

Boy 6

Roald Dahl, eight years old, is at school in Wales. His father has died, and his Norwegian mother is doing her best to have her children educated as their father wished. Roald is in the Headmaster's Study with his friends, and Thwaites has just been beaten. Mr Coombes is wielding the cane, to punish the five of them for putting a dead mouse in a sweet jar in Mrs Pratchett's shop. Mrs Pratchett is enjoying it very much.

Episode 6

Thwaites came hopping past us, clutching his bottom with both hands and yelling, 'Ow! Ouch! Ouch! Owwww!'

With tremendous reluctance, the next boy sidled forward to his fate. I stood there watching and waiting - probably even greater torture than the event itself. Mrs Pratchett kept up her screeching, exhorting Mr Coombes to greater and still greater efforts, and the awful thing was that he seemed to be responding to her cries.

My own turn came at last. I can remember wishing my mother would suddenly come bursting into the room shouting 'Stop! How dare you do that to my son!' But she didn't. All I heard was Mrs Pratchett's dreadful voice screeching, 'This one's the cheekiest of the bloomin' lot, 'Eadmaster! Make sure you let 'im 'ave it good and strong!'

Mr Coombes did just that. At first I heard only the *crack* and felt absolutely nothing at all, but a fraction of a second later the burning sting that flooded across my buttocks was so terrific that all I could do was gasp.

It felt, I promise you, as though someone had laid a red-hot poker against my flesh and was pressing down on it hard. By the time the fourth stroke was delivered, my entire backside seemed to be going up in flames.

Far away in the distance, I heard Mr Coombes's voice saying, 'Now get out.' As I limped across the study, a cackling sound came from the armchair, and then the vinegary voice of Mrs Pratchett saying, 'I don't think we is goin' to see any more stinkin' mice in my Gobstoppers from now on.'

That evening after supper, as I was about to step into the bathtub, I heard a horrified gasp from my mother behind me.

'What's this?' she gasped. 'What's happened to you?' She was staring at my bottom. When I twisted my head around and took a look, I saw the scarlet striped and the deep blue bruising in between.

'Who did this?' my mother cried. 'Tell me at once!'

In the end I had to tell her the whole story, while my three sisters (aged nine, six and four) stood around in their nighties listening goggle-eyed. My mother heard me out in silence, and when I had finished, she said to our nurse, 'You get them into bed, Nanny. I'm going out.'

She put on her hat and marched out of the house. I saw her through my bedroom window. I remember calling out to her to come back. But she took no notice of me. She was walking very quickly, with her head held high and her body erect, and by the look of things I figured that Mr Coombes was in for a hard time.

About an hour later, my mother returned. 'I wish you hadn't done that,' I said to her. 'It makes me look silly.'

'They don't beat small children like that where I come from,' she said. 'I won't allow it.'

'What did Mr Coombes say to you, Mama?'

'He told me I was a foreigner and I didn't understand how British schools were run,' she said.

'Did he get ratty with you?'

'Very ratty,' she said. 'He told me that if I didn't like his methods I could take you away.'

'What did you say?'

'I said I would, as soon as the school year is finished. I shall find you an *English* school this time,' she said. 'Your father was right. English schools are the best in the world.'

'Does that mean it'll be a boarding school?' I asked.

'It'll have to be,' she said. 'I'm not quite ready to move the whole family to England yet.'

So I stayed on at Llandaff Cathedral School until the end of the summer term.

Going to Norway

The summer holidays! Those magic words!

All my summer holidays, from when I was four years old to when I was seventeen (1920 to 1932), were totally idyllic. This, I am certain, was because we always went to the same idyllic place and that place was Norway. Except for my ancient half-sister and my not-quite-so ancient half-brother, the rest of us were all pure Norwegian by blood. We all spoke Norwegian and all our relations lived over there. So in a way, it was like going home. Even the journey was an event. There were no commercial aeroplanes in those times, so it took us four whole days to complete the trip out and another four days to get home again.

