

Best Before End

'What does "B.B.E" stand for, dad?' asked Ogilvie, twirling the tomato ketchup bottle round and round on the table.

'Stop playing with that - you'll break it,' grumbled his dad. 'Where do you see "B.B.E.", anyway?'

'Here, on the top of this bottle.'

'Ah - that means "Best Before End",' said his dad knowledgeably. 'Now, put the bottle *down*!'

There was a pause.

'What does "Best Before End" mean, dad?'

Ogilvie's dad sighed. 'It means that you should eat up the contents before the end of whatever date is on the bottle. Let's see - "B.B.E 11/95" - that means you should eat it all up before the end of November 1995. And if you don't eat it all up, then you should probably throw it out. They put it on all bottles and cans and packets these days, to make sure you don't eat food or drink something that's gone bad.'

There was another pause. Ogilvie went on munching.

'So what do these numbers after the date mean, dad?'

"B.B.E. 11/95 4312L 07:09". H'mmm. I don't rightly know what the "4312L" means, but the "07:09" must be the time it was packed..'

'So does that mean that it has to be eaten before nine minutes past seven on the last day of November?' asked Ogilvie.

'Well, I suppose so.' muttered his dad. 'But I don't suppose it's as accurate as all that. Anyway, don't ask so many questions - eat up your tea!'

Ogilvie continued munching his vege-burger and chips, liberally dosed with tomato ketchup. His mind worked away. Today was the 29th November 1995 - tomorrow would be the last day. What was going to happen at nine minutes past seven tomorrow morning...? His eye wandered over the other jars and bottles on the table: the beetroot jar "BBE Sep 97" - that was safe, then; the

mustard "BBE 09/98" - plenty of time to eat that up, although Ogilvie had no intention of going near it; the jam "Best Before July 1997" - bit posh, that one. And then back to the Tomato Ketchup "BBE 11/95" at 07:09...

The next day, Ogilvie was up and about early. It was still quite dark and cold. The cuckoo-clock had just sounded seven when he crept down the stairs and into the kitchen. His parents were still fast asleep. In the kitchen, he turned on the light and took the bottle of tomato ketchup out of the cupboard. He looked at the clock on the wall: 07:07 - just two minutes to go. He fetched himself a drink of milk.

All of a sudden there was a heaving and straining noise, and the ketchup bottle on the table began to rattle and move about. Then there was a pop and the lid flew off.

'Beh Beh Ehhh!'

With a squeaky little shout, a tiny figure of the deepest red colour struggled out from the open bottle. 'Beh Beh Ehhh!' it shouted again and landed lightly on the table top. The bottle fell over on its side. The little person stretched himself, his arms, his legs, rubbed his sparkling eyes and yawned. Ogilvie coughed quietly and politely.

The little creature jumped in astonishment, looked around and saw Ogilvie. 'Beh Beh Ehhh!' he shouted in his tiny voice, and stuck out his tongue. 'Who are YOU?'

'I'm Ogilvie and I'm seven years old. And who are YOU?'

'I don't have a name. I'm the demon of the ketchup bottle and I'm two years old today, this very minute!'

'Well, Happy Birthday, then,' said Ogilvie.

'Thank you very much, Master Ogilvie,' said the ketchup person. 'I bet you're wondering what I'm doing here, eh?'

Ogilvie nodded.

'Well, of course you are! I get put in this bottle when it leaves the bottling factory, and I have to stay there until my time is up. Luckily, they put a message on the lid, or

on the label or somewhere, so that people know not to eat me up after the time stated. "Beh Beh Ehhh!", I shout and out I pop, and anything left inside is not good to eat or drink.'

'I see', said Ogilvie. He remembered that this was what his dad had said the evening before. 'And what do you do now that you're out of the bottle?'

'Anything I want! Anything at all I want!!', shouted the demon triumphantly. 'I get to run around and eat sweets and stay up late and startle grannies and turn people into socks and play tricks in mirrors and break toys and all kinds of good things. And sometimes I meet up with my friends from other bottles and cans and we have a wild party. Of course, I get to be well-behaved as well, whenever I want to - and that isn't very often!'

So saying, the tomato demon gave the ketchup bottle a great kick with his little left leg, sending it spinning and tumbling towards the edge of the table and.....crash! smash! into splinters on the floor.

'Beh Beh Ehhh!' he shouted again and took a mighty leap which sent him behind the curtain, so that he was out of sight and chuckling just as Ogilvie's father arrived in the kitchen...