

# S'Wonderful!

John Townend is a perfectly ordinary postgraduate student. In fact there is nothing special about John Townend – except for a single extraordinary talent: he is unfailingly able to guess correctly the outcome of random events.

He cannot predict anything, but he can guess the outcome of everything. He is serially lucky and his explanation is simple: he is merely one in a billion billion ... He is not impossible, just highly improbable.

The implications for investment markets, banking, the economy, the Internet, code-breaking and even national security are all too apparent. The world is built on confidence and John Townend may cause that confidence to crumble. MI5, GCHQ, the Lottery Fund, the Bank of England, the Treasury – even the Prime Minister – are all eager to talk to John Townend.

Disastrous to some, heaven sent to others, he's even developing a cult following. However, he has no personal wish to gain from his talent and wants simply to make his own way in life and only the newly found love of his life, Tennyson, understands this.

Now his life is beginning to accelerate out of control and Townend wants nothing more than to be ordinary ... but can John Townend ever be just ordinary? After all, as his Alter Ego puts it, John Townend is a *finominon!*

# **S'WONDERFUL!**

**Stephen Sykes**

**Foxfell**

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**Part 1** With a Little Bit o' Bloomin' Luck

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**Part 3** All in the Mind

## Nothing Special

There was nothing particularly special about John Townend on the day that he was born: June 10 at 6.35am.

He had the same wrinkly skin as any other baby born in the Middlington Maternity Unit that morning. He had five fingers on each hand and five toes on each foot. As he had the usual number of arms and legs, that made ten fingers and ten toes in all. Nothing special there.

He had just the one head and the usual bits and pieces that all boys have and which are there so that the midwife can distinguish them from girls.

He had quite a head of hair and maybe that was just a bit special (but not especially so). It was very dark, almost black. Black hair ran in his mum's family so she was particularly pleased about that.

And he screamed and he hollered and he shrieked and he cried just like any baby would scream and holler and shriek and cry. Maybe more so. And he pooped and he weed and he threw up and he stank just like any baby would poop and wee and throw up and stink. *Definitely* more so.

But none of this made John Townend special. Not if special means unique or out of the ordinary or exceptional or extraordinary, which, according to the dictionary, it does.

Now maybe if he'd climbed down off the bed, stridden purposefully across the room and started writing out the proof of Fermat's Last Theorem on a blackboard, that would have been special. In fact it would have been more than special, it would have been downright scary seeing as there was no blackboard in the delivery room.

Or if he'd popped out and said "Hello, mum," that would also have been special (and still pretty scary, though not as scary as the proof of Fermat's Last Theorem as any student of mathematics can tell you).

But to everyone's relief he didn't do that. He didn't even say "Can someone please go get me a blackboard?" Instead, John Townend just gurgled and went to sleep.

Take it or leave it, looked at inside down or outside up, John Townend showed nothing which marked him out as anything but an ordinary, run of the mill, everyday, common or garden, regular baby. Of course, he was very special to his mum. All babies are very special to their mum, sometimes even their dad. But outside the family, he was a perfectly average baby born in a perfectly average town to perfectly average parents.

Perfect but average.

Not even the day was particularly special. Despite a number of astrologers later pointing to a conjunction with Venus and an opposition with Mars, professional astronomers pooh-poohed the very idea that the planets could somehow allow something special to happen right there in the delivery room of the Middlington Maternity Unit. And, of course, they were probably right. Probably right, because no one could say absolutely for certain that the planets didn't exert some weird influence in the delivery room that morning. Only, the odds were against it ... but then, who knows? Hmmm ...? No! Forget I ever mentioned it. It's just sheer nonsense and we all know it is ... don't we?

Of course, there was the meteor shower the previous evening, but that happened on that day every year. It wasn't always as good as last night's show, but it could always be relied on to happen. And then there was the particularly large comet that had begun to appear a month or so earlier and had been named Nagi-Yuki-Compton-Carruthers after the four people who simultaneously discovered it. Or was it Yagi-Nuki-Something-Something? Anyway, that really was pretty unusual. Not unique, and *probably* completely irrelevant but I thought I'd better mention it for the sake of completeness, even though you probably knew about it already.

But I know that you know that there wouldn't be a story if there weren't *something* about John Townend worth all this effort of putting pen to paper. Something that may be just a teeny weeny bit out of the ordinary. Something that might be just a little bit special. Something that would mark John Townend as not quite the typical little baby born somewhere in the world that day, June 10 at 6.35 in the morning British Summer Time. And I'm not talking weird-but-harmless little birth marks here. You know the kind of thing. A tiny splotch on your back side that if you look hard enough – and I mean *really* hard enough – just might look like it could vaguely remind you of a boat or a kite or your Aunt Edna. Only, of course, you can't look at it because it's on your bum, at least not without the help of a mirror. Now that might be interesting and a talking point down at the swimming pool, but not really something to write home about, let alone write a book.

So, let's get right on with it and look ahead a few years ...

# **Part 1**

**With a Little Bit o' Bloomin' Luck**

## The Real Bob Hoskins

Ben Pearce held John Townend's thirteen-year-old neck in a vice-like grip that threatened to dislocate his head from his shoulders.

"Call it!" growled Pearce through teeth well used to gritting. He tightened his lock and John thought he heard something sound like gristle crackling, in the way that adolescent boys' necks do. At least his did. He'd heard it enough times before. "I said call it!" Pearce repeated.

"Heads!" John spluttered, his windpipe all but sealed by Pearce's unusually well developed arm. Years of neck-locking anyone who failed to stand up to him had toned it to perfection. Having a stature with more than a passing resemblance to a brick outhouse ensured there were few contenders.

Kevin Thompson ('With a p, sir') uncovered the coin on the back of his hand and said, "Fuckin' heads!" There might almost have appeared a secret admiration had it not been for his rictal sneer of a henchman-under-thumb. And Kevin With-a-pee Thompson reckoned it was better to be inside the shithouse pissing out than outside the shithouse pissing himself.

"Toss it again!" Pearce ordered.

Kevin Thompson (Peebrain to his friends) duly spun the coin and slapped it unseen on the back of his left hand.

"Call it!" yelled Pearce, his mouth unnecessarily close to John's left ear.

"T-t-ails!" John croaked.

"Fuckin' tails!" Peebrain confirmed, although there was no real need. The outcome was inevitable. It was always inevitable. It was always one hundred percent, straight-down-the-line, no-questions-asked, honest-to-god, swear-on-the-bible, just-as-expected, completely, utterly, absolutely, predictably inevitable. And nothing much in life – other than death and taxes, as Benjamin Franklin was once of a mind to mention – is quite as certain as that.

Pearce yanked John's head one final notch (John could have sworn the previous click was the final notch) and snarled, "And that's how you're gonna do it tomorrow. OK?"

"O-GAY." It sounded like his response to the dentist when his mouth was full of tools and his gums were full of anaesthetic and the dentist said *Just let me know if you feel anything* and he would reply *O-GAY*.

"Cos if you don't do it I'm gonna rip your fuckin' head from your fuckin' shoulders and take drop kicks with it. You got that?"

Rugby was still their school's official sport and given a choice Pearce would've preferred to have taken free kicks or goal kicks or penalties with John's fucking head, but their game was rugby and not football so he'd settle for drop kicks instead. Fortunately, his concrete block build made him the ideal prop forward and as such he was the star of the Middlington High School First XV. Feared throughout the length and breadth of Middlington and for a radius of at least ten miles beyond, they were unofficially known as The Bone Crushers and officially as The Bollock Busters, at least amongst the other teams which had the misfortune to play them.

Impossible as it seemed to John Townend, Pearce's lock seemed to tighten just a little bit more around his neck, his vertebrae clicking with ratchet-like precision as each extra notch of grip was secured.

"You got that, luckshit?"

There was a kind of open-mouthed *yesh-cum-yeth* which wheezed from John's puce face, like you might hear from a Welshman pronouncing *Llandudno*. And then bliss. Utter unadulterated bliss as he suddenly felt the pressure around his neck release and Pearce's arm slip more comfortably around his

shoulder, if the feel of Pearce's gorilla-like arm around his shoulder could ever be considered comforting. Not even bungee jumping could compare to the sudden exquisite sensation of fresh air once again filling his lungs. Truth to tell, he'd never actually bungee jumped, but he guessed it was like jumping off a high diving board before you hit the water. Only he'd never done that either. Nor had he parachuted or sky-dived or done anything from a great height. He'd never even been in an aeroplane. But still, the sudden rush of fresh air into his lungs was fantastic.

