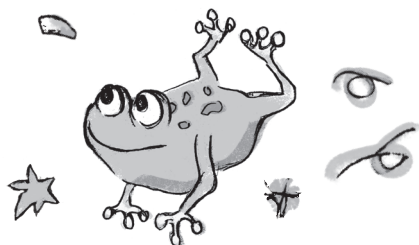


R. A. Spratt

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Foreword

This collection of stories was created to
spread joy in a challenging time.

They were written to be read aloud,
preferably in silly voices.

So be brave, set dignity aside and go for it.

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Nanny Piggins was a great believer in literacy. It was important to be good at reading, so you could be good at reading recipes, so you could be good at making cake. Because there was no more important skill than making cake . . . except perhaps eating cake. That was quite an art in its own right.

Nanny Piggins believed so firmly in these principles she read to the Green children – Derrick, Samantha and Michael – every night. Sometimes she read fairy tales, sometimes adventure novels, sometimes recipe books and sometimes, when they wanted a really shockingly good story, she read to them from her own journal. But on this particular occasion, Nanny Piggins could not read to the children at all.

You see, during the course of the day she had suffered a terrible

baking accident. She had made a chocolate soufflé so good – it was irresistible! The second it came out of the oven she lunged face first at it, trying to gobble it up as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, the oven had been set to 180 degrees Centigrade, which meant that the cake was 180 degrees Centigrade, which meant that the cake crumbs she got in her eyes were 180 degrees Centigrade. Which meant that she had had to spend the afternoon at the ophthalmic surgeon's having them cleaned and bandaged.

The children were naturally alarmed to have their beloved Nanny blinded by her own cake, but Nanny Piggins wasn't worried at all. Consuming an entire chocolate soufflé does give the eater such a sugar rush that a devil-may-care attitude is sure to follow. The only problem was, now she couldn't read the children a bedtime story.

The doctor had said Nanny Piggins would be all right if she rested her eyes for the night by lying down with cucumber slices over her eyelids. Nanny Piggins had asked if the cucumber slices could be chocolate covered. The doctor had frowned and said no, that would defeat the purpose, at which point Nanny Piggins had hit him with her handbag and stormed out. It is not easy to storm anywhere when you are cake blinded – it does ruin the drama of the moment when you walk straight into the wall – but eventually she found her way out.

Now she was at home, resting her eyes by bathing them in soothing honey. Which was actually very pleasant. Except for the fact that her brother, Boris, the ten foot tall ballet dancing bear, couldn't resist licking them periodically.

'I'm dreadfully sorry, children,' said Nanny Piggins. 'I'm afraid I can't see well enough to read you a bedtime story.'

'Aww,' chorused the children.

‘I’m sure Boris could read you one,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘Couldn’t you, Boris?’

‘Mmmm,’ said Boris, still staring at his sister’s honey-covered eyes. He loved his sister, but he loved the taste of honey even more.

‘I think Boris may be too distracted,’ said Samantha.

Boris’ tongue was hanging out and drool was dripping down onto his chest fur.

‘Why don’t you *tell* us a story instead?’ suggested Derrick.

Nanny Piggins did know an enormous number of shockingly good tales. The children loved hearing them. The problem was, Nanny Piggins led such an action-packed lifestyle it was rare for her to sit still long enough to tell them.

‘I suppose I could,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘You had better snuggle around, children. I can’t see if you need a hug, so you’d better work on a self-service principle. Now let me see . . . where should I begin?’

‘At the beginning,’ said Michael.

‘Very well,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘**Once upon a time there was a lovely little girl called Rapunzel,**’ began Nanny Piggins.

‘Oh, I know this one,’ said Michael. ‘She had incredible blonde hair that was metres and metres long.’

‘Well, that’s not the story I’m telling,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘What would be remarkable about that? A girl with hair. All girls have hair. Except girls who’ve been in terrible accidents, perhaps because they’ve been standing too close to chocolate-making machines. Which reminds me of my cousin Gerta. But we mustn’t feel sad for her – she did get the chocolate, so she wasn’t at all concerned about the baldness.’

‘So your story about Rapunzel isn’t about a blonde girl?’ prompted Derrick, trying to get his nanny back on track.

‘No,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘In real life, blonde girls are perfectly fine and normal. But in fiction they are dreadfully over-represented. As if there’s something preferable about having yellow hair. Clearly it’s preferable to have beautiful chocolate-coloured hair.’

‘Like your hair,’ suggested Michael.

‘Why yes,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘I have been blessed with hair the exact shade of a milk chocolate bar. It’s one of the many reasons men can’t tear their eyes off me. That and my world-class circus skills.’ Nanny Piggins yawned. ‘Rightio, time for bed.’

‘But what about our story?’ asked Samantha.

‘What story?’ asked Nanny Piggins.

‘You were telling us about Rapunzel,’ Michael reminded her.

‘Oh yes,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘Rapunzel was a lovely, sweet-natured, kind and beautiful child. Which is a rare combination – extreme beauty and niceness. But as in all stories, when things start off well, you know pretty soon they are going to turn and go very, very badly.’

