

bromera

Roger Simó

**The Mini Adventures of
Bang the Mouse
in Search of the Clockwork Ballerina**

Translated from the Catalan
by Andrew McDougall



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Original title: *Les petites aventures del ratolí Bang
a la recerca de la ballarina mecànica*

© Text and illustrations: Roger Simó Carles, 2024

Translation: Andrew McDougall, 2025

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*For Cecília,
my ballerina.*

*For Amèlia and Jan,
my little mice.*



1

Bang and the ballerina

At the very top of a rundown, three-story house, there is an attic: it is a dark world, full of dust and forgotten items. All is silent and quiet. That's why when the small mouse called Bang comes out of his den and starts to run up and down, a wave of joy washes over every object that has sat there, motionless, for who knows how long. And the mouse, who is aware of this, always pulls off a somersault or a cartwheel, to show off, because he is a bit of a show-off, he enjoys standing out. He knows the attic contains an old mannequin, which he looks at somewhat enviously (it was a tailor's and never loses its

calm); the bust of some important old person, who seems to be thinking *oh to be young again!*; and a guitar with no strings, that would like to play a song to accompany the little mouse's playful movements...

One day, during one of his acrobatic routines, he made a mistake, he tripped – PATAM – and knocked over a pile of bric-a-brac gathered in a corner: old newspapers, boxes full of broken or forgotten scraps, odd shoes... Amongst all these fragments of someone's life, one stood out: a little music box made by skilled hands, with a small wheel on the side to wind it up with. Once he'd stopped rolling on the floor, he opened it and out popped a dancer dressed like a ballerina from the olden days, who, to the tune of a



metallic song, began her dance of infinite circles and twirls as delicate as cotton wool. Bang was spellbound, lying on the floor, until the music came to an end and the ballerina stopped.

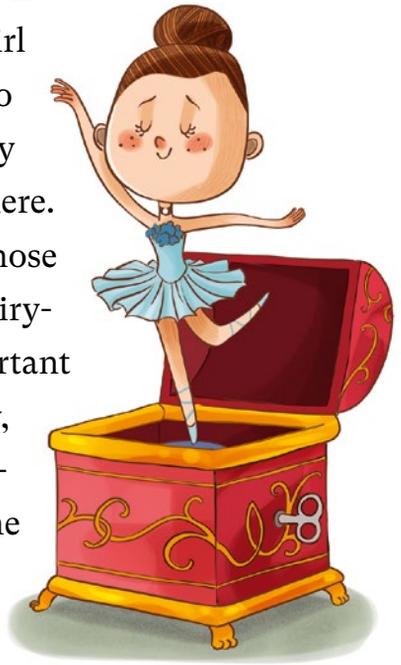
‘And who are you? And what were you doing hiding?’ the mouse asked.

‘I’m a ballerina, and I’m waiting,’ she replied.

‘What are you waiting for?’

‘My mistress. I’m a toy who was once given to the sweetest girl in the world. She loved me so much; I danced for her every night and she took me everywhere. When she looked at me with those eyes as blue as the sky in a fairy-tale, I felt like the most important ballerina in the world... One day, we came up here, she was rummaging around and when she left, she forgot me. That’s why I’m waiting: when she realises she forgot me, she’ll come back to look for me. She won’t be long now. What about you, who are you?’

‘I’m Bang, a mouse, and I live here! I’ve never gone outside, it’s scary, but I don’t need



to: I run around up here to exercise and inside my den there are passages that lead all over the house, even to the kitchen!’

Being, as they were, two lonely souls, the ballerina and the mouse quickly formed a friendship. They met up every night. He turned the wheel on her box and she danced for him; in exchange, Bang told her about the adventures he’d never had, but that one day he’d surely have: he’d make friends with a cat, eat a Swiss-cheese pizza and go to the zoo to personally check whether elephants are really scared of mice... And the two of them laughed for hours.

One day, the last steps on the staircase, the one that leads to the attic, creaked. Bang and the ballerina fell silent mid-conversation, frozen as they saw the door opening.

‘Hide yourself, it could be the girl coming to find me!’ she said to him.