"OK, see you tomorrow then," Pearce announced in as friendly a tone as an outhouse can affect. And with that, John felt suddenly alone, almost vulnerable as Pearce and Peebrain walked quickly away and he was left on his own in the late afternoon sun of the school quadrangle.

Only he wasn't alone. He was joined by the shadow of Mr Machin and then by Mr Machin himself, a teacher of mathematics. In fact a very fine teacher of mathematics.

"Pearce been bothering you again?" With a suit which was slightly too small and a figure which was slightly too snug, shoes which were slightly too worn and socks which were slightly too loose, Machin's appearance had something of an amiable shabbiness in which any schoolboy would find a source of comfortable empathy. His face bore a five-o'clock shadow as deep and as blue as any face could ever bear. AM or PM, noon or midnight, his heavy jaw-line and jutting chin declared it was permanently five-o'clock. The Zero line of longitude might dictate the Mean Time at Greenwich but old Machin's shadow announced to those within its sight that it was the time of day when high tea would be served throughout the British Dominions, both those which the Empire retained and those which had long been relinquished. It was a shadow of which Desperate Dan would be proud, maybe even Desperate Dan's mum.

Despite a voice which spoke of a certain culture and an almost delicate mannerism of the hands, that blue face of Mr Machin placed him in a league of his own so far as the boys were concerned. Macho was his nickname and he secretly enjoyed it. No one ever dared try anything on with old Macho. And he never raised his voice. He never raised a hand. He never lost his temper. No one was ever the target of a blackboard eraser hurled with the surprise of a cruise missile to wipe the smile from a face when it wasn't wiping chalk from a board. No one faced the wrath of a textbook lobbed with deadly accuracy across rows of innocents for having 'played the arse at the back of the class' as the even older Mr Grimshaw (modern history) would delight in saying. But he had a way of glowering in a Rod Steiger kind of manner that everyone understood. Everyone quiveringly acknowledged that he would eliminate any boy who caused even a hint of trouble. It was quite beautiful in its way and Macho revelled in it. He didn't exactly understand it and he didn't intend it, but he absolutely loved it. And to top it all, he was a pretty good mathematics teacher too. Only modesty prevented him from calling it brilliance.

Macho leaned over and held out a hand to help John Townsend to his feet.

"No, sir," Townsend replied, consciously avoiding flinching at the descending hand. "We were just ... er ... you know ..."

"Just er what er? Just er ... having the life strangled out of you?"

"He doesn't mean anything, sir," John replied, trying to brush the dust from his trousers with his hands.

"Why was he making you guess heads or tails?"

"What?"

"He kept telling Thompson to toss a coin and he kept telling you to guess heads or tails."

"Did he?"

"What do you mean, *did he*?" Macho was now becoming irritated. He pointed across the quadrangle. "I could hear everything that was going on from the staff room. He's been tossing the bloody coin for the last ten minutes while Pearce has been forcing you to smell his armpit. *Call it!*

*Heads. Fucking heads! ... Call it! Tails. Fucking tails! ... Call it! Heads. Fucking heads! ... Call it! Tails. Fucking tails!* Well, to use your playground turn of phrase, it was driving me fucking nuts!”

Townend merely gulped. That and his autonomic nervous system which forced him to breathe were the only obvious signs of life right at that moment. The shadow on Macho’s face appeared to be getting bluer as he ranted (but still in a cultured way) and Townend remained momentarily catatonic.

Then Macho glanced at his watch. “Christ! It’s almost five-o’clock!”

Almost five! Almost five-o’clock! My god, thought John Townend, I’m alone with Macho and it’s almost five! What happens at five? Does his five-o’clock shadow presage the shadow of death? Can a shadow foreshadow a shadow? Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me and thy rod and thy staff will strike me and hurt me quite a bit and then probably whack me a bit more until ...

Townend’s reverie was cut short.

“You live over Creston Drive way don’t you?”

“Yes.” Why did Macho want to know that?

“Would you like a lift home?”

A lift home? *A lift home?* Was it a trick? Would he be seen again? What was the motive? Would he be ...

“My wife’ll kill me if I’m late. It’s her birthday and we’re going out.”

He had a wife! Townend never imagined that old Macho, the Desperate Dan look-alike, the man who resembled Bluto, was married!

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

They walked across to the car park and got into Macho’s car, an old Volvo. A very old Volvo.

As they pulled away, Macho asked, “You ever hear of a guy called Uri Geller?”

“He used to bend spoons, didn’t he?”

“And made broken watches work,” Macho added.

“It was all bullsh- ... I mean a load of rubbish. My dad said so.”

“Of course it was all bullshit. He couldn’t do any of it under real experimental conditions.”

“Must’ve made a lotta money though.”

“Suppose he must.” Macho left it at that for a few moments before adding, “You can do it for real, can’t you?”

“I’ve never tried bending spoons or making watches work,” replied Townend, and it was true, he hadn’t.

“But you can do things that no one is supposed to be able to do.”

Townend remained silent.

“I watched you for quite a while as you called every toss of that coin correctly.”

“Not every one.”

“Every single one. I even started noting each one down.”

“Oh?”

“Twenty-two straight calls, all correct.”

“Oh?”

“You know what the odds are against that happening?”

“No.” But he had a pretty good idea.

“Two to the power of twenty-two.”

“Is that good?” He knew it was brilliant.

“The chances of that happening are over four million to one.”

Townend couldn’t help but let slip a sly smile. “Just lucky, sir.”

“Four million to one lucky?”

John shrugged.  
“Why was he making you call?”  
John remained awkwardly silent.  
“Was it to test you?”  
“Sort of.”  
“Is he going to force you to do it to win money?”  
John hesitated again.  
“How can he do that, sir? It’s just down to luck.”  
They pulled to a halt as traffic lights turned against them. Macho reached into his pocket and pulled out a coin and slapped it down unseen on the dashboard. “Heads or tails?”  
“What?”  
“Is it heads or tails?”  
John looked unsure.  
“Well?”  
“Heads.”  
Macho revealed a pound coin. “Heads it is.” He picked it up and spun it. “Heads or tails?”  
“Tails.”  
Bingo! He spun the coin again and again slapped it down on the dash. “Well?”  
A car behind Macho’s old Volvo blew its horn impatiently.  
“The lights have turned to green, sir.”  
Macho was simultaneously elated and annoyed as he accelerated away and the coin slipped off the dashboard. “I don’t know how you do it,” he grinned, “but you do do it, don’t you?”  
“Do do it?” It was so innocently expressed.  
“Yes, you do do it.”  
“Do do what?” So breathtakingly guileless.  
“Come on! You can stop playing games, you know damn well what you do do.”  
“You mean know whether a coin’ll come down heads or tails?” So naïvely matter of fact.  
“You can, can’t you? You can predict the outcome.”  
“No I can’t.”  
“Yes you can, you’ve just done it.”  
“I can’t predict anything.”  
“But you’ve just done it.” Macho was becoming exasperated, the beard bluer. “I watched you do it.”  
“It’s just luck.”  
“Just *luck!*” yelled Macho incredulously, his voice suddenly rising an octave or two before his throat constricted to an irritated cough.  
“Just luck. Honest,” John repeated idly, turning to look out of the door window while stifling an urge to laugh. “You can drop me here, sir.”  
“Where?”  
“Right here.”  
Macho looked around. There was nothing other than a pair of tall wooden gates. Very tall and very wooden.  
“I can drop you off at your house.”  
“This is near enough.”  
“It’s more than my job’s worth these days. I really would feel better dropping you off by your front door.”  
“OK. If you really have to. It’s up there.”  
“Up where?”

“Through those gates.”

“Those gates?”

“Yes.”

Macho eyed John suspiciously.

“If you just pull up close I’ll press my remote control,” said Townend, his hand diving into his blazer pocket.

“You’re having me on.”

“I’m not, sir.”

They locked eyes like deer locking antlers. At least that would be how Macho would describe it later to Mrs Macho over dinner. If he looked long enough into Townend’s eyes, long enough for Townend to feel the will being drained from him, long enough for him to realise that the game was up, eventually he’d submit to Machin’s superior antlers. Machin, Monarch of Middlington.

