

Batman was up to his knees in the cornflakes ...

As soon as he woke up, Johnny knew that he shouldn't have gone back to bed. His mother was calling from downstairs to come and get his breakfast – Now! – or he'd miss the school bus. He looked at the clock. He'd never have time to do his homework. Mr McCluskey would go mental.

In the kitchen his nine-year-old brother was sitting at the table playing with a bowl of sodden cornflakes. His eyes were sticky with sleep, a green crust still in the corner of each one. Johnny noticed that a plastic Batman was up to his knees in the cornflakes.

'Mum, Jerry's putting action figures in his cornflakes again!'

'It's not cornflakes, it's quicksand. Batman's got stuck in a swamp and he's gonna get sucked under,' said Jerry.

'It's not a swamp, it's a bowl of cornflakes, you little



dork! And anyway, there's no way Batman's going to drown in cornflakes that only come up to his knees. He'd just waded through them and crawl out over the edge of the bowl. I mean, he's *Batman*. He'd take a bowl of cornflakes in his stride. And wipe the sleep from your eyes, will you, you look totally disgusting.'

Johnny's mother was in the hall, putting lunchboxes into her sons' schoolbags.

'Stop fighting, the pair of you!' she ordered. 'And, Jerry, take Batman out of your cornflakes and eat your breakfast. The bus will be outside any minute.'

Jerry began to knock Batman with the edge of his spoon, pushing him down under the milk. He held Batman there for a few seconds before releasing the spoon. The action figure, being quite heavy, remained beneath the surface of the cereal.

'Batman's drowned,' said Jerry, expressing no emotion whatsoever.

'Yeah, well, I hope you're proud of yourself. There's not many kids who'd want to kill Batman.'

'I didn't kill him. It was this robot spoon. It was made by the Spoonmaster. He's an evil nutcase who wants to rule the world.'

'I know who the nutcase is and it isn't any Spoonmaster. Just wipe your eyes, you little dork,' said Johnny, getting up from the table. All he'd had was a cup of tea and a slice of toast, but he was more concerned about the homework that he hadn't done.

'Hey,' said Jerry, his sharp little brain suddenly inspired, 'have you done your homework?'

'Shut up before I drown you in your cornflakes with Batman, you little turd.'

At that moment the schoolbus pulled up on the main road, its horn giving one single, irritating blare.

Johnny and Jerry ran out to the hall and grabbed their bags.

'See you later, Mum,' Johnny called out as he opened the front door, 'Oh, and check the cornflakes for Batman. There's still a chance he might be alive.'

Out in the street the school bus was belching a thick blue cloud of exhaust. Enya was already on the bus, and so was Snots Murphy. Other kids were there as well, most of them called 'this Murphy' or 'that Murphy' or 'some other Murphy', but Johnny didn't really hang out with that many of them, they just went to the same school. Jerry got on first and sat near the front where all the younger kids went. Johnny made his way down the bus towards the back. He could see Enya standing at the back seat, shoving everybody off. They all left without any complaint, except for Snots, who stayed where he was. Enya sat down next to him.

By the time Johnny got to the back he could see that Snots had a squashed and very dead hedgehog on his lap. He was showing it to Enya, who appeared genuinely fascinated. The stench from the hedgehog hit Johnny as soon as he sat down.



‘For crying out loud, Snots, what did you bring that thing in here for? It’s gross!’

‘I found it on the road just a minute ago. The crows were eating its guts. There’s not much left of it except for its bristles. There was this sludgy thing that looked like it could have been its brain lying next to it.’

‘Ah man, will you shut up and throw it out the window. I’ve just had my breakfast.’

‘Don’t be such a wimp, Johnny,’ said Enya, taking the squashed hedgehog from Snots’s lap. She held it up before her, as if she was reading a map. A thick, gelatinous streamer of blood hung down from its body.

‘Ah, come on lads, this is sick,’ complained Johnny, but neither of them was listening. Johnny noticed that everybody else had moved further up the bus.

‘Wow, it must be really neat to be covered in prickles,’ said Snots. ‘I mean, no one could touch you.’

‘Yeah, well, fat lot of good it did that little bugger!’ replied Johnny, sitting as far over in the seat as he could get, his face turned to the window where a loose seal let in a relieving breeze.

‘There’s not enough meat left in it for Gristle,’ observed Enya.

Gristle Bonehead was Enya’s pet crocodile. Gristle sucked up food like a vacuum cleaner and Johnny felt he would be quite happy to accept even a meatless hedgehog. But he said nothing. The hedgehog had suffered enough.

Snots, however, already had plans for the little carcass. 'I was thinking of putting it in Monkey's lunch box. He always brings this enormous lunchbox with about ten sandwiches in it. If we could get to it without him knowing, we could swap his sandwiches for the hedgehog.'

'Brilliant,' said Enya. 'That moron eats like a pig. A squashed hedgehog would make a nice change from ham sandwiches.'