‘I can’t bear to listen,’ said Boris. He had begun pre-crying in anticipation.

‘The problem was that Rapunzel’s mother was – a witch,’ said Nanny Piggins.

‘Gosh,’ said Samantha.

‘That’s rotten luck,’ said Michael.

‘Oh no,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘I won’t have you judging the poor woman too harshly. It’s very hard for a single mother to find a good job. I’m sure “witch” was not her first choice of employment, but we can’t all be open-heart surgeons. Not as long as hospitals are going to be such sticklers for insisting that surgeons

have training and medical degrees, and wash their hands all the time and other ridiculous what-not.'

'So was she a wicked witch?' asked Samantha.

'From the west?' asked Michael.

'Or the east?' asked Derrick. 'I hear the witches from there are pretty bad too.'

'Oh no,' said Nanny Piggins. 'Rapunzel's mother was just an everyday, run-of-the-mill type of witch. You know, if your neighbour wouldn't mow their lawn you could go to her to get a toad that would make warts grow on their face. Or a potion to make their parsnip crop turn out all knobbly. That kind of thing.'

The children nodded as if they understood, although they didn't. They just wanted their nanny to get on with the story.

'So one day,' continued Nanny Piggins, 'little Rapunzel was sitting on the floor playing with knives, or whatever it is young human girls do, when her mother tripped over her broomstick while casting a spell and accidentally hit Rapunzel square in the head with a bolt of magic!'

'Noooo!' wailed Boris.

'I know,' agreed Nanny Piggins. 'Head injuries are always so tedious. Everyone always fusses that you might have concussion or brain damage or both, and they try to force you to go off to hospital. But who in their right mind would want to go there?! The desserts are always dreadful. Really, all you need to do to test if someone is brain damaged is see if they agree to go to hospital. That is a clear sign that they have a serious brain injury. Anyone in their right mind would have bolted and been half way to the nearest lolly shop.'

'Did she have a head injury?' asked Derrick.

‘In a way, yes,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘You see, Rapunzel’s mother had been cooking breakfast. So it was a breakfast-food spell she was hit with. As soon as the magic hit her, her hair was transformed into long flowing locks of bacon!’

‘Whoa,’ said Michael.

‘I did not see that coming,’ said Derrick.

‘Bacon is delicious,’ said Boris.

‘Boris!’ snapped Nanny Piggins. ‘How dare you!’ As a pig, Nanny Piggins took the subject of eating bacon very seriously, and very personally. She did not approve.

‘I’m sorry, Sarah,’ said Boris. ‘I don’t know what came over me. I think it’s the honey. It’s addled my brain.’

‘It was dreadful for the poor girl,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘She had been cursed forever to have long, succulent rashes of bacon for hair.’

‘Wow,’ said Michael.

‘Was it cooked or raw bacon?’ asked Samantha. She was trying hard to visualize how bacon hair would work.

‘Cooked,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘Her hair was one hundred per cent hot, cooked bacon, as though it had come fresh out of the pan that instant after being prepared by the finest Michelin-star bacon chef in the entire world.’

‘Are there Michelin-star bacon chefs?’ asked Derrick.

‘Probably,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘There are some very despicable humans wandering about. Now you might think that, as curses go, having bacon for hair was not too bad. But let me assure you it was miserable.’

‘Why?’ asked Michael. He personally would quite like to have hair made of breakfast food. He always got hungry in the

morning – not at the breakfast table, but when he first sat down in class at school, when he didn't have any food and there was nothing he could do about it.

'Because of the smell,' said Nanny Piggins. 'To so many humans, the smell of freshly cooked bacon is irresistible. It makes their mouths water, their spirits soar and their brains turn to mush.'

'So what happened?' asked Samantha.

'Everywhere she went, Rapunzel was chased by people wanting to nibble her hair,' said Nanny Piggins. 'At school, at the shops, at the bus stop – every time she turned around, it was to discover someone with a tuft, or a lock or entire pig tail stuffed in their mouth.'

'I can see how that would be unpleasant,' said Derrick.

'As you can imagine,' said Nanny Piggins, 'Rapunzel's mother felt dreadful. The whole thing was her fault. If she'd been performing a chocolate cake spell that had hit her daughter in the head that would be one thing. But cursing her poor, sweet girl to a life of being chased about by greedy bacon lovers was terrible.'

'The poor woman,' said Boris. Tears were starting to well in his eyes. They were mainly tears for the honey he wanted to lick off his sister's face, but he was partly listening to the story as well.

'Fortunately witches have a lot of ingenuity,' said Nanny Piggins. 'She wasn't going to sit around feeling sorry for herself. She decided to do something nice for her daughter. She magicked up a great big tall tower for her in the middle of the deepest part of the forest and surrounded by the thickest bushes and trees. Then Rapunzel shut herself away to live her life in solitude, where no-one could find her and she could enjoy some

peace and quiet, away from the hordes of greedy bacon gobblers. And so the years went by.'