Unfazed, Townend pulled out something that to Macho bore a remarkable resemblance to a small remote control device. “You don’t want to be late, sir.”

“What?”

“For your wife’s birthday.”

“Oh, no ... no.”

“If you could just pull up a bit closer.”

Machin packed away his antlers and inched the car closer to the gates and they immediately began to open.

“You can just drive up.”

The massively solid gates opened with a grandeur entirely befitting the sight which met Macho’s eyes. The beautiful gates revealed a beautiful house set in a beautiful garden. But not just any beautiful house set in any beautiful garden which you might enter through just any old beautiful gates. This was a large house. A very large house. A stupendously large house in stupendously large and stupendously beautiful grounds. (The gates were beautiful but not stupendously so. They possessed a certain modesty which belied what treasures lay beyond such portals).

If the Berlin Philharmonic had suddenly risen through the floor playing *Sunrise* from *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (you know, the bit used in *2001: A Space Odyssey* which goes *daaah ... daaah ... daaah ... dah-dah* and a bloke on drums goes *duff-duff duff-duff duff-duff duff-duff* when a monkey chucks a bone in the air) he would not have been at all surprised. Not at that very moment. Not one little bit. And if the next best thing was to hear Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic playing *Sunrise* from *Also Sprach Zarathustra* on his car radio then that too would not have surprised him, as indeed they were and as indeed it didn’t.

How perfect! How abso-bloody-lutely, thought Macho, million-to-one-shot perfect!

He felt like Dorothy Gale walking through the door in *The Wizard of Oz* when the film changes from monochrome to Technicolor. He felt like Charlie Bucket when he enters Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory. He felt like Bob Hoskins entering Toontown – or was it Eddie Valiant? ... No, Bob Hoskins always plays Bob Hoskins – in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. He felt like Uncle Remus singing Zip-a-Dee-Do-Dah in *Song of the South*. (He felt he really had to stop watching so many movies).

This couldn’t be only three or four dreary black and white miles down a dreary little black & white road from their dreary little b&w school in their dreary little blah de blah town.

*Could it?*

Not this eyeball-popping, rod-snapping, cone-zapping, mind-blowing, thirst-quenching (no, hold on, that’s Coke ... or is it Pepsi?), heart-pounding, knees-weakening, breathtaking house ... home, residence, dwelling ... what the hell was the right term for what he saw anyway? Mansion, hotel, museum, palace ... civic centre?

He must've crashed. That was it! He must've crashed and killed himself (and Townend too because the boy was still sitting next to him) and this was Paradise. He glanced at himself in the mirror. It had to be Paradise because however mangled they'd ended up in the crash, they still looked the same. And any memory of the awful event had been erased from his memory. He'd driven through the Pearly Wooden Gates and this was the Garden of Eden – only better by the look of things. This would be where he'd spend eternity. Maybe longer if he was really good. It looked like he was going to enjoy being dead. *Really* enjoy it!

But it was all real. It was real, alright. All except for the exquisite rainbow arching over the house in an exquisite blue sky with exquisite fluffy white clouds, that wasn't real. That was just his overactive imagination icing the cake. But that was all that was missing. The rest was the real Bob Hoskins.

But wait! Whoa! Slow down! Reign in those horses and hold that mule! Stop right there and put her in reverse ... civic centre (*ridiculous*) ... palace (*hmmm*) ... museum (*maybe*) ... hotel (*yes!*). Yes! Yes! Yes!

"It's a hotel, right?" Macho asked.

Townend grinned. "Don't ever say that to dad."

"Your parents work here?"

"No, it's my home."

"What, you mean you're an orphan?"

"I mean I live here with my parents. It's our home. We live here, the three of us."

"You live here?" Macho asked, more as a statement rather than a question.

"Could I ask you not to mention this to anyone, sir?"

"You *live* here?" Macho repeated but with a subtle change of emphasis, now definitely unable to comprehend the immensity of what he was looking at and what the boy was saying. No one lived in a place like this. No one. At least not if you weren't a member of the landed gentry and hadn't inherited an old pile and this pile looked brand spanking, state-of-the-architect new.

"But please, you won't mention this to anyone?"

"You ... live ... *here*?"

"Mum and dad and me ... oh, and our butler."

"A butler?" Macho sounded distant.

"And our maid."

"A maid?"

"She's married to our butler ... and then there's our head gardener."

"A head gardener?"

"And his two assistant gardeners ... Oh, and a chef, chauffeur, handyman and Norris."

"What's a norris?"

"He looks after our horses."

Macho pulled up by the front door and just gawped.

"Nice, isn't it?" Townend asked.

"It's so ... so ..."

"Only so-so?" John sounded disappointed.

"So big."

"It's a bit misleading, really."

"Oh?"

"It's actually much bigger inside than it looks from the outside. Dad wanted it that way. Pretty clever really."

"I suppose he didn't want it to look too ostentatious."

"That's what dad said when he built it."

“Your dad built this!”

“Well, I mean he had it built.”

“He had it built?” Macho still had difficulty taken it all in.

“Actually he bought the company which built it.”

Macho just turned to look at Townend and the boy added, “We won the lottery.”

He still just looked at the boy without saying a word and it was enough to extract further details.

“It was a rollover.”

Still Townend was held by Macho’s eyes.

“Well, actually it was a double rollover.”

“And I’ll bet you chose the numbers,” said Macho.

John just looked sheepish. “Just a matter of luck, sir.”

“Some luck.”

“Course we couldn’t afford all this just by that win.” At this point Townend really did seem awkward, but he couldn’t keep it to himself. Not now. Not now that old Macho had seen where he lived.

*What, not with thirty, forty ... whatever millions?* thought Macho, but he kept that to himself. “Oh?” was more discreet and would tempt Townend to reveal what was really behind their wealth.

“Between you and me, sir, we won it three times.”

“Three times?”

“I mean three more times ... four times in all.”

“And don’t tell me, they were all roll-overs?”

“Double roll-overs.” Townend was also punctilious for accuracy, even as a schoolboy.

“And you guessed them all.”

Townend just nodded.

“Do you do the lottery each week?”

“Not now.”

“Why not?”

“Managing all that money was becoming a bit of a headache for dad. He said there was an old Arab saying that a man can only wear one pair of shoes at a time. I guess he thought we had enough shoes. Besides, we gotta give someone else a chance. Don’t want to be greedy.”

“Certainly not,” Macho agreed.

“Anyway, thanks a lot for the lift, sir. I hope your wife doesn’t kill you.”

John climbed out of the car and ran up the vast steps to the vast front door. Then he stopped and ran back. Macho wound down his window.

“You won’t tell anyone, will you, sir?” Townend said.

“What, tell anyone that you live in the biggest house I’ve ever seen that’s not owned by the National Trust?”

“That dad won the lottery. He doesn’t want any publicity.”

“Don’t worry. I promise not to tell.”

“Or that I live in this place.”

“If they don’t know right now they’ll find out soon enough.”

“Maybe, but please don’t tell.”

“Scout’s honour ... dib dib dib.” He had no idea why he added *dib dib dib*.

Townend looked relieved.

“Thanks, sir.”

“Can you tell me one thing, though?” Macho added.

“What’s that, sir?”

“Why don’t your parents send you to a private school?”

Townend shrugged. “Dad says it’s just a waste of money and besides he pays enough in taxes for the state education.” Then Townend let go a beaming smile. “In any case, I like Middlington. My friends are there.”

And with that, Townend turned and raced back up the steps and disappeared into the house.

As Macho drove back down the drive he almost collided with the gate pillars as he watched the house receding in his rear view mirror. He could have sworn that there really was a rainbow over the house and that toons really were frolicking across the lawn ... Look! There’s Yosemite Sam and Bugs and Daffy and Bambi and Pinocchio and Betty Boop (black and white) and Beep Beep and Dumbo and Mickey – *Hi, Macho! – Boop-oop-a-doop! – Varmint! – What’s up, Mac? – Beep Beep!* ... and clouds of cotton wool were skitting across a perfect azure sky and a Technicolor Bob Hoskins was singing about that rainbow way up high.

It was all so perfect. Apart from Bob Hoskins it was all so bloody perfect.

And he’d just been taken in by a load of old bollocks from a school kid.

It was a hotel. It had to be a hotel. What other explanation could there be?