We were always an enormous party. There were my three sisters and my ancient half-sister, and my half-brother and me, and my mother, and Nanny (that's eight), and in addition there were never less than two others who were some sort of ancient friends of the ancient half-sister (that's ten altogether). Looking back on it now, I don't know how my mother did it. There were all those train bookings and boat bookings and hotel bookings to be made in advance by letter. She had to make sure that we had enough shorts and shirts and sweaters and gymshoes and bathing costumes, and the packing must have been a nightmare. Six huge trunks were carefully packed, as well as countless suitcases, and the ten of us, with our mountains of luggage, would set out on the first and easiest step of the journey, the train to London. When we arrived in London, we tumbled into three taxis and went clattering to King's Cross, where we got on to the train for Newcastle. The trip took about five hours, and when we arrived there, we needed three more taxis to take us to the docks, where our boat would be waiting. The next stop after that would be Oslo, the capital of Norway.

When I was young, the capital was not called Oslo. It was called Christiania. But if I call it that here we shall only get confused, so I had better stick to Oslo.

The sea journey from Newcastle took two days and a night, and if it was rough, as it often was, all of us got seasick except our dauntless mother. As

for poor Nanny, she began to feel sick the moment she set foot on deck. 'I hate these things!' she used to say. 'Which lifeboat do we go to when it starts to sink?' Then she would retire to her cabin, groaning and trembling until the ship tied up at the quayside in Oslo harbour.

We always stopped off for one night in Oslo so that we could have a grand reunion with Bestemamma and Bestepapa, our mother's parents, and with her two maiden sisters (our aunts) who lived with them. All of us were embraced and kissed many times and tears flowed and suddenly that quiet gloomy house came alive with many children's voices.

Ever since I first saw her, Bestemama was terrifically ancient. She was white-haired and wrinkly-faced, and always seemed to be sitting in her rocking-chair, smiling benignly at this influx of grandchildren who barged in from miles away.

Bestepapa was the quiet one. He was a small dignified scholar with a white goatee beard, and as far as I could gather, he was an astrologer, a meteorologist and a speaker of ancient Greek. The two things I remember), most about Bestepapa were that he wore black boots and that he smoked an extraordinary pipe. The bowl was made of meerschaum clay, and the flexible stem was about three feet long so that the bowl rested on his lap.

All the grown-ups and all the children, even when the youngest was only a year old, sat down around the big oval dining-room table on the afternoon of our arrival, for the great annual celebration feast. For the Norwegians the best food in the world is fish. And when they say fish, they mean *fresh fish*, fish that has been caught no more than twenty-four hours before and has never been frozen or chilled on a block of ice.

So naturally this feast started with fish. A massive fish, a flounder as big as a tea-tray – it had nearly black skin on top which was covered with brilliant orange spots, and it had, of course, been perfectly poached. Large white hunks of this fish were put on to our plates, and with it we had hollandaise sauce and boiled new potatoes. And by gosh, it was delicious.

Then a tremendous craggy mountain of home-made ice-cream would be carried in. Apart from being the creamiest ice-cream in the world, there were thousands of little chips of crisp burnt toffee mixed into it (the Norwegians called it *krokan*). You chewed it and it went *crunch* and the taste was something you dreamed about for days afterwards.

When the guzzling was over, those who were considered old enough were given small glasses of home-made liqueur, a colourless but fiery drink that smelled of mulberries. In Norway, you may select any individual round the table and toast him or her in a small private ceremony. You lift your glass high and call out the name. 'Bestemama!' you say. 'Skaal, Bestemama!' She will then lift her glass and hold it up high. At the same time your eyes meet hers, and you *must* keep looking deep into her eyes as you sip your drink. After you have done this, you raise your glasses high up again in a sort of silent final salute, and only then does each person look away and set down his glass. It is a serious and solemn ceremony, and as a rule on formal occasions everyone skaals everyone else round the table once. If there are ten people present, you will skaal your nine companions once each, and you yourself will receive nine separate skaals at different times during the meal – eighteen in all. That's how they work it in polite society over there, at least they used to in the old days. By the time I was ten, I would be permitted to

take part in these ceremonies, and I always finished up as tipsy as a lord.

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