

THE SANDWICH



Paul Farnsworth

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All characters, companies, organisations and grotty nonsense
are fictitious, and any similarity to persons living or dead is
entirely coincidental.

Introduction

“A lot of grotty nonsense.”

I should explain.

In 2021 I set out to post something new to *The University of the Bleeding Obvious* every day (the UK's seventh funniest comedy site – what do you mean you've never heard of it?). This would be a continuing narrative, unplanned, freewheeling, with no particular structure and unhindered by continuity, consistency of style or logic. I wasn't sure how long it should go on for; each day I would just write whatever came to mind and see what emerged.

In the end it went on for three hundred and sixty-five days, and *this* is what emerged...

One

I moved the fridge yester-Wednesday and found an old sandwich all stinked up and loathsome. Ham and cheese, I think it may have been once upon a while. Normally I would hurl something like that onto the roof with all the other sludgy nonsense, but this one was different. Fuzzy different, like I had a special connection with it. I think it was the way it was gurning at me. So I put in on a saucer, and I put it on the windowsill so that it could watch the traffic smiling by. I think we are going to be friends.

Two

Yester-morning when I slid down the stairs, my sandwich had shimmied away someplace else. I looked really hard upstairs, downstairs, in all the cupboards and in my specialized places. Eventually I found it in the kitchen, dancing with the tomatoes. My how he has grown! Some of the green bits have dropped off but all around his middle he is all bloated and squishy. It is big smelly though, so I thought it best to put it outside by the bins because the bin boys won't take it away and the birds won't attack it because of the gradient.

Also, there are no crabs by the bins. I've checked. There are no crabs anywhere else either, just so you know, but there are none by the bins in particular. I think it will be happy there.

Three

My sandwich has annexed the shed and now my lawnmower grooves about on the lawn by itself. Oh my, what a palaver and so improper! I suppose it's all right really, because my sandwich is now all massively big and the postman was thunderstruck on Tuesday when he popped round the corner to release his package.

Actually, I'm not very much surprised because when I went out to have a peep at my sandwich it was much grumblesome and I had to tether it down with strong twine. Also, I think it may have eaten next door's cat, silly pussy, so I have to write a grovel letter to the lady next door to make it all better, and possibly buy her a flower. I will also apologise about the screaming at the same time and pledge that I will not do it no more. I think she will be pleased with that.

Four

I called up a man to come and look at my sandwich. I think he came from Wolverhampton. My sandwich is properly large now. It is pressing against the fence and the back wall, and during the night it mutters and squirts and makes a sloppy fizzing sound like the noise of a busy lizard drowning in lemonade. So this is why I called the Wolverhampton man.

On the man's card it says he is an expert on garden pests. I would like a card like that. I don't know what I would call myself on my card. The lady next door made some

suggestions, but she has got a naughty mouth. Anyhow, the man didn't do anything. He just looked at my sandwich and said that he specialised in Japanese knotweed and my sandwich was well out of his comfort zone.

After the man left, the sandwich started doing the electric boogaloo and firing conkers into the air, which was stupid and not at all what you would expect in the middle of the week. My sandwich might become annoying and I'm starting to think I should never have moved my fridge.

Five

Remind me I need to buy a new trowel.

Anyway, today I got a letter on thick paper from the council. I think it's quite encouraging that they can afford thick paper. It means that austerity is over. The contents of the letter were not so much welcome. They said that my sandwich is a mental hazard because it is now bigger than the house and it looms over the bus shelter, in a bad way. They said it makes the air all grotty and the throb-throb pulsating glow throughout the night time interferes with the planes from the nearby airport. Some people can be really touchy.

The long, tall, short and squat of it all is that I have to shift it, which presents big problem number one because I've got nothing big enough to put it in. Somebody really clever said that because it's gone all squishy-squashy on the underneath parts it ought to be ever-so-quite-easy to slide

it towards the downhill bit of the street. Even so, I will need a ten-ton truck to pull it and I will have to demolish the garage. Otherwisely, I might cut it into chunks and get rid of it bit by bit by bit, probably by air mail or electronic diffusion. I'm going to get a spoon and give it a go, although I'm not very much looking forward to it because the last time I went near it, it slapped me in the face.

Six

It's gone!

After spending the whole morning and a little bit of the afternoon pulling and pushing, and slipping and sliding, I finally gave up and went and had a lie down and also a long hard think about some things. But then, when I got up, my sandwich had completely disappeared! Wooha, spooky. It was like it had never been there at all, apart from the right old mess that it had made of the garden and the rank smell that I can still smell when I do a sniff.

I miss it already. I wonder if it was something I said? Now I am really worried about it so if you see it, you will let me know, won't you? You will recognise it by the distinctive mole on its left side and the slight limp when it walks, and also by it being a mutant twenty-foot-high sandwich.

I think I'm going inside now, where I can sit and be quiet for a while.

Seven

Do you know where I can get a hellycopter? I have seen them in the sky, which is clever because you never see them flapping. Birds flap, and you can tempt them down from the clouds with a wriggly worm or a sexy shimmy, but that doesn't seem to work with hellycopters. Not on a Tuesday, anyway, which is when I usually do it. Pooh! Or maybe it's me that has to do the wriggle and the worm that does the shimmy. Confusing, ain't it? Someone ought to write it down in a book and put it in a library.

Any-when, the very excellent reason I want a hellycopter is so that I can zoom about the sky, whoosh-whoosh-whoosh, and see if I can spot my sandwich with binnoclears. A nice lady phoned me yesteryear to tell me that she might have seen it down by the old gasworks. Now listen, and probably maybe write this down, I don't need the hellycopter to spot my sandwich, since at the last count it was twenty foot high, and you could see it all the way from Cleethorpes. But the gasworks is not so obvious, even when you're close up, so I need the hellycopter so that I can find it. Thank you.

Also, has anyone got any binoclears?

Eight

The weather bloke said that today the sky would be all made of dribbles. I am guessing this would make it difficult to fly a hellycopter around and spot my sandwich

from the air. This would be a problem if I had managed to get hold of a hellycopter, but I haven't, so it isn't.

But this is no matter because... drum roll please... I could use a drone!

I haven't got a drone either, but you can buy them off the wide world web if you have some money. I have some money hidden in a sock, but I'm saving it up to buy an otter, so instead I have made a drone of my very own using a balloon, some string, an old Polaroid camera and an empty pop bottle. It was easy-peasy - all I needed to do was bundle up the old Polaroid camera to the balloon using the string, and shazam! I think I am probably an aviation genius. Turns out I didn't need the old pop bottle after all, so if anyone wants it, it's yours. It's plenty sticky though, so you'll need to rinse it out.

The inaugural flight is planned for o-six-hundred hours tomorrow, whenever that is.

Nine

This morning I released my home-made balloon-drone into the wild blue yonder. To make a balloon go up-up-up into the sky you have to fill it with heliums and not potatoes. Luckily, I knew this already, unlike Gary Spenville, who once filled a balloon with half a pound of King Edwards, then just watched it tumble along the ground and plink into a gutter like a sick badger. You probably don't know who Gary Spenville is, in which case

lucky you, because he is a dick so let's not hear any more about him.

Fortunately, I had some packets of heliums under the stairs that were left over from pancake day, so I emptied them into my balloon and went outside to release it (you have to go outside to release balloons full of heliums, because that is where the sky is). It made me all warm and fuzzy to watch my balloon go up-up-up into the sky. Success!

Sadly, it kept going up-up-up until it bugged off completely, taking my camera with it. Not success. I'm going to have to come up with a new plan.

Ten

I have hired a private detective man to track down my missing giant sandwich. You are probably saying: "Hmm, well, yes, but how on earth do you go about hiring a private detective man?" Well shut up and stop fidgeting and I will tell you. What I did was I shimmied up to a man who was grooving about at a bus stop in a raincoat and I offered him twelve pounds to take my case. I mean, of course, that it was the grooving man who was wearing a raincoat, not me. Nor was it the bus stop. But that's not important right now because it wasn't even raining anyway. The point is that I slid over to him and said: "You are a private detective man, here is twelve pounds, please find my sandwich." I said it out of the corner of my mouth, like they do in the films, and a little bit of dribble came out, but I think he understood. He told me that he wasn't a private

detective man, which is exactly the sort of thing that a private detective man *would* say, then he took my money and got on the bus.

Obviously now I will have to save up all over again to buy myself an otter, looking for 2ps in the gutter and scrabbling around in sludgy bin places for spare change, but it will be money well spent when I locate my sandwich.

Eleven

Well this is a jolly old load of cobblers, I must say. I have stayed in the house all day with my nose squished up against the windowpane, waiting for the private detective man to report back to me on his progress. My windows smell like mouldy old socks, not nice.

Well then, at 10:16 am precisely, the postman came and kicked something through my letterbox. I know it was 10:16 precisely because I wrote it down in my big blue book. This is the same book that I use to write down my thoughts about trees and also to draw pictures of things I look at on Wednesdays, but I used a different page to stop me getting confused. Whatever. I thought that the postman might have delivered a message but all there was was a bill for bicycle parts, a leaflet about pizzas and a birthday card from my dead Uncle Malcolm. Stop sending me birthday cards, dead Uncle Malcolm, it is not my birthday!

I thought that the pizza leaflet might be a coded message, so I tried to decipher it using a cipher. A cipher is a large

purple vegetable that is used for decoding messages, and also for making mysterious stew. I learned some intriguing things about pepperoni, but not much else.

At 11:33 a lady came and knocked at my door and asked me to give her some money for her hedgehog charity. I thought that she might be the private detective man in disguise, so I shouted at her "Where's my sandwich? Where's my sandwich? Where's my sandwich?" over and over again. She ran away.

Then in the afternoon, a pigeon landed on my garden wall. I thought it might be carrying a message, so I pounced on it and wrestled it to the ground, but the flappy bastard punched me in the face and zapped off into the sky. It has been a long day, but I am no closer to finding my sandwich and I am covered in scratches.

Twelve

Last night a man in the local paper said that a huge massive sandwich had crashed through his hedge, smashed one of his garden gnomes and scared his second-best pussy cat. There was a picture of him pointing at the shattered gnome and he looked very cross. The caption said he was furious, and he was bright red even though the photo was in black and white.

There was also an article about the dog mess outside the library, but that was of no particular interest to me, as I haven't got a dog and I don't read books, so I made an extra special effort not to read it.

Later on there was a thing on the evening news where the lady said that a dirty big humongous sandwich had interfered with traffic on the ring road and that there were tailbacks all the way back to the wallpaper and carpet shop. There was a red shouty man on this too, but this time he was in colour.

Then, before I went to bed at about eight o'clock, I looked at some of the pictures on the Wide World Web, because I like looking at photos of smiling ants. Some Facebook people were talking about a giant sandwich that had churned up all the flower beds in the memorial gardens. They seemed very cross and said it was probably something to do with Brexit.

Now, I can't be absolutely certain, but all these happenstances might have something to do with my sandwich. It would be a jolly old coincidence if it wasn't, so in the morning I have decided to set up an incident room to track its movements.

Thirteen

CSI Sandwich is go!

I have decided to set up my incident room in my garage. Unfortunately I don't have a garage, so I have used the garage belonging to the lady next door. I didn't ask her permission, because she is a nasty witch and would probably say no, but she never goes in there, so it should all be ok. I must say, she keeps some strange things in there. There are fifteen and a half pairs of shoes, a bowl

full of Weebles, is a capstan lathe and picture of a horse with a bit missing (I do not know which bit is missing, because it is missing). There is also a weird thing in the corner with a blanket over it - it makes groaning noises and I dare not go near it.

Anyway, for my incident room I have put up a map on the wall and stuck pins in it and criss-crossed lots of different coloured strings over it. The map is of Corfu, which is not properly useful, but the only other map I have got is of Disneyland, and I have spilled Bovril on it, which is absolutely not good at all.

I have also cut up articles from the local paper and stuck them to the walls: there is a story about the chip shop, some horrid business taking place in the memorial gardens, a man with a big cheque and a lot of people pointing at potholes. There's not much about my sandwich yet, but it's early days so far. So now I just have to sit tight, try not to suck my thumb and wait for the reports to flood in.

Fourteen

The next door lady was not happy with me using her garage as an incident room. I think she must have heard me whimpering and came to investigate. She was very angry and shouted bad things and threw dirty mud at me that she had collected from the garden. I think there may have been flames coming out of her nose as well, but I may be getting confused with a film I once saw. Have you seen it too? It is ever so good,

The lady told me that I had to clear out, otherwise she would phone her son, who is a big man with a truck, and he would come over and knock my block off. I don't know what 'my block' is, but I'm super sure that I would not like it to be knocked off, so I said sorry to the thing under the blanket and left on foot. (I say 'on foot' in case you thought I caught a train or called a taxi or something, which would have been silly, as I only live next door.)

The whole enterprise had been a load of bum anyway, since while I was in my incident room I didn't get any reports of my sandwich at all. I think this was because I didn't have a phone and nobody knew I was there. It's back to the drawing board, then - or rather, it would be if I hadn't left the drawing board in the lady's garage.

Fifteen

Now things are actually getting proper serious. Today I got a parking ticket for my sandwich and they said that as I am the registered keeper, I will have to pay it, and if I don't they will send a man round to clamp me. I didn't like the sound of that, so I sent them a postal order straight away.

The good thing is that now I know that three days ago my sandwich was illegally parked on the road near the adventure playground. Good oh! And so I made a packed lunch, put on my favourite hat (no, not that one; the green one) and I set off to investigate.

The adventure playground has got two swings in it, plus a slide and a big concrete pipe half buried in the ground. I

think the pipe is where you have the adventure, although I have never seen the attraction myself as it is dank and extra stringy with cobwebs, and I think foxes do their mess in there. Anyway, when I got there, there was no sign of my sandwich so I had a go on the swing instead. Unfortunately, it was all rusty and would only swing one way, which meant I went up in the air and didn't come back down again.

So now I am stuck up in the air. Help! I don't know how high it is because I'm not good at judging altitudes, but I think it must be round about a thousand meters. It's too high to jump, anyway. Not that I'm scared of hitting the ground - no way Pedro! I am worried that when I hit the ground I won't stop and will keep on going until I reach the bowels of the Earth. You see, it's not heights I'm scared of, it's depths.

Sixteen

I don't know if you have ever spent the night on a rusty old swing that it is stuck up in the air and won't come down, but it's no fun, I can tell you. In fact, I think I will put a review on the Wide World Web, because that's something you can do now. "One star," I will say. "It made my bottom numb and strange birds came in the night and stole my pork pie. Do not bother."

I did have an interesting view from where I was, though. There was a loud pub a couple of streets away with music and flashing lights coming out of it. At one point, some men came out into the road and there was a big fight, with

all scrabbling and heaving and grunting and stuff. Then, later on, a man and a lady came out and started doing sexy things, scrabbling and heaving and grunting and stuff. It was a lot like the fight.

I must have dozed off then, because when I woke up everything had gone quiet, except that I could hear the sound of running water. I looked down and saw that there was a man doing a widdle up against my swing. Now I know why it is all rusty. I shouted down to him for help, but I must have startled him because all he did was look around in confusion and run off. It looks like I'm going to be here all night.

Seventeen

When I woke up this morning the sky was loathsome and the clouds were grotty, and this was not nice because I was still stuck on my swing and therefore rather much closer to the grotty clouds than I would like to be. I had hoped that during the night I might have been rescued by air-sea rescue - which is not so strange as you might think, since I was stuck in the air and this is at least half of what they do. But this had not happened, worse luck, so it looked like I would have to rely on my own initiative.

The one good thing about being stuck on a swing in the 'up' position is that it allows you to spy out the land, and so I did some blinking with my eyes to make sure they were clear, and then had a good old gander. And what do you think I did see? I'll tell you: I saw a trail of breadcrumbs! Clearly my sandwich must be moulting and now it would

be simplicity itself to track it down. If only I could get down from this horrid swing.

And then I suddenly had a brain melt. I could unravel my cardigan and use it as a rope to shimmy my way down to the ground. So this is what I did. I had to jump the last couple of feet, but thankfully I stopped when I hit the ground and did not keep going, so that was a relief. It felt good to be on the ground again. I took a moment or two to reacclimatise myself to the altitude, then I set off along the breadcrumb trail.

Eighteen

I am super good at following things. I once followed a cat for about twenty metres, but then it jumped over a wall and so I didn't follow it any more. Anyhow, it was a dirty cat and I had a sneaking suspicion that I knew where it was going. Anyway, following the breadcrumb trail was dead easy for me. From the adventure playground it went across the road and through some trees, over a pile of slimy wriggles, then through a gate and across a field. There were some cows in the field, but I don't like to mix with their sort, so I ignored them.

I crossed a babbling stream, but I was far too busy to stop and listen to what it was going on about, so I carried on, following the trail around the base of a small mound or hummock. Suddenly I heard a splap-slap-slap noise and around the corner came a fat duck, waddling along on its big stupid feet, pecking away at the breadcrumbs. We

stopped, facing each other. It looked at me. I looked at it. It kept looking at me, so I looked at it some more.

I was really proper angry because it had gobbled up my breadcrumb trail and now I was at a dead end, so I did my best googly-eyed stare. But the fat duck just shimmied past me, following the breadcrumb trail back towards the adventure playground, pecking and gobbling as it went. I screamed that I hoped it got stuck on one of the swings like I had done, but then I felt stupid because I remembered that ducks can fly, so I just sat down on the grass and felt rotten.

Nineteen

I once heard a man say that when life gives you lemons, make lemonade. Well, I didn't have no lemons and I don't like lemonade because I've heard that if too many bubbles go up your nose it can take the top off your head off. Then the rain gets in and makes your brains squishy. I suppose you could wear a hat, but then I think it would be far easier to exercise some self-restraint and not drink all the fizzy bubbles in the first place. Jeez, what are you people like! Actually, I think that the man was telling me a metaphor; what he was trying to say was that you have to make the best of a bad situation, but why he couldn't just say that instead of blathering on about fruit, I will never know.

My bad situation was that I was no longer able to track my sandwich, all because of a dirty duck, but I wasn't going to let that get me down. I sang a little song to myself for a few minutes, just to lift my spirits, then took out my

notebook and special pencil and started to draw an artist's impression of my sandwich. I think it was quite a good likeness, even if the crusts were a bit wonky, and it was certainly good enough to show to people when I asked them if they had seen it.

In fact, I was so happy with it that I helped myself to a fruit gum and sang another little song, but I nearly choked during the second verse, so I stopped singing and spat the fruit gum out. Instead, I sat and watched a wriggly worm for a little while, which was an altogether safer pastime.

Twenty

So, I had drawn my artist's impression, I had sung my happy song and I had watched the wriggly worm as it had done its special shimmy. Now it was time to resume the hunt for my wayward sandwich, but just as I hitched up my trousers and was about to set off, I heard stomping and walloping and shouting noises from afar. I climbed up the greasy hillock and looked over into the next field, where I saw some soldiers doing manoeuvres. I did a manoeuvre once, but it put my back out and I had to stay in bed for a week and eat crisps.

Now here was a bit of luck, I thought to myself. Perhaps I could enlist the help of the military to find my sandwich. They would have radar and everything. There was a man in the middle who was shouting and had a different hat on, so I figured that must be the General. I marched up to him, saluted and asked if his army could help me find my sandwich, but he told me he didn't have an army and that

he and his friends were estate agents, doing a team building day. I would like to do a team-building day, but I don't have a team, so it would be difficult. I could do a *me*-building day, but that would not be as much fun, although the catering would be much easier.

Twenty-One

The first time I met an estate agent, he was wearing a nice suit and he was very very very very boring. True story. It was long ago and he was quite a young estate agent with his whole career in front of him. I guess he must be much older now, because it was so long ago, and it's odd to think that he must have spent his whole life being very very very very boring.

Anyway, apart from being very very very very boring, estate agents aren't very good at doing much else. They're not even all that good at selling houses, which is a bit of a problem. Here was a whole field full of them doing a team-building day, but even so I knew they would be no good at helping me find my giant sandwich, so I did a smart about turn and prepared to bugger off.

Then I noticed all the tanks and the guns and the camouflage gear and I did a think to myself: hmm, I thought, what would estate agents be doing with tanks and guns and camouflage gear? Perhaps the general was playing a trick on me, so I asked him if he was absolutely sure that they were estate agents. Ha ha! He buckled under my relentless questioning and admitted that they were the army after all, but that it was a secret and that I

should not tell anyone. So he made me sign the Official Secrets Act, and then I showed him the artist's impression of my sandwich. Now we should get somewhere!

Twenty-Two

Good news! The army general has said he will help me to find my sandwich. He says that he will despatch a squad with a special heat-seeking wotsit and a couple of laser-guided thingies, and that he will call up the RAF and get them to parachute in some tracker dogs. Get in! I did a little dance to show him how happy I was.

Howsoever, before he could do all this, he said that I would have to do a secret mission for him. This was not so good and I didn't feel like dancing any more. I looked at my watch and saw that it was already half past three, which was a big problem because I like to do all my secret missions in the morning. That way I can get them over with early, and it leaves the afternoon free for playing darts. Nevertheless, the general was very stern and said that this was a matter of national security and that my country was depending on me, so I couldn't refuse.

So this was my secret mission:

- Step 1 - Go to the shops;
- Step 2 - Buy a packet of milk chocolate digestives;
- Step 3 - Infiltrate the secret weapons programme of an enemy power, steal confidential information and destroy their capacity to take offensive action;

- Step 4 - Bring the biscuits back and don't forget the change.

I agreed, but only if I could wear a disguise. And so, I changed into a wetsuit and top hat, snuggled into my nineteenth century military greatcoat, made sure my ballet slippers were tied up really tight, then ponced off to the shop.

Twenty-Three

I do not know whether you have heard this about me or not, but I am not a professional spy. I did apply to be a spy once by filling in a questionnaire that was in the back of the *Radio Times*, but in the end I decided against it because of all the travelling. Actually, I would quite like to zoop about the planet and visit far-flung exotic locations, but for your expenses they only pay 45p a mile, so I told them they could stuff it.

Here's the thing though, even though I am not a spy, I know how to carry off a disguise. You don't do it like James Bond does it in the James Bond films; you have to keep a low profile. You certainly don't go around setting off explosions, charging through walls in armoured vehicles or screaming out of the sky with a union jack parachute. That is how a twat would do it.

So, when I got to the shops, dressed in my wetsuit, army greatcoat and top hat, I remained calm and collected, didn't draw attention to myself and, as a result, the lady behind the counter had no inkling that I was on a secret

mission. I even managed to exchange a few pleasantries with her in the local language, which wasn't so very difficult as this happened to be 'English', the very same language that I spoke. At one point her hand went beneath the counter and my heart skipped a beat. Could she be an enemy agent? Was she reaching for a concealed weapon? Thankfully, she was only reaching for a concealed cup of coffee, which is not nearly as dangerous as a semi-automatic pistol or a commando knife, even if it is made with full fat milk.

Having successfully negotiated the purchase of the packet of milk chocolate digestives, I exited the shop, pausing only to hiss the words 'objective achieved' into my lapel. I don't think there was a concealed microphone there, but I had bought the coat second-hand, and you never know.

Twenty-Four

The most extraordinary thing has happened, and now I am all of a tiswas. Having successfully completed my secret mission and acquired a packet of milk chocolate digestives, I returned to the field where the army men were, and they weren't. Weren't there, I mean. Disappeared like phantoms. Woooah! Before, there had been about sixty men flannelling about, half a dozen armoured vehicles, three rows of tents and a shouty man flinging stuff at them, whom I had taken to be a general. Now there was just a sheep, and it stood looking at me as if I was some kind of weirdo, which I thought was an unnecessarily judgemental thing for a sheep to do. I looked behind a

tree, but the army wasn't there, so I plumped down on the grass and scratched my noggin.

I'm pretty sure that I hadn't imaged them, because I'm just not that imaginative. The biggest number of people I had *ever* imagined had been three, and even now I suspect that one of those might have been real. Imagining sixty people, plus all their stuff, was way out of my league. Perhaps they had been called away for an urgent war or a barbecue or something? I hope it was for the barbecue rather than the war, as there are usually fewer casualties at a barbecue, although I appreciate that often it can be a close-run thing.

I thought I'd open the packet of biscuits and have a think about it, but the sheep kept watching me and there was bloodlust in its eyes and a cruel sneer forming on its mouth, so I thought it would be best to head for home before anything horrid happened.

Twenty-Five

When I reached my house I knocked on my front door - rat-a-tat-tat, I went. Rat-a-tat-tat, went I, and rat-a-tat-tat all over again. I waited, but no one answered so I figured that I must be out. Well, I didn't have time to wait for me to get back - I could be out buying chips, for instance, and that would take FOREVER - so I sashayed round the side of the house, limboed under the gate, slipped down the side of the shed, splashed through the ornamental pond, circumnavigated the blast furnace and climbed in through the kitchen window. Then I went and opened the front

door to let myself in, but by this time I had already gone. Some people are just so impatient!

I slammed the door angrily and that's when I noticed something on the doormat. It was yet another bloody badger - I keep getting these, I think they get into the house down the chimney. I kicked it aside and underneath it was a postcard sent from the Lake District. It read:

Hello,

I am in the Lake District. It is very damp here, but I have an umbrella and I have met some very nice fish.

Weather is here, wish you were lovely.

Love and kisses

Your Sandwich.

Sooooooooo, I deduced, scratching my chin thoughtfully, my sandwich was in the Lake District and it was taunting me with scenic views of Coniston Water. The swine! There was no time to lose. Luckily I was already in my wetsuit, so I grabbed my snorkel and flippers, then I hailed a train and instructed it to take me to the nearest cab rank. Then I caught a cab to the train station, and soon I was on a train and hurtling towards Windermere. The game was afoot!

Twenty-Six

I have been on a train four times in my life, and so I consider myself something of an expert. Admittedly, one of those times was at the fair, and some people might say it wasn't a proper train, but I think it was a reasonable simulation of railway travel and so it still counts.

There are some things that you must try to remember if you want to get the most out of your train experience. The first is that you shouldn't sit though the whole journey making 'CHOO-CHOO-CHOO' noises at the top of your voice. This is a very unfashionable thing to do and people are bound to stare at you, and sometimes even poke you a bit. Instead, what you must do is quietly go 'choo-choo-choo' in a whisper, and stop every five minutes to take a breath otherwise you will go blue and drop off your seat.

The second thing you should do - and this is especially important if you are in a hurry - is that you should try to sit as close to the front of the train as possible. This is just common sense, really, since the front arrives at your destination first. Sometimes, depending on the length of the train, you can get to where you're going a whole hour earlier if you sit at the front instead of the back.

Thirdly, and this is the third point that I want to make, you must pay a penalty fine of one thousand pounds for not having a ticket. Some people say that you can avoid the fine by purchasing a ticket from the desk at the railway station, or from a ticket machine, or from the conductor on the train, but the people who say this don't know nothing, because the desk at the railway station will always be

closed, the ticket machine will always be broken and the conductor on the train will just get angry and start shouting regulations at you.

Anyway, my train journey to the Lake District was quite uneventful, the conductor was more than happy when I gave him one thousand pounds, and I sat back and relaxed, knowing that very soon I would be arriving in Windermere and be reunited with my sandwich.

