

The Golden Ticket

I didn't even notice him at first. Probably because I was too busy trying to retain my composure while a chubby boy, who presumably thought his size alone constituted an Augustus Gloop costume, worked his way steadily through the pile of whipple-scrumptious chocolates I had been up until I am making (it wasn't as if I hadn't been warned, the rest of the library staff maintained that most of the children who attended my Charlie and the Chocolate Factory events came for the chocolates rather than the stories).

It was only after I removed the plate from his reach (much to the boy's apparent consternation) and started offering the chocolates to other children around the room that my gaze first rested on the dark haired man sitting awkwardly in the corner, his long legs struggling to reconcile themselves with the small chairs in the children's section of the library. The darkness of his eyes registered but also the way they lit up when his son (who was wearing a home-made Willy Wonka outfit which included a particularly impressive purple cravat), looked at him. He glanced up as I stopped to offer them both a chocolate. His hair was dark and wavy. His face weathered-looking.

'Thanks,' he said taking one. 'You and the other Oompa-Loompas must have been working through the night on these.'

As ridiculous as it seemed, I had forgotten until that moment that I was dressed as an Oompa-Loompa, all orange face and white eyebrows, not to mention the

green wig. I suppose I had got so used to coming to work dressed as all manner of weird and wonderful literary characters over the summer holidays that wigs and face paint had become part of my normal attire. But of course, now he had mentioned it, I was immediately reminded of how ridiculous I looked. I felt my cheeks flush and momentarily wondered whether that would clash horribly with the green wig before remembering that my face was orange anyway.

'I'm afraid I'm a lone Oompa-Loompa actually but it's all part of a night's work to please young Mr Wonka here,' I said, smiling at his son, who looked about seven and sported the same dark curls as his father.

The boy gestured to me to come closer and spoke in a whisper. 'I'm not actually Willy Wonka,' he said. 'My name's Josh. This is just a costume.'

'That's okay,' I said. 'I'm not actually an Oompa-Loompa either. You won't tell anyone, will you?' Josh shook his head. 'Thank you,' I said, tapping my nose, 'and rest assured your secret's safe with me too. Would you care for a chocolate? They're one of our very newest creations.'

Josh took one, popped it into his mouth and chewed, his head on one side slightly. 'They're good,' he said after a pause. 'Although I'd put more whizz-pop in next time and slightly less shuffle-syrup.'

'Thank you,' I said, smiling at him. 'I'll be sure to remember that. You can, after all, never over-do it on the whizz-pop.' His father shook his head, a smile edging onto the corners of his mouth. 'Like he needs any encouragement,' he said.

I smiled at him and carried on around the room with the chocolates, deliberately missing out the Augustus Gloop boy. I glanced back at Josh's dad a couple of times. I couldn't help wishing he'd chosen to come on a day when I was wearing a slightly more flattering costume. The Alice in Wonderland look wasn't such a bad one. I mean, put a long blonde wig on anyone and it tends to perk them up a bit.

Even the Winnie the Witch outfit would have been preferable. You could perhaps overlook a false nose. Orange skin, though, was a difficult one to get past.

Of course, it had never occurred to me to dress to impress anyone other than four-to seven-year-olds. The participants at my events tended to be accompanied by mums or the odd grandma doing their bit to help out with childcare. Good-looking dads were generally conspicuous by their absence.

Not that it would have served any purpose if I had looked less orange. Good looking dads inevitably lived with good-looking mums. I'd read enough books in my time to know how it worked. And I'd long ago realised that the whole happily-ever-after bit only applied to those who fitted the Disney princess description. And mousey-haired librarians from Halifax certainly did not.

'Right then,' I said, clapping my hands and turning to face my audience. 'Well done again on finding your golden tickets and thank you so much for coming to our chocolate factory today. Mr Wonka has got a very important job for you. He would like you to create a brand new chocolate bar. You get to decide exactly what you'd like in it and you get to design the wrapper.'

The Gloop boy's hand shot up. 'Do we get to eat it?' he asked.

'Once you've designed your wrapper, I'll be coming around with little chocolate bars for you to put inside it. But you may want to keep it like that to show your folks at home rather than eat it straight away.'

The Gloop boy gave me a 'yeah, right' look. I carried on regardless.

'And afterwards we'll all sit down together while I read you an extract from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.' I was met with a sea of largely disinterested faces, apart from my friend Josh, whose eyes lit up at the prospect.

