

# **The Magic Light Switch**

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## Prologue

**I**n every child's bedroom - there are secrets. Some of those secrets are special hiding places, made by the children who sleep there. Some, however, *nobody* knows about. What most people don't know, and never notice, is that in every bedroom there exists a *secret* and magical light switch. It sits there right next to your own light switch, but you can't see it - it's invisible.

Only certain, very lucky children ever find the magic light switch. For our hero, Ben, it was all to do with being scared of the dark...

## 1 Jubilee Road

**I**n an ordinary house on Jubilee Road, the smell of a cooking dinner drifted out of the kitchen. It floated down the hall and lazily climbed the stairs, before finally pushing its way under the door to Ben's bedroom.

Ben Gull was a perfectly normal eleven year old boy - he liked watching football matches, enjoyed playing on the computer and, more than anything, he loved playing in his bedroom. If you saw his room, you might almost think that he never left it – there were cups, plates, crisp packets and all sorts of other mess, scattered wherever you looked. He had enjoyed playing in that messy bedroom, in his house in Islington, for all of his life. And he loved it... even if he wasn't very good at keeping it tidy.

Ben preferred playing on his own rather than going outside with friends. As an only child, he'd invented lots of imaginary friends to play with and, with those superior allies, he'd staged wars, fights and robberies; had run-ins with dragons and giants - anything where there were pretend explosions or fires, and people got horribly hurt. His bedroom was the perfect setting for all these adventures, and everything he needed was right there: from the posters on the wall about films he wasn't allowed to see, to the toys that no longer worked quite as they should, from being played with too much. The great thing, Ben believed, about *slightly* broken toys, is that they always broke in new and

interesting ways. One of his favourite toys was an Einstein figure, which spoke in slow-motion and fell over all the time. He enjoyed pretending to blow that one up a great deal. Another favourite was a literal one-armed bandit: a gun-slinger who had lost one of his arms during a nasty battle in a puddle one day. He'd afterwards re-named him Slow-Draw McGraw because he couldn't reach his gun any more. That toy also fell over a lot.

Ben's bedroom meant everything to him.

He was currently busy playing with his soldiers, who were jumping around on his rather threadbare carpet/battlefield and somehow kept getting bits of themselves blown up in the process. Ben had developed the somewhat warped idea that all wars took place on huge marshy battlefields where tanks and people would stroll around in a great big game of "hide-and-seek". And perhaps he wasn't far off, really. Either way, he was having fun enacting this particular game on his carpet, using buckets and giant robots to hide his troops behind.

Ben and his parents lived very happily in that ordinary house on Jubilee Road... until about a year ago, when they found out they were being forced to move home.

Ben had sulked when he'd first been told. He'd lived in that house all his life and was angry that he was being forced to leave behind his school, his friends, his home – and especially his bedroom. He eventually decided that the best thing to do would

be to not think about it at all. His dad said, jokingly, that he was being an ostrich: that he was putting his head in the sand, hoping things would go away if he couldn't see them and didn't think about them. Well, if that was true, he'd been "being an ostrich" for a long time now and it suited him just fine.

The smell of dinner, which continued to pour in from under the door, finally became too much for Ben and, with his stomach growling, he gave up the game he was playing and decided to go for food. He raced out of his room, down the stairs, and into the kitchen.

"I was just going to call you," Ben's mum told him, surprised that she hadn't needed to shout upstairs the three or four times that it usually took before he'd venture out of his room.

"I'm starving!" Ben announced, bouncing into the kitchen. He sat down at the small kitchen table whilst his mum served up his meal of fish fingers and chips.

"Well, put on your sauce or whatever and you can go and watch telly," she said, placing his dinner in front of him. Ben, appreciatively, smiled at her, while he plopped a huge blob of tomato sauce onto his plate.

Television was one of Ben's favourite ways of being occupied when he couldn't, for whatever reason, be in his room. Sitting at the dinner table, listening to his mum and dad drone on about their day, or having to field awkward questions about what he'd

been up to or how his school day had been, was more like torture. So, gratefully and happily, he strolled off into the living room to watch cartoons and eat his dinner.

Just a little while later, a call came from the hallway: “Hey everyone! Dad’s home!”