Twenty-Seven

Last time we spoke, I was telling you that I had got on a train to Windermere, and I was banging on about the things you should know when travelling by rail. Well, I forgot to mention that you should always have at least some idea where the train you are on is going. The train I was on wasn't going to Windermere. It was going to Goole. The reason for this was that back at the station I had got on the first train that I had liked the look of. This method usually works, but on this occasion it had let me down rather badly.

I have no idea where Goole is, so I found myself quite disorientated when my train reached the end of the line and I was thrown out. I was simply not prepared for this: I had no understanding of the local customs or language, no idea if the indigenous wildlife posed a threat, or whether it was safe to drink the rainwater. There was nothing for it but to start from first principles and try to deduce something about this strange place.

Well, the atmosphere was breathable and the gravity felt normal, so I felt it was fairly safe to assume I was still on Earth. My next step was to try and establish contact with one of the locals. The first three people I pounced on managed to run away, but on the fourth occasion I cornered a nervous looking man in a narrow alley between an Indian restaurant and a Tesco Express. Now, how to communicate? I have a smattering of Dutch - by which I mean that I know how to say 'smattering' in Dutch - but other than that my language skills are not great. And so there was nothing for it but to resort to the international language of mime, but after pulling a few shapes the man started shouting at me. I won't repeat what he said here, because very little of it was complimentary, but it was clearly English. Most definitely it was, because I have heard many of those words directed at me before.

And so, communication was established and, after our initial misunderstanding, the man was able to recommend a guest house to which I could retire and plan my next move.

Twenty-Eight

Today I decided to do some quiet contemplation to try and think myself out of my situation. Quiet contemplation is something that gurus and mystics do when they strain and scrunch up their faces. They usually do it sitting on top of a holy mountain or somewhere like that, but I was doing it in room seven of Mrs Vermicelli's guest house in Goole,

and the drip-drip-drip of the tap and the thunk-thunk-thunk of the boiler made my brain fizzy.

This was my problem: I needed to be in Windermere, where my sandwich was, but I was in Goole, wherever that is. So far, so groovy. Surely, I could just get on a train and whoosh on over there? Nope, I couldn't, because I would need one thousand pounds to use the train (I have explained this before, *please* pay attention) and I had used my last one thousand pounds to get *here*. After paying my board to Mrs Vermicelli and buying some new socks, because my old ones were an inappropriate colour, I now had only three pounds and twenty-two pence.

Well, this quiet contemplation was all very well for gurus and mystics, but it was making me dizzy, so I went down to breakfast and stared at a piece of toast for fifteen minutes, because I am on a diet. In the breakfast room there was the reigning North Yorkshire Regional Tap Dancing champion, a man who sat slowly dribbling into his porridge and a lady who sold outboard motors. The tap dancer was tap-tap-tapping all the time and I couldn't get a word in edgeways, the dribbly man didn't respond, even when I shouted 'GOOD MORNING!' right down his earhole, so I went and talked to the lady selling outboard motors. She showed me some brochures and told me that I ought to buy a green one, because it would go well with my eyes. I said that I didn't have a boat, but she told me that didn't matter and that all sorts of people were buying outboard motors these days, even if they were landlocked. Then I said that I didn't have any money, and she told me that didn't even matter either, because I could have it on credit and pay when the cows come home, or next January,

whichever was the soonest. Anyway, the upshot of all this is that I now have an outboard motor.

Twenty-Nine

Hello Gary, if you're reading this. I just want to say about last Tuesday that no, I DIDN'T throw your poxy scooter into the hedge. And anyway, even if I did - which I didn't - you were probably asking for it anyway.

Sorry about that. It was just a personal message to someone I know who is a complete TOOL and thinks he can go around saying bad things about me to everyone he knows. But let's not bother about him. You remember last time that I was doing some quiet contemplation and had just bought an outboard motor? The trouble was that I couldn't really think straight at Mrs Vermicelli's guest house, what with all that tap dancing going on, so I took my outboard motor for a walk. It was clear that I would have to earn some money if I was going to get to Windermere, and that's when I had my great idea. The thing to do, I realised, would be to knock on people's doors and ask if they had any odd jobs for me - and so that is exactly the thing I did.

Well the first three doors I knocked on were no good - the people had jobs for me, but they weren't nearly odd enough. The fourth was no good either. The man there was very angry when I asked him if there was any service that I could perform for him and he told me *exactly* what I should do. I won't go into detail, but it sounded most

unpleasant and unsanitary, and although I said I'd give it a go, we couldn't agree a price.

The fifth house I knocked on was much more promising. The lady who answered said that she needed someone to take her cat to the pictures. This was certainly a very odd job and so I agreed, telling her that my fee would be one thousand pounds. She said that she would be prepared to pay me twenty pounds. Well, we haggled a bit and eventually compromised on twenty pounds. Another success story for the small businessman!

Thirty

I had to pay for three tickets to the pictures - one for me, one for the lady's cat and one for the outboard motor. I can't remember the name of the film that we saw, but it had that tall man in it who was in that thing. You know the man I mean? Yes, you do, he was wearing a hat and he was in that thing. Well, him - he was in this film as well, and he was being all shouty, and striding about the place and slapping people.

At first, he went to a bar to talk to some 'informants' and he slapped them until they told him the things he wanted to know. Then he went to a warehouse, where there were some people loading boxes into a lorry, there was a fight and he slapped them until they ran off. After that he visited a garage, then a large house with an ornamental fountain and then a police station - and during these visits he slapped two mechanics, a delivery driver, a butler, a gamekeeper and the district attorney. But then the bad

guys were on to him and he had to lie low in a convent. He stayed there for either three weeks, or three months, I can't remember which, and the nuns looked after him and showed him all the good works they did, and taught him to be a kinder and more respectful human being. Then, when the danger had passed and it was time for him to emerge from hiding, he thanked them for sheltering him, told them that he had become a changed man, slapped the Mother Superior and left.

It was a really good film, you should watch it. It had that man in it, who was in that thing.

Unfortunately, the cat didn't think much of it and left halfway through. I suppose I should have left with it, but I had already made a lot of people angry by dragging my outboard motor past them to get to my seat. I didn't want all that to kick off again, so I stayed put until the film had finished.

Thirty-One

I did a very odd job and it did not go so well. I had to take a cat to the pictures, but it didn't like the film and now I have lost it. Also, I have just realised that I am out of pocket, because it's cost me more in cinema tickets than I actually earned. Also, again, I am having to lug an outboard motor around with me, and it's becoming a bit of a chore. I suppose I'd better find this cat and give it a good talking to before it turns me in to the RSPCA.

In order to track down a cat you need to think and act like a cat, which I can't do because I am actually a human being. True story. However, I can do a reasonably good chicken impression, so I waddled around for a while, pecking at the ground, in the hope that it would give me some insight into where this ruddy cat has got to. It didn't.

To cheer myself up, I stopped being a chicken and went to an arcade to play Laser Space Battle. Laser Space Battle is a game where you play as a giant brain zooming through the endless wastes of interstellar space, shooting the waves of ancient, long-dead warp-ghosts. I like it a lot, although someone I know called Gary says that it is a 'bleeding existential nightmare'. As it happens, I didn't have enough money to play it anyway, so I just hung around the arcade offering other people the benefit of my advice. That's when I saw the missing cat, trying to win a cuddly rat on the claw machine. I crept up on it and hit it with a chair, then dragged the unconscious feline out by its ankles. I know that this is not a recommended way of dealing with a stray cat, but this one had really pissed me off.

Thirty-Two

I took the lady's cat back and apologised that I had hit it with a chair, but the ruddy thing had been doing my nut in. The lady said that she understood perfectly, and that she often felt the same way. She gave me a cup of tea and a lump of cake that she had made out of old newspapers, which tasted horrible but was very informative. She said she had another odd job for me, but I stuck my fingers in

my ears and went 'la-la-la-la-la-la' until her mouth stopped moving. Then I told her that I was out of the odd job game, because it was more trouble than it was worth. There were no hard feelings and we parted as friends. She even let me hit her cat with a chair again, for old times' sake.

There had to be a better way of making money, I thought, and do you know, I was right! Just down the road I passed a notice in a shop window that said 'Magician wanted for children's party' and my brain went pop. I could be a magician, easy. Anyone can pull a rabbit out of a hat - all you need is the right hat (one with a rabbit in it). And I reckon I could easily saw someone in half, if I put my back into it.

First I would need a costume and some props, so I went into a nearby charity shop and spent my last few quids on a cape, a plastic policeman's helmet, a *Jaws* paperback and a *Parade of Pops* LP from 1972. It was only when I emerged that I realised that I had bought a load of crap, none of which would help me to become a magician. I kept the cape, threw everything else in the bin and then ponced off to my first show.

Thirty-Three

I am now a magician. I have decided to call myself The Great Wazzo, and I have a cape and stick that I found that looks a little bit like a wand. It only had a little bit of doggy do-do on it, but I wiped that off on a passer-by. The house where the children's birthday party was looked really posh,

so I told myself that I needed to be on my best behaviour and not dribble on the carpet. However, when I got inside I found that the place was full of kids smearing cake up the walls, stuffing jelly down the back of the sofa and being sick in the fridge, so I decided that it would be okay if I let just a little bit of dribble out.

The nice man and lady who owned the house were very stressed, but they seemed pleased to see me and when I asked them what magic tricks they wanted me to do, they said anything I liked as long as I kept the little darlings quiet. Actually, they didn't use the word 'darlings', they called them 'little fuckers', but I'm not going to repeat that kind of dirty talk. They asked me whether there was anything I needed, and I asked them if they had any power tools.

Well people, let me tell you something, I never knew how much fun you could have with a chainsaw. It will go through everything - furniture, partition walls, the television. And the kids loved it almost as much I did. The owners weren't so keen, sadly, and when I was thrown out of the house - leaving the front room full of sawdust, cushion stuffing and disintegrated electrical equipment - I regretted not having asked for my fee up front. Still, it was a laugh, and I heartily recommend you give it a go if you ever get the chance.

Thirty-Four

There are, of course, two types of magicians: there are the ones who pull rabbits out of hats and chainsaw up people's

furniture; and there are the mystic wizards who foretell your future and massage your aura, are terribly vague about everything and don't actually do any magic. Actually, there is a third type of magician, the ones who sell houses, but let's not talk about them.

I realised that I had to become a mystic wizard... Wait a minute... Now I come to think about it, that third type of magician - the ones that sell houses - they're not magicians at all. They are estate agents. I think I have mentioned before that they are very, very, very, very boring. They certainly don't do any tricks, so let's treat them with the contempt they deserve and ignore them.

Anyhow, as I say, I realised that I had to become a mystic wizard, because that's where the money was, so I found an old shed, put a sign outside saying 'Come on in and let me feel your chakras' and sat down to wait. It wasn't long before I got my first customer. I asked him to cross my palm with silver, but he said he only had twenty pounds and I told him that would do nicely. I started by telling him that I could sense a very powerful energy emanating from him, and he explained that two years ago he had been struck by lightning and ever since he had interfered with people's phone signals and could change the channel on the TV just by blinking at it.

I then read his future by gazing into my crystal ball. Well, I say crystal ball, but it was actually a goldfish bowl and it was quite distracting because the goldfish was still in it and it kept winking at me. I think it knew that I was charlatan and was threatening to shop me. Thankfully goldfish can't talk because as soon as they open their

mouths to speak, the water rushes up their nose. They do know sign language, but since they don't have hands there is stuff all that they can do on that score either.

Anyway, the man seemed very pleased with his reading and left in a positive mood. Moments later he was hit by a bus, which neither of us had seen coming, so I high tailed it out of there before he regained sufficient consciousness to ask for his money back.

Thirty-Five

Good news: I now have twenty pounds. Unfortunately, this is somewhat shy of the one thousand pounds I need to get me to Windermere. And so I shall invest! There are many things that you can invest in. I know someone who bought half a racehorse. Specifically, he bought the back half, but it never wins because it's always the front half that crosses the line first. The other thing you can invest in is 'pork bellies'. I did this once - I got them from the local butcher. I kept them for six months but they didn't increase in value. They just went all horrid and stinky and became full of little maggoty wriggles. Not pleasant. The bin men refused to take them away, so I left them in the doorway of an Oxfam shop, along with a note saying 'Here are some maggoty wriggles, one previous owner'. I've been past there several times since, but I've never seen them for sale.

Of course, the thing that most people invest in is 'socks and shares'. I don't really understand it proper, but I don't approve of sharing socks, so I have given this one a miss.

No, instead I decided to invest my twenty pounds in beans - magic beans to be precise. Obviously, you can't guarantee that every bean will grow into a mighty beanstalk that leads up to a land of giants and golden eggs, but twenty quid buys a helluva lot of beans and I only have to get lucky with one. However, on the way to the magic bean shop, I met a man selling a cow, and as he was so persuasive, I have decided to buy that instead.

Thirty-Six

I have bought a cow for twenty quids and I am going to use it to make my fortune. How do you make a fortune with a cow, I hear you ask? Well all right, all right, don't be so impatient - I'm telling you, aren't I? I am going to offer cow rides - this is like donkey rides, but with a cow, obviously.

Now, you can't just start charging people to ride your cow without the proper paperwork - you need a certificate of roadworthiness otherwise the cow police will swoop on you, kick you in the teeth and then lock you in a cell. So I took my cow to a local vet who I found going through the bins behind the bookmakers, and he checked it over, making sure the udder wasn't leaking and the fetlocks were properly aligned. He said it was OK but warned me that it would probably need new brakes in six months' time, then he wrote out a certificate on the back of an old off licence receipt. Actually, I'm not so sure that he was a real vet; I just assumed he was because he smelt like someone who hung around a lot of animals.

Nevertheless, the certificate looked like a real deal, so I set up in the park with a sign saying 'Ride my cow for a pound'. I've had a lot of funny looks, but no customers yet. We shall see if business picks up later.

Thirty-Seven

I have started making a list of my favourite green things. So far, the only green things I can think of are peas, green M&Ms and Yoda, and I don't really like peas, so my list is really quite short. The reason I started making my list is because I have stood around in the park all day, waiting for people to come and pay me to ride my cow, and I am bored, bored, bored.

Nobody, it seems, is interested in riding a cow. I know, right, I couldn't believe it either! At one point I decided to adopt a more aggressive marketing strategy by running after people, shouting 'Ride my cow! Ride my cow!' This seemed to attract the wrong kind of attention and I gave it up after two elderly ladies turned on me and kicked the doings out of me.

I went and sat in a bush, nursed my bruises and reflected on my strategy. As far as I could see, I was doing nothing wrong. Therefore, if it wasn't me, it must have been the cow that was at fault. It was an ugly and sullen brute, and it was obviously putting people off. Tomorrow, I decided, we would have to work on its manners, and probably give it a bit of a hair do or something.

Thirty-Eight

I am dead good at doing proper etiquette. Many people know this about me, which is why I am constantly being invited to garden parties and cocktail gatherings and so forth. In fact, it has become something of a bore - yawn, yawn - which is why when I receive an invitation these days, I politely tell them to get themselves stuffed.

Doing proper etiquette is not difficult, as long as you remember a few simple rules. For example, when deciding which cutlery to use, you have to start on the outside and work your way in. Depending on where you are sitting, this could mean that you end up using someone else's cutlery, and they can get a bit shirty about this if they don't understand how to do etiquette as well as you do. Many's the time I've got into a bit of a tussle over someone else's fork, and in these situations it is perfectly permissible to subdue them with a discreet headbutt. This saves embarrassment all round and, believe me, they'll thank you for it later.

Mastering polite conversation is a must. For example, whenever you meet someone posh, you must say 'Ah, Lord Featherstone, I believe we met in San Moritz last season'. It doesn't matter that you've never been to San Moritz, or that you've never met this person before, or that their name is not Lord Featherstone. As long as you say this word for word, and don't accidentally gob on them while you're doing it, then it should be enough to prevent you getting thrown out before you sit down to the soup course.

So, my task today is to try and impart some of my vast knowledge of etiquette to my cow, and thus make it a more presentable member of society. Wish me luck.

Thirty-Nine

I was going to do this joke. You see, I am teaching my cow all about etiquette and presentation, and I was going to start with a thing about elocution. Elocution is about speaking properly, and not about sticking your fingers in power sockets, which is a word that sounds similar but is a different thing all together. Important not to get them mixed up. Anyway, my joke would be about teaching my cow to say 'How now brown cow', which is something that you do in elocution. Then the punchline would be something about my cow ought to be able to say that already, since it already moved in those circles. I would probably have made the punchline a bit snappier than that, but of course my cow can't talk, so I can't do the joke. It would have been good though, wouldn't it?

All right, so it can't talk but it can moo, and it has this habit of doing a moo right down your earhole when you're not expecting it. I have been teaching it not to do this, by slapping it in its fat face every time it does it. It just looks at me stupidly every time, but I think the message is getting through.

I am also teaching it 'deportment', which is walking proper. At the moment it just kind of lumbers about all over the place, barging into people, with its limbs going in all directions. I am teaching it to walk a straight line using

dainty steps, whilst balancing books on its head. Surprisingly, it not only seems to enjoy this, it's actually quite good at it. I'm thinking that we should scrub the idea of giving cow rides and go for something a bit more upmarket instead.

Forty

Great news, I got my cow a gig as a catwalk model, modelling the winter collection for Miss Bovine. She is quite nervous and I had to follow her on with a shovel, but the audience went wild for her and she was an instant hit. She's already done several TV shows and is the cover star of this month's *What Cow?* magazine. She's also been offered a tidy sum for her autobiography, which is being ghost-written by two pigs and a squirrel, and there's also been some interest in a film adaptation and a possible West End musical.

The bad news, however, is that she now has new management. The ingratitude! To think, when I first met that cow - yesterday - she was an ugly, ungainly, talentless nobody. Slap a bit of lipstick on her and teach her to walk without falling over, and suddenly she's Greta Bloody Garbo, and I'm out on my ear. Well screw you, Ermantrude! All I can say is, enjoy it while it lasts, because it's a fickle business and this time next year you're going to be steak.

Well, I've created one star, so I figured I could do it again. I found a weasel with striking bone structure and trained him up to be a matinee idol, but the only work he could get

was an advert for odour eaters, and now he's working in a shoe shop. I also found a goose that could do impressions, but he was booed off the stage at his first audition, lost his temper and savaged the compère.

Who am I kidding? A real star like that cow only comes along once in a lifetime. It looks like I'm going to have to turn my hand to something else.

Forty-One

I sat in the road and watched the ants scurrying about at the kerbside. I was all out of ideas and I hoped that these tiny, mindless creatures would provide me with some inspiration. Backwards and forwards they went, backwards and forwards, round and round and round in tiny circles, zigzagging through the gutter, and then backwards and forwards again. That's when I realised that ants are stupid and don't know nothing. Trust me, if ever you need to figure out your manifest destiny and plot the path to your ultimate goal, don't bother asking an ant. You might as well talk to the snails.

And it was as I was considering consulting a panel of senior academic molluscs that I heard the unmistakable clang, toot, cheer, whistle and thump thump thump of an approaching circus parade. Over the hill they marched, jugglers doing juggles, acrobats doing acrobatics, clowns doing jolly giggles and elephants doing it in the road. What a fantastic sight they were as they lolloped and tumbled down the street, all spangled up and glitzy. That's

the very life for me! Stuff the ants, I thought, and I got myself a leotard and a shiny hat and I joined the circus!

Forty-Two

There are several possible career trajectories for the budding young circus executive. You could start off as a performing animal such as a dancing horse or an elephant. Unfortunately, my fetlocks were knackered and my trunk was at the menders, so that option was right out. You could be a knife thrower, but I have piece of paper signed by some doctors that says I'm not allowed to go near sharp objects. That only leaves one possibility - fire eater. The circus manager said he would apprentice me to The Great Pyro, their top fire eater, who would show me the ropes. This confused me for a long, long, long time, but then he explained - using a combination of diagrams and slapping - that no ropes were involved and that this was just a metaphor. Good, well I'm glad we got that sorted out. Phew!

In addition to eating all the circus's fire, The Great Pyro was also responsible for looking after the animals. The circus had five animals. They had two elephants who would stand up on their hind legs and spray water from their noses at the crowd. At least, I think it was water. They had a slug who did backflips, dressed in sparkly shorts and a top hat. There was a camel called Colin who did card tricks, and also a pony that could type.

In a circus you have to start at the bottom and work your way up. My first task was mucking out the camel, so I was

literally starting at Colin's bottom. I don't know whether you have ever seen a camel, but the best way to describe it is that it's like a three-seater sofa but with a big lump on the back. I was curious to know what was in the lump and that is when I found out that if you prod a camel's lump, it kicks you in the teeth. So, my advice to you is not to prod a camel's lump, OK?

Forty-Three

Today my fire eating training started in earnest. Now, despite what you may have heard, you can't become a fire eater overnight - not unless you are naturally gifted with a flame retardant mouth, and only two people in the entire history of everything have ever had one of those. The first one died over 400 years ago, and it doesn't look like he's coming back, and the other is currently a financial adviser in Stevenage and isn't interested in fire eating as it puts his clients off.

I started by eating matches. Dead matches at first, but then moving on to live matches. Before long, my diet consisted of the following

Breakfast: A bowl matches in kerosene, sprinkled with gunpowder.

Lunch: A couple of firelighters and a charcoal briquette.

Dinner: Petrol soup, followed by dynamite in a light napalm sauce, with gelignite and custard for dessert.

And, if I felt peckish in between meals, I was allowed to suck on a blowlamp.

It's surprisingly nutritious although you really wouldn't want to be around me when I break wind. I've been banned from WHSmiths now, since the last time I was in there I let rip and set fire to all the gardening and lifestyle magazines.

Forty-Four

I have become a fire eater overnight! It's amazing what you can do when you put your mind to it, and you're not too bothered about retaining the ability to taste your breakfast. Today was my first performance in the big top and I discovered two important life lessons. Number one: fire eating makes you really, really, really thirsty. And b), circus tents burn really easily. I mean, it was like WUMP! and I'm like 'what happened to my eyebrows?' and 'where's this draught coming from?'

Now the circus is out of business, the elephants have been barbecued and the circus manager seems to think that it's my fault. I think this is grossly unfair, and I told him so. "Hey listen," I said to him. "You can't expect me to eat that much fire, I've only been doing this for one day. I did my best." And it's true, I really did do my best. It's only due to my diligent devotion to my art that the juggler and the tattooed lady were saved. To be fair, even the high wire walker was only lightly singed.

Anyway, the manager told me to get out of his sight, which at the time I took to be an invitation to play hide and seek. I went and hid in his cupboard, and he promptly dragged me out by the scruff of my neck and threw me outside. Well, that wasn't very sporting, I thought. He was supposed to close his eyes and count to twenty before he came looking for me. Do you know, if these circus folk don't have the common decency to observe the rules of simple playground games, then I think I'm better off out of it.

Forty-Five

A true visionary, when faced with a catastrophe, can spot a fresh opportunity and arise, phoenix-like from the flames of disaster. Just such a man was Biffo the Sad Faced Clown who, with the circus destroyed and his career in tatters, saw the true potential of being in possession of 12 tons of barbecued elephant meat and has started his own elephant burger business. To be honest, at first I couldn't see that there would be much mileage in a clown selling burgers, but they are proving surprisingly popular and it is apparent that we have a hit on our hands.

The responsibilities of running a successful elephant burger restaurant are many, but Biffo and I have divided them up equally between us, which is only fair. For example, Biffo is responsible for counting all the money and for ensuring that it is properly spent, whereas I clean the toilets. I sometimes feel quite guilty about this because cleaning the toilets is really quite easy, but counting and

spending the money seems to take hours. Biffo has to go to a special club in the town to do it, and he is often there till two in the morning, surrounded by ladies dancing in their pants. The poor man looks absolutely wrecked by the time he gets back, and I really do feel sorry for him.

Anyway, I now have an additional responsibility because although 12 tons of elephant meat is a lot, it is not what we burger scientists call 'infinite', and it looks like we're soon going to run out. Biffo has given me a suitcase full of money and my job now is to go and buy more elephants.

Forty-Six

It is a sad fact that there are no longer any elephant shops in our high streets. At one time, so my grandmother used to tell me, you used to be able to groove into town, browse the pachyderms at World of Elephants, flick through the latest models hanging up in Tusk Boutique or even pick up a mammoth at the chemist's. Now our town centres are full of shops selling cheap knock-off walruses and mass-produced stoats shipped in by the container-load from the Far East, and you can spot a lot of ocelots, but it seems that there's nowhere you can buy an elephant. I know, I've tried.

In frustration I sidled into the nearest shop. The first aisle I came to was all shoes - loads and loads and loads of shoes. Great, I thought to myself, when I need some shoes then this will be the very place to come. But, right then, I didn't need some shoes, so I went down the shoe aisle, right round the bend and into the next aisle, which was

also shoes. Blimey, I think to myself, they aren't half keen on shoes in this town. But I still didn't need any shoes, so I slid on down the second shoe aisle, right round the bend and into the next aisle. Now, I won't tell a lie, but at first glance it appeared to me that this aisle was full of tinned meat, packets of frankfurters and individually wrapped cheese slices. But no, actually this was more shoes.

I did a 'harumph', which is something I occasionally do when I am vexed, and went on over to the lady behind the cash desk. "Your shelves are full of shoes," I said. "Yes," she said. "This is a shoe shop." "Where do you keep your elephants?" I said. "We don't do elephants," she said. "This is a shoe shop." "This is a shoe shop and you don't do elephants?" I repeated. "Yes, this is a shoe shop and we don't do elephants," she said, repeating my repetition. "Well, with blinkered retail policies like that, it's no wonder that the high street is dying." And I purchased a tin of shoe polish and some new laces, then marched out.

Forty-Seven

The story so far, for people who DON'T PAY ATTENTION! Ahem, I found a sandwich behind my fridge that grew to a colossal size and wandered off, eventually deciding to visit the Lake District. I set off in hot pursuit but caught the wrong train and ended up in Goole, which is apparently still on Planet Earth. I need to raise 1000 pounds to get to Windermere and my most recent adventure as a fire eater resulted in fricasseed elephant. Well, when life gives you cooked elephants, make elephant burgers, as the old

saying goes. It's going very well, but now I need more elephant meat, and the local shoe shop doesn't sell it. You see, it's all very straightforward, I don't know what your problem is.

Meanwhile, in a house on the edge of town, a man called Martin Brown has decided to sell the family's pet elephant. They won it at the fair two years ago, but now it's got too big for its tank and it won't fit in the sideboard, so the man called Martin Brown has taken out a classified advert in the local paper, in the Caravanning, Boiler Spares and Exotic Pets section. He's had a man round this morning who came and kicked its ankles, peered up its exhaust but said that he wasn't really what he was looking for. The man called Martin Brown is getting really fed up with time wasters, and if he doesn't get any serious offers by the end of the day, he's going to leave it outside with the recycling and hope that the bin men will take it.

I wonder what are the chances of me seeing his advert?

Forty-Eight

Well, what were the chances of that? I was flicking through the paper and happened to see an advert by a man called Martin Brown, advertising his elephant for sale. Apparently, it had only one previous owner and was a very good runner, even though there was a little rust around the trunk and it need a bit of welding at the back. I went around there to kick its ankles and look up its exhaust, and told the man called Martin Brown that I was interested. It would make quite a lot of elephant burgers, I told him.

