

# BENNY

BY BERNARD BECKETT

A lot of people say Benny's stupid, but I never have. I'm his friend, for starters. We've been right through primary school and intermediate together. People also say that Benny and I are opposites. They have a point, I suppose. Benny's tall. The top of my head reaches his armpit. Not that I often put my head in his armpit – it's not a thing we do. I'm skinny, and Benny's mostly muscle with a bit of fat to keep him warm, he says. There are other things too. Like Benny's good at rugby, but I'd rather just watch. And I'd rather watch league than rugby.

I live in the Hutt, and Benny lives in Eastbourne. He didn't always. He used to live just down the road, but his mother met a guy at a work party and she and Benny moved in with him. Now, seeing Benny means a bus trip. At his new place, there are gates and a security camera. My house doesn't have that stuff.

Last week, I took the bus to meet up with Benny, like we've been doing all holidays. I haven't seen him since then.

Eastbourne has an OK beach by city standards. There's an ice-cream shop and a place where you can hire kayaks and a jetty you can bomb off. Our favourite thing was to combine all three. The aim was to land a massive bomb beside some nervous kid paddling past and try to upend their kayak.

It made sense for Benny to do the bombing. Then I'd jump in the water and help the kid back into their kayak and apologise. Benny's so big, and I'm so weedy – I'd always look heroic. The kid would be grateful – or the parent would be – and most of the time, they'd buy me an ice cream. Benny and I would share it behind the pavilion. Our record was six in a day ... before the guy who owns the kayaks threatened to call the police.

That day last week shouldn't have been different, but it was. We were on the jetty, same as always. This little kid was just getting his balance in his kayak at the water's edge. His mother was standing beside him, looking like she was sure he'd drown. They were the perfect target. But suddenly, all I saw was this kid who didn't deserve to be hassled. He looked a bit like my cousin.

Still, I said to Benny, "He looks like a good one," because even when everything changes, you pretend that it hasn't.

"You do it," Benny said, despite the fact he was always the bomber.

"Perhaps we should give it a miss," I said.

That's when it got weird.

"Nah, let's do it – and it's your turn," Benny said. He had a mean look on his face. "I've been doing it all summer. You go." He was standing over me, like he wanted to hit me.

"What's wrong?" I asked. The kid in the kayak was almost underneath us.

"Why should you always be the hero? You think you're better than me, don't you?"

"No," I said. "I don't." Which was true. I'm not better than Benny. Benny's excellent.





I turned away because I didn't want Benny to see my face. Then he pushed me – real hard. It sent me off the jetty ... the bomb I didn't want to do. But Benny's timing was off. My arm hit the edge of the kayak and flipped it. When I came up, Benny was beside me in the water and the kid was nowhere to be seen. He was trapped under his kayak.

On the shore, I could hear his mother yelling.

Benny wanted to be the good guy, but he's not very co-ordinated. He turned the kayak over just as the boy was coming up. It looked like Benny was trying to push him back under, which he wasn't. I managed to grab the kid and drag him back to the beach. His mother was wading towards us, using words my mother had banned.

Poor Benny was still trying to play the hero, and this meant pushing me aside. That's when the kid really started to howl. The mother grabbed her boy with one hand and pushed Benny away with the other. She gave him an earful. Then we heard a police siren. I don't know if it was coming for us or it was just coincidence, but Benny and I headed for the hills. We left our towels and jandals on the beach and didn't stop until we'd followed the track to the top of the ridge.

We were bent over double, sucking in air, so it took me a while to realise that Benny was crying.

I'd never seen him cry before, and I had no idea what to do. So I did what felt right. I waited for Benny to straighten, then I hugged him. My head does, by the way, fit exactly into Benny's armpit. My arms only just reached around him. When he breathed in, my fingers came apart.

I can't say exactly how long we stood like that, but it wasn't long. Then Benny shrugged and pulled away. That was the moment of no return.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Benny looked me in the eyes, and there was something there that I'd never seen before.

"I'm not stupid," he said. Then he walked away, and I didn't follow.

In a few days, we start at different high schools. Benny's school has streaming. I heard from another friend that the class lists went up online last week – the same day as the trouble at the beach.

I miss Benny already.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PIPPA KEEL

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by Bernard Beckett

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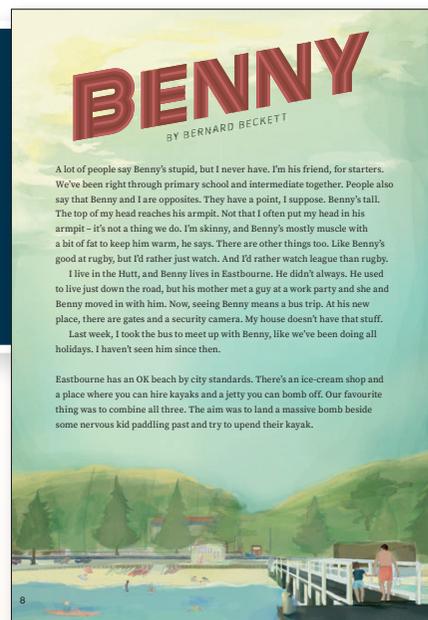
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