Yes, it was a wonderful jape, a hilarious lark to try it on with the Head of Mathematics at Middlington High School, to try and get him to believe that the kid was good at tossing (he’d really have to think of some other expression when recounting the tale in polite company). Well he was having none of it. It nearly worked. Townend would have the satisfaction of that. But old Macho had the bigger set of antlers.

In the playground, Townend and his cronies had just been perfecting a trick to con some unsuspecting victim out of his spending money. And in his car, right there in his car he’d only spun the pound coin a couple of times before the lights changed. Anyone could call two in a row correctly. One in four chance of that.

But one in four million!

Bollocks!

And if you counted in Townend’s continuing “luck” in guessing correctly two further tosses in his car, that made it over sixteen million to one against a straight run of correct calls!

Bollocks!

Bollocks! Bollocks! Bollocks! Bollocks! Bollocks! Bollocks!

*Bloody bollocks!*

\* \* \*

Townend didn’t return to the school the next day. Nor did he return the day after that. In fact he never spent another day at Middlington High School.

Deprived of their newly discovered source of riches, Pearce and Peebrain sought to avenge their disappointment on kids of a suitably smaller size and whose necks were even more vulnerable. In their own sadistic way, they found this just as rewarding.

A week later, Macho drove past the beautiful but-not-stupendously-so wooden gates and saw a *For Sale* sign outside.

And on the radio ... *daaah ... daaah ... daaah ...* Herbert von Karajan was conducting the Berlin Philharmonic ... *dah-dah ... duff-duff duff-duff duff-duff duff-duff ...*

Bugger me, thought Macho, bugger, bugger me.

## Adam 'n' Eve

Townend was falling, falling, falling ... Falling from a very great height into a very great void.

As he fell he had time to think, to ponder, to muse over the fact that in falling there was no sense of falling. At least not if he ignored the uprush of air. With that exception, he felt as if he were merely suspended betwixt and between the great sky above and the good earth below, just like an astronaut experiencing weightlessness in orbit. The principle was exactly the same. If you fall with gravity, you can't experience the effect of gravity. You can't feel it weighing you down. Oh, you'll experience it all right when your descent is brought to an abrupt halt as you hit the ground. You'll know exactly what it's like when your body is smashed to smithereens. But until your accelerating descent is halted, you'll be able to enjoy that sense of floating which costs NASA billions to achieve. It's all relative, you see, just as Einstein explained. Pour a cup of tea on your way down and the liquid will just stay inside the pot no matter how much you tip the spout. You're in freefall, the teapot's in freefall, the tea in the teapot's in freefall. If you couldn't see the ground approaching or feel the rush of wind by your face, you'd swear you were simply floating.

Marvellous, thought John Townend as he floated, bloody marvellous!

Now if John Townend were dreaming, he'd wake up just before he hit the ground. And if he were skydiving, he'd pull the ripcord and his parachute would billow out above his head and he'd drift safely to terra firma. And if he were training to be an astronaut he'd eventually be brought out of his abstraction by the inevitable *Beep ... this is Houston ... Beep ...* and David Bowie would sing ... *Ground Control to Major John.*

But John Townend was neither dreaming nor skydiving. Nor was he an astronaut.

He was falling with an acceleration of thirty-two feet per second per second. He even started to try and calculate the metric equivalent to pass the time as he fell. Surely that's not what you're supposed to do at a moment like this? Surely your life's supposed to flash before you?

*Isn't it?*

*Sure it is!*

*(Isn't it?)*

But it wasn't. It never did. John's life was filed neatly away without the hint of a flash. Not even a spark or a flicker, let alone a glimmer or a twinkle. He knew why, of course. He knew perfectly well why. Or did he? Could he be sure? Maybe this time the endorphins had kicked in and were bathing his mind in a false sense of security? A little euphoria to take your mind off things. Maybe his senses knew something he didn't? How could he tell? How do you interrogate your own mind to see if it's up to tricks?

Is everything OK up there?

*Sure. Go back to bliss.*

You're not just saying that?

*Would I lie to you?*

I don't know. Would you?

*Hey, man, if you can't trust your own grey cells, what can you trust?*

You would tell me, wouldn't you?

*Tell you what?*

If things were going wrong.

*What kind of things?*

I don't know. Things.

*Well if you don't know, how do you expect me to know?*  
Because you're in control.  
*If I'm in control, then I'm really asking the questions which you're posing.*  
Go ahead then, ask a question.  
*What question?*  
Any question.  
*Such as?*  
Such as ... Do you ever lie to me?  
*But now that's your question not my question.*  
Just ask it.  
*OK, do you ever lie to me?*  
No, I mean do you ever lie to me?  
*Oh, I see. You mean do I ever lie to you?*  
Well, do you?  
*Never.*  
You're sure?  
*Absolutely certain.*  
How do I know you're not lying about lying?  
*Because I'm telling you I'm not lying.*  
But how do I know you're telling the truth?  
*Would I lie to you?*  
Not back to that again!  
*Well, would I?*  
You tell me just one more little drink won't do any harm.  
*I like to give you a great time!*  
You give me a great headache.  
*Man, you think you've got problems! You should feel it from in here! But, what the hell, you gotta let go once in a while.*  
Well, how about when you tell me I'm great in bed?  
*Do I say great?*  
Never mind.  
*Nope, can't recall ever having said you were great in the sack. You're on your own with that one, kiddo.*  
OK, OK. Let's try something else.  
*Anything you say, man.*  
Look, can you stop with the *man* bit.  
*Hmmm! Just love those little old endocrines.*  
I think you mean endorphins.  
*Whatever you say, bro. I love 'em all to little biddy bits. Love 'em, love 'em. Yessireebob ain't no two ways 'bout it, I-I-I-I love 'em.*  
Christ! You've released them, haven't you?  
*Released what, man?*  
The endorphins! You've released the endorphins! They're on the loose!  
*Dolphins! I've released the dolphins! They're free! Free! I've set 'em loose an' I'm goin' to swim with 'em ... swim with 'em through the seas forever, swim with 'em away across the oceans forever and ever and ever ... Away I'm bound to go, 'cross the wide Missouri! A-a-way you rolling river! Oh, Shenandoah I love your water, water everywhere nor any drop to drink, drink, drink to eyes that are*

*bright as stars when they're shining on me and my shadow, strolling down the 'aven't you 'eard? I'm swimming with the doughfins! Doughfins. That's 'ow yer says it in the East End, ain't it? Gor blimey, mi ol' cock sparrer! Why, so it is, an' no mistake! Would you Adam 'n' Eve it, I'm swimmin' wi' the bloomin' doughfins. Lord lav a dack, so I am!*

Oh, God! ... Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!

*Ha! Gotcha!*

What?

*Just kidding!*

Jesus!

*I have no need whatever for any artificial hoopty-doo.*

Endorphins are natural.

*No need for any hoopty-doo whether natural or artificial; real or fake; mocked up or knocked up; gobbled up or cobbled up; roared at, snored at; eaten, beaten; sat on, shat on; injected, rejected; sniffed, whiffed, hair-gel quiffed; hurly, burly, short and curly; fucked up, plucked up or cramming your duct up. Ain't no need for any of that shit 'cause my senses are razor sharp and my synapses are all a-tinglin'! And I mean ALL a-tinglin'. Every last little itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny, yellow polka-dot bikini one of 'em. Am I makin' myself clear, boy? I SAY AM I MAKING MYSELF CLEAR?*

Maybe that's the dolphins talking.

*You mean endorphins.*

I know what I mean.

*Well, maybe you do and maybe you don't. Maybe it is and maybe it ain't. That's for me to know and for you to find out.*

Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!

*By the way.*

Yes?

*I lied.*

Which bit?

*The bit when I said I never lie. It was a lie.*

Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!

*But that was all I lied about.*

Really.

Yes.

Swear?

*Damned right!*

Look, this is ridiculous. I can't have a conversation with my own mind. I'm just talking to myself.

*Whatever you say.*

Exactly. You're saying whatever I say.

*You're the boss.*

That's right.

*And if I say, Hey, man, let's have a little recap of your life, you know, a little flash through of certain events, maybe just the highlights 'cause we don't have too long and we'd better skip all the borin' bits, then that's really you sayin' that. Right?*

Hmmmm ...

*And if I say getcha donger out right now and let it have a breath of fresh air, you'd do it, right? ... Hey, don't you go all Sunday School on me like that, you told me to say it ... OK, put it away before it takes you into a spin.*

Is there a particular reason for doing that?