The man called Martin Brown did not seem happy when I mentioned the burgers, and sought assurances that I wasn't going to use his elephant for burgers. This is exactly what I was going to do, of course, but I thought it best to tell him otherwise. "No," I said, in my special posh voice that I put on when I am doing business. "I was just making an observation. I was just saying that it would make a lot of burgers, because it would absolutely make a lot of burgers, if making burgers was what I was going to do." I patted him on the head playfully. "But I'm not going to make a lot of burgers," I told him. "So when I said that this elephant would make a lot of burgers, I was just making an observation, and not actually intending to make a lot of burgers."

The man called Martin Brown seemed quite happy with this, the fool, and so I gave him a case full of money and took the elephant away to make burgers. The elephant looks really sad. I think it knows.

Forty-Nine

I've had a long conversation with the elephant, and we have discussed the pros and cons of turning it into burgers, and it remains dead set against the idea. Personally, I think that it is being a little short-sighted. Being turned into burgers is a great career move for a thrusting young executive elephant, but Jumbo doesn't really see it that way. I shouldn't really call him that, of course. He tells me that calling all elephants 'Jumbo' is discriminatory and

that his real name is Trevor. It's odd, because I don't really see him as a 'Trevor', but there you are.

Anyhow, one has to respect his wishes, and so I have reluctantly agreed not to turn him into burgers. So now I have spent a case full of money on an elephant that is of no financial benefit to me, and the gurgley bubbles in the pit of my stomach tell me that my business partner, Boffo the Clown, is going to be very cross about all of this.

However, Trevor has had an idea. He says that it would be good if our burger restaurant stopped selling elephant burgers and started serving vegetarians. I did a joke then and said that it was no good because you can't make burgers out of vegetarians, and I laughed and laughed and laughed until bubbles came out of my nose and I nearly choked. Trevor didn't seem to think it was all that funny, but he waited until I stopped laughing before he told me that he was an amateur chef with a few interesting recipes and was keen to try something exotic with asparagus. He said he would be happy to come and work for us, so I agreed that we had a deal, and I shook his trunk and we went back to the restaurant. On foot, just in case you were wondering.

Fifty

Back at the burger restaurant, we found Boffo the Clown asleep under a table and we asked him very nicely if it would be alright for Trevor the elephant to work in the kitchen, rather than make him into burgers. Boffo trumped twice in rapid succession, but otherwise made no

comment on the issue, so we assumed his tacit agreement and left him where he was.

We opened up the next morning selling elephant burgers - this time made *by* an elephant rather than *of* an elephant. I'll be honest, these new veggy burgers weren't as scrummy as the old ones - I prefer my fast food more elephanty - but people came from miles around to see a fully grown African elephant flipping burgers. Well, you would, wouldn't you? There he was in his apron and chef's hat, careering wildly around the kitchen, knocking over pots and pans, smashing cupboards and worktops. and occasionally setting himself on fire. He was an enthusiastic and excitable burger chef, rather than a conscientious and hygienic one, but he was clearly enjoying himself and our customers didn't seem to care that the food was fundamentally inedible.

Well, these things can never last, of course. There's always someone who will come along and spoil it, and in this case it was the council's food hygiene inspector. Apparently, there's some ruddy byelaw about allowing exotic wild animals to work in your kitchen, so he closed us down and me and the elephant were out of a job. They bulldozed the restaurant and built a bowling alley on it, and as far as I'm aware, Boffo the Clown is still under lane two.

Fifty-One

I have decided that I have had enough of Goole. There is no way that a man of aptitude and ambition, such as myself, can make it in a place like this, so I have decided to

stop fannying about trying to raise the train fare and hitchhike to the Lake District. Now listen, it's important to know what direction you should be heading in, and experienced hitchhikers like me call this 'navigation'. There are three ways that you can do 'navigation' and the first one is by the stars, although I reckon that this is impossible. When you look at the stars in a book, they all have little labels next to them, telling you what they are called. Well, when you look up at the night sky, none of the stars have labels on them at all! Not even the really shiny ones! Well, how are you supposed to work with that?

The second type of navigation is with a compass. And by compass, I don't mean the pointy thing that you draw circles with, and which Gary Spendville used to stab me with when I was at school; I mean the spinny thing that goes frantic when you put a magnet next to it. This has 'N', 'E', 'S' and 'W' on it, which means North, East, South and West, and this is great if you are going North, South, East or West, but I was going to the Lake District, and this isn't marked on the compass, so it was useless.

The final way of doing 'navigation' is to look at road signs. I looked at all the road signs in Goole, but I didn't see one for the Lake District, so I followed one that said Leeds instead, because at least this starts with the same letter.

Fifty-Two

Some observations about hitchhiking. One of the most important things to remember, if you want to do

hitchhiking properly, is to try not to look like a maniac. Picture the scene: a man and a lady are driving along in their car. It might be a red one or a green one, or it might be a Ford or something. And the man says to the lady, "Oh look, Carol, there's a maniac hitchhiking at the side of the road. Shall we give him a lift?" And then the lady says, "No Alan, we'd better not. He might go all weird and try to lick our faces or something." And then vroom-vroom, off they go driving straight past you. They're not always called Carol and Alan (although they often are) but they certainly almost always decide to err on the side of caution when it comes to picking up people who look a bit loony.

I, of course, am not a maniac - not even on Wednesdays when it's nearly my bedtime - but I still have to make an effort to convince people of this fact. Before I set off on my hitchhike to the Lake District, I made a sign using an old piece of soggy cardboard. Someone had been sick on it, but it wasn't too bad and I wiped most of it off and wrote: 'I am not a maniac, despite what Gary Spenville might say. Don't listen to Gary Spenville, anyway, because I happen to know for a fact that his hobby is taking pictures of doggy-do on his phone and showing them to people. True story. He is WEIRD, and you should ignore everything he says.'

Now, that's a lot of writing, so it had to be quite small, which meant that motorists would have to get really close to read it. Also, I didn't have a pen, so I had to write it in my own blood - and that was quite a lot of blood, what with all the crossings-out and corrections. I actually felt quite weak after I'd done it, so I decided to have a bit of a lie down before I set off.

Fifty-Three

After writing my sign in blood I needed a little sleep, but I felt much better when I awoke, because the hallucinations had stopped and the world had stopped spinning, which is always a bonus. Time to do my hitchhiking, so I started stomping along the grass verge, holding my sign in one hand and holding up my thumb with the other. That's two things I was doing, which is called 'multitasking'. Actually, I was walking as well, so that was three things, which is even better.

Anyway, not many people stopped, and even when they did, they sped off again when I asked them to read my sign and told them that I DEFINITELY would not lick their face. It's strange, but the 'face licking' thing was supposed to reassure them, yet it seemed to have the opposite effect.

Nevertheless, I persevered and, sure enough, six hours later a car vroomed into a lay-by ahead of me. As the man jumped out and went to have a widdle behind a tree, I jumped into the passenger seat and started to eat the liquorice allsorts that I found in his glove compartment. When he got back, he was considerably surprised to find that he had picked up a hitchhiker, but I pointed out that since I was already sat in his car, he was legally obliged to give me a lift. We spent the next twenty minutes completing the all the proper official hitchhiking paperwork - ruddy bureaucracy - then we set off. Hooray.

Fifty-Four

The man who has given me a lift is called Ronnie Piano. He is not in the least bit musical, but he says he will take me to Windemere next week. In the meantime, if I help him to do his business, he will give me board and lodgings. I said I was quite happy about the lodgings, but he could keep the board and could I have some food instead.

Mr Piano took me back to his house and showed me his garage. It was a very nice garage, although I'm not an expert on garages. Inside was row upon row of racks containing cardboard boxes. Mr Piano showed me one that was full of cheap plastic pens. Then he showed me another that was full of baseball caps. A third one was full of mouse mats. Turns out that Mr Piano makes his living by going to conferences, collecting all the freebies and giveaways, then selling them on the wide world web.

He told me to get a good night's sleep because the next day we would be going to a conference for charities that was being held in York. He said that there ought to be some good pickings as these people were always giving away tat. He said this was because they had plenty of money to 'piss up against the wall'. I thought that this was a very strange thing to say, because this is not normally what you do with money, but I suspect that Mr Piano was doing a metaphor.

Fifty-Five

When we arrived at the charity conference, we were directed to a massive room containing rows of stalls, where

lots of different charities were displaying information about their work and giving away free stuff. Mr Piano gave me a sack and told me to go down the rows and collect as much crap as I could. The first stall I came to said they were raising awareness about homelessness, and they gave me a mouse mat. I thought this was very peculiar, since if you were homeless I would have thought that you would already be aware of it. And even if you didn't, a tacky foam rubber mouse mat is not going to prove particularly useful. Nevertheless, I thanked them very much for it, and also for the hat, the pen and the little shopping trolley token that they gave me.

I don't know whether you have seen one of these shopping trolley tokens before, but they came in very useful if you are uncomfortable with being temporarily parted from a pound coin for the length of time it takes you to do your shopping. Anyway, I need to tell you that they are not edible. I can confirm that for a fact, because I spent three hours sucking on one and it didn't get any smaller, and in the end I nearly choked. So, be warned.

After the homeless stall, there was a charity for people in debt, where I collected some more mouse mats and pens and hats and trolley tokens. Then there was a charity that supported people with learning issues, and I bagged another load of hats, mats, pens and tokens. And so on, until I got halfway down the room and had so much stuff that I had to go back to Mr Piano for another sack. By the time I reached the end of the room, I had filled the second sack and I went into a room where a load of people were sat down, surrounded by bags full of freebies. They were listening to a talk about how to screw money for your

charity out of the council without having to show anything for it. It mostly seems to involve putting up a poster in the library and claiming that you're 'raising awareness'.

Anyhow, it was a very interesting and productive day, and I learned a lot.

Fifty-Six

Mr Piano thinks that we have probably got quite enough free mouse mats, pens and trolley tokens, so today we are going to visit a food fair to gather up some free samples. I was quite surprised because it turns out that a food fair is nothing at all like a proper fair. I thought I would get to go on the spinning pasty ride, the sausage roll flume or the giant cheese wheel, but it was just a bunch of stalls offering burgers made out of exotic animals, crumbly wedges of foul-smelling cheese and home-made wine that tasted like widdle. There were also a surprising number of stalls selling artisan dog biscuits. You wouldn't have thought that an animal that spends so much time licking its own bottom would have a palate sophisticated enough to appreciate such things, but hey, what do I know?

Another thing about food fairs is that there are other things there apart from food. There are 'arts and crafts'. I'm not at all certain what 'arts of crafts' is, but, from the look of what was on offer, it appears to be old twigs painted white, with bits of string and ribbon on them, and put on sale for a stupidly massive amount of money.

Entertainment was being provided by some folk singers. Folk songs are a bit like proper music, but they are all on one note and they go on for a week. They are usually about people going away for a long time, then coming back to find that their sweetheart has perished by falling off a cliff, or being trampled by a pig, or something. One of the men was singing about how he had been away at sea for fifty years, and while he was away his wife had had to scrape a living as a washerwoman, and had drowned when she had been overcome by soap fumes and fallen into a tub of filthy water. I didn't believe him, though, because he didn't look old enough or windswept enough to be an old sailor. Turns out I was right because I got talking to his wife - who wasn't dead, actually - and she told me that he worked in the planning department at the local council. The ruddy liar!

Anyway, we came away from there with four sacks of stinky cheese and some fancy doggy biscuits, and Mr Piano seemed reasonably pleased with the haul.

Fifty-Seven

Today was a day off, so we went to play golf. Mr Piano says that golf is something that all successful businessmen have to do. I have done golf before, at the seaside. You have a stick and a ball and you have to use the stick to knock the ball through obstacles like windmills and bridges, and then get it into the hole at the end. Then you have to eat too much candyfloss, go on the waltzer and be sick. That last part is the bit I like the most.

Although, the golf that businessmen play is not nearly so much fun. The course goes on for miles and miles and miles, the obstacles are just rubbish sandpits, and there is NO candyfloss. Mr Piano says that businessmen don't like candyfloss because it reminds them of when they had hair - pink, sticky hair, presumably. Also, golf is not really about playing golf, it's about rubbing shoulders with important people. I went around the clubhouse and rubbed some people's shoulders, but they didn't seem to like it, so instead I went up to the first hole to tee off.

I can report that playing proper golf is really, really, really boring. It's like when you throw a stick for a dog, and the dog is really stupid and just fetches the stick, and then you throw it again and the dog goes after it again, because it is stupid. Well, golf is like that: people wearing silly knitwear and stupid trousers whack their ball up a field, then go and find it, then just whack it up the field again. The first time I tried it, my ball went into a tree, ricocheted off a squirrel, came back at me and knocked me unconscious. I do not think I've ever been more grateful to be rendered comatose.

Fifty-Eight

I think I must have been unconscious for quite some time. I kept waking up, feeling delirious, and with the sensation of water dripping over me, but most of the time I was out of it and having strange dreams. When most people have strange dreams, they are all about weird, impossible, unreal stuff. Like, for instance, they might dream that they

are dressed as a carrot and lecturing a room full of nuns on the best way to look after a tortoise. Well, that exact scenario actually happened to me in real life, so it's not the sort of thing that I tend to dream about. I dream about really mundane things. For example, while I was unconscious, I dreamt that I worked in a newsagent's and someone came in and asked for *The Telegraph* and a bottle of lucozade. I know, mental right? Then I did a dream in which I was at home and I was cleaning my windows and I got them all sparkly and shiny and then it started to rain. And that is just crazy, because I never clean my windows, because that way nobody can look in and distract me when I am doing some important thinking. Then I done a dream that I was working as a waitress in a cocktail bar, but you probably don't want to hear about that.

I went to see a specialist once to see if she could tell me why I have these dreams. She was a posh brain doctor and she had one of those things with a light on that they look down your ear with, so that they can see what you are thinking. She said that my dull dreams were the sign of an underactive imagination gland, and that it was nothing to worry about. Mind you, I now realise that I went to see her in dream, rather than in real life, and so I should probably take what she said with a pinch of salt.

Fifty-Nine

When I finally regained consciousness properly, I found myself soaking wet, covered in compost and surrounded by tomato plants, cucumber plants and runner beans.

Turns out that a nice lady had found me laid out on the fairway, surrounded by giggling squirrels, and she took pity on me and carried me back to her house. Unfortunately, she doesn't have a spare room, so she has put me in the greenhouse.

I gather that I have been here for three days, and the doctor has seen me. I mean he has 'seen me' in a professional capacity, not just as an interested spectator. He took one look at the big lump on my head and told the nice lady that it was probably overwork, and that she should feed me liquid fertilizer three times a day. This explains why there is a horrible taste in my mouth, and also why my leaves look so healthy and shiny.

The nice lady tells me that her name is Lucy Flowerdew and that she is a horticulturist. I thought that a horticulturist was something dirty and that it had been banned, but Miss Lucy said that it was all perfectly legal these days and a lot of people did it in wellies. At least this explains the smell. Anyway, she tells me that she is really quite pleased with my progress and that she plans to show me at a forthcoming agricultural show, along with a marrow called Trevor.

Sixty

Miss Lucy has given me a brand new pot, fed me on a special breakfast of plant food and horse manure, and entered me in the unfeasibly massive vegetable competition at the agricultural show. I have never been to an agricultural show before, and it's really quite

spectacular. This morning a troupe of cows gave a display of rhythmic gymnastics. Meanwhile there is a sheep giving tarot readings, some chickens doing close-up magic, a face painting tent run by a donkey and the Amazing Porky Rasher, a pig that does a fire eating act.

I quite enjoyed the attention as I stood in my pot alongside all the other unfeasibly massive vegetables. As the public came through, they pointed and oohed and ahed, and stroked my leaves and told me how groovy my stamen was. I didn't know what a stamen was, but they seemed pretty pleased with it. Not so the judges, they were horrible. They were all sneery and superior, and they muttered among themselves and wrote things on clipboards in nasty spidery writing. Anyway, I didn't win, but I'm not bitter. First prize went to a cauliflower, and I simply can't compete at that level.

However, something happened towards the end of the day that brightened my mood. During their gymnastics performance, one of the cows lost its footing and careered into the donkey tent. The donkey shot out and collided with Porky Rasher, who set fire to the chickens. Terrible tragedy, but one hell of a barbecue.

Sixty-One

I didn't win a prize in the unfeasibly massive vegetable competition, but Miss Lucy was very supportive about it. She patted my leaves sympathetically, told me not to let it bother me, took me home and threw me on the compost

heap. I decided I'd had it with being a vegetable, so I got up, hopped over the garden wall and legged it.

I must have looked a proper sight as I ran down the street, covered in dirt, potato peelings and carrot tops. There were leaves and stalks tangled in my hair and wrapped around my arms and legs, and I must have stunk to high heaven, if the clouds of flies that were buzzing around me were anything to go by.

I tried to ask for help but people screamed and scattered before me, or pelted me with rubbish, which only made my wretched condition even worse. Desperate, I found a quiet alley and hid behind some bins, where I felt at home amongst the other rubbish. I waited until things had calmed down, then emerged into the deserted streets. It was cold and dark, and I was lonely and covered in guck. I stopped at a shop window, in which there was a television showing the local news. There was CCTV footage of some idiot running through the streets, covered in rubbish. It made me happy to see that there was someone else making a proper idiot of himself, but then I noticed my reflection in the glass, and I realised that it was me and I felt sad. I sank to my knees and shouted: "WHAT HAVE I BECOME?" You should have seen me - it was proper dramatic and I was great!

Sixty-Two

I live by the bins now and I have befriended the rats and the mice and a badger called Keith Spoons, who is really up himself and thinks he's better than everyone else. It's

not such a bad existence. We have formed a residents' committee and we meet up every so often to discuss what we're going to do about the vandalism, plan our campaign to save the local library and share a lot of gossip about the family of hedgehogs that have moved into the bin down the street.

The great news is that I have been elected the head of the neighbourhood watch. I think this is because of my organisational skills, and also because I am taller than everyone else and can see over the adjacent fence. Before I came along, the rats and mice had to stand on each other's shoulders.

Keith Spoons is not entirely happy, however. He used to be the top dog around here - or rather, top badger. Now nobody is interested in his stories about how he once went on holiday to the other side of the bypass, or about the time he appeared on *Springwatch*, or about when he went to a Queen concert and was invited backstage by Brian May. Now they only want to hear my stories, which is understandable when you consider that 1) I have had really quite a lot of interesting adventures; and 2) I am not a badger.

Sixty-Three

The problem, when you are caked in potato peelings and living behind some bins with some rats and some mice and a badger that's got an unrealistically inflated opinion of itself, is that you tend to lose touch with reality. For instance, I had no idea that sightings of me had sparked

wild stories about a strange, previously unknown creature at large in the town. Neither did I know that these stories had attracted the interest of the famous cryptozoologist Sir Digby Everest.

I say 'famous', what I actually mean is 'reasonably well known in certain circles'. Cryptozoology is a lot like zoology, except the animals aren't real, and therefore there isn't so much mucking out. It's all about going out to far flung exotic places to look for mythical creatures previously unknown to science, and then not finding them but having quite a nice holiday nonetheless. These cryptos are usually funded by a combination of public donations and publisher's advances, and Sir Digby is probably the most well-known. He has published many books, including an account of his expedition to Indonesia, where he didn't find the ring-tailed sabre-toothed bear, his voyage around the Indian Ocean in futile pursuit of the great white squid, and several volumes detailing his frequent failure to locate the Loch Ness monster. His most recent bestseller is a harrowing account of not finding the Mongolian death worm - an objective predictably doomed to failure, since lack of funds meant that he was looking for it in Bolton.

However, it wasn't long before a little bird told me that Sir Digby was hot on my trail. I say a little bird, I actually mean a fat pigeon called Pecky Patinkin. I don't normally hang out with pigeons, you understand, but sometimes it's handy to have eyes on the street. Sir Digby was out there, all right, and slowly and surely, he drew his plans against me.

Sixty-Four

No one would have believed, one dreary afternoon just before teatime, that my affairs were being watched by a man wearing a pith helmet and a coat made of chicken feathers. This, apparently, was how the moderately famous cryptozoologist Sir Digby Everest preferred to disguise himself when he was stalking his prey. That kind of rig-out might serve well enough if you're punting a kayak up the Zambezi, shooting an okapi up the Limpopo or hunting tigers out in India, but in the middle of an English market town, just before teatime, you look a bit of a pillock.

Nevertheless, disguised thusly was how he had tracked me down and the first indication I had of his presence was a BOOM! as he loosed off his blunderbuss. He missed, but the eruption of grapeshot that whistled past my left ear had a shattering effect on the plate glass window that I was looking through, and equally profound consequences for the cat that was perched on the wall beside it. Poor, poor pussy cat. I've still got his ear.

Now, I was brought up proper. I believe in the importance of good manners - my mother slapping it into me when I was a child - and I know that the correct way to introduce yourself to a stranger is not by trying and blow their head off. I don't think it's how most cryptozoologists behave, either. They usually just try to take your picture or collect your droppings - weird but rarely fatal.

I thought the best thing to do would be to retire to a safe distance, so I legged it into the nearby supermarket. Sir

Digby gave chase. Panic stricken, I burst through a pyramid of wash powder boxes, stumbled down the detergent aisle with washing up liquid and cleaning fluid tumbling around me, became tangled up in a feather duster display and then pitched head first into a large basket of sponges. Quickly freeing myself, I squeezed past the mops and floor polish, escaped through the fire exit and hurtled through the car wash next door. But then, horror! It was a dead end and I was trapped as Sir Digby bore down upon me. However, thanks to the thorough scrubbing I'd just endured, he no longer recognised me as the dirt and potato peel-encrusted monster that he was hunting, and simply asked me if I'd seen a hideous ape creature fleeing this way. I pointed down the street, said 'it went thataway', then sauntered off in the opposite direction.

Sixty-Five

I felt like a new man after running through the car wash, all sparkly clean, rub-a-dub-dub. It had even brushed my teeth because I'd had my mouth open at the time (I was screaming). My toothy-choppers were gleaming white, even though everything still tasted of soap and I was foaming at the mouth. I just styled it out.

Whatever. The point is, I realised that I had been living by the bins for too long and it was time to resume my quest to recover my naughty giant sandwich. I planned to start hitchy-hiking again, but then I saw a party balloon float past me, ducking and bobbing on the wind, and I had a

sudden brain spasm. I could travel by forklift truck! No, even better - I could travel by balloon!

You see, there are shops where you get these party balloons, and they fill them with special air which makes them go up in the sky, so that you lose them and have to buy more. You can get them to celebrate all sorts of special occasions, such as getting a new chicken, or passing your dribbling test, or successfully constructing a box girder bridge. All I needed to do was find the right kind of shop, so I went down the high street, past the window with the faceless plastic ladies wearing new dresses, past the window with the shiny rings and necklaces, WHICH YOU CANNOT EAT, until I came to a window that was all sparkly tinsel and glitter and things. There was a banner that said 'Congratulations on your new pig', so I figured that this was the very place I was looking for. I went inside and asked how many balloons I would need to float me to Windemere.

Now, I'm sure you would agree that it's a simple enough question, but the silly girl behind the counter just pulled a stupid face at me. I asked to speak to her manager, and when the manager came I asked her how many balloons it would take me to get to Windemere. *She* pulled a stupid face as well, so I asked to speak to *her* manager. Anyway, several managers later, I walked out of the shop with four thousand floaty balloons.

Sixty-Six

So, I've got four thousand floaty balloons that I'm going to use to get me to Windemere, and I bet I know what you're going to ask me. You're going to say, if you've got four thousand floaty balloons, how come they don't hoist you up up up into the sky straightaway. Ha! You must be proper stupid if you don't know that actually that these days they have special 'smart balloons' that only go up in the sky when you tell them to. That's what the lady in the shop told me anyway, and she had a posh blouse and a name tag on, so I have no reason to disbelieve her.

So anyway, I needed to find a box or something that I could fix underneath the balloons so that I could travel in style, so I went round the back of the market, left my balloons by a wall and started rummaging around for a box or something, like I said before. But oh no! When I turned back, my balloons had gone. And because they were smart balloons they couldn't have floated off on their own - they must have been stolen. This was a job for the police!

I went round to the police station and demanded to see Inspector Lestrade or Hercule Poirot or Columbo or Cagney and/or Lacey or whoever was available. There must have been a very big case on because none of those people were available. I imagine someone had probably lost a rabbit or stolen some liquorice or parked on a traffic warden, or something like that. Instead I spoke to Constable Henry Paradox. I gave him a full description of each of my four thousand floaty balloons, which he wrote down in a big book, and I said I would call back the next day, after I had munched through my breakfast.

Sixty-Seven

This morning I called round to the police station to see if Constable Paradox had any news of my stolen balloons. He said they had rounded up some likely suspects and he asked me if I could pick one out in a line-up. I have done a line-up once before, but that time I was actually in the line while a nice lady went along and tried to pick out the person who had stolen her handbag. It was nerve wracking, I can tell you, because I wasn't one hundred percent certain that I hadn't done it. Thankfully she picked out someone else, so if I guess that if I was guilty then I must have got away with it.

Constable Paradox took me to a room where six rough-looking men were lined up, each holding a balloon. The constable explained that these weren't actually my balloons, these were police balloons, which were kept at the station especially for the purpose of taking part in identification parades. I went along the line, looking at each of these thugs in turn. They were an ugly looking bunch, especially the one that smelled of cheesy onions. In the end I picked the tallest man, because he looked at me funny. And also, being the biggest it would be easier for him to steal things that live in the sky.

I did point out to Constable Paradox that I hadn't actually seen the man who took my balloons, but the constable said that it didn't really matter, as long as I 'had a good feeling about it'. He told me that the man I had picked was a known criminal called Fingers McGinty, and they had subtle ways of extracting a confession out of him. He told

me to come back tomorrow when they had battered him senseless.

Sixty-Eight

When I returned to the police station, Constable Paradox said that Fingers McGinty had confessed to the theft of my balloons, and also one or two other crimes that had been on their books for a while. One of these was robbing a Royal Mail stagecoach in 1824, which I thought was a little unlikely, but Constable Paradox assured me that the coach had had McGinty's dabs all over it.

So that was the good news. The bad news that it was probably too late to recover my stolen balloons. They had most probably been resprayed and sold on, or possibly stripped down for their parts. It seems that every floaty balloon has something called a 'helium' in it, and these heliums are often sold on to rich businessmen in Asia.

Luckily, they had been insured for third party fire and theft, so I rang up my insurance company. It was answered by a robot who asked me questions and after each one I had to press a button on the phone to get through to the next level. It was like one of those 'choose your own adventure' books they had in the old days, but instead of turning to page 24 and meeting a dragon, you had to press number two to be put through to the claims department. If I had a robot, I wouldn't make it ask stupid questions on the phone - I would strap laser cannons to it and tell it to invade Bolton. This is probably why I've never been allowed a robot.

Anyway, they said that they would send a man round. I hope he's not a robot as well.