Ben’s dad looked in on the living room (“Hello!”) before stealing a particularly juicy chip that Ben had been purposefully saving (“Oy!”) and then going off into the kitchen. Ben could hear his parents talking softly. He was surprised when, just a few minutes later, they came through to the living room. They both sat down: his dad in the armchair and his mum on the sofa next to him. Ben got that horrible feeling he got whenever he was in trouble. Any second, he thought, and they were going to start being all patient and calm with him until he broke down and confessed to whatever minor crime they suspected him of doing. However, Ben wasn’t in any trouble at all. What his dad wanted to talk about was something much more serious:

“I went down to the council meeting today about us having to move,” said Ben’s dad in a tone that Ben wasn’t sure he liked. His dad looked sad.

## 2 The world turns

**B**en had known all about the council meeting but had tried not to think about it. It was, for all of them, a kind of “day of reckoning”. A last chance, so they said, to get their voices heard and their views taken into consideration before something called a Compulsory Purchase Order was issued to them by their local council. The way Ben understood it: the council were going to send them a piece of paper telling them they *had* to sell their house to them. Then, once they’d all moved out, the house would be demolished, then rebuilt; before finally selling the *newly built* house to someone else. Ben struggled to understand quite how that worked.

His dad had been trying to do research for several weeks, finding out as much as he could about what the council were doing, and how to prevent them. He had eventually come to the conclusion that there was very little hope, and had gone to the latest meeting looking for a miracle. The look on his face, as he sat there ready to explain that to Ben, said everything about how well that plan had gone.

“It’s not good news, I’m afraid,” he told Ben. “We all did our best but the truth is that there’s nothing we can do. They’re insistent that the foundations under the street are dangerous and so because of ‘fears about public safety’, they’re going to knock everything down. They’re really close to issuing the purchase

orders now and it looks like we're *definitely* going to have to move."

It had already been a year since Ben had first been told about all. Since then, all the affected residents had been fighting the council and there had been all sorts of delays and meetings. Whenever he had let himself think about it, he'd held on to the hope that something could be done to prevent it all; surely something could save the day? It was rather devastating to have all hope fade like this. Ben's stomach, though now satisfied at least with food, gave a lurch and squeezed itself tight with a mixture of unhappy emotions.

All of this was happening because some of the houses on his street were said to be unsafe. Some were already being repaired, or needed repairing because of subsidence - where parts of some of the houses were literally sinking into the ground. Ben's house seemed completely fine but, because of various laws and regulations, the council were either going to have to spend lots of money fixing up the whole street (and under it), or instead they had the chance to knock all the houses down and build new ones from scratch. The council had weighed up those two options and come to the conclusion that, sometime in the coming summer, all the affected houses would be demolished.

Ben's dad turned to his mum and the conversation continued:

“There were quite a lot of people there, at the meeting. I spoke to a few people who had the same idea we had, of seeing if we could preserve the streets - set them up as National Trust or something. A few others had been to see their solicitors again who basically told them that we had three choices.” Ben’s dad began counting out these choices on his fingers. “One: we back down, and sell the houses to the council. Two: we could get all the problems fixed ourselves; basically buying them out of their plans. Or, three: we could have the properties seized from under us if we don’t make our minds up soon.” He smiled, sardonically, about the third ‘option’.

“I’m sure some of them will carry on fighting,” he continued, “which will probably delay things a bit more, but I don’t really see that there’s much they can do.

“After the meeting a few of us went to talk to Councillor Lord, although we shouldn’t have bothered. I couldn’t believe it: he said, right to our faces, that if we could just repair all the foundations ourselves, that would be fine.” Ben’s dad laughed. “Well – you can imagine what the reaction was. I just walked away.”

“How much would it cost?” Ben asked.

“A serious amount of money,” he answered. “That’s why everyone was so angry. Nobody’s really sure how much it would

cost but we do know that there's no way it's not going to happen. We're certainly talking in the millions."

Ben's dad looked terribly frustrated. It made it rather worse for him to see the look on Ben's face; watching that last thread of hope that his smile was hanging from "snap!" because of his own words.

"Look," Ben's dad said in an optimistic tone, "it's not the end of the world. We're going to get some money for the house and possibly from the insurance, and we'll move. It doesn't have to be so far away and we'll soon get used to wherever we end up moving to. Honestly, I'm really sorry; I've done everything I can."

"We know you have," Ben's mum said. She moved to the chair his dad was sitting on, and rubbed his arm in a gesture that made Ben realise that they really did feel the same way he did.

