

Pink Bow Tie
by Paul Jennings

Well, here I am again, sitting outside the Principal's office. And I've only been at the school for two days. Two lots of trouble in two days! Yesterday I got punished for nothing. Nothing at all. I see this bloke walking along the street wearing a pink bow tie. It looks like a great pink butterfly attacking his neck. It is the silliest bow tie I have ever seen. 'What are you staring at, lad?' says the bloke. He is in a bad mood. 'Your bow tie,' I tell him. 'It is ridiculous. It looks like a pink vampire.' It is so funny that I start to laugh my head off. Nobody tells me that this bloke is Old Splodge, the Principal of the school. He doesn't see the joke and he decides to punish me. Life is very unfair. Now I am in trouble again. I am sitting here outside Old Splodge's office waiting for him to call me in. Well, at least I've got something good to look at. Old Splodge's secretary is sitting there typing some letters. She is called Miss Newham and she is a real knockout. Every boy in the school is in love with her. I wish she was my girlfriend, but as she is seventeen and I am only fourteen there is not much hope. Still, she doesn't have a boyfriend so there is always a chance. She is looking at me and smiling. I can feel my face going red. 'Why have you dyed your hair blond?' she asks sweetly. 'Didn't you know it is against the school rules for boys to dye their hair?' I try to think of a very impressive answer but before I can say anything Old Splodge sticks his head around the office door. 'Come in, boy,' he says. I go in and sit down. 'Well, lad,' says Old Splodge. 'Why have you dyed your hair? Trying to be a surfer, eh?' He is a grumpy old boy. He is due to retire next year and he does not want to go.

I notice that he is still wearing the pink bow tie. He always wears this bow tie. He cannot seem to live without it. I try not to look at it as I answer him. 'I did not dye my hair, sir,' I say. 'Yesterday,' says Splodge, 'when I saw you, I noticed that you had black hair. Am I correct?' 'Yes, sir,' I answer.

'Then tell me, lad,' he says, 'how is it that your hair is white today?' I notice that little purple veins are standing out on his bald head. This is a bad sign. 'It's a long story,' I tell him. 'Tell me the long story,' he says. 'And it had better be good.' I look him straight in the eye and this is what I tell him.

I am a very nervous person. Very sensitive. I get scared easily. I am scared of the dark. I am scared of ghost stories. I am even scared of the Cookie Monster on Sesame Street. Yesterday I am going home on the train after being in trouble at school and I am in a carriage with some very strange people. There is an old lady with a walking stick, grey hair and gold wire-rim glasses. She is bent right over and can hardly walk. There is also a mean, skinny-looking guy sitting next to me. He looks like he would cut your throat for two bob. Next to him is a kid of about my age and he is smoking. You are not allowed to smoke when you are fourteen. This is why I am not smoking at the time. After about five minutes a ticket collector puts his head around the door. He looks straight at the kid who is smoking. 'Put that cigarette out,' he says. 'You are too young to smoke.' The kid does not stop smoking. He picks up this thing that looks like a radio and twiddles a knob. Then he starts to grow older in front of our eyes. He just slowly changes until he looks about twenty-five. 'How's that?' he says to the ticket collector. 'Am I old enough now?' The ticket collector gives an almighty scream and runs down the corridor as fast as his legs can take him. The rest of us just sit there looking at the kid (who is now a man) with our mouths hanging open.

'How did you do that?' trembles the old lady. She is very interested indeed. 'Easy,' says the kid-man as he stands up. The train is stopping at a station. 'Here,' he says throwing the radio thing on to her lap. 'You can have it if you want.' He goes out of the compartment, down the corridor

and gets off the train. We all stare at the box-looking thing. It has a sliding knob on it. Along the right-hand side it says OLDER and at the left end it says YOUNGER. On the top is a label saying AGE RAGER. The mean-looking bloke sitting next to me makes a sudden lunge forward and tries to grab the Age Rager but the old lady is too quick for him, 'No you don't,' she says and shoves him off. Quick as a flash she pushes the knob a couple of centimetres down towards the YOUNGER end.

Straight away she starts to grow younger. In about one minute she looks as if she is sixteen. She is sixteen. She looks kind of pretty in the old lady's glasses and old-fashioned clothes. It makes her look like a hippy. 'Cool,' she shouts, throwing off her shawl. She throws the Age Rager over to me, runs down the corridor and jumps off the train just as it is pulling out of the station. 'Give that to me,' says the mean-looking guy. Like I told you before, I am no hero. I am scared of my own shadow. I do not like violence or scary things so I hand over the Age Rager to Mean Face. He grabs the Age Rager from me and pushes the knob nearly up to the end where it says YOUNGER. Straight away he starts to grow younger but he does not stop at sixteen. In no time at all there is a baby sitting next to me in a puddle of adult clothes. He is only about one year old. He looks at me with a wicked smile. He sure is a mean-looking baby. 'Bad, Dad Dad,' he says.

'I am not your Dad Dad,' I say. 'Give me that before you hurt yourself.' The baby shakes his head and puts the Age Rager behind his back. I can see that he is not going to hand it over. He thinks it is a toy. Then, before I can move, he pushes the knob right up to the OLDER end. A terrible sight meets my eyes. He starts to get older and older. First he is about sixteen, then thirty, then sixty, then eighty, then one hundred and then he is dead. But it does not stop there. His body starts to rot away until all that is left is a skeleton. I give a terrible scream and run to the door but I cannot get out because it is jammed. I

kick and shout but I cannot get out. I open the window but the train is going too fast for me to escape. And that is how my hair gets white. I have to sit in that carriage with a dead skeleton for fifteen minutes. I am terrified. I am shaking with fear. It is the most horrible thing that has ever happened to me. My hair goes white in just fifteen minutes. I am frightened into being a blond. When the train stops I get out of the window and walk all the rest of the way home. 'And that,' I say to Splodge, 'is the truth.'

Splodge is fiddling with his pink bow tie. His face is turning the same colour. I can see that he is about to freak out. 'What utter rubbish,' he yells. 'Do you take me for a fool? Do you expect me to believe that yarn?' 'I can prove it,' I say. I get the Age Rager out of my bag and put it on his desk. Splodge picks it up and looks at it carefully; 'You can go now, lad,' he says in a funny voice. 'I will send a letter home to your parents telling them that you are suspended from school for telling lies.' I walk sadly back to class. My parents will kill me if I am suspended from school. For the next two weeks I worry about the letter showing up in the letter box. But nothing happens. I am saved. Well, it is not quite true that nothing happens. Two things happen: one good and one bad. The good thing is that Splodge disappears and is never seen again. The bad thing is that Miss Newham gets a boyfriend.

He is about eighteen and is good-looking. It is funny though. Why would she go out with a kid who wears a pink bow tie?

*'Pink Bow Tie' is from 'Thirteen Unpredictable Tales' by Paul Jennings
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