Sixty-Nine

The insurance man came. He gave me a card with his name on it, and underneath it said 'loss adjuster'. I have never met a loss adjuster before and I asked the man whether it was anything like a moss adjuster. The insurance man looked puzzled and said that he didn't think there was such a thing as a moss adjuster, because he couldn't think of any occasion on which anyone would want their moss adjusted. I had to disagree with him, as I thought that a moss adjuster would be a jolly useful person to have around. There has been many a time when I wished that I had someone who could come around and adjust my moss, but the insurance man wasn't having any of it, so we just agreed to disagree. By the way, the insurance man was wearing blue trousers, but that's not important right now.

So, anyway, I described the details of the theft, and drew a little map with arrows on it, and we went to visit the crime scene and take some pictures, and then we filled in all sorts of forms and paperworks and things, and I had to sign my name over and over and over again. And then the insurance man told me that I couldn't have any money. To be honest with you, I don't think there was any need to do those paperworks or photos, because he was going to tell me I couldn't have any money whatever happened.

OK, so I couldn't have any money, but I asked him if I could have some courtesy balloons, or possibly a helicopter, but still he said no. He said that my claim was disallowed, because my balloons were insured for third party fire *and* theft, instead of third party fire *or* theft, and there was no evidence that they had been set alight as well as being pinched. However, although the balloons were not covered, the strings they were tied to were, so he gave me eight thousand feet of twine. I suppose it's better than nothing.

Seventy

Let me review my current assets. Number one: eight thousand feet of string. Number two... Nope, that's it. So, the question is how can I turn eight thousand feet of string to my advantage? Hmmm, I decided that I would have to carry out some research so I got myself a clipboard and went and stood in the street and asked passers-by what I could do with my string. The first man I asked told me that I could get knotted, which was a very funny joke and we both laughed about it a lot, until I blew bubbles out of my nose and he ran away. Then I asked a lady and she gave me the same answer, and we laughed again, but not so much this time because I'd already heard it.

Anyway, most of the rest of the people I asked told me the same thing, and by the end of the morning it wasn't very funny at all, and I think it seriously skewed the outcome of my survey. I went and had my lunch in the park, during which I collated my results. If you're interested, for my

lunch I had a jam sandwich and a satsuma, and then I had a yoghurt, but I DID NOT HAVE AN APPLE. If you're not interested in what I had for my lunch, then don't read that last bit.

You probably want to know the results of my survey. After I discounted all the silly joke answers, the responses to the question 'What should I do with all this string?' were:

Sorry, I don't have time right now: 60%

Why don't you go and get a job, you layabout: 30%

I don't know, I don't live round here: 28%

Private equity: 15%

My sister Carol was nearly eaten by a donkey (it's ok, she's alright now): 1%

You have probably already noticed that this adds up to more than 100%, but the thing is I had a very busy morning.

Seventy-One

Yesterday I learned that if you want to find out what to do with eight thousand feet of string, then don't ask the general public. They are idiots. Instead, I have decided to ask the Wide World Web. This is something you can do thanks to the miracle of modern electronic fibre optic communications. You just ask the question to the Wide World Web, and people from all over the planet, and

Stoke-on-Trent, will give you useful, accurate and useful (again) information.

So I asked my question: "What can I do with eight thousand feet of string." The first answer I got asked me what I wanted eight thousand feet of string for. Not useful. The second answer said that I should use sticky tape instead of string. Again, not useful. The third one said he didn't know the answer but that he wished me luck. That was nice of him, but ultimately of no use to me. The fourth one said that people like me made him sick, and the fifth one said that this whole string problem was down to Brexit. I had no idea what to do with this information. The sixth one said that I needed to crawl underneath it and release the clip from below - I don't think he'd read the question. The seventh one started an argument about Brexit with the fifth one, and the eighth one said that he had a cousin who had once seen some string by the side of the road whilst on holiday in Cornwall, and did this help?

Today I learned that if you want to find out what to do with eight thousand feet of string, then don't ask the Wide World Web.

Seventy-Two

Today I decided that I would consult an authoritative source on the subject of string and what to do with it, so I went to the library. A library is a lot like a Wide World Web, except it smells funny and you're not allowed to argue with people. In fact, you're not allowed to speak at all, unless it is to say 'shush' and only the librarian is

allowed to do that. In very big libraries, they are allowed to go 'shush' through a megaphone.

The only way you can communicate in a library is visually, which can be a problem if you're not used to it. The first time I went to a library, I was thrown out for making rude gestures, but all I was trying to do was ask for a copy of *Moby Dick*. Incidentally, *Moby Dick* is a very good book to tell people you have read if you want to look like you are a clever person. You can say that it is deeply symbolic about all sorts of things, like human relationships and religion and obsession and other stuff like that, but really it's just about whales.

Since then, I have taken a course in mime, which makes it relatively easy to communicate without making a noise. Of course, it helps if the librarian is also familiar with the miracle of mime, which in this case she wasn't. She wasn't at all impressed with me jiggling about and trying to tie myself in knots - the international mime symbol for 'string'. I even tried starting with a few basics, like walking against the wind, but she shouted at me through a megaphone that she was going to phone the police. Eventually I had to write it down, and she gave me a map of the library and pointed out where I would find the string section.

I must say, by the look of the map, this is a very big library. I think I'll come back tomorrow when I've had a good night's sleep, and I'll bring a packed lunch.

Seventy-Three

Today I returned to the library, but this time I was prepared. I was wearing my sturdy walking boots, and I had my ice pick and mountaineering rope, of course, but I also took the precaution of packing my passport, a Primus stove, a World War II German paratrooper's uniform and a jet ski. You never know when this stuff is going to come in handy. I also took some Kendal mint cake, because this has special powers and will allow you to survive in the wild for up to three weeks. You can also use it to fend off bears, honest.

According to the library map, to reach the string section, I had to head west, past the modern poetry section, then turn left at the local history shelves and on down the biography aisle. I made good time at first, but after a couple of hours the going became much more treacherous. It was noticeably darker when I reached the mechanical engineering section. The ground was uneven and I had to fight my way over piles of discarded books and cut my way through fallen shelves to get to the animal husbandry section. This part of the library was filthy, strewn with cobwebs and more than once I saw movement from the corner of my eyes, which gave me cause to wonder what strange creatures might lurk unseen at the back of the shelves. Nevertheless, the way was relatively clear, but then I reached the geography section and came to a crevasse.

Did you see what I did there? Did you? Did you, though? Geography. Crevasse. Get it? Never mind.

Had I not been prepared, this may well have been the end of my journey. Thankfully I was able to hook my rope over one of the rafters and swing across. Beyond the crevasse I entered the more obscure sections on the library: the spanner section, the history of drainpipes, smells of the world and chutney. Then finally I reached the string section. But, oh no! The shelves were empty. Why, oh why, oh why were there so many books on chutney and yet nothing at all on string? Not fair.

Seventy-Four

I find myself deep in the heart of a strange library, miles from civilisation, searching for a book about string. But the shelves are bare! Oh what cruel fate is this, to have come so far, to have braved so many perils all in vain! I swooned. I think I swooned, anyway. Come to think of it, I'm not exactly sure what a swoon is. I suppose I could have looked it up, seeing as how I was in a library, but the swoon section was miles back. Oh, this was all too confusing, so I decided to sit down and have a Twix instead. Yum yum.

That's when I saw it. The book, I mean. That's when I saw the book. I had missed it before because it was lying flat on the shelf, but now I saw a gleam of light from the illuminated fire exit sign reflected on its spine. I reached out for it excitedly - it was a book called *All About String* and, coincidentally, it was all about string. It was all there: there were chapters on the history of string, the chemical composition of string, the part string played in the Apollo

moon missions. There were even string recipes. And - oh joy of joys - there was a chapter entitled 'What to do with Eight Thousand Feet of String'. I turned to it quickly. It said: 'Put it in a drawer. You never know when it will come in handy.'

I closed the book with a thump, choking on the big cloud of dust that it created. At last, I had an answer to my question! All I needed now was a drawer big enough for eight thousand feet of string. I sighed contentedly and leaned back on the shelf behind me. There was a click, a rumble and the bookcase slowly began to slide open...

Seventy-Five

...There was a click, a rumble and the bookcase slowly began to slide open...

Ooh, a cliffhanger, how exciting! I wonder what happened? Hang on, I was there, so I can tell you, can't I. I peered through into the secret doorway, brushed aside the tangly cobwebs, and saw a dark stone passageway that was full of mucky doings. I went inside. The walls were all wet and the floor was slippery. Splip splop splash went the drip drops from the ceiling, and there was a horrid smell like cheesy trousers, or like the man who lives round the corner from me, what works in the fish and chip shop.

I carried on warily - normally I would skip but, as I say, it was slippery so I thought it best to do my special wary walking, so that I didn't fall over and break my bum. Fortunately, it was still light enough to see where I was

putting my feet, because the passageway was illuminated by phosphorescent veins of rock, which don't actually occur in nature, but always come in very handy for made up stuff on the telly.

Where would this strange tunnel take me, I wondered? Could it lead to a secret underground base, where some Machiavellian despot was preparing a devastating attack on civilisation? Might it deliver me to a lost prehistoric kingdom, where giant lizards held dominion, long hidden from the prying eyes of man?

No. It wouldn't. Before very long I saw light ahead of me: twin beams striking through the darkness. Then, around the corner, parked in the middle of a cavern, headlights stabbing through the gloom, was a number 73 bus. Now, this was odd, because the number 73 doesn't normally run on Tuesdays.

Seventy-Six

I climbed aboard the bus and asked the driver for a one-way ticket to somewhere groovy. He told me that there might be a bit of a delay, since this wasn't his usual route and he seemed to have taken a wrong turn. Seeing as how his bus was currently parked in a grotty, stinky old cavern deep underground, which wasn't even a request stop, I'd say that he'd taken a very wrong turn indeed. In fact, I *did* say it. "You've taken a very wrong turn indeed", I said, and he scowled at me and went back to looking at his map. It was totally the wrong map, actually, because it had the post office on it, and the marketplace, and the police

station, but it didn't have the cavern or the tunnels or any of the other underground doings. I was about to point this out to him when I noticed a sign what said 'Please do not speak to the driver. He is a grumpy bastard.' Well, the sign was right, so I went and sat down.

There was only one other passenger on the bus. She was a crackly old lady sitting at the back and she was knitting, going clack-clack-clack with her knitting needles all the livelong day. When I asked her what she was knitting, she said she was knitting a tank for her grandson, who was in the army. I said it looked very nice but I wasn't sure about the colour. Turns out she had already knitted a mobile command centre, a pontoon bridge and a motorbike, all while she had been waiting here on this bus. I'm guessing that the bus has been parked here for quite some time.

Seventy-Seven

I am sitting on a bus, which is parked in an underground cavern, waiting for it to set off for somewhere groovy. I have learned that the bus has already been here for several months, so it looks like I may have a bit of a wait. The only passengers are me and an old lady going clack-clack-clack with her knitting needles, but apparently there used to be a dozen or so others. Some of them got off and decided to walk and two or three were eaten. I didn't like the sound of that, especially since the old lady was looking at me hungrily, so I ding-ding-dinged on the bell to get the driver's attention and told him to get a move on because I had an important meeting to get to.

I didn't have an important meeting to get to, but I thought I'd tell him a bit of fib just to get him going. I used to do a job, long ago, where we had an important meeting every week. We would all gather round a big shiny table, and there would be a biscuit and coffee and an agenda. I always thought that an agenda was a large metal device with steam coming out of the top and a whirly thing on the side. I never saw one of those at the meeting, but I was assured that it was there. We all had to pay close attention to it, otherwise it would get angry. There was also a man who took minutes. I really envied him, since for the rest of us the meeting seemed to take hours.

I don't really know what the meeting was supposed to be for. Nothing ever got done as a result of it. Everyone just gossiped, or shouted at each other, or made jokes, and the man whose job it was to feed the agenda just got angrier and angrier. Anyway, the one good thing about being fired is that you don't have to go to meetings any more.

Seventy-Eight

The bus driver ignored me at first, but I kept tapping my watch and ding-ding-dinging the bell and telling him that we were going to be late, and eventually he put down his map and we pulled away. This is my first time in a cave, and I honestly can't see why those potholers make such a fuss. They are always banging on about wriggling through cramped tunnels and getting their knees wet and banging their heads on stalactites. But here I am, sitting in comfort

on a number 73 bus, being driven through the tunnels and enjoying the sights.

When I say 'enjoying the sights', I should point out that there isn't a fat lot to look at. There were some rocks, and then there were some more rocks, and then around the corner there were even more rocks. It's basically just rocks, and whether you think that is interesting is very much down to what opinions you hold about boulders.

Actually, there was one point of interest. We stopped at a set of traffic lights (they put them everywhere, these days) and while we were waiting I had time to study some prehistoric cave paintings. There were depictions of a hunt and some cavemen running with spears. Then underneath that it said 'Ug luvs Oog' and 'Stig is hung like a mammoth', but that's all I got to see before the lights changed and we were off again.

Seventy-Nine

After driving round in circles underground for ages, the bus driver finally decided to stop and ask for directions. We came to a group of squat, grubby little fellows with hairy feet, who sang filthy songs as they swung their pick axes and dug for gold. After convincing them that the bus was not a dragon, the driver asked them if they knew the way to the railway station, because he'd be able to get his bearings from there. They told him that we needed to head down the Tunnel of Infinite Sorrow until we reached the Chamber of Emerald Souls. Once here, a magic elf would ask us three questions, and if we answered

truthfully and had stout hearts he would open the Door of Glimmering Radiance and allow us to pass through to the Causeway of Ancient Abundance. After that, we had to take the second exit off the roundabout, next to the big Asda, and then the railway station would be on the left - we couldn't miss it.

The driver thanked the fellows politely and gave them a toffee each, then we set off. Well things were looking up at last, so I started to sing a happy little song, but the driver shouted at me to belt up and the old lady with the knitting jabbed me in the ribs with one of her needles, so I just mouthed the words quietly to myself instead.

Before long we came to a sign that said 'TUNNEL OF INFINITE SADNESS (NORTH)' and then under that it said 'NEXT SERVICES 3 MILES'. I asked the driver if we could stop at the services so that I could buy crisps and have a widdle, although not at the same time, but we didn't get that far. There was a screech of brakes and the bus stopped dead because the tunnel was blocked!

Eighty

We had been making really good progress on our underground bus journey, and I was looking forward to reaching the services so that I could buy a comic and some fizzy pop, but we suddenly found that we couldn't go any further because the tunnel was blocked. At first I thought it might be roadworks, but there was no diggers or Portacabins, so this was clearly not the case. No, when we

got off the bus, we found that it was a great big boulder that was in our way.

I have always thought that leaving giant boulders all over the place is a very very very antisocial thing to do. It is what you might call one of my pet hates, and it really gets up my goat. I have NEVER left a boulder ANYWHERE that wasn't a proper, designated boulder parking spot. It's just good manners, isn't it? It's something that was impressed on me when I was a small boy, along with always saying 'please' and 'thank you', making sure I don't rest my elbows on the dinner table, and never gobbing on a bishop.

Anyway, we had a look at the boulder to see if it had a name or address on it, or perhaps a phone number we could ring, but nope, there was nothing. However, we found it curious that the boulder was so very smooth and even, and when you tapped it, it sounded sort of hollow. That's when we came to the conclusion that this wasn't a boulder but a giant egg.

If anything, I think that leaving your giant eggs lying around is even more antisocial than dumping boulders.

Eighty-One

How does one deal with a giant egg that is blocking your path? This is not a rhetorical question. I'm not being deeply philosophical here. There really was a big egg blocking our way, and we somehow needed to get a bus either over it, under it, around it or through it. Well

luckily eggs are a bit of a speciality of mine, since I did them at school when I was in Mrs Edmondson's class. Mrs Edmondson had a wooden liver and she was frightened of cheese, but apart from all that, and the thing with the Womble, she was all right really. She certainly knew a lot about eggs - she had a certificate and everything - and thankfully she passed on all that vital knowledge to her pupils.

For instance, I learned that there are two main ways of dealing with eggs. The first one is to boil them then smash their tops in with a spoon. Obviously, with an egg this size we would need a big paddling pool full of boiling water and a really really really big spoon. These things are not easy to come by when you're stuck underground, miles from the nearest John Lewis.

The second thing you can do is to hatch them. For this, we would need a giant chicken, and these are even harder to get hold of than giant spoons. In fact, I don't even think you can get them in John Lewis. I once knew someone who ordered a badger off of the wide world web, but it was just an ordinary sized one. And when it turned up, it was faulty and he had to send it back. Actually, I don't know why I mentioned it, it's not relevant. Listen, forget everything I said about the badger, ok?

It looked like we were stumped, but then the lady passenger with the knitting had a sudden brain pang and said that she could knit an egg cosy for it, and that might help it hatch. So she knitted it. And then we fitted it. And then we waited.

Eighty-Two

If you had told me this time last week that I would be on a number 73 bus deep underground, waiting for a giant egg to hatch, I would tell you that you were out of your brains, and that you should get away from me in case your looniness was infectious. And yet, here I was doing exactly that! Isn't life weird? Mind you, in 2016 someone told me that one day I would find myself trapped in a cable car in the Swiss Alps, fighting off a duck with an umbrella, and that didn't come true at all. At least, it hasn't come true yet. Maybe next week.

Anyway, back to this giant egg. We waited. And we waited. And we waited some more. Actually, there was a lot more waiting - I won't go through them all because you'll probably get bored and go off to get a doughnut or a packet of fruit pastilles. I would, in your position. So I'll skip all the waiting and get straight onto the bit where a big crack suddenly appeared in the side of the egg. It got longer, and longer, and we could see something trying to burst out from inside. Could it be a chicken? Or a crocodilly? The bus driver said it might be a duck-billed platypus, but frankly I think the man had been underground too long and his imagination had begun to run away with him.

With one final heave, the egg finally broke open and the occupant emerged. And do you know what it was - it was a man! He said his name was Graham and he was from the local planning department of the local council, and he asked us if we had permission to leave this egg here.

Eighty-Three

So, this man from the council has burst out of an egg and he says that me, the bus driver and the knitting lady were all in trouble for not having planning permission for the egg. We tried to tell him that it wasn't our egg, and that since he was the one that came out of it, perhaps he should take responsibility for it, but he just waved his clipboard at us then nailed a writ to the bus driver and told us that we all had to appear in court that afternoon, and that we'd better get ourselves a good lawyer.

Well, it's just bureaucracy gone mad! It reminds me of the time I accidentally rode my tricycle into the chemist's and wounded an off-duty fireman when I swerved to avoid my own shadow. I don't know why it reminds me of that, because that was a completely different thing altogether, but memory works in strange ways, doesn't it?

Nevertheless, legal representation was what we would need. Happily, the bus driver knew someone who had previously represented him in a neighbour dispute involving four hundredweight of ostrich feathers and a potato, and he was able to navigate our way out of the tunnels and straight round there. The lawyer listened very carefully to our version of events, nodding thoughtfully at intervals, then put on some really thick glasses and went and consulted a big book of case law.

After more nodding and thinking, he closed the book, told us that the council had got us bang to rights and that our best bet was to plead insanity. Then he charged us four hundred quid and threw us out. Well fine! I said that I

wasn't going to back down that easily and that I would personally present our defence. The other two cheered, but then the knitting lady mumbled that we would be lucky if we got off with forty years.

Eighty-Four

What is important when you are fighting a big stakes legal battle, like what I am doing, is to create a good impression. Go and look at any courtroom. Go on, do it now! Did you have a look? Well, what you would have seen is a lot of men and ladies wearing long black robes, like silly dresses, and stupid wigs like offcuts of cheap carpet. This makes them look really stupid and it gives them an air of authority. I don't know why. I guess the thinking is that anyone who can get away with poncing about whilst looking that ridiculous must be hot stuff, in the strictly legal sense of the term.

Anyway, if I was to present a convincing legal defence, it was important that I look the part. Unfortunately, all that gear is made out of horsehair and bits of dead foxes and is really expensive, not to mention smelly. We would have to improvise. The bus driver managed to make me a gown out of an old curtain, and the knitting lady very quickly whipped me up a wig out of some straw and birds' nests and some grotty old string that we found by the roadside. Meanwhile, I bought a cheap pair of spectacles with really thick lenses from a charity shop. I can't really use them properly because they make my eyes hurt, and if I stare through them for too long I get dizzy and start to see all

different colours, including one or two that they haven't invented yet. But that's not the point. When you are a big shot lawyer, you use spectacles to peer intimidatingly over the top of. The effect is electric and can reduce a nervous witness to jelly.

I am confident that we will sweep to victory.

Eighty-Five

We are in court - the bus driver, the knitting lady and me - charged with knowingly leaving a giant egg in a tunnel without a permit. And it wasn't even our egg! I know, the law is an ass, right. Also, the man from the council was a bit of a squirrel, but that is by the by. Don't worry though, because I'm presenting our defence, and I'm about to get the whole case dismissed without a stain on our characters.

I was expecting the courtroom steps to be thronged with journalists, but there was just one old feller there with his dog, widdling up a lamppost. The dog was widdling, I should say, not the old feller - I expect the old feller had probably gone before he came out. Well, I had a whole speech prepared for the benefit of the international media and it seemed a pity to waste it, so I launched into it for the benefit of the old feller. It was good stuff, all about liberty and justice and the rights of man and stuff. The old feller listened to about four minutes of it, then interrupted me to tell me that he had an appointment to get his ears scraped. He shuffled away and we went into court.

"My lords and ladies," I announced once we were in session. "People of the world and my brothers in oppression." I blew a kiss up to the public gallery. There was no one there, but it's all theatre, isn't it? "M'lud, in outlining our defence may I direct your attention to the case of Great Uncle Bulgaria versus the East Sussex Dairylea Cheese Triangle Appreciation society, in which it was held that an a priori adjudication could not, ipso facto, be held binding in instances where sub nomine hocus pocus was proven to be vexatious. Notwithstanding the juris privati of the habeas corpus, or indeed the permeability of the aquifer, I move that this matter be declared a case of cavatappi carbonara. No further questions, your honour."

The judge found us in contempt of court and sentenced us to four years' hard labour.

Eighty-Six

I am in the chokey doing stir, and one of the screws is giving me grief and keeps having it away with my snouts, the nerk. Sorry, I've been in here for twenty minutes now, and I seemed to have picked up the lingo. Allow me to translate: I have been incarcerated in a corrective facility and one of the prison officers is behaving in an unnecessarily antagonistic manner, and has removed my cigarettes with the intention of permanently depriving me of the same, the nerk.

I have seen programmes on the tellybox about being in prison, but this doesn't seem anything like that. On the

telly there's usually all sorts of banter and japes, usually at the expense of the warders, and your cellmate is a cheeky Brummie who keeps stealing pineapple chunks. This is not nearly so fun - it's full of people who are violent and nasty, and so I'd really rather like to leave now.

Luckily, I have made contact with a group of people who are as fed up with this grotty place as I am, and we have formed a secret escape committee. Three of them are prison officers, which shows you just how bad things really are.

Eighty-Seven

Our prison escape committee has decided that our best chance of success will be to divide our efforts between three different escape plans. The first one - or 'Plan A', as we have decided to call it - involves building a full-scale steam train out of plywood in the woodwork shop.

Obviously, a steam train is unlikely to go unnoticed by the screws, and once they see us laying the track straight out of the prison gates, they are bound to suspect something is afoot. For this reason, the whole thing will be built to look like a number of bookcases, which will be screwed together at the last minute. The whole project is being masterminded by Charley 'Chippy' Minton, who was the brains behind last year's four-million-pound Ikea job. I say 'brains', but the guy got caught, didn't he, so I have one or two or three reservations about calling him that.

The second plan - or 'Plan 2', as we are calling it - is a classic. We're digging a tunnel under the prison garden.

This scheme is being led by Digsy Macgregor, who was a leading horticulturist until he was caught tunnelling into the Bank of England. Apparently, the jury didn't buy his excuse that it was just a novel irrigation scheme that had got a bit out of hand. We're hoping that he will have more luck persuading the governor that radishes really do have to be planted that deep.

The third plan - which we're calling 'Mrs Betty Hopkirk', in memory of Big Bob 'Basher' Hopkirk's mother - is to wait for a freak solar flare to temporarily scramble the CCTV and release all the electronic locks, so that we can just stroll out. To be honest, this one is a bit of a long shot.

Eighty-Eight

Today is breakout day! This morning, we assembled our wooden stream train. The assembly instructions were actually very difficult to follow and when we'd finished it looked more like a wardrobe and we had several bits left over, including some important-looking bolts, a couple of hinges and a boiler. Nevertheless, we fired it up, climbed aboard and tooted the whistle. We almost got halfway across the exercise yard before the whole thing caught fire and collapsed into a pile of smoking embers. Here's a piece of advice: if you're building a steam train, try to make it out of something less combustible than wood.

Ah well, there's still our second attempt - the tunnel disguised as a harmless attempt to plant radishes. Digsy Macgregor's efforts are really quite impressive - he has managed to sink a shaft 1000 metres into the ground. The

governor was a bit dubious that radish roots really go that deep, and he got a bit jumpy when he saw the winding tower going up, but all that's been forgotten now that Digsy has struck oil. The escape tunnel has also been forgotten, I'm afraid. Digsy has gone into partnership with the governor and is now far more interested in being an oil baron than in breaking out.

Never mind. As it happens - and this really was a billion to one chance - there was a solar flare that knackered the CCTV and stuffed up all the locks, so we were able to just stroll out. Isn't nature wonderful?

Eighty-Nine

So, I have broken out of prison, but I am still a wanted man, so it is important for me to adopt a disguise. I am very good at doing disguises and moving unnoticed through all levels of society - you just ask the head of security at Chessington World of Adventures, he will tell you that he has never seen me there. Ha! Of course, this is because I have never been to Chessington's World of All the Adventures, but the head security guard is not to know that, is he? You see, that's how good I am.

I have adopted many great disguises over the years. I once wrapped myself in clingfilm, put a bucket on my head and infiltrated the local hospital disguised as Professor Brian Cox. No one suspected a thing! Also, I once painted myself blue, sellotaped some flippers to my arms and strolled around backstage at the Albert Hall, pretending to be the bloke who did that TV programme before he went

mental. Again, no one suspected a thing. And another time I rolled myself in breadcrumbs and went to a U2 concert disguised as a fish finger. Yet again, no one suspected a thing, although I was followed around by an Airedale terrier who seemed to have an inclination that something was up.

For my prison breakout I have decided to disguise myself as Dr Heinrich Crabs, a Norwegian cotton wool salesman from Oslo. My papers are in order, I can do the voice, so nothing can go wrong.

Ninety

Something has gone wrong. I have disguised myself as Dr Heinrich Crabs, a Norwegian cotton wool salesman from Oslo. All was going well as I strolled around the town, and no one had any suspicion that I was really an escaped convict. At one point I was stopped and questioned by a policeman, but I spoke gibberish to him and showed him a passport that I had drawn myself with crayons, and he was perfectly satisfied that I was indeed a foreign businessman. He even let me have a go with his truncheon.