*It acts a bit like an aileron deflectin' the air on one side which sets you ...*  
I mean having to recall my life.  
*Oh ... that wasn't my idea. I just thought that's what you wanted me to think.*  
I mean, is it absolutely necessary to do that?  
*You mean, like is it necessary for a drownin' man to see his life pass before his eyes?*  
Yes?  
*You ever asked a drownin' man what he sees pass before his eyes?*  
You already know the answer to that. You're my mind.  
*So, it gets lonely with no conversation ... Well?*  
Well what?  
*You ever asked a drownin' man what he sees pass before his eyes? ... Just humour me, OK?*  
No, I've never asked a drowning man what he sees pass before his eyes.  
*Well, he'll see a lotta water pass before his eyes, that's for sure. Maybe even a school of endorphins.*  
Funny.  
*It's true.*  
Look, have we really got the time for all this?  
*Sure we have. Why a drownin' man can see a whole lifetime pass by.*  
I'm not a drowning man.  
*Principle's the same.*  
Then he does see his life flash in front of him!  
*Search me, man. You're the one who believes that crap.*  
Then it's not true?  
*How should I know? You've never drowned.*  
But ...  
*Look, for the sake of argument, let's suppose it is true.*  
Is there really any point to this?  
*You got anythin' better to do?*

## Under the Bridge

Let's start at the beginning.

*That's way too far back. Best not to push the envelope on this.*

How far back do you suggest?

*How about school days?*

I'd rather not talk about that.

*Why's that?*

I was thinking about it quite a lot recently and ... hang on a minute, you know that already.

*Sure I do but I can't keep sayin', "I know" all the time. There'd be no point in our havin' this little chitchat.*

Suppose not.

*OK, so I know you didn't like the other boys forcin' you to call coins so they could make money and your dad didn't like it when that teacher took you home.*

We moved quite a few times.

*I know ... oh, sorry.*

That's OK.

*And it was always for the same reason.*

Always the same reason.

*Whatever school you attended, sooner or later the bullies would realise you were their licence to print money. Boy, were you a pushover!*

No need to be personal.

*That's you talking.*

You said it.

*Same thing.*

How do I know?

*Let's not go through that again. Trust me.*

How do I know I can ...

*A - a - a!*

OK, OK. I trust you ... for now.

*I can live with that. It's not perfect, but I can live with it.*

Where were we?

*You were a pushover.*

I wanted to live.

*Very sensible. Anyhow, somehow you managed to survive and you gained a place at university.*

Despite dad killing himself with alcohol after losing all our money in various ill-considered ventures and mum dying of a broken heart. You forgot to mention that.

*Well, you've mentioned it now, so can we move on?*

Please.

*You went off to study maths and physics and, having been left no money, you had to take various jobs to survive in your miserable digs.*

They weren't that bad.

*They were a bit of a come down from what you'd once been used to.*

The Ritz would've been a come down compared to what I'd once been used to.

*That's true. And you could've had it all again. You could've made your own fortune on the lottery, but oh, no, John Townend is such a goody goody. John Townend believes it's like cheatin'.*

*It is like cheating.*

*John Townend is such a dill pickle that he'd rather scrape by doing an 'honest' job like bar work or servin' tables.*

*It is honest.*

*What a mush-head!*

*Just stick to the facts.*

*Wouldn't even do it for your dad.*

*He'd have blown it again. He always did.*

*Or your mother.*

*She didn't want me to.*

*You could've insisted.*

*Let's move on.*

*Water under the bridge.*

*So I saw an advert at the university for volunteers to act as guinea pigs for the psychology students' exams. It paid a few quid.*

*You had to do various tasks like estimating time intervals in your head.*

*I was pretty good at that.*

*Counting the number of spots that are briefly flashed on a screen.*

*I was pretty good at that too.*

*Reacting to subliminal pictures of naked women slipped into a sequence of more mundane images.*

*I was very good at that!*

*And guessing the outcomes of computer-generated heads or tails.*

*Of course, I was brilliant at that!*

*It ruined her exam results.*

*It did, didn't it?*

*Don't sound so pleased with yourself. Nobody gets a perfect score.*

*I did.*

*You could've cheated.*

*You know that wasn't possible. I couldn't cheat because I didn't know whether or not I'd be cheating.*

*You could've tried.*

*I didn't know if it was a right call or a wrong call. It was just a guess.*

*You shouldn'ta done it.*

*But I did do it.*

*Water under the bridge.*

*Stop saying that. I didn't realise they were going to ask me to do a coin tossing test.*

*Can't these students think of anything more original? Point to the Heads or Tails on the screen, they told you, and click your guess. So you'd click your guess and then the computer would show what it had chosen. They left you to it for ten minutes.*

*And I'd click Heads and it would be Heads, and I'd click Tails and it would be Tails. Over and over and over and over ...*

*Point to Heads ... click ... Computer shows Heads ...*

*Point to Tails ... click ... Computer shows Tails ...*

*Point to Heads ... click ... Computer shows Heads ...*

*(Yawn!) Point to Heads ... click ... Computer shows Heads ...*

Simon says computer choose Tails ... click ... *Computer shows Tails ...*  
Simon says computer choose Heads ... click ... *Computer shows Heads ...*  
Choose Heads ... click ... *Heads ...*  
Choose Tails ... click ... *Tails ...*  
Tails ... click ... *Tails ...*  
Heads ... click ... *Heads ...*  
H ... click ... *Heads ...*  
T ... click ... *Tails ...*  
T ... click ... *T ...*  
H ... click ... *H ...*  
Z ... click ... *T ...*  
*Zzzz ... click ... H ...*  
*Zzzzzzz ... click ... H ...*  
*Zzzzzzzzz ... click ... HHHHHH ...*

## Brushing His Nose

“Hey, wake up!” The voice was impatient. Maybe even sexy in its fractious little way.

“Hmmm, what?” John tried to rouse himself from his stupor.

“You fell asleep.” *Definitely* sexy. John hadn’t noticed that earlier. Perhaps it took the edge of irritation to bring that out in the attractive twenty-year-old. *Definitely* attractive, he had noticed that though.

The room was dark and warm. A soporific gloom in which they seemed to find it appropriate to speak in half-whispers. It wasn’t actually necessary, but she seemed to do it and he followed her example. Her half-whisper sounded huskily sensuous. Not the sort of husky that pulls sleds in the Iditarod, but the sort of husky you probably get from yelling “Mush” all day in temperatures cold enough to freeze your tonsils. John wondered whether his did too. *Mush*, he inwardly tried, *mush, mush, mush*.

“Mush.” It kind of slipped out between his teeth when his lips weren’t looking. What a jerk! What the fuck made him say it aloud? (But it was sort of husky, only not as husky as hers).

“Mush?” the girl asked. “What do you mean, mush?”

“Mush?”

“You said mush.”

“Mush ... I mean must be the heat in here. Made me feel drowsy. See, can’t even get my tongue to work right.” *God!*

There could’ve been a sceptical glint to her eye, only he thought it best to concentrate on the screen.

“More like you were bored to death by my experiment,” she suggested, leaning over him. “Let’s take a look at what you did before exhaustion took over.”

Was she leaning over him just a little more than necessary, John wondered, her left breast dangling more than comfortably near John’s face? He could smell her perfume. It was provocative, enticingly provocative. Not *too* provocative. Just provocative enough to weaken him and make him salivate uncontrollably. He always did that when he was enticingly provoked. That and her left breast almost brushing his nose. He suddenly wanted to swallow. He wanted to swallow quite badly. It was the kind of wanting-to-swallow that came from over-stimulation of your senses. And those full breasts of hers. Those erect nipples straining against her little tee-shirt and saying *Kiss me, John. Just pucker up and kiss me, kiss me, kiss me, kiss me* were certainly very stimulating. But a swallow in that room, in that dark and humid silence where his nose was filled with the scent of angels and his eye-line was filled with those gorgeous tits would all but sound like a sink-plunger sucking the gunge from a blocked u-bend.

So he saved it and saved it until the moment came – and he knew it would come – when the swallow fairy tickled the back of his throat with her spiky little wand and he couldn’t hold it a moment longer. He gulped with a kind of loud choking cough which he hoped would distract from his dilemma. It didn’t, of course, and he brushed her breast with his right hand as he tried to cover his mouth.