Snots unfastened his schoolbag and pulled out a plastic shopping bag containing his own lunch things. He emptied the plastic bag and stashed his lunch in the pockets of his jacket. Then he held up the plastic bag while Enya dropped in the squashed hedgehog. Holding the bag as far away from himself as possible, Snots expelled all the air and tied the end really tight, then put it into his schoolbag.

'We'll have to look for an opportunity,' said Enya, already fired up with enthusiasm.

Johnny just sat by the window looking out at the passing scenery, thinking about his homework. He considered scribbling something down while on the bus, but even the idea of it tired his brain out. The thing was, he was exhausted from getting up so early in the morning.

'Hey, Enya, did you do that maths homework?' he asked.

'Nah, I'm going to copy mine off Orla Daly. She's not



bad at maths, so my marks'll be quite good.'

'I've done mine, Johnny, if you want to copy it,' volunteered Snots, even though he already knew what the answer would be.

'No thanks, dude. I really appreciate it, but most of your answers will be wrong, 'cos maths is about the only subject you're no good at. McCluskey will take great delight in asking me how I arrived at this answer and that answer and how *extraordinary* it is that Mr Coughlan's wrong answers are the same as Mr Murphy's wrong answers. Then we'll both get detention 'cos he'll rumble that you let me copy from you. Anyway, I'm not really into copying. I just wondered if Enya had done it, that's all. If she hadn't, then we would have been in detention together. I mean, detention with Enya is a laugh.'

Enya said nothing. She seemed to be in a world of her own, staring out of the other window, occasionally scratching at one of her spots. Johnny noticed that the spots were all present and correct. The rag cure and the prayers obviously hadn't kicked in yet.

The bus went on, spreading its blue exhaust up the hilly roads to Kilfursa. Soon it came into Kilfursa Town and eventually reached the gates of Saint Fursa Combined School.

Johnny, Enya and Snots were the last to leave the bus, but they didn't follow the others in through the school gates. Instead they made their way back down

the main street. They were going to call on Jimmy Pats Murphy, whose parents ran one of the local pubs. This was their usual morning ritual. After collecting Jimmy Pats, they'd all walk back to the school and slouch through the gates just before the bell rang.

Halfway down the main street they came to the pub, The Injured Priest. As usual, the front door was open and they walked in. Jimmy Pats's father was sweeping the floor of the lounge and he wished them a half-hearted good morning. While they waited for Jimmy Pats, they went up to one of the walls where there was a glass display case. Although they saw it every school morning, they never tired of its contents. Indeed, the contents of that display case were one of the treasures of Kilfursa, and possibly the main tourist attraction of the entire town.

Inside the case was the preserved left arm of Father Enda Murphy. After being embalmed, presumably as a mark of respect and good taste, Father Enda's arm had been dressed in a white shirt-sleeve with a silver cuff-link. Some of the locals complained that a silver cuff-link wasn't becoming of a priest, but Jimmy Pats's father said that they were only begrudgers. Beneath the case was a brass plate with an inscription:

*This display case contains the left arm of Father Enda Murphy, first cousin of Tim Mike Murphy, the original proprietor of this public house. Father Murphy lost his arm in an accident in July 1952 while fishing on the waters of*



*Tip Lake. His arm was later retrieved by Tim Mike's brother Paddy Joe, who pulled it from the stomach of a giant pike. Also inside the pike's stomach were three Guinness bottles, which can be seen in Kilfursa Museum.*

Johnny often wondered about those three Guinness bottles. He wasn't too curious as to why the pike had swallowed them, but he always thought it was strange that the bottles were on display in the museum. As far as he was concerned, the bottles should have been on display in the pub, the arm should have been on display in the church, and the fish should have been on display in the museum. To him the whole thing was organised backwards, but nobody could give him a satisfactory answer as to how it had come about. His Dad said that it was just the way it had been done. You obviously had to be an adult to understand it.

After a few minutes, Jimmy Pats came down with his schoolbag and they left the pub and made their way back to the school.

Only one of the school gates was open and they had to step over the principal's dog, a heavily muscled Boxer called Vigrid, who was fast asleep in the narrowed opening. As they crossed over him, one by one, the dog's guts rumbled beneath them like a living engine. For a moment, Johnny wondered if Vigrid had been there when Jerry had gone into the school earlier. Johnny knew that if that was the case, then Jerry would have got into the yard by climbing over the

gate. Jerry was scared of his life of dogs, and Vigrid simply terrified him.

Inside the school yard Orla Daly had two boys in a headlock, one under each arm, and was extremely annoyed when Enya disturbed her to ask for the maths homework. But Orla wasn't going to argue with Enya, because Enya was even tougher than she was. Still, she wasn't at all pleased that she had to let the boys go. They slunk off, one nursing a bloody nose, the other a reddened ear, without either of them thanking Enya for her intervention.

While Enya copied Orla's homework, Johnny sat on the grass verge feeling totally depressed. Mr McCluskey would do his nut. That was certain. And he'd humiliate Johnny in front of everyone. That was another certainty. Oh man, why did his life have to be such a mess? At that moment the bell rang for the start of school.