A short while later, his parents moved off into the kitchen where they busied themselves preparing their own dinners. There was a part of Ben that wanted to stand up and shout after them: "None of you really care, you don't understand!". But the truth was that he knew that they cared just as much as he did.

Ben's Grandma had bought this house nearly twenty years ago, and they all lived there perfectly happily, having moved away from a very run-down part of London. Ben's parents had looked after his Grandma until she had died, just a few years ago. Partly

because of that, he thought, they were *all* hugely attached to this house. It somehow represented a lot more than just bricks and stone and, as clichéd as he knew it sounded, that was something the council would never understand.

All Ben's fears had been confirmed. He was going to lose everything - all the things he cared most about.

And, most importantly to him, he was going to have to say goodbye to his well-loved bedroom.

### 3 Scared of the dark

**B**en was sitting in the living room, staring into space with a blank expression on his face. He'd tried watching television but had found he couldn't concentrate properly, and so had turned it off. This, for him, was very unusual, and his parents had even come back into the living room to see why it had all gone quiet. His mum, in particular, was worried that he seemed so distracted, but Ben claimed that he was simply tired.

It had been two hours since his dad had dropped the final bombshell about losing their fight to stay in the house. Ben had tried hard to bury his thoughts but they kept resurfacing, like dolphins coming up for air. He knew that sooner or later he would need to vent his frustrations but, he decided, this was not yet the right time. Although it took him all evening, Ben eventually succeeded in locking away all his worries, deep within himself.

A whole hour before his usual bedtime, Ben announced to his mum and dad that he was going up to bed, and duly set off for his bedroom.

*Before we continue, we have to understand one very important thing about Ben. It isn't something that makes him very unusual, but it is something important, nevertheless. It was this:*

Ben did **not** like the dark.

In fact, he was terrified of it. Being eleven years old, he could no longer ask his parents to accompany him upstairs or anything like that, and so his pride forced him to take on his imaginary monsters all on his own. He at least partly justified his fear by reminding himself that other people were afraid of things too - things that, to him, were just as silly. His parents, for instance, were both mortally afraid of the tiniest spiders. In that respect, he told himself, being afraid of the dark wasn't such a big thing to be ashamed of.

He stood at the bottom of the stairs, staring up at the darkness ahead of him as though he was calculating his chances of survival. There was no light switch here at the bottom to control the landing light, and the only illumination available came from the bulb in the narrow hallway he was standing in. This, however, gave out only a small amount of light; its beams seemingly giving up after only a few metres, making mysterious shadows of everything thereafter. Only when he reached the very top of the stairs would he be able to properly dispel the darkness.

He could feel a breeze as it whispered through the front-door directly behind him, making the letter box rattle gently in the wind. As was his common routine, Ben took a deep breath, closed his eyes tightly, then leapt upwards from step to step, eyes still tightly shut, until he reached the very top - when he slapped

the landing light switch on. He kept his eyes closed until he was completely sure that the light was on, before looking back down from where he'd come, to make sure there was nothing following him. There wasn't. Perhaps, he thought, he wouldn't be attacked by monsters tonight, after all.

The bathroom had a pull-cord that hung just inside the door, and he pulled on it to turn on the light. He brushed his teeth and properly washed his face, foregoing his usual trick, which was just to give his face a quick rub with a damp towel. All washed and scrubbed, he was now ready for the final and scariest stage - getting into his bedroom.

Ben's room was farthest from the landing light and felt, to him, like it was more than a mile away. After making his way cautiously across the landing, he placed his hand, almost fearfully, on the handle of his bedroom door, as though afraid it might transform into something hideous.

Slowly, he pressed down on the door handle, waiting for the catch to release itself from the door-frame with a 'ping'. Taking care not to open it further than he had to, he then pushed the door gently open until it remained just slightly ajar. All this caution was so that he would not have to peer into a pitch-black room that his imagination would undoubtedly fill with ghosts and monsters.

Taking care not to push the door open any further, Ben arched his arm around the gap and into the room, again with his eyes tightly shut. He padded the wall with his fingers in an attempt to find the light switch, which, since he couldn't see it, and was scared that at any time his hand might be grabbed or bitten, took longer than you might imagine. Once he found the switch, he pressed hard against it and started to push the door open, feeling the light spread across his eyelids. Still with his eyes closed, Ben stepped into his bedroom. When he did finally open his eyes, he was very surprised to find he was not standing in *his* bedroom, at all.