



**People keep telling Ben he's so lucky to have
won a Golden Ticket.**

So why does it feel like his world is falling
apart?

THE GOLDEN TICKET

'It's like that old film,' said Ben's dad, 'the one Granddad always used to go on about.'

Ben remembered the film. There were funny little people in it, and lots and lots of chocolate.

'They won a Golden Ticket, remember?' Ben had known something was wrong right then. If the Golden Ticket was so brilliant, why was dad crying?

The bus trundled on. At least it was cool in there. Ben felt hot inside. Like his eyes and his brain were burning. He leant his head against the glass. Yellow fields slid by, blue sky, dark shapes of trees. If he squeezed his eyes shut a little they became three dancing stripes of colour. He had done that with the sun once, dared himself to look at it directly through a tiny gap between his eyelids. His vision had been wrong for ages afterwards, little dancing blobs of black, and the scorched shadow of the shape of the window frame. It was a whole day before he dared to own up to his mum and she had been so angry with him he never did it again. At the time her fury had upset him, he'd told her she was mean. How could she be like that when he had hurt his eyes, spent a whole day worrying that he would never see properly again? He had wanted a cuddle, not to be shouted at. Now though, sat on the bus, the golden ticket in his pocket, he had a flash of understanding. He understood now that she had been like that because she loved him so very much, and the realisation hurt him in a way that made him want to curl up in his seat with shame.

'Hello children.' There was a pretty young woman at the front of the bus. She was wearing a yellow uniform and speaking into a little microphone. 'We are now 15 miles from Manchester and not far from our destination. Now I know that some of you must be feeling very strange,' her voice dropped and she pulled her eyebrows together, wrinkling up her smooth forehead, 'but although I know I can't make that feeling go away, I can at least try to reassure you. You are very lucky. You are going to a beautiful place and there are many people there who are waiting to look after you. Some of them you may even know. Oops, excuse me a moment.' The microphone clicked off and the bus came to a stop. Ben craned forward in his seat. There was an old man stood in the middle of the empty road dressed in an assortment of ragged clothes. The lady got out and went to talk to him. She kept her

voice gentle and low but the old man was gesticulating wildly and had started to shout.

'You know nothing girl! You've barely lived! Don't you tell me where I should go; you know nothing of where I should go! There's whole worlds in me girl, whole universes. There's the nits in my hair, and the lice in my clothes, they're happy, all happy and they aren't hungry or thirsty, I am everything to them.'

Ben watched the bus guide, bright in her canary-yellow uniform next to the bedraggled old man, continue to try to talk to him. After a few seconds, though, she gave up, shrugging her shoulders then hopping back on to the bus. As the doors closed she whispered to the driver. He turned the steering wheel to full lock and started to inch the bus over on to the right-hand lane (Ben had wondered why he'd bothered sticking to one side of the road anyway, he couldn't remember when he'd last seen a car, at least one that was moving). The old man refused to move, facing southwards on the dusty road, arms limp at his side, oblivious to the coach full of staring children. Ben studied him as they crawled past. His hair and beard were matted together, the jacket he was wearing greasy and shapeless. Ben knew they weren't supposed to feel sorry for the old people; it was their fault after all that this was happening. But he couldn't help it. He couldn't believe that this old man was to blame; was the reason he was on this bus today. His instincts told him it must be the fault of someone bigger, or richer or more powerful than this pitiful figure.

'Sorry about that children. He was a bit lost and asking for directions. Now where were we?' Ben remembered when the man had come to the door with his ticket. At first his parents had refused to let him in, his mum had started crying before he had even put his hand in his pocket to get it, slid to the floor, right there and then in the hall. Dad had to half-carry her to the sofa, she was shouting, and wailing. Ben and his brother had gone and sat on the stairs, he on the second from bottom step, his brother on the second from top, long gangly legs folded so that his knees came up to his chin. The voice of the man in yellow never seemed to change, low and relentless; they only caught snatches of what he was saying: 'You know this is the only way...governments across the world...'

His mum had screamed then, 'Governments! Fuck the Governments! Who caused this? Who? You tell me that! And now you want to take away my child!'

'I understand your anger but...a great opportunity for us all...a future...'
His brother had come down then and put his arm around him. It had felt like they were falling away from the world, out into space, weightless.

They were passing a lake now, a little greenery crowded lovingly around the last few feet of water. A small house stood lonely, casting a long

shadow onto the field behind it as the sun started to set. Could it really all go? God with his giant hand, sweeping mankind and its mess away like crumbs off a table-top. Just like that? Maybe if there was a God, he was bored and fed up with people. Maybe if there was a God, he was bored and fed up with Ben too.

'Isn't that a lovely sight children?' Their host was smiling broadly and gesturing towards the window. 'There's a beautiful lake where we are going too, just one of very many great things and places for you to play and learn. Now I know you are going to miss your parents terribly. Some of you must think that the tickets are unfair, cruel even. Why is it that some children have been able to come with their mum or dad or sister, but not you? It does feel unfair, but believe me children, the cleverest people from all over the world have thought about this for many years, and they worked out that the luck of the draw, was the only way. Right now you must feel like you are very *unlucky*, but with time you will come to realise that you are the most fortunate children in the world.' She surveyed the silent faces in front of her, eyebrows raised. She was pretty, but, Ben decided she was definitely also a bit stupid.

Ben's mind drifted. Everything inside felt wrong and he wanted to switch off his brain. It didn't help that someone was crying behind him. To distract himself he turned around and peeked between the seats to see who it was. It was a girl about his own age, he recognised her straight away.

'You live on my street don't you?'

She struggled to answer, tears streaming down her cheeks.

'Yes...number...22.'

'Your mum and dad didn't get picked either?'

'No. Can I sit with you?'

'Yeh, all right.'

She scrambled out of her seat, clutching her small bag tightly to her chest. She sat next to him, close, and took hold of his hand. He would have rather picked up a rattlesnake than have a girl take hold of his hand in his old life, but right now the warmth and firmness of it made him feel a bit calmer. He might never let go of it, if she would let him.

The girl's sobs started to lessen and she took a deep trembling breath. 'Apparently...there's sheep there.' she said, just above a whisper, 'They go wherever they like and people can have them as pets.'

'I've never seen a sheep. My Grandma said lamb was her favourite meat though.'

'I can't believe they ate them, it's so mean. They're so soft and friendly. I bet they don't let people eat them *there*.'

'Children, children!' Their guide had sprung up out of her seat, she was bouncing with excitement. 'You can see it! Straight ahead! Isn't it

beautiful?!' They stood up in their seats, Ben strained to look, pushing his tightening stomach hard against the headrest of the chair in front. Every child on the bus was doing the same, some nudging each other and whispering, others transported deep into some private place, mute with fear and wonder. Three huge craft filled the field in front of them, dwarfing the convoy of buses that was pulling up beside them.

'What do you think's going to happen?' He was trembling. 'To everyone back home?'

The girl looked at him and shook her head. It was such a sunny day; everything ahead of them was on fire with light. The girl squinted against the brightness of it.

'I don't know. I used to wish things, but I don't anymore.'

They came to a stop, and a stream of people in yellow uniforms surrounded the bus, smiling up at the astonished faces of the children. The door opened and Ben willed himself away from his seat and into the corridor. He pulled the girl gently after him, still holding tightly onto her hand.

'Come on then, we'd better go.'

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