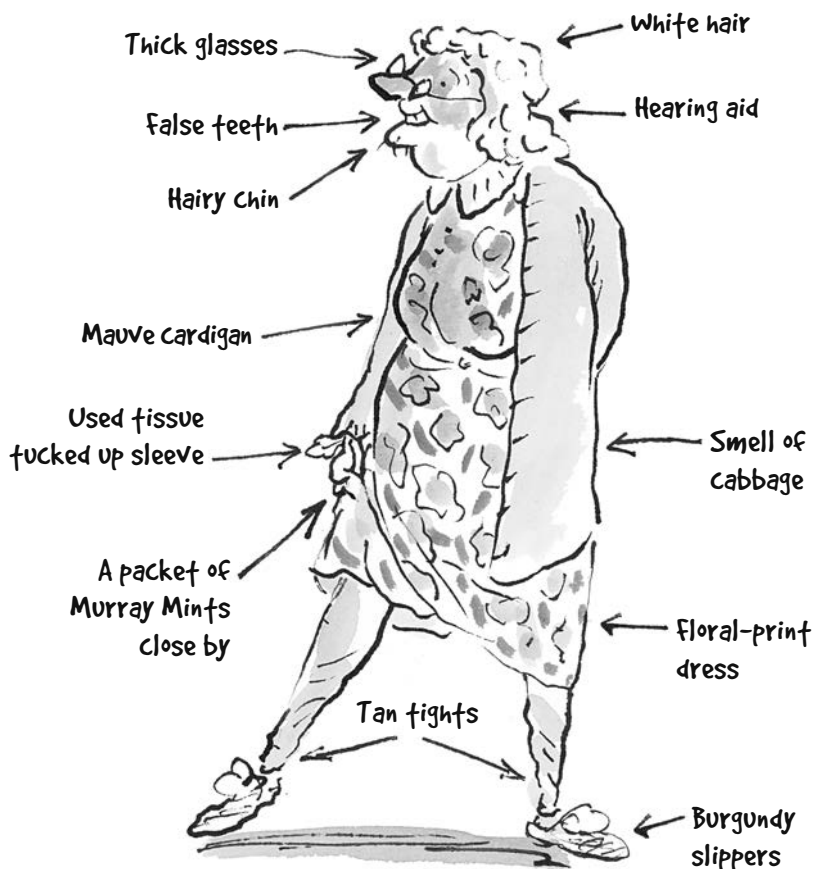
“Ben!” growled Dad. He released the child lock and Ben grudgingly pushed the door open and stepped out. Ben didn’t need the child lock, of course: he was eleven years old and hardly likely to open the door while the car was driving. He suspected his dad only used it to stop him from diving out of the car when they were on their way to Granny’s house. *Clunk* went the

Gangsta Granny

door behind him, as the engine revved up again.

Before he could ring the bell, Granny opened the door. A huge gust of cabbage blasted in Ben's face. It was like a great big slap of smell.

She was very much your textbook granny:



Cabbagey Water

“Are Mummy and Daddy not coming in?” she asked, a little crestfallen. This was one of the things Ben couldn’t stand about her: she was always talking to him like he was a baby.

Broom-broom-brroooooooooooooommm.

Together Granny and Ben watched the little brown car race off, leaping over the speed bumps. Mum and Dad didn’t like spending time with her any more than Ben did. It was just a convenient place to dump him on a Friday night.

“No, erm... Sorry, Granny...” spluttered Ben.

“Oh, well, come in then,” she muttered. “Now, I’ve set up the Scrabble board and for your tea, I’ve got your favourite... cabbage soup!”

Ben’s face dropped even further. *Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!* he thought.

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A Duck Quacking

Before long, granny and grandson were sitting opposite each other in deadly silence at the dining-room table. Just like every single Friday night.

When his parents weren't watching *Strictly* on TV, they were eating curry or going to the movies. Friday night was their 'date night', and ever since Ben could remember, they had been dropping him off with his granny when they went out. If they weren't going to see *Strictly Stars Dancing Live On Stage Live!*, they would normally go to the Taj Mahal (the curry

house on the high street, not the ancient white marble monument in India) and eat their own bodyweight in poppadums.