'Does young Charlie Bucket there want to take that off before we start?' I asked turning to a small boy whose costume consisted of a yellow bucket over his head and a tee-shirt with 'Cheeky Charlie' on it. The boy shook his bucket. His mother, for whom the phrase 'long-suffering' may have been invented, shrugged and raised her eyebrows.

'Okay,' I said, 'let's get creative and let your imagination run riot.'

There was a stampede for the pens and pencils and somewhere in the melee Charlie Bucket, not altogether surprisingly, knocked over the jug of Ribena I'd put out. Unfortunately it tipped over a girl wearing a pale pink dress and a white bolero jacket. She screamed as if it were blood, rather than Ribena and promptly burst into tears.

‘It’s okay, I’ll fetch a cloth and we’ll get you cleaned up,’ I said. I looked around for Charlie Bucket’s mother but she was sensibly cowering behind the other parents.

The girl’s mother stepped forward and glared at me. ‘It will take more than a cloth to get that out,’ she said.

‘Well, at least we can dry her out a bit.’

‘She’s got a party to go to straight after this. She can’t go looking like that.’

‘I’m sure no one will mind.’

‘Well I mind. I’m not having my daughter turning up in that state. What will the other mothers think?’

I was tempted to answer that they might think she’d had Ribena spilt over her and these things happen in the big, scary world out there but decided from the look on the mother’s face that she probably wouldn’t appreciate it.

‘Let me go and get that cloth,’ I said.

‘The woman tutted loudly and rolled her eyes. I turned around to find Josh standing next to me trying very hard not to laugh.

‘She looks like she’s turning into Violet Beauregarde,’ he whispered into my ear.

‘I know,’ I whispered back. ‘I think we might have to take her to the juicing room.’ I winked and walked off in the direction of the kitchen. By the time I

returned, the Ribena girl and her mum were nowhere to be seen. Josh and his dad came up to me.

‘Violet Beauregarde’s gone,’ Josh informed me.

‘Shame, really,’ added his dad. ‘In an ideal world she and her mum would have turned into giant blueberries and exploded.’

He said it with a completely straight face. It was only a second or so afterwards, as I stared at him, that he allowed himself a small smile.

‘I do believe you’re enjoying this,’ I said.

‘Oh I am,’ he replied. ‘Best fun I’ve had all summer. I’m glad I got my golden ticket now. Very glad indeed.’

For a second I wondered if he was flirting with me. It was only a second mind, before I remembered that people don’t flirt with Oompa-Loompas (presumably Oompa-Loompas flirted with each other, otherwise there wouldn’t be so many of them).

‘Anyway, I said, ‘I’d better go and see how everyone’s getting on with the chocolate bars.’

I turned and hurried away. I tried as best I could to concentrate on the children’s chocolate bar designs but I couldn’t help glancing over at him and Josh a couple of times. They both had their head bowed over Josh’s creation. Every now and again Josh’s dad would say something and he would start colouring with renewed

vigour, looking up at his dad for approval every minute or so. They were tight. That was the thing which you noticed about them. How unusually tight they were.

‘So, what have you got for us Mr Wonka?’ I asked Josh when I got back to him.

‘It’s an Oompa-Loompa bar,’ said Josh, holding up his wrapper proudly. ‘Look, I’ve drawn a picture of you on it.’

‘So you have,’ I said smiling at the picture of a round orange face with masses of curly green hair. ‘That’s fantastic, well done. Here’s the chocolate bar to go inside it.’

I handed it to Josh who put the golden ticket next to it and carefully taped the wrapper around them as instructed. I glanced up at his dad and when my eyes met his, quickly glanced down again.

‘Right,’ I said, standing up and clapping my hands. ‘I do believe it’s story time. Let’s tidy everything away and gather around.’

The children, most of whom had already started eating their chocolate bars, showed no sign of interest in anything else. The parents and grandparents scrambled around trying to find pen lids and wipes for their children’s chocolaty hands. There was a sudden shout from the bucket boy’s mother. ‘Charlie’s disappeared. He said he was going to the toilet but he’s not in there.’

‘Are you sure?’ I asked, ‘let me just go and double check.’ I hurried into the women’s toilets. They were empty. No sign of bucket or boy. When I came out a

few moments later other parents and library staff had started searching behind book cases, calling Charlie's name.

'Do you want me to go and check the men's just in case?' Josh's dad asked. I nodded, trying to keep my smiley Oompa-Loompa face in place.

'I'll go too,' said Josh, 'because I'm little and I know good places to hide.' They emerged a few minutes later and simply shook their heads.