As quick as a flash, Bang hid behind a shoebox and watched on. The door opened slowly and a little old woman appeared with heavy steps and a sad expression. The only place she didn’t have wrinkles was her clothes. Disappointment washed over the ballerina: it wasn’t the girl. The old woman stopped in front of the

toy and with a movement as slow as time, she reached her withered hand towards her, frightening her. But then she saw the old woman's eyes, which were as blue as the sky in a fairy-tale. And she understood... An immense happiness overcame her. And she once more felt like the most important ballerina in the world. She had just enough time to turn towards the mouse (the old woman's tired eyes didn't notice) and whisper a few words to him. At that moment, the hand reached the toy. The old woman lifted her towards her chest and with a thin voice full of nostalgia, she said, *you're coming with me, dear...* And with uncertain steps, they went out the door and left the attic.

Bang needed a couple of minutes to react. Then he heard noises through the half-open window, so he ran and in one leap he reached the windowsill and looked down. The old woman was getting into the back of a van, holding her toy. With her was a young couple, a man and a woman, who were trying to encourage her, while holding a suitcase. The woman held the old lady's hand, as if to comfort her. The vehicle, which had a sign on the side that read *Fountain Spring Care Home*, started up with all of them inside. As





it pulled away, the mouse went over what the doll had said to him in those brief seconds.

‘I’m happy now. You should be too! Make the most of life, it goes quickly! Don’t stay shut away in here. Do things!’

Suddenly, Bang felt more alone than he ever had before, even though he’d never had the company of anyone else before meeting the ballerina. Dragging his feet and leaving a trail of tears, he went into his den.

Five minutes later, he came out with a bag slung over his shoulder and a map in his hand, and he said in a firm and resolute voice:

‘Fountain Spring Care Home. With a name like that, it shouldn’t be hard to find!’

Then, approaching the still half-open door, he took a deep breath, strode forward and disappeared.



2

The first scare

The first obstacle Bang encountered was the stairs. He was in the attic and, as all little mice know, the attic is the highest part of the house. Luckily, Bang was quite the gymnast, so, after throwing his bag (with the map inside) down the gap in the wooden staircase, he jumped down all the stairs one by one until he reached the ground floor. Darkness shrouded everything: when they left, they had shut the blinds and closed the curtains. Only a slither of light snuck in through the odd crack. He waited a moment until his eyes got used to the low light. Then he went forwards for a bit until he



reached the dining room, covered in shadows and silence. With the greatest of care, he began to move around it and observe: the walls full of frames, some with paintings and lots with photos. The old lady's whole life unfolded before his little mouse eyes. Many of the photos sparked his curiosity: in them he saw the old lady, a bit younger, sat at a table, wearing a headscarf, a cat on her lap, sometimes with a crystal ball and sometimes with a cup in front of her. There was always someone with her, a

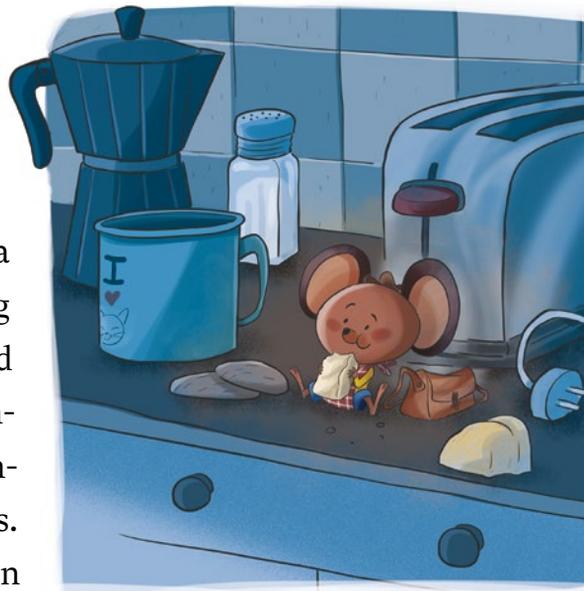


different person in every picture, but mostly famous people. And then he saw her in a framed clipping from an old newspaper: *Madame Visionaire. Reads cards, crystal ball and tea leaves.*

So, this was her way of earning a living: she read the future! He stayed there, spellbound, looking at the photos, when suddenly he thought he saw a movement reflected in the glass, just behind him. He turned round in the blink of an eye, but he didn't see anything.