All that could be heard in the bungalow was the ticking of the carriage clock on the mantelpiece, the clinking of metal spoons against porcelain bowls, and the occasional high-pitched whistle of Granny's faulty hearing aid. It was a device whose purpose seemed to be not so much to aid Granny's deafness, but to cause deafness in others.

It was one of the main things that Ben hated about his granny. The others were:

- 1) Granny would always spit in the used tissue she kept up the sleeve of her cardigan and wipe her grandson's face with it.
- 2) Her TV had been broken since 1992. And

Gangsta Granny

now it was covered in dust so thick it was like fur.

- 3) Her house was stuffed full of books and she was always trying to get Ben to read them even though he loathed reading.
- 4) Granny insisted you wore a heavy winter coat all year round even on a boiling hot day, otherwise you wouldn't "feel the benefit".
- 5) She reeked of cabbage. (Anyone with a cabbage allergy would not be able to come within ten miles of her.)
- 6) Granny's idea of an exciting day out was feeding mouldy crusts of bread to some ducks in a pond.

- 7) She constantly blew off without even acknowledging it.
- 8) Those blow-offs didn't just smell of cabbage. They smelled of rotten cabbage.
- 9) Granny made you go to bed so early it seemed hardly worthwhile getting up in the first place.
- 10) She knitted her only grandson jumpers for Christmas with puppies or kittens on them, which he was forced to wear during the whole festive period by his parents.

“How's your soup?” enquired the old lady.

Ben had been stirring the pale green liquid around the chipped bowl for the last ten minutes hoping it would somehow disappear.

Gangsta Granny

It wouldn't.

And now it was getting cold.

Cold bits of cabbage, floating around in some cold cabbagey water.

"Erm, it's delicious, thank you," replied Ben.

"Good."



A Duck Quacking

Tick tock tick tock.

“Good,” said the old lady again.

Clink. Clink.

“Good.” Granny seemed to find it as hard to speak to Ben as he did to her.

Clink clank. Whistle.

“How’s school?” she asked.

“Boring,” muttered Ben. Adults always ask kids how they are doing at school. The one subject kids absolutely hate talking about. You don’t even want to talk about school when you are *at* school.

“Oh,” said Granny.

Tick tock clink clank whistle tick tock.

“Well, I must check on the oven,” said Granny after the long pause stretched out into an even *longer* pause. “I’ve got your favourite cabbage pie on the go.”

She rose slowly from her seat and made her

way to the kitchen. As she took each step a little bubble of wind puffed out of her saggy bottom. It sounded like a duck quacking. Either she didn't realise or was extremely good at pretending she didn't realise.

Ben watched her go, and then crept silently across the room. This was difficult because of the piles of books everywhere. Ben's granny LOVED books, and always seemed to have her nose in one. They were stacked on shelves, lined up on windowsills, piled up in corners.

Crime novels were her favourite. Books about gangstas, bank robbers, the mafia and the like. Ben wasn't sure what the difference between a gangsta and a gangster was, but a gangsta seemed much worse.

Although Ben hated reading, he loved looking at all the covers of Granny's books. They had fast cars and guns and glamorous ladies luridly

painted on them, and Ben found it hard to believe this boring old Granny of his liked reading stories that looked so thrilling.

Why is she obsessed with gangstas? thought Ben. *Gangstas don't live in bungalows. Gangstas don't play Scrabble. Gangstas probably don't smell of cabbage.*

Ben was a very slow reader, and the teachers at school made him feel stupid because he couldn't keep up. The headmistress had even put him down a year in the hope that he would catch up on his reading. As a result, all his friends were in a different class, and he felt nearly as lonely at school as he did at home, with his parents who only cared about ballroom dancing.

Eventually, after a hairy moment where he nearly knocked over a stack of real-life crime books, Ben made it to the pot plant in the corner.

He quickly tipped the remainder of his soup

into it. The plant looked as if it was already dying, and if it wasn't dead yet, Granny's cold cabbage soup was sure to kill it off.

Suddenly, Ben heard Granny's bum squeaking again as she made her way into the dining room, so he sped back to the table. He sat there trying to look as innocent as possible, with his empty bowl in front of him and his spoon in hand. "I've finished my soup, thank you, Granny. It was yummy!"

"That's good," said the old lady as she trundled back to the table carrying a saucepan on a tray. "I've got plenty more here for you, boy!" Smiling, she served him up another bowl.

Ben gulped in terror.