I found Charlie Bucket's mum among the bookcases. 'Look, I'm sure we'll find him in here any moment but I'm just going to nip outside in case he's wandered out there.

She nodded, not appearing capable of speech. I headed for the main door.

'I'll come with,' said Josh's dad, running after me.

'What about Josh?'

'He's fine, he's reading a book. He doesn't wander off. He's not that sort of child.'

'Thanks,' I said, wishing Charlie Bucket hadn't been 'that sort of child' either. 'This whole thing is turning into a bit of a nightmare.'

'Well, a bad day at the chocolate factory at least,' he said. I looked up at him and managed half a smile.

'I feel you should know that I'm not in the habit of losing children or ruining their clothes,' I said. 'The Alice in Wonderland event last week ran without a hitch.'

‘Didn’t cut off any heads then?’ he asked.

‘Nope. I went as Alice not the Queen of Hearts. I don’t dress up as baddies in case it scares the children. Bad experience with a child catcher a long time ago.’

‘I see,’ he said as we arrived at the bottom of the steps. ‘Although we could do with a child catcher net for our friend Charlie Bucket right now.’

People stopped and stared as we stepped on to the street. I realised that if I went up to anyone while wearing an Oompa-Loompa costume and asked them if they’d seen a small boy with a bucket on his head, I was not likely to be taken seriously.

Fortunately I didn’t have to try. Josh’s dad pointed at the large flower tub on the corner. Charlie was sitting next to it on top of his bucket.

‘Hello Charlie,’ I said, hurrying over and taking his hand. ‘Your Mummy’s been looking for you. Let’s get you back inside.’

He looked at me and stood up, I glanced down at the yellow liquid in the bottom of his bucket.

‘I needed a wee,’ he said.

‘That’s fine,’ I replied. ‘But next time you need to stay in the library.’

Charlie stood up and picked up his bucket.

‘Er, let’s empty that before we go back in, shall we?’ I said.

He nodded. Josh’s dad stepped forward, took the bucket from him and emptied it in the flower tub.

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘You’re welcome. Just think of me as the wee-bucket emptier. And if the flowers die, I’ll say you did it,’ he whispered to me.

‘Very chivalrous,’ I replied. I was smiling too though. And trying hard to empty my mind of things not suitable to be inside a children’s librarian’s head.

Charlie’s mum burst into tears when I brought him back inside. After hugging him, scolding him for wandering off and apologising repeatedly for the time wasted, she said she was taking him home, that it had all been too much for one morning. I nodded in agreement and suggested that she might want to give the bucket a wash out when they got home.

I turned back to the rest of the parents and children. Only at that point did I realise that the group now consisted only of Josh and his dad, who were sitting patiently on the rug in the children’s corner.

‘It’s like the book,’ said Josh, when I walked over to them. ‘We’re the only ones left.’

‘Augustus Gloop?’ I enquired.

‘Took the last chocolate before he went,’ Josh informed me. ‘I don’t think you should invite him again.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I think you’re right. What about the others?’

‘Scoffed their chocolate bars and left, I’m afraid,’ said Josh’s dad. ‘I blame the parents.’

I nodded slowly.

‘So does that mean we’ve won?’ asked Josh. ‘Like Charlie won the chocolate factory for being the only child left?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t give you a chocolate factory Josh,’ I said.

‘That’s okay,’ he said, obviously trying to hide his disappointment. ‘We don’t really need a chocolate factory anyway. Our house is old but it’s not got a hole in the roof like Charlie’s. And it’s not like there’s loads of us. It’s just me and my daddy.’

I glanced across at Josh’s dad. His eyes met mine and I held his gaze this time. I was trying very hard not to look pleased at Josh’s revelation. I suspected from the amused look on Josh’s dad’s face that he knew it as well.

‘He’s your dad?’ I said, acting surprised. ‘I thought he was your Grandpa Joe.’

Josh laughed. His dad laughed too, his eyes sparkling with aliveness.

‘We haven’t even been properly introduced, have we?’ I said.

‘Chris,’ he said, stretching out his hand for me to shake.

‘Alison,’ I replied.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ he said as he shook it. And apologies for the fact that you will forever in our house be known as the Oompa-Loompa lady.’

‘That’s fine,’ I said. ‘I quite understand. ‘Now,’ I added turning back to Josh.

‘How about I read you that story?’

So we sat on the rug, just the three of us, while I read the first chapter of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, with Josh reciting some of it off by heart and Chris looking at me, his eyes never leaving my face for a second. And me, hardly able to read for smiling.