Your nerves are playing tricks on you, Bang, he said to himself. *And every good little mouse knows what's good for the nerves: food!*

With his stomach rumbling, he went towards the kitchen. A long time ago, he had discovered that the fridge was very old and he could open with little effort. He took out a piece of cheese as big as his head, jumped onto the kitchen counter and helped himself to some biscuits. After taking a napkin from his bag and tying it round his neck, he began to fill his stomach. With his mouth full and his mind empty, his eyes wandered over the kitchen shelves. There



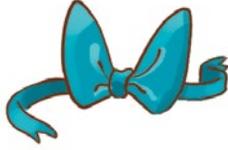
were cereal boxes, cookie jars, tins of cat food, jams, marmalades...wait a moment...what did he just read?

‘CAT FOOD???’ He couldn’t help shouting out loud. ‘How could I have been so foolish???’ he continued in a trembling, terrified voice. ‘I forgot about that devilish cat!’

In his excursions around the house in search of food, he had come across the lady’s cat more than once: large, fat, hairy...silent! Luckily, Bang was smart and agile and hadn’t had any problems dodging it; however, now he was in the middle of the kitchen, defenceless and, to make matters worse, he didn’t know how to get out of the house! The front door was closed and he couldn’t fit through the keyhole! Then, he remembered the back door, which led to the garden and had a small door at the bottom so the cat could get out. Frightened, but slightly relieved at having found an escape route, he put the rest of the food in his bag and with four jumps and one of his best twirls, he had his exit in front of him.

‘There’s the cat’s door,’ he said.

And then, a sweet, smooth and unsettling voice from behind him spoke...



3

That's my door

Hearing those words, as you might expect, left Bang more frozen than a snowman with a cold. As a bead of sweat trickled down his cheek, he turned round veery slowly and, lifting his head, he found himself in front of a huge, hairy animal. That was when he saw the small turquoise bow tied to its left ear and he wondered, not that it mattered, how it was possible he hadn't realised she was a lady cat.

'Hello, pipsqueak, at last we meet face to face,' the cat drawled. 'It seems the rats are abandoned the ship, eh?'

'Wh...what do you mean?' the little mouse managed to stutter.

‘Well, as grandma isn’t here anymore and there will no longer be any food in the kitchen, you’re leaving to look for a new home.’

Bang wasn’t especially brave, just like most of us, but when the situation called for it, bravery emerged from within his heart, also like most of us, and he exploded in rage:

‘No, actually, little miss furry! I’m leaving for a much more powerful reason! And let that be the last time you call me a rat. I’m all MOUSE!’

His loud, angry shouts gave way to a silence where the echoes of the words he’d just spat out were still present. Bang couldn’t believe what he’d said; he went white, he was a dead mouse! But instead of jumping on him and gobbling him up in one bite, the cat turned around and began to walk slowly and elegantly, while continuing to talk.

‘Carry on, sweetie, make yourself at home. But as you well know: this house is as much my home as it is yours. Both of us are four-legged creatures who lived under the roof and protection of the old lady.’

Bang didn’t understand anything. Inside his head, he was torn between running away and not looking back ever again, and the curiosity

that the cat's words awoke in him. In fact, by the time he realised, his little legs were hypnotised and following the feline.

The cat walked across the dining room and jumped onto a wicker armchair, positioned in front of a small table with a crystal ball in the middle. She invited him to climb onto the table.

'Now, tell me this story that is so...powerful. If I like it, if you convince me, I WON'T eat you.'

That last bit she said with a look that chilled Bang's blood, but as the escape door now looked so far away, he resigned himself to telling the story of the ballerina in the music box.



‘Now eat me if you want, but I’ll go down fighting!’ said Bang when he finished, getting ready and striking a pose with his fists that he’d seen in an old newspaper cutting of an article about boxing.