*Oh, God!* “I’m sorry,” he mumbled. *Oh, God!*

“My fault.”

*Her fault?* What did she mean, *her fault?* Did she mean her breasts were too close to his face and he didn’t have enough room to move, or was she apologising for making him salivate? Or was she apologising for having breasts in the first place?

Some many possibilities, so little time to duly consider them all.

“This can’t be right,” she husked.

“What can’t be right?”

“You’ve scored one hundred percent.”

“Oh?” He tried innocence but it sounded more like the *oh?* when you’ve been caught cheating but you try acting dumb.

“You played seventy-seven and you guessed every one correctly.”

“Lucky streak.”

She wasn’t listening. “Must be something wrong with the computer.”

“Just one of those things.”

“Let’s clear the score and start again.” She clicked the mouse a few times and reset the test.

John looked at his watch. “Jesus! Look at the time! I have a lecture at 2.30.”

“Wait a minute, I haven’t finished.”

“I’m really sorry, but I can’t miss this. It’s important.”

“So is this.”

“I hope you pass your exam OK.” John was already out of the room and into the sunshine as she heard his *OK* disappear with him.

“Thanks a lot, you bastard.”

She sat down at the screen and began clicking the mouse.

Point to Heads ... click ... *Computer shows Heads ...*

Point to Tails ... click ... *Computer shows Heads ...*

Point to Heads ... click ... *Computer shows Tails ...*

Point to Heads ... click ... *Computer shows Heads ...*

Point to Tails ... click ... *Computer shows Tails ...*

Point to Tails ... click ... *Computer shows Heads ...*

*(Yawn!)* Point to Heads ... click ... *Computer shows Tails ...*

*(Y-a-a-a-w-w-n!)* Point to Heads ...

\* \* \*

John Townend walked out of the building towards Tavistock Square and its garden, a shady haven on such a beautiful afternoon.

On the corner of the square, as always on the corner, was the old man who sat there day in and day out, year in and year out. He sat there on a little seat on the pavement with his childlike paintings tied to the wire mesh fence that surrounded the gardens.

John had walked by hundreds of times, yet he’d never really taken any notice other than to wonder why the old man was there. He’d never seen anybody buy one of the paintings. He’d never seen anybody stop to look at the man’s artwork. He’d never seen anybody give the old man a few coins. Come to think of it, he’d never even seen a tin or a cap or any receptacle for donations, though he had to admit he’d never really looked for one.

The old man and his naïve watercolour paintings on wrinkly paper were just part of the urban landscape. People were too busy or reluctant to look, unwilling to take notice and certainly loath to make eye contact.

John walked straight onto the pedestrian crossing. From his right there came the sudden ear-splitting squeal of brakes as a black cab skidded to a halt just inches from his shins. Townend was entirely oblivious, just as he was always oblivious to such things. He’d spent his lifetime being unaware of the normal ways of the world. The normal things that any normal person would take for granted in the normal course of living. Everyday things such as looking both ways before crossing the road. You know, just in case there might be the remote possibility of some traffic using it. OK, so he

did look both ways if there was no pedestrian crossing. But on a crossing, he had the right of way and the traffic should stop. Be it bicycle, motorbike, car, bus or thirty-ton juggernaut. All should stop for John Townend on a pedestrian crossing. And they did.

“Oi!” yelled the cab driver, his head stuck out of his window. “What the bleedin’ ’ell d’you think you’re doin’?”

John stopped and turned towards the driver. “Walking across the pedestrian crossing.”

“You tryin’ to be funny?”

“No.”

“Well, are you blind or some’in’? Didn’t you see me comin’?”

“You’re supposed to give way to pedestrians on a crossing.”

“An’ your supposed to bleedin’ well look to see if there’s any approachin’ traffic.”

“And you’re supposed to stop.”

“I can only stop if dickheads like you don’t walk straight out in front o’ me.”

“But you did stop.”

“You takin’ the piss?”

A number of cars were now held up by their middle-of-the-road conversation and a single briefly-blown horn set off a chain reaction of honkings. As the contretemps served no purpose, John decided to move on. Anyway, the day was far too nice to be spoiled like this.

“Bloody lucky I didn’t kill you,” John heard as the taxi rattled on its way behind him.

Yep, thought John as he strode on into Tavistock Square Gardens, hurrying by the old man who sat there day in and day out, year in and year out, bloody lucky.

“Silly sod,” the old man muttered.

## The Best Waggle

John lay on the grass, the perfect trees providing perfect shade on a perfect summer's day. In the heart of London, yet if he looked up at the sky, through the gently swaying leaf-heavy branches he could almost be home. He could almost be twelve again and playing on the lawn of his house. He missed that, almost more than anything, although he could never share it.

There was no lecture. It was a lie.

It was a lie just like all the other lies he was so used to making. Only he didn't call them lies. To John they were curvatures of the truth. They were warps within the fact-fiction continuum. They were routes through the fabric of fable-reality, which helped everyone whom his life touched to accept the unacceptable, tolerate the intolerable.

Accept John Townend. Tolerate John Townend.

Because without that curvature of the fact-fiction continuum John Townend would be labelled with any appellation that helped people come to terms with whatever it was that John Townend was. He knew what it was, only he didn't know why.

Why the hell did he do the tests today? What the hell made him do it? Just for beer money? Or was it something else? Was there some deep urge trying to surface? Was it vanity that made him do it? After years of suppression and denial, did he want someone to know? He couldn't admit it to himself but he knew there was more than a hint of truth there somewhere. He knew it just like he knew when he was six years old and he went to Jimmy Burke's birthday party. That was when he first savoured the sweet, sweet taste of popularity. It was Jimmy Burke's party, it was Jimmy's day but John Townend had to go spoil things for poor spoilt little Jimmy by becoming the centre of attention. John's mother made excuses later, as mothers do on such occasions. Maybe she actually believed that her son just needed some guidance, after all he was only six years of age. Maybe she made excuses just as any mother would make excuses. He was so young, so inexperienced in these matters, any matters come to that. How could a six year-old be expected to understand?

Jimmy's party was really special because Jimmy's dad had organised a professional magician to entertain the kids. It wasn't cheap, but then Jimmy's parents liked to do things in a certain way that showed how much they loved their son. How much they'd lavish on him. How much money they could spend on him. How much money they had. How much more money they had than the other parents. You know the kind of thing. We've all seen it and all detested it.

Naturally, Jimmy's party had been the talk of his class (all of whom were invited) for weeks leading to his birthday and all the kids were getting pretty excited at the prospect. In adults this can lead to a case of severe anticlimax, but kids have still to get to know about such things and the excitement mounts and mounts and mounts until it's in danger of blowing their heads right off their shoulders.

Uncontainable childhood stimulation: maybe that's what leads to heart disease in later life. Never mind the MockaDoodleDooFried MockaDiddleChicken or the MockaTripleCheese MockaDiddleDoodleBurgers with the 100% Beef GuaranteedDee (though it's reassuring to know that nothing on the MockaDeadleCow is wasted). Some day some scientist looking to make a name for himself will put two and two together and it'll click. The exponential expectations of UCS: that's the real arterial MockaDiddleBlocker.

Probably complete bullshit, but so long as no one else has thought of it, that's what's important in science. That and even the remotest possibility that it may save the world from some new disaster, preferably involving potential collision with an as yet undiscovered asteroid or a few odd deaths over a period of years but which *maybe* just *maybe* could lead to an epidemic in forty years time. That's

what's needed to clinch the funding. That's what grabs the headlines. *More than thirty percent of adults who die of heart disease read The Beano as a kid.* There has to be a link! We've gotta know! Research it! Fund it! Shake rattle and roll it! Save the world! Oh, the humanity!

*Warning: Reading comics can seriously damage your health.*

Perfect! Just perfect!

So on that Saturday afternoon in March, after all the food had been eaten, and after all Jimmy's presents had been admired (though not played with, that didn't seem to be part of the deal), and after anyone who wanted to go to the toilet had gone to the toilet (which took longer than Jimmy's mum anticipated because Catherine Carradine had decided to puke up and then, as kids are prone to doing, was joined by a couple of others out of mild mass hysteria which was soon contained after a bit of straight talking), Jimmy's dad strode into the lounge and closed the curtains.