However, shortly after this, disaster struck when I ran into a fellow called Prentis Crackers, who works for a company that makes giant cotton buds for elephant ears. He is desperately looking for someone who can supply him with a significant quantity of cotton wool, and I seem to be the answer to his dreams. Right now he won't let me out of his sight, and tomorrow he is going to the zoo to measure elephant's ears. Who knew that giant cotton buds for

elephants were made to measure? Anyhow, I fear that if I can't produce cotton wool in the quantity he requires, my cover will be blown. Oh golly gosh.

Ninety-One

We are driving to the zoo and Mr Crackers is very talkative, and asking me all sorts of questions about cotton wool and how it is made. I know stuff all about cotton wool, having failed my cotton wool exams when I was at school, and so I am having to extemporise. That means that I am having to make it all up, which is difficult for me as normally everything that comes out of my mouth is actual real life facts and not deluded imaginings. Oh yes, I am a very serious person, just ask Carlos Trumpet. Carlos Trumpet is a tiny elf who lives in my pocket - not the one with the keys in, the other pocket, obviously. Carlos is imaginary, of course, but nevertheless he will swear on oath that he is the *only* thing I have ever made up, and everything else is the honest truth, cor blimey.

So I started to tell Mr Crackers that raw cotton wool comes from mines deep underground. Some of the deepest mines in the world in fact - down down down, past the coal and the salt and the copper and all the dinosaur bones and stuff. However, even though the mines are very deep, they are also really safe because if ever anyone falls down a shaft, they will always have something soft to land on. That said, I told him, most cotton wool these days was actually recycled from the fluff in people's pockets. This is

much more environmentally friendly than mines, because with pockets you don't have to sink the shafts so deep.

Mr Crackers nodded and accepted my explanation without question. I think he is probably an idiot.

Ninety-Two

We have arrived at the zoo. There are three types of zoo, you might be interested to know. There are big proper zoos, full of lions and tigers and okapis, where you are not allowed to touch the animals, or even feed them. I often wonder how the animals survive if no one is allowed to feed them. I have a theory that they fill them with gas. I have a boiler that runs on gas and when it's running it sounds like an hippopotamus, which I think confirms my theory. Also I once saw an hippopotamus doing a big widdle, and it was all hot and steam was coming off it, just like when I run the water for a bath - so, again, that's another tick for my theory.

The second type of zoo is the petting zoo. This time you are allowed to touch the animals, within reason. There are no lions and tigers and okapis, which is just as well, because they'd have your arm off. At a petting zoo you have chickens and ducks and sheeps and lamb chops, and all the other animals that you can get at the butcher's. You're not allowed to ride on the pigs, though.

Finally there is the Babylon Zoo. This is not actually an animal-type zoo, but a band from the nineties that no one remembers any more. Not even me, and I just said it. I

have also heard that there is something called a Shih Tzu, which is one with no penguins, but I think this might be a joke. I don't get it.

Ninety-Three

We are at the zoo and I am helping Mr Crackers to measure elephant ears so that he can custom-build cotton buds for them. Cotton buds, of course have many many uses, such as... well, you can use them for... Well, whatever. The one thing you should definitely not use them for is cleaning your ears out, even though this is the only thing that anyone ever buys them for. There are much better ways of cleaning your ears out, though. I have this friend, Crispy Mathews, who regularly goes out in thunderstorms, climbs to the highest point he can find and waits to get struck by lightening so that it will blast all the wax out of his ears. It works, but it has worrying side-effects: these days he glows in the dark and he interferes with electrical equipment, so he's not allowed on aeroplanes and he's been banned from PC World.

Personally, I favour a bicycle pump and pipette-based device of my own construction, which does the job tolerably well, even if it does leave you with a slight ringing in the ears if you pump too fast. I suppose such a contraption would be unsuitable for an elephant, hence the giant cotton buds. My job today is to hold up the elephant's ear while Mr Crackers crawls underneath with a tape measure. We have to be very quiet so as not to startle the animal, but it's not the worst job you could have. Next

door there is a man measuring a giraffe for a tie, and he's already fallen off his ladder twice.

When he had finished his measuring, Mr Crackers did some calculations and then asked me if I could supply him with four hundred tons of cotton wool. Well no, of course I couldn't, but I kept calm and told him that I would have to phone head office to get him a price. Then I ran off and hid in the meerkat enclosure.

Ninety-Four

You would have thought that a close-knit family of meerkats would not take kindly to the arrival of an escaped prisoner disguised as a Norwegian cotton wool salesman, but surprisingly I have been accepted into the group without too many awkward questions. I think this might be a good place to hide out until the heat is off.

In fact, I've been made to feel most welcome. They have brought food for me - mostly worms and grubs. Not very appetising, I must admit, and I later found out that they don't eat these themselves, preferring a diet of chips and fish paste sandwiches, but it's the thought that counts. I've also started to pick up some of their special skills and abilities, such as burrowing, standing on my hind legs* and playing the banjo. They really go for the banjo in a big way. I think it's because they are physically better suited to playing string instruments than, for example, brass. You try an imagine a meerkat playing a trombone. See what I mean - ridiculous, isn't it?

Anyway, I'm getting quite good with the old banjo, and me and two of the other guys - Sniffy Pickles and Itchy MacGyver - are talking about getting a band together and touring the folk clubs.

**Actually, I don't like to show off, but I could do this already.*

Ninety-Five

I have formed a banjo band with my two meerkat mates and we are currently rehearsing ahead of a major national tour. Itchy MacGyver has said that we should start by touring small clubs and theatres before we tackle the big stadium gigs, because this will help us refine our act and gel as a band. Also, he didn't think many people were ready to pay money to watch two meerkats and a Norwegian cotton salesman playing banjos. Me and Sniffy Pickles agreed with him because Itchy is usually right about these things. Also, if we argue with him, he hits us with a plank.

But before all that, we have to think of a name for the band. We've had several ideas. At first I thought that we could call ourselves The Spanner Heads, because I quite like spanners and they are always useful things to have around. Sniffy then suggested we should call ourselves Baby Carrot, because people think babies are cute and everybody likes carrots, so the name would combine the best of two very different worlds, i.e. infants and vegetables. I disagreed as I personally do not like the taste of carrots and I have never eaten a baby, so I suggested

that we should call ourselves The Sock Detectives instead, since having a sock detective around would be jolly groovy, especially if you are missing a sock.

At this point, Itchy hit us a both with a plank and said that we should call ourselves Deep Purple, so we're going with that.

Ninety-Six

Turns out that there is already a band called Deep Purple and they are massively litigious. This is a shame since we have already had all the posters printed and ordered the merchandise, including all the pens and baseball caps and trolley tokens and things. Instead, we have decided to call ourselves The Fly By Night Jazz Merchants, which means that we have to go all round the country, crossing out 'Deep Purple' on all our posters and writing out the new name in felt tip. When I say 'we', I mean me and Sniffy Pickles. Itchy MacGyver has to stay in the meerkat burrow, drinking fizzy pop and eating custard creams. He says this is because he is our de facto manager and he is required to stay by the phone in case we get an important booking.

Two problems with that. Firstly, I don't think I actually own a 'de facto', don't even know what one would look like, but I am pretty sure that I have never asked Itchy to manage it. Secondly, we don't have a phone. Of course, we can't really say anything, since as soon as we open our mouths to protest, Itchy hits us with a plank.

Still, the poster campaign was going well and it's good to get out and about. I got as far as Norwich before my felt tip ran out, but Itchy FedExed me a new one and I was soon able to carry on. This one is green, but it doesn't taste as nice as the old one. I have noticed that a lot of the time, someone has already scribbled on our posters before us. At first, I thought that this was other bands trying to get in on our act, but some of the words don't really sound like the names of other groups. In fact, they are more like the naughty words that you sometimes hear on the telly. I don't like to repeat them here, but they are things like 'bum', only much much worse. Anyway, I don't think that there is a group called 'Felch'.

Ninety-Seven

The Fly By Night Jazz Merchants have hit the road! Our stage costumes are packed, our banjos have been restrung and we're on our tour bus speeding towards our first gig in Doncaster. I say 'tour bus' but that is perhaps not the most accurate description of the vehicle in which we are hurtling towards fame and fortune. Tractor, would be a better word. And 'trundling' might be more precise than 'hurtling'.

In his defence, Itchy MacGyver said that getting hold of a tour bus would be ludicrously expensive. And they were all booked up anyway. And he was a meerkat, and most vehicle hire places refuse to deal with small mammals. Something to do with insurance, apparently. Tractors, he told us, were far cheaper - especially when you steal them.

It's getting us noticed, anyhow, especially as it still has the muck spreader on the back. They certainly won't forget us in the last town we drove through anyway, when Sniffy Pickles leaned forward, uttered those five magic words 'What does this switch do?' and it was suddenly raining manure all the way from the marketplace right the way down to WH Smith's. Blimey, these muck spreaders can really sling it out, can't they? I'm thinking of getting one for my cousin Trevor. I've never liked him.

Ninety-Eight

There's been a bit of a mix up in the bookings. We were supposed to be playing the most prestigious venue in Doncaster - St. Tiddles in the Font Church Hall - but it turns out it was double booked, either by the Doncaster over eighties knitting circle, or by The Who, I can't remember which. So we set up in the car park instead. We had to play a reduced set because it was only a short stay car park, and Sniffy Pickles nearly got run over by a Transit van, but I guess that's rock and roll. Also, we didn't really have a decent sound system and the noise from the church hall easily drowned out our banjos. Nobody could hear a thing once the over eighties knitting circle started playing 'Won't Get Fooled Again'.

Then it rained, Itchy MacGyver's ears started to fill up and my socks got wet, so we called the whole thing off and squished back to the tour tractor and sat there steaming for the rest of the evening. Itchy said that we were not to worry because this was exactly how The Beatles started,

and I tried really really really hard to imagine John Lennon sitting in a tractor wearing squishy socks, but I just couldn't get my brains around it. We got a parking ticket, as well.

Ninety-Nine

Hey guess what? We got a fantastic write up for our car park gig in the Doncaster Evening Bugle. Fabbo! It seems that the fact that nobody could hear us worked very much in our favour and the reviewer kindly said that we had been the most exciting thing to happen in the town for years. Whizzo! I looked through the rest of the paper and it looked like he might be right. The only other story of any interest was about a man who had reported a missing duck. Apparently, frantic quacking had alerted the duck police to the animal hiding under an upturned wheelbarrow in the man's own shed, and now he was being prosecuted for insurance fraud. The duck was obviously in on it too. You can't trust them, you know. They have very shifty looking beaks.

Anyway, as a result of this review there is renewed interest in the band and Itchy is getting quite a lot of enquiries. He is being very careful to only accept bookings next to airports, large scale factory units and other places where the audience will be unable to hear us. Tomorrow night we are due to play a gig in the car park of a bicycle horn testing facility in Newcastle, so we're really going places. Specifically, we're going to Newcastle.

One Hundred

We went down a storm in Newcastle. They're really crazy about banjos in this town. Of course, it helped that nobody could hear a thing and Sniffy has bought a new hat. Showbiz! It's a cowboy hat with silver tassels on it. Personally, I think that celebrity has gone to his head. He has employed a hamster as his personal assistant and it runs round after him, fetching snacks and running errands and warming the toilet seat for him. He's started demanding his own dressing room, too, which is a bit of a pain since we usually have to get changed behind the recycling bins. Itchy MacGyver has said that he can't have a dressing room but he can have a dressing gown, which I thought was quite generous in the circumstances. But that wasn't good enough for Sniffy - he wanted gold-plated slippers and magic pyjamas as well.

Of course, I tried to keep out of it as best as I could. I just sat at the back, twanging my banjo and watching all the programmes about antiques and houses and stuff on daytime telly. There is a really great one about upcycling where each day they take stuff out of skips - old tables, paintings, kitchen appliances, garden implements, bottles, jars, chairs and things - then turn them into lamps and put them back in the skip.

Anyway, Itchy has had enough of Sniffy acting like a proper diva, so he set about him with a plank for an hour and a half, and now he's calmed down a lot.

One Hundred and One

Well it had to happen sooner or later. Last night there was a talent scout in the audience - he was trying to keep a low profile, but the woggle was a dead giveaway. Anyhow, he came backstage after the gig, saluted smartly and offered us a recording contract. We accepted immediately, then gave him a quid and asked him to wash the tractor.

There's just one itsy-bitsy problem. You see, we do cover versions - mostly seventeenth century dairy farmers' shanties - and what the record company wants is original material. They also want it more relevant and up to date - so, less about cows and milk churns and buckets, and more about transgender issues, climate change and computer games. I've written a song about Pong. The first verse goes:

How can it be wrong,
To sing you a song,
All about Pong,
It's not very long.

I think it is dead good because it rhymes properly and it fits the brief, because it is about a computer game. Sniffy disagrees. He says that it is naïve, simplistic and that pong is a really really really old game that won't engage the youth of today. I took offence at this and said that he couldn't possibly have a clue what the 'the youth of today' were interested in, because he was a meerkat. Well, you know when you've said the wrong thing, don't you? He accused me of being 'speciest' for bringing up the whole 'meerkat' thing and that his genus had nothing to do with

it. I responded that it was purely a matter of his upbringing, and that a small mammal who had spent his formative years in a zoo, being fed peanuts and bits of lettuce by the keepers, couldn't possibly have the insight to understand what young people wanted.

Well, he went into a sulk then. I hope things are better when we go into the studio tomorrow.

One Hundred and Two

It's our first day in the studio recording our debut album. We've have got a top producer called Stevie Stevenson who has flown in specially from L.A., which I gather is somewhere abroad. He has previously worked with The Sleazy Bishops, Jim Throat and lots of other people that I haven't heard of, which is all rather exciting. He has decided to beef up our traditional banjo sound with a string quartet, a Peruvian pipe band and a man called Raymond who has a big gong. We were a bit unsure about all this at first, especially in the first number - a gentle ballad during which Raymond was banging away on his gong like an absolute mentalist. But Mr Stevenson said it would all work out in the mix, so we went along with it.

The session seemed to go quite well at first, but it wasn't long before the old tensions came bubbling up to the surface once more. We were recording a song written by Sniffy Pickles, about the difficulty of finding a good window cleaner in this day and age. He seemed to think that this was quite modern and relevant, and I suppose he has a point. Back in the day, when window cleaners

actually used to go up ladders, they took a real pride in their work. Now they just stay on the ground with a cloth on the end of a pole, and they don't care about getting into the corners or anything.

Anyway, that's what Sniffy's song was all about, and I played this really good banjo solo in the middle, but Sniffy was really... well... sniffy about it, I suppose. Things got heated and I told him that I'd play anything he liked, or I wouldn't play anything at all, whatever would please him. Sniffy thought I was being sarcastic and stormed off, which is fair enough, because that is exactly what I was being.

One Hundred and Three

We have reconvened to continue our recording session. Itchy MacGyver has suggested that maybe we are not at our best in the studio environment and has suggested that we go up onto the roof to record. So, this is what we do - we get set up, the tape is rolling and we run through our set. There's quite a commotion down on the ground as people stop to watch us, shouting comments, hurling abuse and throwing missiles. Unfortunately, as this is only a single storey building, we are well within range of the bottles and brickbats, and half the pipe band is taken out before we reach the second chorus.

As if that wasn't enough, we are also set upon by pigeons, who seemed to have taken exception to us for reasons of their own. Clack clack clack, go their beaks; squawk squawk squawk and scratch scratch scratch. Nevertheless, the show must go on, and so we keep at it until, forty

minutes later, bruised, bleeding and covered in poo, we hit the last sustained twang of the final number then drop our banjos and run for cover.

Once inside, we listen to the playback and can hardly hear ourselves for all the squawking, squealing, shouting and crying. Nevertheless, our producer seems very pleased with it. He says that it all adds atmosphere and that it will be fine after he's done all sorts of technical computery things to it. He looks at his watch and says it should be ready for release by ten o'clock tomorrow.

One Hundred and Four

Our album is due for release at ten o'clock today. We received an advance copy at 9:50. The album is called *Twanging All Night Long* by The Fly By Night Jazz Merchants, which is us. However, when we play it, it appears to be a crackly old recording of The Andrews Sisters from 1945. For people who do not know, The Andrews Sisters were a group of ladies who were famous during the war for taking out machine gun nests, bombing raids on enemy ammunition dumps and for singing 'Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree'. I was very surprised to hear them on our record because I don't remember them being on the rooftop when we recorded it. Of course, there was a lot going on at the time, so I could have been mistaken. I gave our producer a ring and he explained that after he'd removed all the swearing and the screaming from our recording, what was left sounded 'a bit thin', so he had bulked it out by sampling some old records that were now

out of copyright. But he assured us that we were still on the record, just really low down in the mix.

We were admittedly a bit miffed at this and felt that it offended our integrity as creative and innovative musicians, but then the record started to sell really well, so we figured that on this occasion it was perfectly acceptable for our integrity to go and get stuffed.

One Hundred and Five

Good news! Our debut album is at number one, we're all over the music press and we've been booked to go on *The One Show*. Bad news - the record company has ripped us off and we're not getting a penny, Sniffy Pickles has left the band due to creative differences and Itchy MacGyver has sold our banjos and fled to Mauritius with the proceeds. So the band is no more, which is a real pity since I was really looking forward to going on *The One Show* and sitting next to some perplexed Hollywood B-lister while they play a report on the state of the drains in Cirencester. "Well Ryan, I bet you don't have problems like this with the drains in Beverly Hills." "No... er, no Alex. Can we talk about my movie now, please?"

The really really really surprising thing is that Sniffy already has a solo album out, and he's made a couple of videos, and he's already playing solo shows. I can't figure out when he found the time to do all this. I think it must have been yesterday afternoon. He said he was nipping out to a dentist's appointment, but I think we now know what he was really up to.

So now my dreams of stardom are over. After this whirlwind of touring and press junkets, I've finally come back down to earth with a bump. I didn't even know where I was, so I stepped outside the hotel and found I was in Stoke on Trent. Like I said, down to earth with a bump. But then I looked up and saw something extraordinary. There was an open-topped tourist bus going by, and there, on the top, listening to the tour guide pointing out places of interest, was my sandwich! I couldn't believe it. Who would want to go on an open-topped bus tour of Stoke?

One Hundred and Six

When you have been a top-selling rock and rolling person in a number one popperoonny banjo band with a couple of wild and crazy meerkats, you kind of lose touch with reality. Trust me, I've been there. Oh yes, I've known the glitz and the glamour of life in the fast lane, even if it was only for just shy of twenty-four hours. I was surrounded by yes-men, my every whim was catered for, and gradually my brain dribbled out of my ears as I came to believe my own myth. I'd lost my direction. I'd abandoned my purpose. I didn't know who I was any more!

Specifically, I had completely forgotten that I had set out to track down my giant sandwich, which had grown to a horrifyingly massive size, had lumbered off on its own, and had last been heard of enjoying a relaxing holiday in the Lake District. You see, normal, everyday stuff like that - you just become completely cocooned from reality. So when I saw my sandwich whooshing past me on an open-

topped bus, it all came flooding back: the anguish, the anger, the crippling sense of loss and the hunger. Yes, especially the hunger.

But now I was back on the trail. I hailed a taxi. "Follow that bus!" I cried. "What bus?" said the taxi man. He had a point - by this time the bus had gone. I told him that I was very sorry for bothering him, but by that time the taxi man had gone as well. Luckily, I know a little bit about buses. I can track them by their spore. So I got down on my hands and knees, got my nose right down in it and before long I was hot on the trail.

One Hundred and Seven

I am tracking a tourist bus through the mean streets of Stoke, and I expect you are wondering how I'm getting on. I have made a particular study of buses, as you would imagine from someone in my position. I have familiarised myself with every aspect of them, and can identify them from the tiniest clues - a whiff of exhaust fumes, a fleck of paint, the taste of rubber left by a screeching tyre. So, shuffling along on my hands and knees, my nose pressed firmly to the tarmac, I was having no difficulty in following the trail.

I was slightly annoyed by people shouting at me to get out of the road, the honking traffic and so on. And the fag ends, sticky chewing gum and doggy do with which I was gradually getting coated was becoming unpleasant. But I did my best to ignore these unpleasant distractions and was making significant progress when I was stopped by a

policeman. He motioned to me to pull over to the side of the road, so I grudgingly shuffled over into the gutter, where all the muck and doggy do was even worse.

"Evening sir," he says to me. "What do you think you is doing?"

I told him that I was trying to catch a bus.

He didn't like that and walloped me with his truncheon.

"Very funny, sir," he says to me. "May I ask why you were in the road on your hands and knees, and not in a vehicle like other road users?"

I explained that if I had a vehicle I wouldn't be trying to catch a bus, which I thought was witty. He didn't and walloped me with his truncheon again.

"Can I ask if you have a licence for those knees?" was what he asked me next.

I said that I didn't think you had to have a licence for knees, and he explained that you do if you want to use them on the King's highway, then he walloped me again and arrested me for being illegally parked.

One Hundred and Eight

I have been taken to a police station, walloped with a truncheon and then cautioned. The policeman said "Watch it" then walloped me again. I am now covered in shame and bruises, not to mention fag ends and doggy do, and I have been banned from crawling along in the street

on the trail of buses. So, if I want to find the bus that my sandwich was on, I would have to adopt other ways. Fortunately there is more than one way to skin a cat. Unfortunately, I'm not trying to skin a cat, I'm looking for a bus, so I think that you are very silly for bringing the cat into this.

Down to some detective work then, but before I started doing my detecting, I would need some proper detecting clobber. I bought a pipe, a magnifying glass and a silly hat. I would also need some sort of gimmick, like all the proper detectives do. Like, I would have to have a silly voice, or a dirty habit or a catchphrase. I decided that a catchphrase would be bestest, so I adopted the phrase, "Blimey oh crikey, Pedro, I think we're onto something!" This meant I would also need a sidekick called Pedro who I could say it to. I found a man in a fishmonger's who wasn't doing anything. He said his name was Derek, or something, but from now on I would call him Pedro, and I bought him a dirty raincoat and a pair of slippers. Now, everything was in place and we were ready to detect!

One Hundred and Nine

I am Detective Ronnie Ilfracombe (my new detecting alias) and me and my greasy sidekick Pedro are investigating The Curious Case of the Bus with the Sandwich on It. We started our investigating in a café I know, where you can get a reasonably priced pot of tea and the cakes are very nice. I began by detecting a cream slice, a Bakewell tart and a couple of macaroons, while Pedro had a jam tart.

Then we got down to the serious stuff of examining our clues. We needed to find out which company was operating that bus tour, and I knew that the information must be locked away somewhere in my brains.

I decided that I would go into my 'mind shed'. This is where I sit and concentrate and try not to dribble as I visualise my special shed in which all my memories are locked away. It's a technique that I have found very useful in the past: it has enabled me to recall all sorts of things, such as where I put my keys and that I would need to buy more milk. Even though I only caught a fleeting glance of the bus, I was sure that the memory would be locked away in the mind shed.

I pushed open the door. Inside, the mind shed was dark and fusty, and there was a lump in the corner that was buzz-buzzing with flies. Phantom images swam before my eyes: old paint tins, ladders, a cucumber. I forced myself to concentrate. Looking behind the old wheelbarrow and the broken lawnmower I saw a hazy shape. Concentrate. Concentrate. Yes! Slowly it started to resolve itself into the shape of a bus. There it was - now all I had to do was examine it for clues. Could I make out the registration number? No, it was too fuzzy. What about the driver? He was a fat, balding man with a red face. No good - all bus drivers looked like that. What was that in the window - a sign? An advert? No, it was too small to see. And then I saw it, emblazoned on the side of the bus in big yellow letters: 'Happytimes Sightseeing Tours'.

I snapped out of my trance. "Blimey oh crikey, Pedro, I think we're onto something!" I said. "Also, I need to buy some more milk."

One Hundred and Ten

Hello. I have discovered, through my detecting, that the bus on which I saw my sandwich was being operated by a company called Happytimes Sightseeing Tours. You will notice that I started with the word 'hello'. I did this because it is more friendly. I recently read about a survey by a leading pet food manufacturer that if you are more friendly in your communications you are more likely to sell more leading pet food. I do not sell leading pet food, so this doesn't currently apply to me, but I thought that I ought to adopt the policy, just in case it's an area that I want to get into. So, as I say, hello.

Now, having discovered the name of the tour company, I needed to find their address. Fortunately, detectives like me have a special technique that never fails. There is something called a 'phone book' which is known only to detectives, and you will find them in special detective places called 'phone boxes'. Unfortunately, I couldn't find a phone box, so I had to resort to infallible method number two, which was to find a book of matches that someone had inadvertently dropped. Couldn't find one of those either, so my trusty sidekick Pedro just Googled it on his phone. I hate all these modern things; they take the romance out of detecting.

Anyway, we found out that Happytimes Sightseeing Tours had an office at the bus depot. Quick Pedro, to the tricycle - there's not a moment to lose!

One Hundred and Eleven

Me and my trusty sidekick Pedro had some difficulty finding the head office of Happytimes Sightseeing Tours. In the end we discovered that the 'extensive and luxuriously appointed offices conveniently situated at the heart of Stoke-on-Trent's main communication hub' was actually a workman's tent on some rough ground adjacent to the toilets.

Now, as a detective, I know that I can't just stroll in there and demand information. I need a ruse, and nothing works better than passing yourself off as someone in authority. So, I got myself a hat, a clipboard and a moustache - all essential kit for anyone masquerading as an official. I would also need a high visibility jacket, and luckily I had access to a brown and yellow checked blazer that my uncle Tony used to wear in the seventies. It stank of brown ale and Benson and Hedges, but you could see it for miles off, so it was the very thing for me. Thus attired, I strode into the tent.

I have never been in a workman's tent before and I was surprised to find how spacious it was. There was a counter, racks of shelves and a waiting area. A man came through the door at the back and welcomed me with a smile. I told him that I was interested in his tours and he got some brochures and started telling me all about them.

There was a trip to the gas works, a trip to the sewage farm, a trip to the abattoir - all the usual tourist attractions, in fact. I told him I wasn't interested in any of that, and I wanted to see his passenger list. That's when the smile fell and he started to get cagey, so I whipped out my clipboard and went to work. It was time to get serious.

One Hundred and Twelve

There are very few people who can resist the power of a clipboard when it is deployed properly. It is the ultimate symbol of authority and most people will wilt at the sight of it. My clipboard was particularly intimidating, because it was covered in pink fur and had glitter on the back, and the man at Happytimes Sightseeing Tours was certainly shaken by the sight of it. Even so, he was still reluctant to give me the information I needed, and so some tough talking was needed. We did a conversation, and it went a bit like this:

Me: I'm an inspector and I want to know about a passenger on one of your recent tours.

Him: Sorry, I can't give you that information. It is protected by the Maritime Data Protection Fire Safety Directive (Amended) 2014.

Me: I don't care about your ruddy directive you ruddy idiot. Give me the ruddy information I want, or I will ruddy well bust your ruddy balls.

(Sorry about the language, but it gets results.)

Him: OK, OK, just put the clipboard down and I'll tell you what you want to know.

Me: I want to know about sandwiches on your trips.

Him: Sandwiches? We don't do no sandwiches. Our passengers usually bring a packed lunch.

Me: You're ruddy well trying my patience, mister. Did you sell a ticket to a sandwich?