'She must have been terribly bored,' said Michael.

'Not at first,' said Nanny Piggins. 'The first year she taught herself how to speak Latin, the second year she experimented with hydroelectric power systems, the third year she focused on the art of fire breathing, the fourth year she perfected the tango and the fifth year she devoted to trying to make the perfect jar of raspberry jam. But after about ten years of personal betterment, she was finding things a little bit tedious. How good did she want to get?'

'She must have been so lonely,' said Boris with a sob.

'Yes, she was indeed,' said Nanny Piggins. 'There is no point being wonderful at everything if there is no-one there to observe and say, "Gosh that was wonderful! Can I bake you a chocolate cake?" So year by year she grew ever more lonely, and year by year her bacon hair grew longer.'

'Euurggggh,' wailed Boris. 'This is the saddest story I've ever heard! I can't bear it anymore!' Boris licked Nanny Piggins' face to cheer himself up.

'Get a hold of yourself, Boris,' said Nanny Piggins firmly. 'I can't finish the story if you keep licking me.'

'Mmmmm-mmm-mm,' said Boris. Which is how bears say 'sorry' when they're eating honey.

'She was a very sad, lonely and bacony girl,' said Nanny Piggins. 'Until one day, when a prince came riding through the forest.'

'Oooh,' said Samantha excitedly. 'Was he a handsome prince?'

‘I don’t know,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘This is a story from the olden days. There were no photographs back then.’

‘Oh,’ said Samantha disappointed.

‘But I assume he was devastatingly handsome,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘Writers never write stories with ugly heroes. Their ugly characters always have to live under bridges and jump out to scare goats and that sort of thing. Writers really are the most incredibly prejudiced people. It’s a wonder they aren’t all in jail for making up such wicked lies all day long.’

‘And this prince found the tower?’ prompted Derrick.

‘No,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘He smelled Rapunzel’s hair.’

‘Oh,’ said Derrick.

‘You’ve got to understand,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘The Prince had been riding for days. And there were no fast food restaurants back in the olden days. There was just the lump of mouldy cheese and three-day-old bread he had set out with. And he had eaten that. So when he smelled the delicious heavenly scent of freshly cooked bacon he went temporarily insane.’

‘Oh no,’ said Boris. ‘Was he rushed off to hospital?’

‘Of course not!’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘He was in the middle of a deep dark forest and he was deranged with hunger. Seeking medical attention was the last thing on his mind. Instead, he turned off the path and followed the bacon smell. The delicious odour led him further into the forest through thick bushes and trees. As he went deeper and deeper, the smell grew stronger and stronger. Eventually he came to a clearing and in the middle he saw a great tall tower stretching up into the sky. The Prince sniffed the air. There was no mistaking

the smell coming from the top of that tower. The bacon smelled so good it was all the Prince could do not to drool on his royal robes. He was just that hungry.

‘Hello!’ called the Prince. ‘Is there anybody up there?’

Rapunzel had not heard a man’s voice in many years. She could not help but be curious. She went to the window and looked out. And when she saw the Prince below, she fell in love at first sight.

He was very handsome, and people always look better from above. It’s very slimming.

‘What is your name?’ asked the Prince.

‘Rapunzel,’ said Rapunzel

‘Rapunzel, Rapunzel,’ said the Prince, ‘let down your bacon. Please, because I’m really hungry.’

Rapunzel could not refuse him. She took her fried pink tresses and tossed them out of the window. The bacon cascaded down the length of the tower like a waterfall of meat. The Prince was speechless. He had never seen such a wonderous sight. He stepped forward and began to eat. He ate and climbed, and climbed and ate, until he had eaten his way up to the tower window. Rapunzel now had the shortest cropped hair imaginable.

He felt a little sick from overeating, but in his eyes burned true love. He leaned forward to give Rapunzel a bacony kiss, then felt kind of ill and had to lie down for a couple of hours,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘But when he got up and had a nice cup of tea and slice of lemon cake to calm his stomach, the Prince was able to get down on his knees and beg Rapunzel to marry him.’

Boris broke into wracking sobs, 'Oh my, this is the most wonderful story I've ever heard!'

'But Rapunzel said "no",' said Nanny Piggins.

'What!!!' exclaimed the children.

Boris just sobbed louder.

'I don't want to be married just for my bacon,' cried Rapunzel. 'I want to marry a man who loves me for my personality and good looks.'

'But,' said the Prince, 'you don't have any bacon hair. I ate it.'

Rapunzel ran her hand threw her hair and discovered he was right. She was entirely bald.

'And you want to marry me anyway?' asked Rapunzel.

'Yes,' said the Prince. 'I have always loved the taste of bacon and the look of a bald lady.'

Rapunzel's heart swelled with love. The Prince kissed her and they were married before sunset that day.

And so they lived happily ever after.

Because every night her hair grew back. And every morning the Prince enjoyed the most delicious breakfast, then spent the day looking at his beautiful bald-headed wife,' said Nanny Piggins. 'The end. Time for bed.'