‘Ha ha ha!’ guffawed the cat. ‘Eat you? Me? I only said that to add a bit of dramatism. It’s been many years since I stopped eating hairy, dirty little creatures like you... The old lady bought me tins of more refined cat food. Little by little, look,’ and as she said that, she opened her mouth wide and Bang discovered that she hardly had any teeth left. ‘I’m very old, you know, and I don’t have many teeth anymore.’ Then she continued, ‘Well, I believe you, I wish you luck on your adventure, it won’t be easy. Give me your hand a moment.’

‘Why do you want it?’

‘To read your future.’

Bang was perplexed, so the cat explained.

‘Haven’t you seen the photos on the walls with the old lady, younger then, telling people’s futures? And didn’t you notice that I am always there with her? Yes, as I said, I’m very, very old, I’ve seen it all. But the thing is, as it happens, the old lady couldn’t tell the future, I’m the one with the gift! That’s why I was always sat on her

lap, I read the cards, the tea leaves and people's hands, and I whispered what I saw to her. Now give me your hand and I'll see what the future has in store for you.'

Still not sure what to think, the mouse stretched out his hand, palm facing up. The cat looked at it for a long time and, at a certain moment, her expression changed, her face became serious. Finally, she spoke.

'It's going to be very difficult. I can't see if you'll manage it in the end. You might, you might not, you may regret it for what is left of your life, which might not be much... If it's alright with you, I'll come with you. And if it's not, I'll do so anyway.'

'Wh...what?' replied Bang, who couldn't believe that a cat wanted go on who knew what kind of adventures with him.

'Look, pipsqueak, the old lady has gone and all I have left of her is this,' she touched the collar with her name engraved on it that hung around her neck. 'Soon, her children will be back and I don't know what they'll do with me, but I don't intend on hanging around to found out. I'd rather go out into the wide world with company, even that of a tiny rat.'

‘Mouse!’

‘Same difference, you’re all rodents. Besides, I’ve seen clearly that you’ll need the help of a friend. The future is wrong there, though, because we’re not and we won’t be friends, only travel companions. And if we arrive safely, I will be reunited with my owner. Shall we go? I promise I won’t eat you. For now.’

To be honest, going out into the street with the protection of a cat didn’t sound like a terrible idea to Bang. He’d have to make sure she was always well fed; he didn’t want her to start looking at him with hungry eyes. Which is to say, after turning it over for a while, the optimism and natural sympathy that Bang felt towards everyone displayed itself with its usual force.

‘Okay! Nice to meet you, my name’s Bang,’ he said, offering her his hand. ‘What’s yours?’

The cat answered him while already heading towards the exit.

‘Nunya.’

‘Nunya?’

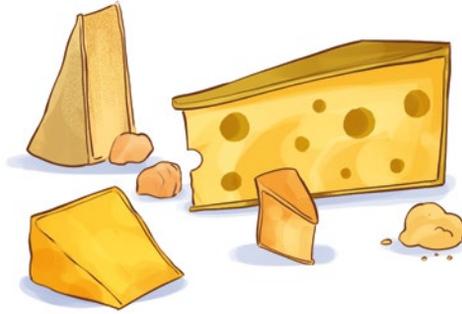
‘Nunya business, pipsqueak.’

Bang, scurrying along behind her, burst out laughing.

‘Ha ha ha! Good one. I enjoyed that.’

Nunya! Ha ha ha! What are you like! I think I will call you Nunya from now on. Ha ha ha! Nunya! Well, I knew a beetle who was almost called that, except the difference was...'

'Clara! My name's Clara, but shut up now!' shouted the cat exasperatedly as they both went outside and left the dark house behind, empty and full of old memories.



4

The big world

Distracted as he was, Bang didn't remember that this was the first time in this life that he'd left the house. The spectacle of the big city appeared before him, lit up by a burning sun, people all around, with children, dogs, suitcases, shopping bags... All kinds of sounds hurt his ears, which, accustomed as they were to hearing nothing more than a fly's breath, were sick of the noise in just thirty seconds. The traffic lights changed colour scarily fast, cars and motorcycles spat out smoke and noise all around... Clara, seeing that her companion was feeling dizzy, led him to an alleyway. Once there, Bang calmed down and,

with the calmness, his senses, which had been worn out for a moment, recovered their usual strength. Particularly his sense of smell: what Bang caught a whiff of, and then confirmed with his eyes, lifted his spirits. It was market day and before them were stalls of all kinds of things, clothes, of course, but also...