Him: You don't need a ticket to bring sandwiches. Excuse me, but what exactly are you an inspector of? Did Brenda send you?

Me: I'm an inspector of seats. Bus seats. Yes, I'm a bus seat inspector, and I don't know anyone called Brenda. Answer the ruddy question, you ruddy nincompoop, or I'll bury your whole operation so deep that it... it... it will be really difficult and everything. So, yeah, spill the beans - did a giant sandwich book a seat on one of your tours recently?

Him: Oh, you mean Mr Penwright?

Turns out my sandwich booked itself on a sightseeing trip to the local council recycling centre, under the name 'Mr Penwright'. The man from Happytimes had thought it rather odd at the time since giant sandwiches wearing hats and false beards, and going under an obviously false name, did not normally book themselves on trips to the recycling centre. They normally favoured the gasworks.

Anyway, the Happytimes man gave me the address of the boarding house where my sandwich was staying, I gave the

Happytimes man a peck on the cheek and we parted as friends.

One Hundred and Thirteen

I've have found out the name of the place where my sandwich is staying. It is Mrs McGonagall's Boarding House for Executive Lunches. I hailed a skateboard and told the driver to take me there straight away. I arrived ten minutes later with scuffed knees and gravel in my hair and, if I say so myself, it gave me a somewhat rakish look.

The boarding house was a tall, imposing building with a gothic frontage and dead birds in the guttering. I knocked on the door with the special knocking fist that I have for knocking on doors with. It was opened by Mrs McGonagall herself, who was a tall, imposing woman with a gothic frontage and dead birds in her hair.

"Have you come about the sideboard?" she asked.

I said I didn't know nothing about no sideboard, or something like that. I think I must have lost count of all the negatives in that sentence, since she clearly thought that I was interested.

"Well," she said, "I was hoping to sell it to someone taller, but seeing as you're here you can have it for twenty quids. Are you sure you'll be able to lift it on your own?"

I spluttered and protested that I wasn't interested in no sideboard, but I don't think that she understood me proper. Or maybe she just wasn't interested.

"Only it's got a pig in the bottom drawer," she said. "No, I don't know why there is a pig in there, but I'm not going to disturb it, so you'll just have to take that as well. Well, come on - pay me. Pay me now."

So anyway, I didn't want a sideboard. And I didn't want a pig. And I didn't want an antique lampstand either, but the upshot of it was that I ended up buying all of these things, and then she slammed the door in my face.

One Hundred and Fourteen

My first attempt to quiz Mrs McGonagall about my sandwich had ended with me buying a sideboard with a pig in it, and it's difficult to see how anyone might consider this a success. I've come too far to give up now, so for my next attempt I reckoned that I must try my absolute bestest to look like someone who is not in the market for buying a sideboard. I combed the gravel out of my hair, put on an admiral's uniform, a spangly bow tie and a pair of yellow wellington boots, then knocked again.

Mrs McGonagall opened the door in her nightdress. I could do a joke about that, but I won't because this is a serious matter and it would spoil the tone. So please don't ask me to do the joke. Anyway, she opened the door, then she opened her mouth, and these are the words that came out of it:

"If you've come about the sideboard, then I'm afraid you're too late. I've sold it."

I told her that I had not come about a sideboard. In fact, I said it three times, because I wanted to be extra clear about my position in respect of the purchasing of sideboards. I even wrote it down on some sticky paper and stuck it to her forehead.

"Well, if you haven't come about the sideboard," said Mrs McGonagall, doing a little dance, "then you must have come about the ottoman."

Now, this is where I was a bit stupid. I know, it's hard to believe, isn't it? What I should have said is that I hadn't come about the ottoman. In fact, I should have said it three times and written it some sticky paper, and then stuck it on her head. But the thing is, I didn't know what an ottoman was, so I said, "What's an ottoman?"

"This one is twenty quids," said Mrs McGonagall. "I hope you will be able to lift it, it's got a pig in it."

"Does all your furniture have pigs in?" I asked.

"Have you been speaking to the man I sold the sideboard to?" she replied.

Anyway, the upshot is that I now had an ottoman to go with my sideboard and my antique lamp stand.

One Hundred and Fifteen

I figured that the mistake I had made in my most recent encounter with Mrs McGonagall was that I had chosen the wrong disguise. I had dressed as an admiral and it was

obvious that anyone who had spent so long at sea must have been desperate to purchase an ottoman.

I must try again, but in a different costume. So I dressed up as a circus ringmaster, knocked again and Mrs McGonagall sold me kitchen dresser. With a pig in it.

Okay, that was a slight miscalculation. I gave it another go, this time dressed as a vicar and Mrs McGonagall sold me a wardrobe. With a pig in it.

If at first you don't succeed, dress up as a spaceman and try again. I knocked on the door - it was one small knock for a spaceman, but one giant thud for mankind. Mrs McGonagall sold me a chest of drawers with a pig in it.

Anyway, this went on for some time. I won't bore you with the details, but suffice it to say that by late afternoon I had amassed quite a collection of furniture, not to mention pigs. Finally, I dressed up a gas boiler engineer and knocked again. The door was opened by a plain-clothed police detective. He thrust a warrant card in my face, told me his name was DCI Flapjack from the Pork Squad and arrested me for aggravated piggery.

One Hundred and Sixteen

The story so far: I found a sandwich behind my fridge, which got really big and messy and then... Actually, quite a lot has happened, most of which I can't remember. Let's bring you right up to date: I have tracked my sandwich down to the guest house of Mrs McGonagall, who sold me

a lot of furniture with pigs in it, and now I have been arrested by DCI Flapjack from the Pork Squad. Also, I am disguised as a gas boiler engineer - that may or may not be of significance, we have yet to discover. You probably want to know why I have been arrested. So do I, let's listen to what DCI Flapjack has to tell us.

"We have had Mrs McGonagall's place under observation for some time," said the DCI as he bounced me about the interview room. "We suspected it was being used to launder pigs - pigs which were the proceeds of organised crime. All we needed to know was who the pick-up man was. That's when you showed up. What have you got to say to that?"

"Oww," is what I said to that. "Stop hitting me."

"We have evidence that you smuggled illegal pigs out of the house, hidden in furniture," said the DCI as he hit me with a table. "Any comment?"

"Oww," was my comment. "I think my knees are broken."

"A likely story!" said the DCI as he jumped on my neck.

"Confess! You're the mastermind of this whole plot, aren't you?"

I made a certain gesture at him. It was the only piece of sign language I knew.

"For the sake of the tape," said the DCI, "the suspect is signing that he confesses he is a heinous villain, a proper wrong 'un, and he only hopes that the full weight of the

law is brought against him. He is also asking that I hit him with the table again."

"No, I'm not," I screamed from under his foot. "I'm asking to see a lawyer. Preferably one who is an expert on pig laundering."

The DCI told me that no such lawyer could be found, so they got me a pork butcher instead.

One Hundred and Seventeen

I have been arrested for pig laundering, which is apparently a thing. Instead of a lawyer they have got me a pork butcher whose main legal qualification is that he once watched an episode of *Ally McBeal*. Impressive. His name is Silas P. Lovelock, and he is the genius that successfully represented defendants in the Colchester bacon heist, the notorious Pontypridd gammon forgeries and the sausage riots of 2013. After a brief discussion, Mr Lovelock said that our best tactic would be for me to 'keep my gob shut'. We returned to the interview room and I noticed that now that my solicitor-butcher was present, DCI Flapjack was far less punchy and kicky and slappy. This is how the questioning went.

DCI FLAPJACK: So, can we begin with your explanation as why you were observed to have paid multiple visits to premises belonging to Mrs Beatrice Q. McGonagall, a notorious gangster and pig launderer.

SILAS P. LOVELOCK: You do not have to answer that question

ME: On the advice of my solicitor, I am keeping my gob shut.

DCI FLAPJACK: You're not doing yourself any favours, you know. We have photos of you receiving stolen pigs. Who are you working for?

SILAS P. LOVELOCK: You do not have to answer that question.

ME: On the advice of my solicitor, I am keeping my fat gob shut.

DCI FLAPJACK: Come on now, just give us a few names and you can be out of here in no time.

SILAS P. LOVELOCK: You do not have to answer that question.

Me: On the advice of my solicitor, I am keeping my fat stupid gob shut.

At this point, Mr Lovelock suggested a way for me to prove that I was not a pig launderer. I should point out that I was still dressed in my disguise as gas boiler engineer, and Mr Lovelock said that if I could successfully service the police station's boiler, this would prove my identity. Well, I'm not a real engineer, of course, but I had seen how it was done, so I agreed to give it a go. I took the cover off it, blew the dust out of it, told them you couldn't get the parts for this model any more, then charged them one hundred

and fifty quids. That seemed to convince the DCI, and I walked out of there a free man.

One Hundred and Eighteen

Alrighty then. Now that all pig-related charges against me had been dropped and I was a free man, the first thing I did was to go back to Mrs McGonagall's guest house to quiz her about my sandwich. Actually, that's not absolutely proper true. I felt like celebrating, so the actual proper first thing I did was to go to a shop to buy a milk shake - a red one made of berries or something, because that is my absolutely favourite species of shaky milk.

Actually, no, that's not quite true, because I went into the wrong shop. Instead of the shaky milk shop, I went into a junk shop, and this was a disappointment because they didn't have no milky shakes. Actually, I say a junk shop, but when I exclaimed loudly that this shop was full of junk, the lady behind the counter was very cross and said that her shop did not sell junk. I begged to differ, but she told me that all the items in her shop had been previously discarded and then 'upcycled' into new, exciting and extremely desirable objects.

I have heard about this 'upcycling' thing before. As far as I remember, it is when you take something out of a skip, clean the poo off it, paint it white and then sell it to an idiot for too much money - very probably the same idiot who dumped it in the skip in the first place. I looked around the shop. There was an old vase that had been cleaned up and turned into a lamp. And there was an old

wooden chest that had been cleaned up and turned into a lamp. And there was an old toaster that had been cleaned up and turned into a lamp... It occurred to me that everything in this shop had been turned into grotty old lamps, and when I mentioned this to the lady, she said what else could you do with this old crap? She had a point, so I bought an old lawnmower that had been turned into a lamp, and then I left.

One Hundred and Nineteen

So then, I was telling you that after my release from the cop shop, I wanted to celebrate with a milk shake. I also told you that I went into the wrong shop, but that is not my fault because people should properly label their shops correctly. Back in the olden days, things were much simpler. I know, 'cos I've seen it in old pictures. If you wanted, say, some cheese you would look for the place that had a giant wedge of cheese hanging over the doorway, and then that would be where you would buy your cheese. And if you wanted a piano, you would look for the shop with the piano hanging over the doorway, and then you would walk in and say "I would like a piano please," and everything would be groovy. And if you wanted a haircut, you would look for the shop with the stripy pole outside because, well, I don't know. The system wasn't infallible.

I suppose all that kind of thing came to an end when department stores came along. At a department store you could buy cheese and pianos and goldfish and tables and spoons and dresses and sheds and loofahs and get your

hair cut and everything. That means that over the entrance they would have to have giant versions of cheese and pianos and goldfish and tables and spoons and dresses and sheds and loofahs and everything else. You wouldn't be able to get through the door.

Anyway, I wasn't going to make the mistake of walking into the wrong shop again. And so I didn't. I went into the milkshake shop and bought me a milky shake. Mmmm, yummy!

One Hundred and Twenty

I feel sick. I have had a big shaky milk from the milkshake shop, but it is now going all gurgle-gurgle though my tummy, and I am about to start having big regrets. What makes it worse is that it was my best favourite kind of milkshake, strawberry milkshake, and I have often wondered how they make it. I think they must stuff the cows full of strawberries before they milk it, but I have a friend called Susan who disagrees with me. Actually, she's not really a friend of mine, she's just some woman I met at the chiropodist. Anyway, Susan from the chiropodist reckons it is the other way round: she thinks that they get the strawberries and stuff them full of cows. Well, that's mental when you think about it - it would mean that you would then have to milk the strawberry. Have you every tried to milk a strawberry? I have. Even though I squozed it very carefully, I ended up with juice down my shirt and pips in my eye. It was a flipping nightmare, and I am never going to do that again.

I think Susan from the chiropodists must be a proper nutter to believe that, and considering the state of her feet I am not at all surprised.

Anyway, shortly after leaving the shaky milk shop, I was sick on a small dog, after which I felt a whole lot better. I looked down at the puddle of vomit with the sticky little dog in the middle of it and I said, "Crikey, I don't remember eating that." It was a joke, of course, because I would easily have remembered eating a dog. However, the dog didn't seem to think it was funny and bit me, so if you see a small dog covered in pink sick wandering around, steer well clear of it because it has no sense of humour.

One Hundred and Twenty-One

Right, I am returning to Mrs McGonagall's to ask her about my sandwich and this time I'm not going to take a sideboard for an answer. I knocked on the door, knock-knock-knocketty-knock. A big man answered the door in a ginger beard. "I am not going to buy a sideboard," I told him. "Good for you," he said, and closed the door in my face.

Fair enough. Well, that's established the ground rules. I knocked again, knock-knock-knocky-knocky-knock. The man opened the door in his ginger beard again. "I want to know where my sandwich is," I said. "No sandwiches, just cats," said the ginger beard man, and closed the door again.

Hmm, we were making progress, but it was slow. Perhaps this time we could have a sustained conversation. I knocked again, knock-knocky-knock-knock, knock-knock. "Hello," I said, jamming my foot in the door. "Please tell me at length what you meant by the phrase 'just cats', using diagrams and illustrations, if necessary." The man explained that he didn't know nothing about no sandwiches, and that this building was under new management, and was now the Fennimore Home for Agitated Cats, and that unless I had an agitated cat that needed treatment, I should leave immediately. He then pushed me out into the street and slammed the door. I walked around the building and came back to the front, and that's when I noticed that there was indeed a sign saying that it was a home for jittery pussy cats. I knocked on the door again, but he just shouted "Piss off" through the letter box. This was very naughty of him, but in the absence of any better ideas, I did as I was told.

One Hundred and Twenty-Two

Here is my dilemma: the guest house where my sandwich was staying is now a home for weird cats. However, because my spidey-sense is tingling, I feel sure that if only I could get inside I might find some clue as to where it has gone. Unfortunately, the man in charge has a ginger beard and is very cross, and won't let me in. Life is really much more complicated than it needs to be.

I'm not suggesting that it is the ginger beard that is making the man so cross, although I suppose it could be. I don't

know about such things because I have never had a ginger beard. I did once have 1975 Datsun Cherry, but that is not the same thing at all, really. As far as I know, you cannot drive a ginger beard to the shops and buy four triple-A batteries, a bag of sprouts and a copy of *Woman's Weekly*. Not that I was every able to do that with the Datsun Cherry, either, since it was already twenty-five years old by the time I got it, and the only thing that worked on it was the left indicator - which was pretty useless since the ruddy thing couldn't go anywhere. It just sat in my back garden, where moss grew over it. There was a badger called Mr Goebbels who lived in it for some time, but he came into some money and moved into a Mark V Ford Cortina down the road. Eventually I swapped it with my friend Kevin for some liquorice allsorts.

Why am I telling you this? I need to sit down and have a think about how I'm going to get into this cats' home. Go away and come back tomorrow.

One Hundred and Twenty-Three

I've come up with a plan to get into the cats' home. I told you I'd be able to come up with something, just as long as I was left alone to think it through. Well, I did: I sat down on the pavement and had a real good ponder. When I had finished, I felt all sticky because I had sat in the remains of a discarded pizza. Pepperoni and radish, if you're interested. But I had the answer - I would wait until the dead of night, and then I would stealthily shin up a

drainpipe and gain entry via an unsecured window. Ha ha! I am a master bugler!

Darkness came. I knew it would. I dressed up in black clothing, smeared muck on my face and bought a jemmy from a man called Jimmy who ran a special burglar's supplies place that only people like me know about. Then I crept round to the Fennimore Home for Agitated Cats. Performing a quick recce of the premises, I heard the faint sound of purring coming from an open window on the second floor and decided that this would be my point of entry. There was a fire escape that would give me easy access in a matter of minutes, but I had spent lots and lots of time perfecting my drainpipe climbing technique, so I opted for that route.

Climbing drainpipes can be quite difficult for a novice, especially if it is plastic, because these don't offer much purchase. Luckily I am quite an experienced drainpiper, and this was an old cast iron pipe that was quite corroded and offered plenty of handholds, so in no time I had reached the first floor. I pitched camp here and fired up my Primus stove to cook a humble but energy-packed meal of sausages in baked beans. After resting for a couple of hours, I pressed on. The route became tougher now, and at one point I slipped and nearly tumbled into a crevasse. However, before long I reached the open window and paused on the sill to peer in.

What I saw was a chilling sight: about forty furry feline faces turned towards me. The leader hissed and suddenly flew at me, clawing at my face. He was quickly joined by

the others, squealing and wailing and leaping at me. I lost my grip, fell back into the midnight void and...

Ooh, exciting, a cliff-hanger!

One Hundred and Twenty-Four

I'm falling backwards through the darkness. My attempt to infiltrate the cats' home has gone horribly wrong. The furry monsters leapt at me, tumbling me back into the void, scratching and tearing and ripping at my flesh as I plummeted to my inevitable doom. Golly wotsit, this is a right old pickle.

I don't know what goes through *your* head whenever you are falling from a second-floor window with a face full of murderous moggies, in the sure and certain knowledge that you will inevitably come to grief on something hard and/or sharp on the ground below, but whenever it happens to me I can't help but think about my Uncle Cyril. It's unlikely that you would know my Uncle Cyril, so I expect you think about something else whenever you are in this situation, but for me it's Uncle Cyril all the time.

The reason I think of Uncle Cyril is that he had a dread fear of falling to his death, and so he wore a parachute wherever he went. My Uncle Cyril never travelled by air, lived in a bungalow, never rode on the top deck of a bus and managed to avoid staircases his entire life. He died when he fell down a manhole and his chute failed to open, and I can't help but think that whatever precautions you

take, the brutal truth is that once your number's up, that's it sonny.

What would be really nice, I thought as I fell, would be if I landed on a mattress, and as luck would have it, I didn't. I landed on the next best thing, which was a compost heap, and I'm not sure who was more surprised - me, the cats or the small community of slugs that had been happily munching their way through a rotting lettuce leaf prior to my unexpected arrival.

One Hundred and Twenty-Five

My advice to you is that if you want to gain entry into somewhere like the Fennimore Home for Agitated Cats, don't try shinning up a drainpipe. I came to this conclusion as I lay in compost heap, surrounded by startled slugs, having recently arrived there from a great height. I got my breath back then crawled off the heap and brushed most of the squashy dribbly slimy bits of stuff off me. This was no life for a close friend of the royal family, I thought. I am not a close friend of the royal family myself, but I nevertheless think that my observation holds true. I did once see a prince or a duke or something from a distance in a Wolverhampton branch of Asda - at least, someone told me he was a prince or a duke or something. I wasn't sure because he wasn't wearing a special hat - that's how you recognise them, of course, by their special hats. However, whatever he was, me catching a fleeting glimpse of him in the frozen foods aisle does not make him a close friend, so let's just quash those rumours right now.

It was clear to me that I would need to be more subtle if I was to get inside the cat's home. I would need to disguise myself as a customer - someone who had an agitated cat that they wished to deposit at the home. For this there was one essential that I would most definitely need: a false moustache! Oh, and a cat - specifically an agitated cat. There are plenty of agitated cats about, of course. Sadly, we live in an age where most moggies are increasingly concerned and perturbed by the state of the world. The problem is that they are naturally very skittish and henceforth very difficult to catch. What you have to do is find a perfectly normal, well-balanced cat and then freak it out. I set a trap, luring my victim using some cat treats and a book of Rick Stein's fish recipes. I then put it in a box and spent three days humming the theme to *The Magic Roundabout* at it. By the end of this time it was off its nut, and I was ready to infiltrate the cats' home.

One Hundred and Twenty-Six

What's happening dudes? A gentleman just said that to me in the street. He said, "What's happening dude?" and so I told him all about my attempt to inveigle myself into the Fennimore Home for Agitated Cats in order to track down my absent sandwich. I then gave him a brief rundown of the latest national and international news, related a heart-warming story of a skateboarding duck with a broken leg and then finished with tomorrow's weather. The man seemed anxious to get away, but I grabbed hold of his coat and hung on to him until I'd finished. Then he ran off. Anyway, if you're interested,

tomorrow the forecast is that the sky will be full of filthy dribbles and there will be a chill wind from the north that will whistle round the back of the Co-op and may bring snow showers. Have you got all that written down? Good, then we'll continue.

I have got an agitated cat in a box, which is the best place to put a cat when it is agitated. It's for their own good. I am now standing at the door of the aforementioned Fennimore Home for Agitated Cats and I am about to knock. Let's continue this in the past tense, it's more comfortable.

I knocked on the aforementioned door. Knock-knock-knocky-knock, I went. The aforementioned man with the aforementioned ginger beard opened it. "Whadya want?" he growled. He had chips in his beard. I think I had interrupted him while he was having his tea. Either that, or he was pioneering a daring new fashion in beard accessories that had so far failed to catch on.

I held up the cat in the box. "I have got a cat in this box," I enunciated clearly. "It is agitated. Can I come in?"

The ginger beard man looked in the box. The cat had pushed itself into the corner and was shivering and blowing hot bubbles out of its nose. "Blimey," said ginger beard. "That looks proper crackers. You'd better step inside."

One Hundred and Twenty-Seven

I am inside the cats' home with my expertly pre-stressed agitated cat in a box. The ginger beard man seems much friendlier now that he thinks I am a fellow cat lover. I, of course, am ambivalent about cats in boxes. I can take them or leave them. Sometimes both at the same time.

The ginger beard man started to tell me all about...

By the way, that was a bit of a joke I did back there. The cat-in-the-box/both-at-the-same-time thing. It didn't really work, did it, but you can see what I was reaching for.

Anyroad, the ginger beard man started to tell me all about his love for cats, and how cats were his only real friends and how cats were different to people. Well, I knew that cats were different to people. Blimey, I'd be silly if I didn't know that. They smell different and they have a leg at each corner and, by and large, they are several degrees furrrier than most people I know.

The ginger beard man told me that his name was Felix Scratcher and that he had been a very lonely orphan when he was growing up, and had been locked in a basement by his evil guardians, along with their many many cats. The cats had raised him and cared for him and taught them all their weird cat ways, and he vowed that when he grew up he would work to protect and promote the cat way of life.

I didn't ask him to tell me any of this, you understand. He just volunteered the information, and I stood there mutely, occasionally nodding, as this mad plonky nutter rambled on. Every instinct told me to get out of there right away,

but I knew I had to stay if I wanted to find out what had happened to my sandwich, so I just smiled politely and let him talk rubbish.

One Hundred and Twenty-Eight

The man from the cats' home is a mad plonky nutter called Felix Scratcher, but thankfully he didn't suspect that I had an ulterior motive in being there. He decided to show me around his establishment for the rehabilitation of his feline friends and I was astonished at the levels of squalor and wretchedness - by which I mean there wasn't any. Squalor and wretchedness, that is. These animals ought to be living like animals, but they were better off than I was. Each pussy cat had its own room, with en suite bathroom, TV and video games consoles. Meals were served three times a day and consisted of only the very best fresh fish, prepared in the home's own extensive kitchen. The chef, Anatole, told me that each dish was prepared with an award-winning sauce of his own invention, which I thought was an unnecessary extravagance for creatures that habitually lick their own bottoms.

Felix then showed me to a room where all the cats would meet for group therapy sessions. It was a safe environment where they would sit in a circle and discuss their problems, their fears and share their hopes and dreams. When I said that I didn't know that cats could talk, Felix told me that they could say one word, 'miaow', but that they way they said it could express a multitude of

different meanings to the trained ear. Which apparently was what he had: a trained ear.

He also showed me the gymnasium, where I saw cats leaping over vaulting horses, climbing ropes, doing push-ups and all sorts of other jiggling about. He told me that physical exercise was an important part of their rehabilitation. "It's also important for... other reasons," he added, not at all suspiciously.

He then showed me to the guest bedroom, where I could stay while my cat was receiving treatment. It was bare and unfurnished except for a plank on which I would sleep, and a bucket in the corner for the purpose of night-time widdling. It was quite scary, so I backed myself into the corner of the room, where I shivered and blew hot bubbles out of my nose.

One Hundred and Twenty-Nine

I spent the night in a shivery funk, sitting in the corner of my spartan room in the cats' home. Strange sounds happened in my ears: the noise of walloping and crinkling, all sorts of splatty poundings. It was when the stringy fallooping started that I really sat up and took notice. I don't know what kind of horrid nonsense was going on in other parts of the building, but it didn't sound decent.

In the morning, Felix Scratcher brought me some breakfast. It was a book. He said it was food for the mind, which was all very well, but it was my tummy that was

hungry. Nevertheless, I ate it. Some of the chapters were a bit tough, but most of it went down a treat.

I was then invited to take part in one of the cats' group sessions. There were about two dozen cats there when I arrived, licking themselves, tearing at the furniture and showing various levels of disinterest. Mr Scratcher said that we would start with a trust exercise. He told me to cross my arms, close my eyes and fall backwards, and the cats would catch me. I did so and hit the floor with a wump. Mr Scratcher seemed satisfied with this and asked me to do it again. I did it again and hit the floor with a crack. Again, Mr Scratcher was rather pleased, and asked me to do it a third time. I did it a third time and hit the floor with a horrible splintering sound. I didn't know if it was me or the floor.

At this point I thought it was time to get smart, so I strained my brains, and decided to stay on the floor, since it was safer. I said to Mr Scratcher that I thought the cats were going to catch me. He said that he thought they were going to catch me as well, and that this should be a lesson for me. Then they all went off to play table tennis, but I stayed where I was because the way they played it sounded lethal.

One Hundred and Thirty

What did you do today? I lay on the floor in a home for anxious cats, listening to disturbed moggies playing table tennis in an adjacent room. Ha! I win.

I realised that now - while the cats were busy thrashing the living daylights out of a harmless ping pong ball - was the perfect time for me to skulk about the place looking for evidence of my sandwich. Trouble was, I was awfully comfortable. Not that the floor was a particularly pleasant place to be, it's just that there are moments of stillness like that when you just want to lie back and let it all wash over you. Especially if you'd had a hard time of it lately, which is what I'd had.

All the same, I couldn't stay there forever, so I got to my feet, put my trousers back on and went to the door. Good, the coast was clear. The previous night I had heard plinky grobulating sounds coming from somewhere down below, so I found a staircase that was heading in a downwards direction and I descended. I went down it on my bottom because that is more fun - you've got to make the most of these moments of pleasure when you find them. When I got to the bottom - the bottom of the staircase, that is, not my own bottom - I entered a dark, windowless room. So I put the light on, obviously. There was a long table and along the far wall was an illuminated map of the world, with various sites of strategic military importance marked on it.

A chair at the far end of the room spun around and Mr Scratcher was sitting there, stroking a cat on his lap. "Ah, I see you have discovered our little secret," he said. It would have been quite a chilling moment, had the cat not jumped off his lap and sat on the table licking its bum hole.