The room fell dark and an unnatural silence descended on the roomful of sixish year-olds. This lasted for at least four or five seconds before someone broke wind and the room erupted into a crescendo of allegations, all of which were vehemently rebuffed. Every allegation was countered with instant denial, every rebuttal was followed with instant accusation. Those that smelt them dealt them, that was the theory that was encapsulated in the old adage. It was perfectly axiomatic. Jimmy's dad remained silent throughout, oddly silent, and that led several young sleuths to suspect the only adult in the gathering at that moment. It didn't take long before big Pete Bickerstaff, in the heat of the moment, yelled out, "Mister Burke!" in a way that seemed to say *Mr Burke, fancy blowing off in front of all these kids! Why, you probably crapped in your pants it was such a corker!* Except it didn't just seem that way. The way that big Pete said it sounded more like insider knowledge that Jimmy's dad really had engaged in a brown-trouser job. He said it in such a way that stopped the entire gathering of sausage-roll revellers in mid revel. No one moved. Except for the lone remnants of a pink blancmange which quivered and shivered like an independent life form, all was perfectly still.

*The boy who accused his host's father of breaking wind in front of guests!*

*Cool!*

Now this could have been a very awkward moment. The sort of moment which could break up parties, maybe even families for all these kids knew. But there's one thing that's guaranteed to set kids breaking into unbridled mirth and that's for an adult to utter the f\*\*\* word. And that's what Jimmy's dad did. "Alright, kids, no more farting." (OK, to be pedantic it was the f\*\*\*ing word, but who's counting?)

Squeals of delight ignited general euphoria that swept through the room like a bush fire. Once again it was teetering on the precipice of masteria.

If the gathering of innocents had a few more years of experience they would have sensed the relief on Mr Burke's face.

"Well, I was going to open the window anyhow," he said as he made his way back through the human obstacle course to the French windows which led into the garden. He peeped through the curtains before adding, "OK, everyone! Ready!" The room fell almost silent once more. And then with quite a bit of drama, a little bit of a flourish and, for reasons best known to himself, a Spanish "Olé!", Jimmy's dad pulled on the cord operating the floor-to-ceiling drapes which shot back revealing a tall, oldish-looking man wearing bushy eyebrows, a large red turban and a not dissimilar colour of nose. If his mouth hadn't been hidden by a partially filled glass, he might have been smiling. Only it was more of a scowl. Actually, a rather menacing grimace was revealed when he hurriedly downed the last drop of liquid and withdrew the glass from his face. There was more than a passing resemblance to Boris Karloff and one girl screamed which, as such things do, set off a cascade of similar vocal assaults. Catherine Carradine rushed out of the room, presumably to once more keep the toilet company.

Jimmy's dad opened the door and the man lurched into the lounge as he misjudged the step up. While one or two girls used this as another opportunity to let out a shriek, most of the others thought it was all part of the act and giggled. The grimacing lurcher shambled across the floor and seemed even larger standing over the little kids, all except to big Pete who eyed him suspiciously. Big Pete habitually eyed everyone suspiciously. Maybe he even eyed himself suspiciously when he looked in the mirror to comb his hair, though he obviously didn't do that too often.

When calm once again broke out, the man asked, "Anyone here like magic?"

*Yeah!* Came the deafening response.

"Well my name is Ali Kazam ...". So it definitely wasn't Boris Karloff. "... and I'm here to show you a few tricks." (The first had already been *the disappearing gin bottle* which he deftly performed somewhere between swaying outside the French windows and falling into the room).

*Yeah!* Repeated the deafening response.

Ali Kazam *Party Magic for Party People* – from *Nine to Ninety* it said in the Yellow Pages and was later confirmed on his business card, printed using the machine at the local railway station. As all other magicians that Mr Burke tried to hire at short notice were already booked, he checked with Ali Kazam (real name Ted Winterbotham) to see if he catered for people under nine. Certainly he did and the only reason he mentioned *Nine to Ninety* was because the alliterative *Five to Fifty* or *Six to Sixty* brought down the upper end of the age spectrum by a decade a go. Since placing the advert he had, understandably, regretted his choice of epithet.

After removing the rogue blancmange, Mr Burke brought over a small pre-arranged table from which Mr Kazam performed, before retiring from the room and leaving the magician to work his magic. "Just popping out for a spell!" quipped Jimmy's dad, but it was lost on the youngsters.

So Mr Kazam went into his well-trodden repertoire of cheap tricks and simple illusions. It was enough to amuse the kids. After pulling a rabbit from a hat – *Aaaah!* – and pouring water from a rolled-up newspaper – *Ooooo!* – and puffing on a fag and blowing the smoke out of his ears – Jimmy's mum would have a word with him about that one later – and devouring goldfish which looked like thin slices of trembling carrot – squeals of squeamish glee, but Jimmy's mum would have a word with him about that one too, the fish left in the bowl to swim around and give credence to the deception looked distinctly like a limp shaving of root vegetable to her and she didn't like the way he whisked the bowl away – he next took three playing cards from a rather dog-eared pack. This trick needed a volunteer and not an arm in the room was not jiggling for attention. *Me! Me! Me! Choose me!* they waggled beseechingly. *Ooo, me! Ooo, me! Ooo! Ooo! Ooo!*

Maybe John Townend had the best waggle because he was The Chosen One. That and the fact that he was sat closest.

"Come forward, young man," said Ali Kazam in his best magician's accent which sounded increasingly like Alec Guinness as Fagin as the show progressed. *Cam forward, my dear! Cam forward!*

The Chosen One couldn't really get any more forward but he shuffled on his knees to show willing.

"And what's your name, young man?"

"John," said John.

"Well, John, you see these three cards?" Ali dropped them face up in a row on the table.

Of course he saw the cards! He wasn't blind! "Yes."

"Well, now, two of them are black and one of them is red. Do you agree?" It was best just to use colours with such a young audience. Identifying numbers was always a bit of a gamble.

"Yes."

"All right. Now watch very, very carefully."

John watched very, very carefully.

“Are you watching very, very carefully?” asked Ali.

Of course he was watching very, very MockaDoodleCarefully! He might only be sixish but he wasn't a MockaDiddleIdiot. “Yes.”

“Good,” wheezed Ali, taking the odd drag from the fag which was still going strong, only the exhaled smoke was now coming out of the more conventional orifices, though some in the audience still looked to his ears in hope. He turned each card over and then placed the two outermost black ones on top of the red one. Picking up the cards in his right hand, he showed to John and the others that the red card was still on the bottom. Next he quickly, and for a man of his condition rather deftly, threw down the cards back onto the table so that they once again formed a row.

“Can you tell me where the red one is?”

John knew. The whole room knew, they were meant to know. He was working his audience and there was a deafening yell of “That one!” and “The one on the end!” from everyone. John pointed to the one on the end, his right.

Ali turned the end card, his left, over. “So it is!” He replaced it face down and once again placed the other two cards on top, after first proving that they were indeed black and that he hadn't changed them all for red. “Watch now.”

John watched as Ali Kazam prestidigitated. The magician's lips eased into a slight smile of satisfaction as he asked, “Now where's the red card?”

A few kids offered advice, but this time there was no consensus. But John unhesitatingly pointed to the middle one. Ali's smile noticeably tightened. “Are you sure?”

“Yep,” said John.

“You don't want to change your mind?”

“Nope.”

Ali was caught between a rock and a hard bunch of kids. There was no option and he revealed the card. It was red.

“OK, I think you're getting the idea now,” Mr Kazam said in a way that an adult might do to a small child who's not only got the idea but has already applied for the patent.

He once again picked up the cards, all face down with red at the bottom. It was all in the throw. “Watch the cards, John. Watch them very closely.” He could make any one of the three cards in his hand land in any one of the three positions and make it look as if he were throwing not the top one but the bottom one, or the bottom one and not the top one or ...

“Which one is the red now?”

John tapped the middle one again.

The middle one it was.

*Hurray!*

Ali picked up the cards and dropped the cards and before he had chance to ask the inevitable question John Townend simply touched the left-most card.

A cheer went up from the kids as John was proven correct. But after several more goes, in which John was confirmed unerringly accurate, the children were beginning to wonder what the trick was all about. If John knew where the red card was, what was the point?

Not to be outdone, Ali tried three more times before he asked, “Anyone else like a go? How about the birthday boy?”

Jimmy nearly disabled several of his school chums in his desperation to trample over them.