‘Foood...! he salivated. ‘So much foood...!’

Only natural: at market stalls, apart from knickers and boxers, t-shirts and hats, sheets and socks, they also sell food. And an unmistakable, but at the same time strange, scent reached his nose.

‘What’s that I can smell?’ he said out loud. ‘It seems like cheese, but...what on earth, it’s as if...I don’t know...as if...’

‘As if instead of the smell of the standard supermarket cheese you found at home, now you’re getting a whiff of all kinds of delicatessen cheeses?’ Clara continued. ‘Of course, right here we have a cheese stall.’

Bang looked closer. Between a stall with pyjamas and another with pots and pans, there was mouse paradise: a stall full of all kinds of cheeses, with a thousand different shapes and scents, and all of these smells were floating through the

air and into his expert nostrils. He couldn't talk from all the saliva, so the cat did so for him.

'On you go, help yourself. But don't let them see you.'

Bang snapped out of his hypnotised state.

'What do you mean?'

'You see, humans exchange things, such as food, for something else, something very boring, which you can't eat or play with, called *money*. And they earn that by working a lot (well, some don't). And you and I do not have any money,' Clara explained.

'Right, so, if I take their cheese and don't give them any money in exchange, I'll be doing something bad,' the mouse pondered.

'What wouldn't be good is dying of hunger because we don't have money to pay for food,' replied the cat.

This perspective cheered Bang up, so he climbed stealthily onto the stall and set his eyes on the target: a piece a creamy cheese a few centimetres away. He didn't know how to get any closer without being seen, but then a loud commotion broke out on the other side of the stall: a large, hairy, almost-toothless cat with a turquoise bow next to its left ear jumped on top of

the stall owner and started licking his bald head (he didn't have even three hairs to do a sad plait with). The owner was scared and ran round and round shouting for help.

'Get this monster off me! I've been bald for too long to be comfortable with this furball on my head! I'm too hot! And I don't like hats! Heeeelp!'

The distraction of his *not friend but companion*, gave Bang time to shove a big slice of cheese into his bag and dash out of there.

Once he was back on the ground, hidden behind some boxes, Clara returned.

'Thank you!' said Bang.



‘What are you doing?’ said Clara, noticing that Bang had a needle and thread.

‘I didn’t feel right taking something and not giving anything back,’ he began to explain. ‘And it just so happens that I’m very good at sewing. Everything I’m wearing I made myself,’ he said with a proud smile, showing off like model on a catwalk. ‘And as I came down from the stall, I noticed that the cloth covering the table has a tear in it. And with these two stitches, I’ve fixed it!’ And with that the little mouse put the needle and thread back into his bag full of cheese.

‘You’re very strange,’ said Clara the cat. ‘I didn’t know you rats were so honourable.’

‘Well we are, NUNYA.’

‘I’m not called Nunya, my name’s Clara.’

‘Indeed, and I’m not a rat, I’m a mouse.’



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Bang was a swaggering, acrobatic little mouse who had never left the attic of a rundown three-story house. His world was tiny and confined to the known objects which filled it: an old mannequin, the bust of some ancient person, a guitar with no strings, faded newspapers, odd shoes...and his beloved clockwork ballerina. But nothing stays the same forever and when the ballerina went missing, Bang knew it was time to venture into the outside world, prepared to do whatever it took to bring back his friend.



**Sooner or later the world calls us:
and we have to head out on our own adventure**



Roger Simó (1971) is a writer and illustrator for what he considers the best audience in the world: children. He has written numerous stories in *Cavall Fort* magazine and makes his long-form debut with this, his first novel. He hasn't won any prizes, but he says he doesn't mind, his children tell him they love him every day and that is all he needs.