One Hundred and Thirty-One

I have infiltrated a cats' home, which appears to be a front for some kind of nefarious activity. I have been discovered by Felix Scratcher, who at some point will probably turn out to be a diabolical criminal mastermind. Now read on.

"Ah, Mr Bond, so you have discovered our little secret," said Mr Scratcher.

"My name's not Bond," I said.

"Come now, Mr Bond," he said. "We are men of the world, let us be frank with each other."

"Frank?" I said. "You're confusing me with someone else. I don't know who this Frank Bond person is."

He ignored my protestations. "No doubt your superiors set you here to foil my secret plan."

"My superiors?" I said. "I work for the council. My superior is Mr Brownlow. He's head of drains. I don't think he would be too happy to find me here, I should have been back at work last Tuesday. And I don't know anything about this secret plan."

"Please Mr Bond..."

"I am not Mr Bong!"

"Surely you know all about my secret plan..."

"No, don't tell me!"

"... to take over the world for the glory of cat-kind using an army of highly trained feline ninjas."

"Oh, what did you go and tell me that for?" I cried. "Now it's not secret, you silly sod."

He just grinned at me and pretended to stroke his cat, even though it had buggered off and was scratching at the skirting board. "What did you expect?" he said. "I'm a diabolical criminal mastermind. Gloating about our plans is what we do."

There you are, I told you he would turn out to be a diabolical criminal mastermind.

"But I'm afraid to say that you will not live to tell anyone, Mr Bond." He turned to the cat in the corner. "Mr Tibbles, seize him." Mr Tibbles looked him insolently, then raised leg into the air and started licking his nuts. "Oh, have I got to do everything myself?" Mr Scratcher said, and got up and seized me himself.

One Hundred and Thirty-Two

I have been seized by a diabolical criminal mastermind called Felix Scratcher, who was raised by cats and has gone a bit wrong in the brainbox. A lady once told me to beware of diabolical masterminds, and I guess she was right. Fat lot of good that advice was to me now, because Mr Scratcher had strapped me to a table and was adjusting a laser beam so that it was pointing right up my doodahs.

"So, Mr Bond," he said. "How do you like my ingenious device."

"I keep telling you," I kept telling him, "I am not Mr Bond. But I think I know where he lives. I can go and fetch him, if you like."

He ignored my offer, which I think was a very generous one in the circumstances. Not only was this fellow a diabolical criminal mastermind, he was also very rude, which in many ways is often worse.

"You see, " he continued. "When I activate this switch, the laser beam will gradually track upwards between your legs, shear off your doodahs and singe your wotnot. At that point, these big crunchy cogs will move in and give you a right nasty going over. The gas jets beneath you will fire up and roast your buttocks, then this trap door will swing open and drop you into the shark tank. It will sting a bit. What do you have to say about that, then, buddy?"

"Has all this stuff been PAT tested?" I asked.

"Is that all?" said mad Felix Scratcher. "Nothing else you want to say to me?"

He waited for my answer. I got the impression that he wanted to hear something specific. "Err, no." I said. "Am I missing something, here? This is my first time being tortured, I'm not really sure what the etiquette is."

"You're supposed to say, 'Do you expect me to talk?'" he said.

"What about?"

"What do you mean, 'what about?'" Scratcher said. He seemed to be getting a bit cross now. "I don't know. It doesn't matter, does it? It's just something you're supposed to say."

"Why?"

"Because then I can come back with my witty response," he said angrily. "I mean, what's the point of me going to all this trouble, with the lasers and the choppy things and the shark tank and everything, if I don't get to do my witty line?"

"All right, sorry," I said. "OK, I'll play along. Here goes..." I cleared my throat, then spoke loudly and clearly. "What do you want me to talk about?"

"No!" he shouted. "It's not, 'What do you want me to talk about?' The line is... Oh, to hell with it."

He flicked the switch, the laser glowed into life and then he left the room, explaining that he couldn't stand the smell of burning testicles.

One Hundred and Thirty-Three

It is very important when you have been strapped to a table by a loony headcase, and all sorts of mangley nonsense is about to happen to your bits, that you stay calm and try not to think about the laser beam slowly creeping towards your wotnots. That's what I think, anyway, and I have some experience of these matters.

So I stayed really calm and tried to think about how to escape. I once went to see a magic show, where there was an escapologist. The word 'escapologist' comes from two other words: it comes from 'escape', which means to get out of a sack; and it also comes from 'apology' which means apology. So an escapologist is a man or a lady who gets out of a sack and then apologises for it. I didn't mean to go to the magic show, I was supposed to go and see a musical about some roller-skating cats, or something, but I went in the wrong door. By the time I realised my mistake, everything was already going on, so I thought I had just better stay where I was and shut up.

There is a reason I'm telling you this. I'd better get a move on because the laser thing is getting really quite close now. Anyway, the point is I got called up from the audience to help the escapologist man get into his sack. I didn't volunteer, they just pointed at me and told me to get up on the stage. I didn't see why the man couldn't get into his own ruddy sack, but I didn't want to make a scene, so I did as I was told.

Right, I need to hurry up with this story now, because I can smell burning.

So, I helped the man get into his sack. Actually, before he got in the sack he did this other thing where he lay on a bed of broken glass. He asked me to feel the broken glass to make sure that it was really sharp, and I told the audience that it was, even though it wasn't really.

My crotch is getting really hot.

Anyway, he did the glass thing, which was rubbish, he made me tie him in a sack real tight, then they put a screen up so that nobody would see he had some scissors and voila! He was free. And the reason I'm saying this now is that if I was an escapologist, I would probably be able to free myself from this death trap. However, I am not an escapologist, I am someone who knows how to tie sacks up, and this is no use at all in my current circumstances.

I think I have been pursuing the wrong line of thought.

One Hundred and Thirty-Four

Now then people, I was telling you about being strapped to a horrible death table and things were getting quite urgent. Ah ha! I suddenly realised how I could escape - I could gnaw through the straps. But no! I was on a strict diet. What a horrible choice to make: either have my nuts lasered off or ruin my chances of being beach body ready in time for my holibobs.

Thankfully it was a choice I did not have to make, for at that very moment - or at least, at a moment very close to that very moment - a man arrived to throw a spanner into the works. Literally. He had a bandana with a load of spanners in it, and he threw one with devastating accuracy into the doings of the torture device. Hang on, I don't mean bandana, do I? That's a head thing. I mean bandolier - one of those things you see on the cowboy movies, full of bullets. Well, he had one of those, only it was full of spanners.

So anyway, he chucked this spanner, there was a bang-pop and I shot up out of there as if my bottom was on fire. "My name's Hamilton Prong," said the man with the spanners. "I'm from the Cats' Protection League and I'm going to get you out of here. By the way, did you know that your bottom is on fire?"

Ah, that would account for the warm feeling in my trousers, and in many ways this explanation was a relief. But there was no time to extinguish my bottom now, for the freaky mad dude Felix Scratcher appeared in the doorway, and he was armed with a vicious set of screwdrivers. A 6mm Phillips came whizzing through the air and narrowly missed my head. Mr Prong returned fire with a couple of spanners, then we darted for cover behind a control console. Oh crumbs.

One Hundred and Thirty-Five

Myself and a nice man called Hamilton Prong have taken cover behind a control console, while the evil bad man Felix Scratcher is bombarding us with various-sized screwdrivers. Luckily Mr Prong is an expert with a spanner and has managed to wing him. However, things are getting desperate, and also my bottom is on fire.

A screwdriver came zooming over our heads, clattered off the wall behind us and fell at our feet. Mr Prong picked it up. "Look," he said. "It's one of those funny ones with the star-shaped head. He must be running out of ammo." The trouble is, so were we. Mr Prong's spanner bandolier was empty and all he had left was one of those long socket

things that they use to get sparkplugs out. "I've called for backup and I was hoping that we could hold out here until they arrived, but it looks like we're going to have to make a break for it. When I hurl this, I want you to run for the door."

I started to protest, but he told me not to worry about him, he'd take his chances. To be honest, I wasn't worried about him, I was going to suggest that *he* make a run for it while I stayed where it was safe. But he had an imposing moustache that suggested he was in charge, so I did as I was told.

"Now!" he shouted. "Blimey!" I shouted. He hurled the socket and I legged it.

One Hundred and Thirty-Six

Drama! I have made a break for the door while Mr Prong covered me with a sparkplug socket. I heard it ricochet off the evil Felix Scratcher's bonce as I ran, but I didn't turn to look or laugh at him or anything. I just kept running as if my bottom was on fire, which, as we have previously established, it was. I reached the door and shot out into the corridor, then lolloped up the stairs three at a time. But then, more drama! I found myself surrounded by cats, their yellow eyes glowing with satanic glee as they slowly crept towards me, purring and miaowing and wanting someone to scratch them behind the ears. Even more drama!

There seemed to be only one escape route: a door to my left was unguarded and I darted through. I found myself in a very strange place indeed. The room was in semi-darkness, the curtains were drawn and it was lit by an eerie turquoise glow from above. But wait, that's not the weird bit. The weird bit is that it was occupied by rank upon rank of glass tanks, filled with a bewildering variety of fish: spiny slimy flappers, trumpet-faced tuna, silvery kippers and a haddock called Jemimah Teacake who had a sinus infection. I realised that this must be the fishatorium, and noted to my dismay that there was no other exit. There really is getting to be too much drama now. The cats had followed me and were now massing in the doorway. Slowly I backed away to the far wall.

Oh crumbs, I thought. But then I could smell burning, and it wasn't me, which made a nice change. My flaming backside had set fire to the curtains! They were dry and brittle and seemed to be made mostly of sulphur and petrol, and in no time the whole room was aflame. Well, that made the cats stop and think. I was a little perturbed myself.

One Hundred and Thirty-Seven

I am trying to escape from a cats' home and I have set the fishatorium alight with my bottom. The cats, who were chasing me, ran off in panic, but I was trapped and surrounded by flames. Suddenly something long and slimy reached out of a nearby tank, hooked itself around me and lifted me off my feet and into the tank. Moments

later I heard a sizzle and felt a sense of blessed relief as my burning bottom was quenched. I took in a big breath, then was pulled completely under the water, where I was safe from the flames.

I had been rescued by an octopus! Well, it was bound to happen sooner or later. Now, you can't talk underwater, because as soon as you open your mouth, the water rushes straight up your nose and floods your brain. This is why you have to use hand signals. Octopuses are very good at this because they have eight testicles, which they can use to signal eight things at once. It also makes them very good typists, which is why so many of them work in data entry.

Anyhow, through the medium of testicular sign language, I discovered that the octopus who saved me was called Emperor Slippery Bellows IV, and he was the ruler of a vast undersea kingdom in the South Pacific. He had left his home many years ago and journeyed to London to meet Ringo Starr, whom they venerate as a god. Octopussys are also very good at drumming. Anyway, he was captured by an evil industrialist and put to work putting covers on duvets. Octopuddles are also very good at stuffing duvet covers.

So, some other stuff happened to him. It was all very boring, but here I was stuck in a tank, surrounded by flames and had nothing else to do, so I was forced to listen to the whole sorry tale. The upshot of it was that he longed to return to his homeland and never did get to meet Ringo. By the time he finished the story, the fire had burnt itself

out, so I thanked him, shook him warmly by the testicle and climbed out of the tank.

One Hundred and Thirty-Eight

The cats' home was a smoking ruin. The people from the Cats' Protection league had arrived and were herding up the surviving cats. I was pleased to see that Hamilton Prong had survived - well, I was indifferent, to be honest, but one has to be polite. He explained that the evil nutjob Felix Scratcher had escaped, as per his contract (he mentioned something about a sequel) and that his phalanx of feline followers would be reconditioned and re-homed.

"We'll find you a new family to live with," he told me.

"Somewhere you will be looked after and cared for."

"That's very nice of you," I said. "But I'm not a cat."

"You'll have a fresh scratching post," he continued. "And a proper basket. And a nice new collar with a little bell on it."

"Yes, sounds lovely," I said, with little enthusiasm. "But not really for me - although I do like the idea of the little bell. See, I am not a pussy cat. I am a free man."

At this point he tickled me under the chin and made silly noises at me. "Puss, puss, puss, puss," he went. "Who's a clever boy, then?"

"Please stop that," I said. "This is inappropriate. Actually, if you could just scratch behind my ears, that would be

smashing. The point is, I am not a cat. Now, if you could find me a decent hotel and a new pair of trousers - you see, I've burnt the backside out of these - then that would be most appreciated. Also, I'm looking for my sandwich - "

"Ah, no sandwiches," he said, patting my head. "But there will be plenty of meaty chunky pussy grub for you. And a saucer of yummy milk. And some catnip if you're lucky. Now get in the cage."

I protested again, and this time he stood upright and became very cold. "Listen pal," he said. "We're the bloody Cats' Protection League. We do cats, we don't do people. So either lick up the honey, stranger, and ask no questions, or do one. What's it to be?"

I looked around, considered my options. Then I shrugged and got in the cage.

One Hundred and Thirty-Nine

I have been rescued by the Cats' Protection League and have now been put up for adoption. Every day, prospective owners come to the pound and peer in at me then pass me by. Meanwhile all the others are being rehomed all the time, and it's now got to the point where there's only me and a couple of the more fire-damaged moggies left. I think the disadvantage I have is that I am not a cat. When people come here looking to adopt a cat and they see me not being a cat, they are so overwhelmed by the fact that I am not even remotely like a cat that they fail to notice my other qualities.

I have gone to the trouble of updating my CV and have affixed it to the front of my cage. It has got all my qualifications on it, including the woodwork and the cycling proficiency thing. I should point out, just to avoid any confusion, that these are two separate qualifications - you don't do woodwork while you are cycling, that would be very dangerous. In fact, one of the first things that they tell you in woodwork is that you must never do woodwork while you are cycling. That is the first rule of woodwork. It's also something that is hammered home on the cycling proficiency course - you'll never be a proficient cyclist if you're doing woodwork, they said. Also, never cycle with hammers - we learnt that in brickwork.

I have also put some of my jobs on my CV - not all of them, obviously. I haven't mentioned all the ones I was fired from, so there are inevitably a few holes in my work history - the odd decade or two. Also, I didn't put down jobs that were covered by the Official Secrets Act, because I'm not allowed to talk about them. In fact, I don't think I'm even allowed to tell you that I can't tell you about them, so forget I said anything.

Finally, I put that I enjoy walking and reading, and that I am good at working on my own initiative and also as part of a team. I'm bound to get re-homed now.

One Hundred and Forty

I still haven't been adopted yet. What's wrong with people, don't they want to re-home someone who has completed The Scout Association of Great Britain's advanced knot

tying course, and has extensive experience packing unbends for a leading plumbing supplies company?

Well, there's only one thing for it now. I really didn't want to have to do this, but needs must when the devil drives two into the bush without a paddle, or however the saying goes. You see, I have a secret weapon. Showbiz is in my blood; I was born to perform. Give me a stage, a spotlight, a bucket full of sequins and an audience, and there is no stopping me. This, then, would be how I would get myself noticed: I would put on a show!

Unfortunately, I didn't have a stage, a spotlight or some sequins, so I would have to improvise. In the right light, cat litter can sparkle almost as well as sequins, and by repurposing my scratching post, a ball of wool and my collar with the little bell on it, I soon had a costume and some basic props. And the clockwork mouse toy that they had given me was perfect for my lion taming routine.

The lights went up. The punters started to arrive. Showtime!

One Hundred and Forty-One

I am Marvelloso The Performing Moggy - at least that's the name that I have sewn onto my cape - and this is going to be my ticket out of this cats' home. As the first of my prospective new families enter, the band strikes up and I launch into my routine. Ah yes, the band. I had engaged the services of some of my fellow inmates. Macavity, in the cage to my left was laying down some wicked beats on a

makeshift drum kit. Felix, on my right, was contributing some sweet licks using a rubber band. And Tiddles across the way was producing strange whining noises from the back of her throat - to be honest, it wasn't adding anything to the performance, but she wanted to be involved and we didn't have the heart to tell her no.

And so, the show began. I paraded out into the centre of the cage and began with a few simple illusions - card tricks, clairvoyance, sawing a goldfish in half, that sort of thing. Then it was on to the mouse taming, in which I subdued a clockwork toy with a whip and a chair, and persuaded it to jump through a flaming hoop. Next, the erotic dancing. Cheeky! Finally, I finished with a song and took my bow.

Well, I was a sure-fire smasheroony hit, and no mistake. "Daddy, daddy, can we please have this one?" cried one saccharin-saturated child as it poked its jam-stained fingers through the bars to stroke my head. "It's so funny and stupid and weird." The father agreed. At last, I was to be released from this dismal cage! If only I hadn't been so excited, I would have seen the pound signs in the man's eyes and I would have been more wary.

One Hundred and Forty-Two

I am pleased to report that I am no longer at the cats' home and have been re-homed. Let me tell you about my new family. The young boy - he of the jammy fingers and snot-streaked face - is called Kevin. The father, also called Kevin, is a tall, grim-looking man with one leg longer than

the other. He has a pocket full of marbles that weighs him down on one side and so stops him walking around in circles. I haven't really seen much of the mother. She seems to spend a lot of her time in the garage making conceptual art out of old car exhausts. I don't know what her name is, so I have decided to call her Not-Kevin.

None of them seems to have noticed that I'm not a cat, which would suggest that they're not too tightly wrapped. I think I might see how things go before I reveal my true nature as an actual human man. I must be careful to only do cat things, and not inadvertently do man things, such as wearing a hat or opening a bank account.

One Hundred and Forty-Three

I was telling you about my new home. I have introduced you to the human members of the household, but there are a fair few animals here, as well. Quite a menagerie, in fact. There are several other cats, a tortoise, some goldfish, an old Labrador retriever and a snake wearing a bow tie. One of the cats sidled over to me. "All right, geezer?" he said.

"Hmm, yes thanks," I replied. He was a large, shaggy brown unit, with dark eyes, a haunted expression and duelling scar just under his ear. There was something strange about him that I couldn't put my finger on.

"New boy, yeah?" he said. "Guess you don't know what goes on here yet?"

"Err, no," I responded. "Excuse me, have we met before?"

I was thinking that he might have gone to my school.
"Don't think so, treacle," he said. "Think I'd remember you. Now listen up. If you want to survive here - "

"Hang on!" It had suddenly struck me what was so peculiar. "You can talk!"

"So can you," he said with a shrug.

"Well, that's because I'm not a cat," I said. "I'm a human bloke."

"Ah, I see," said my new friend. "That would explain why you're wearing that hat."

The hat! I quickly whipped it off, before my cover was blown. "But you're a talking cat," I said.

"Well yeah, that's my talent, see," said the cat. "We're all performers here, and that's how we earn our keep. They enter us for talent shows and the like. And let me tell you, you need to keep on top of your game, because if you don't, you'll be 'retired'."

"Retired?"

"Yeah, put into a sack with a couple of bricks, taken down to the canal and 'retired'."

One Hundred and Forty-Four

What a talented bunch of animals that I have found myself among. There is Colin the Labrador who will bark

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony when you give him a doggy choc. There's the Amazing Splasho, a goldfish who does a stunning memory act. There is Alphonse the Backflipping Tortoise, who is quite possibly the most balletic and graceful reptile that I have ever seen. And then there is my new friend Maxwell The Talking Cat. OK, so he talks, I hear you scream, but what does he have to say? Well, he does stand-up. It's observational comedy, mostly. His wry and amusing comments really nail what it's like to be a talking cat in the twenty-first century and the audience can't help but be captivated by his sharp and original material - five stars.

Then I told them about my act - the magic, the dancing, the singing - and there were glum looks all round. When I asked what the problem was, Maxwell sheepishly shook his furry head at me. "Well, ok. I'm sure it's proper tasty, it's just that, well, that was Gideon's act."

I looked around. "Gideon?"

"Yeah mate," said Maxwell. "Gideon was... well, he was like you really, but cleaner. He came here thinking that all he had to do was dress up in a spangly leotard and do a few card tricks. But, see, that's not enough. Times have moved on; audiences want more. Gideon couldn't cut it - nil point - so it was canal time."

"They threw him in the canal? Just like that?"

"No," Maxwell said. "Of course not. Not just like that. They hit him with a brick first. But don't worry mate, we're not going to let that happen to you. We're not animals."

"Yes, you are."

"All right, we are," said Maxwell. "But we're going to help you. We'll work on your act, and by the time we're finished with you, you'll be the biggest thing in showbiz since Malcolm Windemere!"

"Malcolm who?"

One Hundred and Forty-Five

Training montage!

Maxwell the Talking Cat and his talented troupe of animals have promised to turn me into the greatest name in showbiz since someone I'd never heard of. Okay, let's get to work!

GRAMS: "Let's Get Physical" by Olivias Newtons-Johns

I'm being taught to juggle by a frog. Look, see, there I am. Oh dear, I keep dropping the clubs though.

Now look - I'm an acrobat, swinging from trapeze to trapeze. It's great! I'm brilliant at this. But, oh dear, I miss the bar and plummet out of frame with a scream.

I'm riding a monocycle. Look at me! And it's on fire! Don't worry, it's supposed to be on fire, that's part of the act. I don't look happy about it though, do I?

I'm in a chair, surround by animals who are doing my hair and makeup. We're all laughing and having a wonderful time. This is great!

I'm juggling again. But this time I'm not dropping anything. Look at me, I'm really happy.

Montage over. That was fun.

"Well treacle," says Maxwell. "I reckon we've just about turned you into a star."

"Yes," I reply. "And it only took one minute and thirty seconds."

"But we need a better name for you. 'Marvelloso' is a bit dated, know what I mean? You need something with a bit more gravitas; something that will make you stand out without being so... crap."

"Got it!" I say. "Graham!"

Maxwell tried to talk me out of it, but I stuck to my guns, and so 'Graham' it was. Now I was sure to be a hit! However, just to be on the safe side, Maxwell taught me one last thing: escapology. Specifically, he taught me how to escape from a sack that has been weighted with bricks and thrown into the canal.

One Hundred and Forty-Six

Today's the day. The man with the wonky leg called Kevin has entered me for a talent competition. I am wearing my

best trousers. We get into his car, which is a blue one, and we set off. There are some barley sugars in the glove compartment and I am allowed to have one every seven miles. I am not sure where we are going, but we are taking the motorway and Kevin is driving really fast. Soon the inevitable happens and he is pulled over by a fat copper. Kevin winds down the window, and he and the bloated copper do some talking that goes like this:

FAT POLICEMAN: All right Stirling Moss, in a hurry, are we?

KEVIN: You want to think about updating your references, officer. Stirling Moss was racing back in the fifties.

BIG FAT POLICEMAN: Now that's enough of your lip.

KEVIN: Seriously, a lot of people reading this won't even know who Stirling Moss is. For information, he was a racing driver who -

HUGE FAT POLICEMAN: Please don't break the fourth wall while I'm talking to you, sir. Did you know that you were doing 98 miles per hour, per hour?

KEVIN: Wow, that's a lot. How do you know?

GINORMOUS POLICEMAN: Because I was following you, sir.

KEVIN: Then you must have been speeding as well. J'accuse and checkmate! Anyway, I have a medical excuse - I've got one leg longer than the other, and it presses harder on the accelerator.

BIG WOBBLY POLICEMAN: Do you have any evidence of this? Apart from the leg itself.

KEVIN: I have a certificate from my doctor.

Kevin hands the massive policeman a piece of paper. I must say, it doesn't look much like a medical certificate.

FAT POLICE GIT: Ah, I see this medical certificate has been issued by the Bank of England and promises to pay the bearer fifty pounds. That will do nicely sir. Now piss off.

One Hundred and Forty-Seven

CAUTION: This episode may include distressing scenes and the word "bum".

We are at the talent competition. It is a big telly show and there are lots of people here and most of them are very strange. We are waiting in a big room and everybody is going through their act, singing and jiggling about and fire-eating and juggling sausages. It is a bit much, to be honest, and I am getting fed up with all the ruddy noise. I end up talking to a young man called Belton, who wants to be famous. That's not his real name - his proper actual name is Elton, named after a sports presenter called Elton Welsby, who is the second most famous Elton in the world and the fourth most famous Welsby. He says he put the "B" in front of his name to make him more showbiz. I ask him what he does and he says he doesn't really do anything

at the moment, but once he hits the big time, his job will be to be famous.

Then I meet a lady called Martini - I suspect that this is not her real name either. Martini is destined to be a top poperoony singer, with a record in the charts and everything. She has spent the last fifty years performing in clubs and on cruise ships, and tells me that she is going to hit the big time sometime soon because she read it in her horror scope. She sings a bit of a song for me. I sort of recognise the bit of the song that she sings, but she manages to cram far more notes into each line than I remember being in the original. In fact, in her version, she stretches the first two lines out to a minute and a half, which is probably a useful skill to have.

I suspect these people have no concept of what constitutes 'entertainment', but then I'm just a man pretending to be a performing cat, so what would I know?

APOLOGY: Turns out this episode did not include any distressing scenes or the gratuitous use of the word "bum". Sorry.

One Hundred and Forty-Eight

They are calling us up one by one by one to go out onto the stage and do our act. It is very nerve-wracking. My nerves have never been as wracked at this, which is quite hair-raising. In fact, I don't think my hair has ever been raised as high as this before, which just wracks my nerves even more.

I'm babbling. Sorry, but I'm nervous. The act on before me is called Count Alexei Drastic and he is a professional sausage tamer. He really is very good. With the crack of his whip, he has those sausages rolling over and playing dead, sitting up and begging or jumping through flaming hoops and into a frying pan. Some people think that it's cruel, but what they don't realise is that he only uses vegetarian sausages that are grown on sausage bushes.

Anyway, he gets a standing ovation and his bus fare home, and then it's my turn. Now, I've been quite clever. Oh yes, I have, really. You see, I'm one of the last ones to perform and I've seen most of what everybody has done, and I know that I need to do something radically different if I want to make an impression. I had planned to do a high-stepping showbiz-type torch song whilst balancing on a tightrope, but at least half a dozen people have already done this act, and it didn't go down well. So, what to do? It's too late to get hold of a chicken at this late stage, and my plunger is broken anyway, so that idea is right out. Hang on, I've got the very thing!

They're calling me. It's my turn. Gulp, here goes.

One Hundred and Forty-Nine

Some people are O negative. Some people are AB positive. I'm talking blood groups here. But me, well, I've got showbiz coursing through my veins. That means I was born to perform. It also means that if I am in an accident, I can only get a transfusion from Bradley Walsh.

I wait in the wings. The adrenaline is rushing through me. There's a pounding in my ears. The excitement mounts and I step out onto the stage. Blinded by the light, I shield my eyes. The audience waits in silence. In front of me are the three judges who will decide my fate. The man on the right with the big trousers asks me my name.

"I am Graham the Performing Cat," I tell him, and he accepts this without comment. I guess he's already seen enough weirdos today, one more won't make any difference. He tells me to start in my own time. I didn't bring any of my own time with me, so I use some of theirs. I have everything ready on the table before me - the bread, the margarine, the strawberry jam. I nod to cue my music, there is a fanfare and I make a jam sandwich.

I step back from the table, pleased with the results. "Well that was unusual," says the goofy-looking man on the left. I have seen him on the telly before - he's the man who puts on a silly voice and is very funny. Sometimes he dresses as a lady. He has been doing it for twenty years now and no one seems able to stop him. "Is that all you do - you make a sandwich? Sorry, but it's a no from me."

