

## “WHAT IF,” THOUGHT BEN

“What if,” thought Ben dreamily one afternoon, “dinosaurs still roamed the earth?”

Ben was lying in bed; he had had flu and was beginning to feel better, but his Mum insisted he stayed in bed another day. He was bored; he wanted to be up and out.

Suddenly he heard a lot of shouting outside; he ran to the bedroom window and looked out. He could not believe his eyes. People were running along the street, shouting and screaming. From the end of the street Ben saw a diplodocus plodding along. It damaged cars as it stomped past them. He saw there were other diplodocuses following on behind.

“Oh dear,” thought Ben. “That’s not so good. What if we had only *small* dinosaurs!”

The diplodocuses vanished and Ben saw several small animals darting about on their hind legs. They had thin bodies and the largest of them was no more than a metre long. Ben thought they looked cute. They were eoraptors, though Ben did not know that.

“That’s better,” Ben thought. “I like them.”

He laughed as he saw them darting around while some of the braver people tried to shoo them away. Then one went into the minimarket near the corner; it gave some high pitched calls which attracted the others. They all went towards the minimarket and were soon causing havoc inside as they tucked into anything they could eat.

“Oh dear,” thought Ben. “That’s not so good. What if the dinosaurs were back in their own time and I was with them!”

His bedroom and the street outside had disappeared. Around him were some very strange looking trees and a lot of fern-like plants, but larger than any ferns he had seen before. It was hot and dry. He saw the eoraptors darting about among the plants. They were looking for small animals to eat. He noticed their teeth and wondered how sharp they were. Although many were smaller than him, some were as big as he was. Would they attack him? Were there other, larger dinosaurs around?

“Oh dear,” thought Ben. “This is not such a good idea. What if all the dinosaurs were vegetarians!”

That was much better. The eoraptors stopped running about and spent their time browsing on the plants around them. Ben decided to take a walk through the jungle. He saw some larger dinosaurs who, although they looked as though they might be fierce, were happily browsing on the leaves of trees.

“That’s good,” thought Ben. But as he walked on he began to feel lonely, and as the sun began to sink he felt lonelier still.

“Oh dear,” Ben thought. “This is not so good. What if there were other boys here!”

“Hello,” someone called out to him. “Who are you?”

“I’m Ben,” said Ben. “Who are you?”

“I’m Shrat,” said the boy. “Come on! Let’s meet the others.”

Ben was not sure that Shrat was speaking English nor, for that matter,

that *he* was speaking English.

"I suppose understanding each other is part of the 'What if'," thought Ben.

But before Ben could think any more about that, Shrat ran off through the jungle. Ben hurried after him. Soon they came to a clearing where Ben saw a whole group of boys around a camp fire. They were roasting meat on spits and laughing and singing. It all looked exciting.

Shrat introduced Ben to the other boys. They all had names which sounded very strange to Ben. But they made him welcome and said he must join them for supper.

"Thank you very much," said Ben.

The meat was soon ready. It tasted like nothing Ben had eaten before, but he liked it. He supposed it must have been dinosaur meat of some kind. They had a strange, but not unpleasant, drink. As they ate and drank, the boys began singing. Ben soon picked up the words of the different songs and joined in. They had a merry time around the fire till late in the evening.

Eventually, feeling very tired, they crawled into a large sort of den made of sticks and animal skins which served as their shelter; and there they slept.

When Ben woke next morning he thought he could hear the sound of splashing and laughter. He noticed the den was empty, so he went outside and there he saw the boys, all naked, splashing around and fooling about in a nearby creek.

"That looks fun," thought Ben. "I'll join them."

So he did and had a great time splashing around with the others. Then they went back to the camp and dried themselves in the hot sun. But breakfast was disappointing – only bits of cold meat left over from the night before.

"Don't you have anything else?" asked Ben.

"Not till we've killed more animals," said Shrat. "We'll be off hunting soon. Will you come with us?"

Ben was not so sure about that.

"Where I come from," said Ben, "we buy our meat in shops."

"Buy?" said Shrat. "Shop? I don't understand."

"Oh dear," thought Ben. "How can I explain? What if there were a butcher's shop here!"

"Look," cried Ben, "there's a shop over there in the next clearing. Come on, you lot!"

The boys all followed and could hardly believe their eyes.

"All that meat!" they cried. "Let's kill the man and take it!"

"Stop!" shouted Ben. "That's not right! We must buy the meat with money."

"Money?" they said, "What's that?"

Ben realized he had hardly any money in his pockets.

"Oh dear," he thought. "This is not good. What if I had loads of money!"

He felt in his pocket and drew out a whole wad of bank notes.

"This is money," he said. "You choose all the meat you want and I give the money to the man."

So they did. Everyone was happy and the boys went back to their

camp with all the meat they wanted. They were especially happy because they did not have spend the day hunting.

But then they started asking Ben questions. They wanted to know where money came from and how they could get it. Ben was finding it more and more difficult to explain things.

“Oh dear,” he thought. “This is going wrong. What if we were all back where I live and I could show them how things are!”

The jungle faded and there Ben was back in his own bedroom; but now he had company. All the boys were with him.

They were confused by the cars and buses they saw from his bedroom window. They did not understand what he said about them. They did not like being shut in this strange room. They became more and more frightened and got noisier and noisier.

Ben heard his mother shout from downstairs: “Ben! Turn down the radio at once! It’s a terrible racket.”

The boys were even more alarmed.

“Oh dear,” thought Ben. “This is getting out of control. What if the boys were all back in their own time and place!”

Suddenly the room was empty again. Ben’s mother appeared at the door.

“I see you’re up and dressed,” she said. “When I brought your supper last evening, you were sound asleep – quite lost to the world. It was almost as if you weren’t there at all.”

Ben grinned. His mother looked at him.

“Well,” she said, “that sleep certainly seems to have done you some good. I think you are well enough to get up today; you must have found it very boring up here.”

“It wasn’t so bad,” said Ben, as he thought about the dinosaurs and the boys.

“Come on,” said his mother. “Breakfast is waiting for you downstairs.”

“Thanks,” said Ben. “But there’s just one thing, Mum. Why are those police cars outside the minimarket?”

“Oh,” his mother replied. “There was some trouble yesterday afternoon. A bunch of vandals came along the street damaging cars; they went into the minimarket and looted it before they got away. It was all very confusing; some people said it hadn’t been vandals, but monsters. Why! Some even talked about dinosaurs! But that’s daft; they must have been seeing things.”

“They must have been,” said Ben, laughing.

“I’m surprised you didn’t hear all the shouting,” said his mother. “I suppose you must have already fallen asleep by that time.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Ben, grinning, as he hurried down to breakfast.