Well, maybe it was the fact that Jimmy was a real face-ache and his dad was a real face-ache and Jimmy's mum (and he really hated to think this about anybody's mum) was the achiest faciest face-ache he'd ever seen. Whatever it was, that magician sort of tripped something in John Townend and John said, “I'd like to have another go.”

“I think that our birthday boy ...” whose name he’d forgotten, “... really should have a go.”

“Please,” John added in what must have been a particularly imploring way because Ali Kazam couldn’t really find it in himself not to say, “Just one more go then.” He quickly gathered up the cards and cast them down.

This time John seemed more considered. He studies the cards for several moments while his friends yelled out their guesses.

“Well?” said Ali, somewhat impatiently.

John looked at Ali and then back at the cards. He knew he really should stop. He really, really shouldn’t aggravate adults more than absolutely necessary. A line had to be drawn somewhere, even at his tender age he’d learned that. The guy was doing his best to entertain the kids and if he didn’t watch out he could spoil things and he didn’t want to do that.

“Well?” said Ali again. “Which is the red card?”

There was no surprise when John guessed correctly, not to John. It was impossible to do otherwise. No matter how hard he’d try to double-cross his own intuition he couldn’t fool himself. He knew he couldn’t. He tried it many, many times. If he went to guess the right one, it would be the right one. If he went to guess the wrong one, it would be the right one. If he went to guess the right one and then changed his mind at the very last moment and went to point at the wrong one, it would still be the right one.

John pushed away from the table and the birthday boy took over and when he couldn’t get any right (which is statistically significant in its own right and could attract research funding) the tears began to flow and Ali Kazam looked happier than Boris Karloff ever could and the party moved on to the disco finale and distribution of goody bags.

John was a wow with all the kids except Jimmy Burke and he liked that. He liked that very much.

Ali stuck to his *Nine-to-Ninety* rule from then on, but specialising in the nonagenarian end of the market. He figured that from where John was sat on the floor he could see the colour of the cards in the instant between release and landing. Still, no point in taking chances in future.

\* \* \*

A sudden *splat* brought John Townsend back to Earth, back to the present, back to London, back to Tavistock Square, WC1 and reality.

Ali Kazam disappeared in a dazzle of blue sky as John blinked against the almost impossible brightness of the mid-afternoon sun. Jimmy’s howling was drowned by the rattling diesel engine of an old red Routemaster bus. The adulation of his childhood classmates was replaced by the shimmying of countless leaves as a wonderful breeze blew through the trees.

“That’ll bring you good luck!” chortled an old lady as she scuffled on by.

Instinctively his hand went to the source of the splat.

Bird shit on his shoulder. Great. Just great.

And then another splat as a pigeon high overhead decided there was nothing for it but to emulate what its mate had already achieved. Spot on.

“Oooo! Another load!” whooped the old woman with almost inconsolable merriment. “I gotta touch you to see if some’ll rub off!”

“I’m sure it’ll wash out.”

“You can keep your bird shit!” she cried in amusement as she diverted towards John with surprising speed. “It’s your luck I’m after!” She bent down with an almost audible crackle of bone and reached out a wrinkled hand to touch his head.

“Take as much as you want. I’ve got plenty to go around.”

Another splat.  
Another uproarious cackle.  
“A shit load of it.”  
Cackle, cackle, cackle!

## An Unidentified Pubic Hair

“Hello, Mrs Guggenheim.”

“Hello, Johnny.” She always called him Johnny. He had no idea why because no one else ever called him that. Maybe she once knew a Johnny. He didn’t mind.

Of a generous girth and with an architectural bosom, the sort which could conceivably keep a battleship afloat, she said she’d moved from Germany just after the war and was some distant relative or other of fabulously wealthy Solomon R. Guggenheim, the same fabulously wealthy Solomon R. Guggenheim after which was named the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Whether this had any foundation in truth was impossible to know, although, to split hairs, she only actually mentioned being related to the almost-as-fabulously-wealthy Benjamin Guggenheim, Solomon’s brother who happened to be one of the unfortunates who’d secured a stateroom for himself and his French mistress on the maiden voyage of RMS Titanic. Even more unfortunately, he was one of the fifteen hundred and three souls who reached neither America nor the Cunard liner Carpathia. Curiously, she never mentioned Solomon.

She always poked her head out of her flat on the ground floor whenever he opened the front door. It didn’t matter what time of day or night it was or how quietly he opened the door, her bosom would always miraculously appear with a “Hello, Johnny.” Her only concession was to leave a chain across her door after midnight when she opened it a fraction to peep out. It was never done in a snoopy way. She was always entirely up front and abundantly pleasant about it. It was almost like having a friendly dog guarding the place, one that would invariably welcome you with a cheery “Woof, Woof.” Only he knew she could stand up for herself if push came to shove. There was a little rottweiler in there somewhere. Maybe, just maybe a pinch of Solomon R. Guggenheim, but definitely more than a smidgen of rottweiler.

He began trudging up the two flights of stairs to his room at the top of the house.

“You have some mail. I put it on your bed. It’s safer that way.”

“Thank you, Mrs Guggenheim.”

“Four letters and a bill of some sort.”

“Thank you, Mrs Guggenheim.”

“And a couple of circulars.”

“Thank you, Mrs Guggenheim.”

He unlocked the door to his small but discerningly shabby digs in Camden Town.

Frayed at the edges it may have been, a place that Solomon R. Guggenheim may not have been acquainted with, but it was his little domain and his friends seemed to like it. Stereo, TV, fridge, sink and bed. It did the job. What more could he ask?

Admittedly it did smell a bit, but you got used to the aroma of curries from the Indian takeaway at the back. Anyway, he rather liked it. The only problem was that it made him feel perpetually hungry, but at least they gave him a discount as a regular customer.

True to her word, his landlady had placed his post on his bed. She always did that. She said it was safer that way. She always said it was safer that way. You never know who might just walk off with it otherwise. Not that any of her tenants were thieves, you understand, but you just never know, so best to be safe. And if that gave her the opportunity of snooping around to see if any girls had been in there, then so be it. She didn’t want any girls in that room, that’s what she said. He didn’t know what it was she thought she’d find. Was it anything as obvious as a silk stocking (she was old enough to have worn those in her younger days) or a suspender belt (for the silk stockings) or a pair of camiknickers or pants

big enough to run up a flagpole or a bra with the capacity to save quite a few of those that didn't make it to the Carpathia? Or was it altogether something more forensic? An unidentified pubic hair, maybe? Or a carefully wrapped tampon which was hidden discreetly inside a bag inside a bag inside a bag? Or a used condom that obstinately refused to flush away. Just when you thought you had it, just when you thought you were safe, you'd almost miss it slip back round the bend and lie there, floating accusingly. The johnny with Johnny written all over it. Maybe that's why she called him Johnny. Had she heard his endless attempts to wash one down the bog? (Hey! Chance would be a fine thing. Only, it wasn't that sort of chance).

He sat on the bed and looked at the envelopes.

Nothing much looked like a bill to him, but he knew that Mrs Guggenheim was unfailingly correct. Her ability to categorise mail was entirely baffling, yet he knew with absolute confidence that one of them had to be a bill. If Mrs Guggenheim had said so, then it was so. There were no identifying features on the outside of any of them. There were no special franking marks or adverts. No give-away return addresses. Absolutely nothing, so far as he could tell, which might hint at the contents within.

He did once try and get around to asking her how she did it, but she just shrugged and said it was "Experience." What experience, he wondered? The experience of age? The experience of being a landlady? Had she once worked for the Post Office perhaps? Or was there more to it? Was there far more to Mrs Guggenheim than met the casual eye? Perhaps she was very experienced at steaming letters open and then resealing them. Perhaps she had once been a spy. Espionage. Or counter espionage. Or counter counter espionage (if there was such a thing).

He often wondered, but he never found out.

Sure enough, the third envelope he opened was a bill, but that wasn't important. What was important was the fourth envelope. That was very important.

It was a letter from his bank. A letter asking him to make an appointment at his earliest convenience to discuss his account. His account was problematic.

It had been problematic for quite a while, but he'd managed somehow or other. He'd always managed.

"Shit," he said to himself as he fell back on the bed. "Shit, shit, shit."

But this wasn't lucky bird shit. This was the sort of shit which hits the fan and there was a whole heap of shit and the kind of fan you'd normally only find in a hypersonic wind tunnel.

And if he wouldn't mind, his earliest convenience should be within the next seven days.

Shit and fan were on a collision course.