

Ratburger





Previously by David Walliams:

The Boy in the Dress

Mr Stink

Billionaire Boy

Gangsta Granny

David Walliams

Ratburger



Illustrated by Tony Ross



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For Frankie, the boy with the beautiful smile.



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Meet the characters in this story:

Burt, a burger-van man

Dad, a dad



Zoe, a little girl

Sheila,
Zoe's stepmother

Mr Grave, the
headmaster

Miss Midge,
a small
teacher

Raj, a large
newsagent



Tina Trotts,
the local bully

Gingernut,
a dead
hamster

Armitage,
a live rat



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Prawn-Cocktail-Crisp Breath

The hamster was dead.

On his back.

Legs in the air.

Dead.

With tears running down her cheeks, Zoe opened the cage. Her hands were shaking and her heart was breaking. As she laid Gingernut's little furry body down on the worn carpet, she thought she would never smile again.

“Sheila!” called Zoe, as loudly as she could. Despite her father's repeated pleas, Zoe refused to call her stepmother ‘Mum’. She never had,

and she vowed to herself that she never would. No one could replace Zoe's mum – not that her stepmother ever even tried.

“Shut ya face. I'm watchin' TV and stuffin' meself!” came the woman's gruff voice from the lounge.

“It's Gingernut!” called Zoe. “He's not well!”

This was an understatement.

Zoe had once seen a hospital drama on the telly where a nurse tried to revive a dying old man, so she desperately attempted to give her hamster mouth-to-mouth resuscitation by blowing very gently into his open mouth. That didn't work. Neither did connecting the rodent's little heart to an AA battery with a paper clip. It was just too late.

The hamster was cold to the touch, and he was stiff.

Prawn-Cocktail-Crisp Breath

“Sheila! Please help...!” shouted the little girl.

At first Zoe’s tears came silently, before she let out a gigantic cry. Finally she heard her stepmother trudge reluctantly down the hall of the little flat, which was situated high up on the 37th floor of a leaning tower block. The woman made huge effort noises whenever she had to do anything. She was so lazy she would order Zoe to pick her nose for her, though of course Zoe always said ‘no’. Sheila could even let out a groan while changing channels with the TV remote.

“Eurgh, eurgh, eurgh, eurgh...” huffed Sheila as she thundered down the hall. Zoe’s stepmother was quite short, but she made up for it by being as wide as she was tall.

She was, in a word, spherical.

Soon Zoe could sense the woman standing

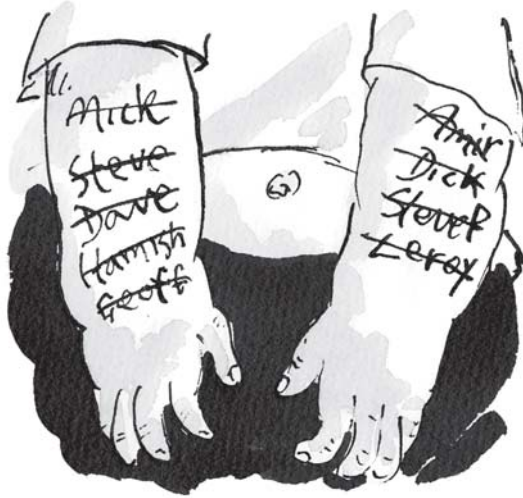
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Prawn-Cocktail-Crisp Breath

in the doorway, blocking out the light from the hall like a lunar eclipse. What's more, Zoe could smell the sickly sweet aroma of prawn cocktail crisps. Her stepmother loved them. In fact, she boasted that from when she was a toddler she had refused to eat anything else, and spat any other food back in her mum's face. Zoe thought the crisps stank, and not even of prawns. Of course the woman's breath absolutely reeked of them too.

Even now, as she stood in the doorway, Zoe's stepmother was holding a packet of the noxious snack with one hand and feeding her face with the other while she surveyed the scene. As always, she was wearing a long grubby white T-shirt, black leggings and furry pink slippers. The bits of skin that were exposed were covered in tattoos. Her arms bore the names of her ex-husbands, all since crossed out:



“Oh dear,” the woman spat, her mouth full of crisps. “Oh dear, oh dear, how very very sad. It’s ’eartbreakin’. The poor little fing has snuffed it!” She leaned over her little stepdaughter and peered down at the dead hamster. She sprayed the carpet with half-chewed pieces of crisp as she spoke.

“Dear oh dear oh dear and all dat stuff,” she added, in a tone that did not sound even remotely sad.

Prawn-Cocktail-Crisp Breath

Just then a large piece of half-chewed crisp sprayed from Sheila's mouth on to the poor thing's little fluffy face. It was a mixture of crisps and spit¹. Zoe wiped it away gently, as a tear dropped from her eye on to his cold pink nose.

“’Ere, I got a great idea!” said Zoe’s stepmother. “I’ll just finish dese crisps and ya can shove the little fing in de bag. I won’t touch it meself. I don’t wanna catch summink.”

Sheila lifted the bag above her mouth and poured the last of the prawn cocktail crisp crumbles down her greedy throat. The woman then offered her stepdaughter the empty bag. “Dere ya go. Bung it in ’ere, quick. Before it stinks de whole flat out.”

Zoe almost gasped at the unfairness of what the woman had just said. It was her fat stepmother’s

¹ *The technical name for this is a ‘spisp’.*

prawn-cocktail-crisp breath that stank the place out! Her breath could strip paint. It could shear the feathers off a bird and make it bald. If the wind changed direction, you would get a nasty waft of her breath in a town ten miles away.

“I am not burying my poor Gingernut in a crisp packet,” snapped Zoe. “I don’t know why I called for you in the first place. Please just go!”

“For goodness’ sake, girl!” shouted the woman. “I was only trying to ’elp. Ungrateful little wretch!”

“Well, you’re not helping!” shouted Zoe, without turning round. “Just go away! Please!”

Sheila thundered out of the room and slammed the door so hard that plaster fell from the ceiling.

Zoe listened as the woman she refused to call ‘Mum’ trudged back to the kitchen, no doubt to rip open another family-sized bag of prawn

Prawn-Cocktail-Crisp Breath

cocktail crisps to fill her face with. The little girl was left alone in her tiny bedroom, cradling her dead hamster.

But how had he died? Zoe knew that Gingernut was very young, even in hamster years.

Could this be a hamster murder? she wondered.

But what kind of person would want to murder a defenceless little hamster?

Well, before this story is over, you will know. And you will also know that there are people capable of doing much, much worse. The most evil man in the world is lurking somewhere in this very book. Read on, if you dare...