

Ben Short (4) What is the matter with you?

Hi my name is Ben, Ben Short

For the few months after my run in with Pavlov things have been OK. He has joined in with me and my friends playing football and most Mondays we catch up talking about how Chelsea and Gunners have got on. We are having a better season than him so that is usually good fun for me, I can wind him up a bit.

Poppy the puppy has not been well. Something wrong with her stomach, possibly something she has eaten says the vet. I do most of her walks and haven't let her eat *anything*. She keeps on being sick and sometimes there is dark red blood in it, it's horrible and smells nasty. I have slept downstairs with her a couple of times, no one else seems that bothered but I am. Penny the other puppy is fine but even she seems a bit concerned about Poppy – more than my stupid family anyway.

I have a new teacher at school Miss Bunce. I have other names for her that I won't write here in case someone reads them but trust me they are not nice names. She is not a nice person and I think she hates me. On her first day I accidentally bumped in to her in the corridor and her books went sprawling across the floor. Worse the hot coffee she was carrying went down her blouse and she had to walk round the school with a big brown stain all day. Not my fault, an accident but now she hates me. All my class work gets poor marks no matter how I try. Yep she hates me.

Last week some graffiti appeared in the girls toilets about my sister Emma. It was really nasty stuff about her which I know is not true. She was really upset and her boyfriend Tim didn't do anything about it or try to find out who it was. He is such a goon. Other girls were adding to it every day until mum went up the school. The caretaker had to spray paint over it to hide it. My mates all thought it was really funny, some of them even sneaked in to the girls loo to take a look. I had to have a word to stop that!

Last night when I went to bed I had a long chat with Scar my big black goldfish. Nothing was going wrong or really bad it just wasn't very good, I felt really fed up. He blew bubbles and stared quietly at me while his tail gently swished. As always he seemed to understand. I lay dozing in bed but could not sleep

worrying about Poppy. Eventually I grabbed my sleeping bag and went down to the utility room to give her a cuddle. I just about fitted in the small gap between her bed and the washing machine. It was quite snug but the bodies of the puppies kept me warm and cosy.

I must have drifted off to sleep cos' I woke up to shouting. Mum and dad were in the kitchen.

"So you are going then? Going to Peter?" Dad shouted. He doesn't normally shout but he sounded really nasty. Who was Peter? I don't know a Peter.

"No I am not going. I have done nothing with Peter - it is all in your stupid head!" Mum was crying as she said this' the tears making her red blouse wet. What was going on? "I had lunch with him that is all." I had never heard mum so upset and dad so angry. I could hear mum coming in to the utility room. She screamed out as she saw me cuddled up to the puppies in my sleeping bag. I realised I was crying.

"Ben darling what are you doing here? I thought you were in bed?"

"I was but I came down to keep Poppy company."

"C'mon you can come in with me for a while." Then she hissed at dad "YOU need to grow up!" and walked me up to their bedroom.

I don't know where dad slept but I woke up next to mum in the morning and went down to check on the puppies and there was no sign of him. He must have gone to work.

Mum was stony faced and red eyed but tried to be cheerful over breakfast, it didn't work. I was confused....and a bit scared. What was going on?... Were my parents splitting up like so many of my friends at school? It seemed very few of my mates lived with both parents together. I had never thought about it before. I didn't want to think about it.

Emma sensed something was wrong and kept asking me. I told her to shut up and nothing was going on. I felt sick and could not eat breakfast. I walked the puppies. Thankfully Poppy was not sick this morning. I don't think I could have coped.

At school it was weird. Nothing would go in, I was trying but it was like someone had filled my head with cotton wool, it wouldn't do anything I told it. It was producing some weird thoughts of its own as well. It was sooo embarrassing ... I started to cry in Miss Bunce's class of all places. Everybody looked at me and there were a few spiteful comments and sniggers. She just told me to pull myself together and finish my work. I took a deep breath scrunched my eyes to clear the tears and somehow got through the last ten minutes.

When I got home I went straight up to my room and just burst in to tears. I have no idea why. I just sat on the bed holding my knees, rocking and cried. Scar seemed as puzzled as I was swimming round in faster circles like he was trying to work it out for me. I fell asleep watching him until I heard mum calling dinner was ready. I washed my face hoping I did not look like I had been crying. I went downstairs and said I needed to walk the puppies before dinner but I would do it quick.

I got half way down the road and poor Poppy started heaving. As I stopped she was sick. It was bright red, there was more blood than sick. I looked around for someone to help but the street was empty. She was still a small puppy but I struggled to pick her up and tried to run home while Penny followed us thankfully.

Mum shrieked as I burst in the door. Poppy had been sick again in my arms and I was dripping blood. "Get her to the vet. Now. Please. Please mum. C'mon".

To be fair mum got it and we rushed to the vet. We didn't get home til late as she had to have an operation but the vet was really nice and told us she was going to be ok but that she would need to stay there for a few days. I fell asleep in the car and so did Emma. When we pulled on to the drive I woke up and just blurted it out "Are you and Dad splitting up mum?"

Mum's head went to one side as she looked down on me and Emma in the back of the car "Oh Ben I wasn't sure how much you had heard. But no we are not splitting up."

"Who's Peter?"

'It doesn't matter. Come in to bed, it's been a long night for us all'

I went to bed and cried myself to sleep. Forgot to say goodnight to Scar.

School was not good. My head could not think in a straight line. It kept jumping around and then freezing up. Dave Boswell one of the kids in the year below me told me to 'cheer up'. I just lashed out at him and hit him a bit too hard. He fell over and I knew immediately I was in big trouble. I helped pick him up and said sorry but it wasn't going to help because Miss Bunce had seen it all.

It was a blur...headmaster, mum at school, sitting outside waiting for the verdict as he spoke to her. Other kids making faces as they went past trying to make me laugh. Frogmarched to the car. Mum not talking. Hand sore. Head a blur of nothing.

Mum had put a plaster on my hand and given me an ice pack as it was swelling up. But she had sat me at the table, I knew one of those 'chats' was coming. 'Ben, you know you can't just hit people, what is the matter with you?' Here we go.

Mum did most of the talking. I was not sure why I had hit Dave Boswell. I didn't know what to say apart from sorry. I did not understand how I felt and could not think of the words that might describe my feelings, my confusion, my anger and frustration. I could feel myself getting angry as mum talked but did not know why. I began to cry hot tears that rolled down my face on to the table making a small puddle. I was sobbing, my shoulders shaking and could not stop.

'Can I go talk to Mr Higgins Mum?'