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## Bad Barry

by Victoria Watson

Barry's Mum was just like Fagin from *Oliver Twist*; same nose just less facial hair. She had trained him well, pushing him into bank jobs, quick getaways, jailbreaks and late-night jewel heists. Barry was nonplussed; he could take or leave the balaclava or the running car engines. He didn't seem to notice when his Mum jumped red traffic lights or ended up in a speed chase, brakes squealing behind them. He did occasionally get bored at all the hanging around in the back of cars or sitting in the dark with the lights off. But his mum made good snacks and sometimes she let him use his torch to read the *Dandy* if he made sure to turn the pages quietly.

But Barry was only six years old and he really did not know any better. He was a simple boy who enjoyed simple things like Lego, dinosaurs and Tom and Jerry cartoons. So mostly when out "working" with his mum, Barry was just looking forward to a slice of Arctic Roll in front of the *Dukes of Hazzard* on his Gran's TV.

He was small for his age, and he had the bruises on his shins to prove it. Like a badge of honour, those bruises revealed he was a kid known not to be messed with. Not because he couldn't be lifted up, scuffed school shoes frantically punching the air, this had happened many, many times. But these naïve attempts brandishing height over power were always quickly overcome, and usually sorely regretted. Everyone knew Barry packed a punch. Any would-be school bully quickly discovered he was not the right titch to steal his lunch money, and those unlucky few who attempted to go further discovered to never, ever nick his school backpack, that bag of horror could give them nightmares for weeks.

So, it was strange that late one Thursday afternoon, just as the shops were closing and Barry was idly traipsing home from football practice, he realised that someone was following him.

He could sense them before he saw them. All those late nights hanging around for his mum meant his listening skills were finely tuned to the slightest abnormality, the merest squeak or the tiniest of cough. This time it was trainers dragging along a wet pavement. Barry was neither alarmed nor surprised, he knew those steps were an amateur's; only an amateur would let themselves be heard so clearly; racing to catch up and then slowing down again so not to be seen.

He was curious more than anything; who was stupid enough to follow Bad Barry home? Who had not heard about his notorious backpack, rumoured to be full of handguns, knives and even a cosh? Had they not even seen his Mum? It was when his curiosity started to get the better of him that he decided he was going to confront the slouching footsteps and he bravely but nonchalantly turned round to face them.

Barry never even saw it coming, didn't see the bag come down over his head or the van speed away. All he knew was that he was now somewhere else, somewhere that felt wrong. For a long time, he did not move from the dark, wood-panelled hall. But finally, rifling through his backpack he found his torch. The beam was shaky in his small hand but its glow was bright enough to show him the pale majestic faces staring back at him. Barry had never felt real fear before. But as he looked up and saw the gilt-frames of long dead kings and queens glaring down at him with accusative stares, it made his stomach feel queasy. He realised what he wanted more than anything right then, more than any bag of tricks or a school-famous left hook, was his mum.