"A jam sandwich," I elaborate.

"I'm afraid it's a no from me, as well," says the lady in the middle. I feel quite sorry for her, because she clearly can't afford a dress that covers up all her front. I hope she has got a big coat, because it's nippy out today and she'll freeze her bits off.

"Well I overrule you both, because I've got the biggest trousers," says the slimy man with the big trousers. "I

thought it was fresh, original, edgy and I love jam sandwiches. So it's a yes from me, which means that next week you will be performing for the King at the Royal Demand Performance."

"Yay," I say. "Ta very much, squire."

One Hundred and Fifty

I am performing at the Royal Remand Performance, doing my jam sandwich act. Unfortunately, the King will not be attending, because he has to stay at home to watch *Only Connect*, so one of the others will take his place. I don't know which - hope it's not one of the dodgy ones. I think it might be a ginger one, because I saw his horse parked outside.

Before I go on, Bradley Walsh gives me some advice. I don't know why Bradley Walsh is there, 'cos he's not on the bill, but he swings into my dressing room on a rope, rolls across the floor and crashes into a mini-fridge. The mini-fridge springs open and covers him in Twixes and Irn-Bru. Gosh, that man was born to perform.

He gives me this piece of advice: keep smiling and always check your flies. And then he's away, winched up by helicopter to film more quiz shows and comedy dramas.

I am on after The Amazing Drashig Brothers, a troupe of acrobats from Hungary - at least, that's what they are tonight. Tomorrow, they will perform at Batley Working Men's Club as Carlos Rodrigues and the Mandrils, a

comedy juggling act from Portugal. The night after that, they're appearing at the Albert Hall as The Sugababes.

Anyway, before my turn, the man with the big trousers tells me I am going to be great. Turns out, I am not great, and the audience is not interested in watching me make a jam sandwich live on stage. When I come off stage, the man with the big trousers is nowhere to be seen, and someone tells me they saw his Range Rover leaving the car park at an uncomfortable speed the moment my act began. Showbiz is a fickle business.

One Hundred and Fifty-One

I have made a bit of a berk of myself at the Royal Hatstand Command Performance thingy. Some people just don't appreciate real talent. Ha, stuff 'em! Anyway, even though I'm probably going to be taken out and shot (I think that's what happens on these occasions) I still have to join the line-up and be presented to the Royal - whoever that turns out to be.

I am taken aside by an equerry who is to instruct me in how to behave in front of the Royal. I am an itty bit worried, because I have never seen an equerry before and I'm not entirely sure what one is. I think I saw one on the telly once - it was trying to suck people's blood, and some men had to subdue it by putting a box on its head and locking it in a suitcase. But the one that came to see me was a little bloke who seemed quite harmless, and I was confident I could handle the situation if he got a bit bitey.

The equerry told me that when I met the Royal, I should not look him directly in the eye, and I should not speak to him unless he asked me a direct question, and even then I should answer in an incoherent mumble. The equerry also told me that I should not try to feed him, touch him or say the word "creosote." He also told me not to wear red, as this would antagonise him.

So, we lined up and were presented to the Royal in turn. I didn't recognise which one it was, but then there are so many of them these days, it's difficult to keep count. The Royal got a bit agitated at one point and they had to taser it to calm it down, but other than that the occasion passed quite peaceably, and when they got to the end of the line, they put it in a sack and took it away.

One Hundred and Fifty-Two

My showbiz career is over after I tanked at the Royal Variable Command Performance, and there are only two options for has-beens like me - either go to the jungle and eat bugs or get put into a sack and thrown in the canal. I'm not sure which fate is worse, but in order to avoid both, I hid in the theatre when everybody else had gone.

Empty theatres are dank and smelly and proper spooky. After the audience has gone, all that left is the fading echo of laughter and the smell of ancient farts - poignant, huh? Anyway, as I hid there in the darkness, I started to wonder if the place was haunted. I don't actually believe in ghosts, but then stuff tends to happen whether I believe in it or not. For instance, I spent a whole year not believing in

jelly. It was an experiment that I did - and I didn't get any funding for it, it was all done out of my own pocket. Anyway, I tried really really hard not to believe in it, I screwed my eyes up really tight and concentrated a lot, and yet there was still plenty of empirical evidence to suggest its continued existence. For example, whenever I visited the supermarket and went past the jelly shelves, I would repeat to myself, "I deny your existence," over and over again. Despite my best efforts, by the time I got to the checkout my trolley was always full of the stuff.

It occurred to me that jelly might have a particularly tenacious grip on reality, and that I might be better off trying to not believe in something else. So, after my jelly experiments, I spent the following year not believing in fully integrated goat milking systems. This, I thought, would be much easier than jelly, because I was surrounded by jelly all the time, whereas I hardly ever saw a fully integrated goat milking system. However, just the other day, I saw an advert for a fully integrated goat milking system all over the side of a bus, so I guess this experiment was a failure as well.

What I'm trying to say is that although I don't believe in ghosts, they might still exist, in spite of my incredulousness. See?

One Hundred and Fifty-Three

I am hiding in an empty theatre, and I am getting a bit nervous about ghosts, even though they definitely don't exist. I have never seen a ghost, obviously, but I know

someone who has. His name is Kevin - that's my friend's name, not the ghost's. I don't know what the ghost's name was. Anyway, Kevin claimed that he saw one and I am not sure whether to believe him. This is the same person who once told me that Elton John taught physics at his old school, and it's thanks to the flamboyant gap-toothed pop star that he now fully understands Boyle's law. I think he made it up because he was jealous when I told him that David Bowie taught me chemistry.

So, this ghost that Kevin reckons he saw - he said he saw it one dark and moonlit night, climbing over the wall behind the back of Asda's. When I asked him how he knew it was definitely a ghost, he said that it was because it was wearing an Elizabethan ruff and bellowed the word "Gadzooks!" when it caught its tackle on the barbed wire. Of course, if it had been a ghost, it could have walked through the wall instead of climbing over it, but when I pointed this out to Kevin, he just shook his head and said that I didn't know nothing. Ghosts, he told me, could only walk through stuff that didn't exist in their time, and his ghost had to climb over because it was an original Elizabethan wall. That's when I knew for definite that he was talking bull-plop, because I know for a fact that they didn't have Asda's back in them days.

One Hundred and Fifty-Four

I have been in this empty theatre for several hours now, and I need a widdle. I am hiding in a room full of old props and stuff, behind a big cardboard cut-out of a

Christmas penguin. I don't really want to emerge into the open, because of all the theatre ghosts that don't exist, but I really have to move soon otherwise there will be a urinary incident of considerable magnitude, and I might fuse the electrics.

Getting to the toilet was dead easy. Hey, here's a tip for you. When you go to the theatre - which I'm sure you do a lot - and they blow the whistle for half time, everybody rushes out to do a widdle, and there is a big long queue. By the time you've finished and made yourself decent, the second half has already started, and you will have missed a very good joke, or an important clue about who done the murder, or whatever it is. Well, my idea is that if you wait until the show is over and everyone has gone home, there will be no queue and you can use the lavvy whenever you want, and make as much noise as you want. There you go, that was a good life hack, wasn't it?

I have another life hack. I thought of it a couple of weeks ago when I was trying to get some pickled onions out of the special pickled onion cupboard high up in my kitchen. I nearly fell off the chair I was standing on and it was scary, and then I thought that if I kept all of my things on the floor, then I wouldn't have a problem like that again. So that is what I do now, I keep of my things on the floor, where they are a trip hazard but very easy to reach.

Anyway, it was after my successful toilet trip that I heard an eerie wailing noise. I stopped and listened. Was it me that made the noise? Because I have been known to make eerie wailing noises before, you know. But then the noise

happened again, and this time I knew it wasn't me because my mouth was shut. Oh crumbs.

One Hundred and Fifty-Five

There is a strange, eerie wailing coming from somewhere in the theatre - whoo-whoa-wah-wah-whoa, it goes. Proper spooky doings and no mistake. Seems to me that I have two choices: I can either be a brave little pixie and investigate, or I can take the sensible option and run away. I decide to run away, but I am confused by the darkness, and one of my shoes is wonky, and by mistake I run the wrong way. I end up going down some cold stone steps, into the basement. The sound is coming from beyond a heavy wooden door in front of me. What should I do, readers?

I don't know why I'm asking you. I can make up my own mind, thank you very much.

Actually, now that I'm closer I realise that the sound is not ghostly whoo-ing at all. It's more like singing - very bad singing, admittedly, but there is clearly the suggestion of some kind of tune threaded through the din. I burst through the door, all confident, and I see, illuminated in a single spotlight, a dozen old men dressed in rags, dancing and singing "You've Got to Pick a Pocket or Two." They stop dead as I enter, which is a blessing for us all.

"Who are you?" I ask.

Their leader sticks his thumbs in his lapels, trots over to me and in an excruciatingly bad cockney accent he says, "We're the original cast of *Oliver!* by Lionel Bart! Cor blimey! Luv-a-duck! And watch me old apples an' pears! Is it nearly showtime!?"

One Hundred and Fifty-Six

Who would have thunk it? The original cast of *Oliver!* by Lionel Bart! is lurking in the basement of a London theatre, waiting to go on. I point to one wrinkled old man with a long straggly beard and a number of filthy habits that I won't go into here. "Is that Nancy?" I ask.

"Cor blimey, no!" says their leader. "That's young Oliver Twist and we are a mischievous gang of pickpocketing urchins! I'm The Artful Dodger, me old china!" He points to a skeleton collapsed in the corner. "That there is Fagin!"

"I thought urchins were supposed to be young kids?" I said. "You lot must be a least blinking eighty. This is the most heinous piece of miscasting since [INSERT SUITABLE CULTURAL REFERENCE]."

"Leave it out guvnor!" says Dodger. "We're a right tasty bunch of young rascals, ain't we lads!" He starts singing and dancing again, but promptly collapses in a fit of coughing, during which his teeth fly out and skitter across the floor. "Fair enough. Listen, I don't know nothing of this 'insert suitable cultural reference' of whom you speak, but it looks like our days of playing cheeky young scamps

are over. But what to do, we can't all be King Lear, can we?"

And so we built a fire and sat around it, telling sad stories. They told me about how their one and only performance was a press night, and following the bad reviews they were locked in this basement and the whole production was recast. I told them about the time I got my thumb stuck in a ticket barrier at Mornington Crescent. Then Dodger told a dirty joke and we went to sleep.

One Hundred and Fifty-Seven

I woke up this morning to find the man who plays Oliver Twist licking moss off the walls. I see, so it was going to be one of those days, was it? I pulled on my socks and shoes, in that order, and got to my feet, and found that all the other urchins were also sampling the walls. This, apparently, was how they had survived down here all this time. I was appalled. "Surely you can't live on mossy walls all the time?" I said. "Even if moss can technically be considered one of your five a day." They said that of course they didn't and that I was being silly - for lunch they licked the floor, and they were looking forward to cobweb risotto for dinner.

I shook my head sorrowfully, but not too hard, in case it came off. My head never has come off, of course, but I put this down to being extremely cautious with regard to the vigour with which I shake it. Anyway, when I observed that this was a terrible way for a person to live, even if they were an actor, they just looked at me pitifully and asked

how else were they to survive, locked away in this here basement.

Now, in retrospect, I might have broken the news a little more cautiously. After all, it must come as something of a blow to realise that, after being 'trapped' in a basement for years and years and years and years, the door was not actually locked. But they had seen me walk through it casually enough, and I would have expected that in all that time one of them would have at least tried the handle.

But no, this was a terrible shock and there was much wailing and sobbing and gnashing of teeth and all the rest of it. It was really over the top, but then - actors.

One Hundred and Fifty-Eight

I will never forget the moment I led the original cast of *Oliver!* by Lionel Bart! out of captivity. I opened the basement door and they emerged blinking into the light. They shielded their eyes, hissing, weeping, trembling. It was all too much for one of them and he crumbled to dust, but gradually the others became accustomed to the brightness.

We climbed the steps, into a corridor lined with posters of the many shows that had come and gone since their incarceration, and they were sorely amazed and full of questions. "What is Christopher Biggins?" they asked. "Why would anyone want to see a musical about roller skating?" "And how can I get tickets to *Fire Escape*?"

Then we reached the dressing rooms and that's when the fight broke out. It was horrible to see so many brittle old men pounding the hell out of each other, and once it was all over there were three casualties and Dodger had bagged the biggest room. Before long, they were all applying makeup, going through the wardrobe and bitching about each other. For them, it was just like old times.

One Hundred and Fifty-Nine

My dilemma is what do I do with a bunch of eighty-year-old actors who have no real prospect of working again? There are very few opportunities for people like this, now that *Last of the Summer Wine* has finished. I have to admit that I feel kind of responsible for them, since it was me that let them out of the basement. I toyed with the idea of locking them up again, perhaps leading them back downstairs with the promise of the signed photo of Kenneth Branagh, but I dismissed this idea.

You see, this might be an opportunity for me to make amends. When I was little, I had a goldfish, and I wanted to look after it properly - I really did. So, I bought a book on goldfish care, but it was in Swedish, and unfortunately I don't understand Swedish - not even a little bit. However, it had pictures in it, and I thought I could get the gist of proper fish maintenance from them. I was mistaken, and my fish died after I nailed it to a fence. I think I must have had the book upside down. So, you see, if I look after these old actors, and try very hard not to nail them to anything, then really it's a chance to redeem myself.

But what can you do with a bunch of old actors? None of them are famous enough to do a celebrity antiques programme, and they've all been locked in a basement for decades, so a book of theatrical anecdotes is going to consist mostly of eating dirt and widdling into a bucket. The only thing they can really do is sing and dance, and pretend to be cockney pickpockets... Ah ha!

One Hundred and Sixty

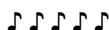
It's a mean old world and there's no room in it for sentiment. That's what my piano teacher, Mrs Rigby, used to say to me, anyway. "It's a mean old world, git-face," she used to say to me as she beat me around the brains with a piano stool, "and there's no room in it for sentiment, so you'd better learn the piano and learn it fast, or I'll slap you so hard that your nose will spin right round your head and end up pointing behind you." This was not something that I particularly wished to happen, even though I admit that I was slightly curious. Would it mean that you could smell things that were behind you? Would I suffocate when I wore my balaclava? Could I continue to wear spectacles or would I have to switch to contact lenses?

Anyway, I'm telling you this because Mrs Rigby's methods left a deep impression on me - both mentally and, quite frequently, physically. It was thanks to her uncompromising methods that I finally learned what a piano was, and had I continued under her tutelage I'm sure I would have also learned to recognise a trombone, given sufficient time and beatings. I needed to take the

same approach to my troupe of elderly actors if I was to ensure they could survive on the mean streets of the metropolis. They had been employed to play a gang of pickpockets, and maybe this was a trade they could pursue in real life? I asked them to give me a demonstration.

One Hundred and Sixty-One

I have asked my elderly actors to give me a display of pickpocketry, in the hope that they can use their skills to make their way in the world. The first surprise I get is when they tell me they can't do anything without the music, so they give me some paper with dots on it. It may surprise you to learn that I actually can read music. Here, look at this:



That says "dot dot dot dot dot with squiggly bits."

See, easy. Dodger points to a piano in the corner of the room - which is handy. Now, as we established last time, I have taken piano lessons, which enable me to recognise a piano - I got B-minus - but I can't actually make music come out of it. I know you have to thump the keys in a particular order, but turning that into a tune is some kind of mystic voodoo, and I have deliberately avoided learning that skill so that I don't get burned as a witch.

Never mind. After a bit of rooting around, we find an old cassette tape and an old cassette player in an old cupboard, and when we combine them in a special way and press

"Play" some old music comes out. That'll do, I think but then they demand lights and make-up and costumes and stuff. My head starts to buzz and I get cross, and I shout at them to just blinking well get on with it. So, we start the music and they blinking well get on with it.

One Hundred and Sixty-Two

My old actors are demonstrating their pickypockety skills and I am making a thorough assessment of their abilities. I have a clipboard and also a hard hat, in case of accidents. The music starts and they begin their routine. It is very odd. It involves a lot of singing and dancing about while Dodger pretends to be the "mark" and they all make a great kerfuffle about trying to pick his pockets.

I start writing things down on my clipboard, but then it gets boring so I doodle a picture of a rabbit instead. His name is Bernard and he likes to eat cauliflower - remind me to tell you about him some time. Anyway, eventually it is all over and I stand up, say the word "phew" and put my hands on my hips. I am not happy.

"What the flip was that?" I say. "You can't pick someone's pockets while you are leaping about and singing 'You've Got to Pick a Pocket or Two'. It's a dead giveaway - someone's bound to notice. You have to be surreptishis... syruptaty... surrendipitish... You have to do it secretly. Like this."

I very sneakily tapped one of the elderly urchins on the shoulder, pointed out of the window, then when he was

looking the other way, I nicked his wallet. "Now you try," I said to Dodger.

Dodger tried it. He tapped the urchin on the shoulder, pointed out the window but when he tried to pick the pocket his elderly hands were shaking so much he couldn't get anywhere near. In his frustration, he hit the guy with a lamp, laid him out cold and lifted the wallet from his unconscious form.

"Unsubtle but effective," I said. "It'll do. Boys, I think we're ready."

One Hundred and Sixty-Three

There comes a point in most people's lives when they have to bite the bullet and lead their gang of decrepit, geriatric, pickpocketing Thespians out onto the streets to take on their first victim. For me, that point had now arrived. We decided to make our first attempt under cover of daylight, because I am scared of the dark. We found our first mark waiting at a bus stop. We chose him for two reasons: one, he looked quite rich; and two, he had really really big pockets. Big pockets are an important factor for the novice pickpocket. Not many people realise this, but it's dead obvious when you think about it.

Dodger was chosen to make the first attempt, while the rest of us waited round a corner out of sight. But I detected a problem - Dodger was jangling whenever he moved. This is not very good for a pickpocket, because really you want to be in stealth mode. Upon investigation,

we found it was down to a bracelet that he was wearing as a lucky charm. He handed it over, but the jangling continued. This was down to his lucky pendant. Reluctantly he removed it, but hark! More jangling. This, it turned out was the lucky cow bells in his pocket.

Actors are ridiculously superstitious, as you probably know, and Dodger seemed to have assorted lucky charms secreted all over his person. We removed about 14 pounds of ironmongery from him before he was ready. Here we go then! Dodger tearfully kissed us all on the cheek, we told him to break a leg, and he was away.

One Hundred and Sixty-Four

My gang of pickpockets is about to wallop its first victim, a man with unusually large pockets. As I think I may have mentioned before, if you've been listening, large pockets are good for novice pickpockets, because you can get in there and have a good old rummage about without being detected. There is a downside, of course. People with big pockets tend to keep a lot of rubbish in them. Sometimes you have to dig your way through layers of used tissues, boiled sweets, bus tickets, envelopes, cow bells, fully integrated goat milking systems, rolls of lino, dead mice and apple cores before you get to the shiny valuables and the cash.

Perhaps that was why Dodger was taking such a long time, because he seemed to be gone an awfully long time. I looked at my watch, but it didn't really tell me much because it wasn't there. One of my gang grinned up at me

and handed it back. I congratulated him and cuffed him round the ear. According to my watch, the big hand was on the three and the little hand was on the fourteen. This still didn't tell me much, because I hadn't made a note of where the hands had been when Dodger had left.

I turned to Oliver and told him to go and find out what had happened. He left. We waited. We waited some more. The big hand was now on sixteen and two thirds. I turned to one of the other of the gang. I didn't know his name, we weren't that close, but I told him to go and find out what had happened to Oliver. Well, he disappeared as well, and in this fashion I worked my way through the whole gang until I was the only one left. That's when I felt a "thunk" on the back of my head, and everything went dark.

One Hundred and Sixty-Five

I awoke in the fusty darkness with an old man's elbow in my face. Well, this was a load of grotty old nonsense, and no mistake. You're probably wondering how I knew that it was an old man's elbow, seeing as how it was so dark. Well, it was attached to an old man, silly. How else would I know?

Where was I? That was what they call a "rhetorical" question - I don't expect you to know the answer. I'll tell you where I was in due course, if you'll just be patient about it. I decided to call out a challenge into the blackness, to see if this would provoke a reaction. "My name is Samuel Ozymandias, you are the Black Fingernail and I claim my ten pounds reward!"

"No you're not," said a voice. It was Dodger's voice! Perhaps, seeing as his voice was here, the rest of Dodger was here as well. I reached out a finger and prodded him in the ribs. He went "Oww." His ribs. His voice. I think it was safe to assume he was present in his entirety.

"The gang's all here," said Dodger. "Me, Oliver Twist, all the other ones that we haven't got names for." They all had the same story to tell - they had all been creeping up on the man with the big pockets when suddenly whammo! There was a great splunk on the back of their heads, and they woke up here.

"So what do we do now?" said Oliver, because it was about time he had a line.

"Let's put on a show!" said Dodger.

"No, let's not do that," I said. "Let's try to find out where we are." And we all agreed that this was a much better idea.

One Hundred and Sixty-Six

I am going to do one of my special recaps now, so you must all pay attention, because there may be some questions afterwards. I found a sandwich behind my fridge, as a result of which an awful lot of other stuff has happened and now I am trapped in a dark and horrid place with a lot of elderly actors who used to be Fagin's gang of pickpockets from the musical *Oliver!* by Lionel Bart!

Right, now here are the questions:

1. Who was the strange man in the bicycle cape who followed me all the way home from the lido last Tuesday?
2. What colour was the lady's hat in Episode 38? (No, not that lady, the other one.)
3. How many times must I tell you not to play with it when you are sitting at the dinner table? Put it away, Nigel.
4. What are the three chief exports of Tuvalu?
5. Why is a raven like a writing desk?
6. How does the man who drives the snowplough get to work in the morning?

Answers on a stamped, addressed thing to:

Admiral Pontius Beefsteak
4b The Mews
Little Podbury
Sussex.

Please remember to enclose your name, address and blood type. Now, where was I? Oh yes, trying to figure out where I was...

One Hundred and Sixty-Seven

I am trapped in the dark with a lot of old actors, and we have no idea where we are. I am going to write to my MP about this. "Dear MP," I will write. "How are you? You don't know me, but I saw you once in the supermarket.

You were buying a large jar of marmalade and some rubber gloves and nothing else. I thought that this was very odd at the time, but then when I got home and put my feet up in front of the telly, I realised that you were very probably having a party, and that everything was all right. On an unrelated note, have you ever tried putting your feet up in front of the telly? I wouldn't advise it because it means you can't see the screen. Of course, it all depends on how big your feet are. On another note - which is unrelated to the two notes I have previously noted, and which is really the real reason that I am writing to you - I am stuck in a grotty dark place with a load of old men. This is really not on, and you should make a law that will stop this happening. Bye!"

That is what I am going to write, but for now I have to figure out where I am before something really bad happens. I notice that the dust in here has an odd taste. Now then, I was a detective for an afternoon once, and during this time I made a special study of the taste, smell and texture of various types of dust, grime, muck and mess. These things can tell you a lot about a place. For instance, did you know that the dirt you find behind a washing machine in a launderette in Exeter is very different from the grease on the back of an oily duck in Nottingham. Oh yes, you've got to know these things. Right, time to put my powers to work.

I stuck out an experimental tongue. The experimental tongue is a spare one that I have in my pocket, which allows me to keep my real tongue minty fresh. Hmmm, I know that taste: pocket lint. We were in giant pocket!

One Hundred and Sixty-Eight

Have we been miniaturised and put into an ordinary pocket, or are we normal-sized and been put into a really really massive pocket? It is these kinds of tricky questions that have exercised the minds of philosophers for literally ages, and if you're not too careful and you think about them too hard, it can make your head go wobbly, and you become all confused and have to be left out in a field for at least three days until it all wears off. Of course, your philosophers only ever consider the "pocket problem" as an abstract exercise, whereas we are actually physically in the pocket. This is a big advantage for us, since it means that we can examine empirical evidence. For example, we can prod and poke to feel what the pocket is made of. And if we do a big sniff we can smell things, which can give us more clues about our predicament. Unfortunately, it is dark in here - this is evidently one of those pockets without electric lighting - and therefore we can't see very much.

I ask if anybody has a light. One of my elderly pickpocket friends says that he has. I hear a match being struck, there is a flare of illumination, he lights his pipe then extinguishes the match. Now the pocket is very dimly illuminated by the red glow from his pipe, which is frankly no ruddy help at all. Suddenly there is a dim light from above and something comes plunging down towards us. Golly gosh, it seems to be a giant hand, and it's coming straight at me. Well, this appears to answer my question, although this is very little consolation, as I am about to get the finger.

One Hundred and Sixty-Nine

I have been miniaturised and put into a pocket - or so it would seem - and a giant hand is coming towards me. I think I am about to get all squashed up like an old jelly baby, and this is really not something I had planned when I woke up this morning. "No, no, no!" I shout. "Geroff me you dirty big monster," I add. "I am sick of all this grotty nonsense, cut it right out." I put up my hands to protect myself, and as soon as I touch the giant finger, two things happen. These are the two things: the first thing is that the hand stops. Jolly good. The second thing is that I realise that it's not a real hand at all, it's made out of polystyrene.

Then a third thing happens: a door opens in the side of the pocket, and there is a man standing there in a lab coat, laughing his bottom off. A normal-sized man, I might add. Well, a bit of a short arse, but you know what I mean. "Sorry guys," he says, "Chill out, it was just my little joke. Seriously, you should have seen your faces when that big hand came down. I know it's just not cool of me, but I couldn't resist." He stood back from the doorway so that we could exit. "Right, you'd better come through so that you can wash all that pocket fluff off you."

One Hundred and Seventy

So, we were in this pocket and we thought we'd been miniaturised because this big hand came down. Only it

was a fake and we hadn't been miniaturised at all, it's just that we were in a big pocket. What kind of looney-tune goes around putting people in big pockets? We were about to find out. The man in the lab coat showed us out of the pocket and when we had cleaned up he gave us some hot Bovril and sat us down.

"Hi guys, my name is Jez Moonbeam," said the man.

"Sorry about the whole big pocket thing. Let me elucidate."

"You do and you clear it up yourself," I said.

"I am an inventor," he explained. "You may have heard of me. I am the dude who invented three-way glass. My latest invention is set to revolutionise the world, like for real. You are the first guys to see it - the giant pocket! Any questions?"

"Yes," I said. "What is three-way glass?"

Oliver put up his hand. "Please sir, how big is the pocket?"

"Good question," said Moonbeam. "On the inside, it's about twenty feet square. Any other questions?"

"Yes," I said. "Three-way glass - what is it?"

Dodger put up his hand. "Cor blimey, guv'nor," he said.

"Does this mean that the pocket is bigger on the inside than on the outside?"

"Another good question," said Moonbeam. "No. Anything else?"

"WHAT IS THREE-WAY GLASS?" I shouted.

Oliver put up his hand again. "Please sir, what are the technical specifications of the pocket, in particular in respect of the tensile strength of the fabric and the load-bearing limitations of the stitching?"

"Another good question, dude," said Moonbeam. "Follow me and I'll show you." So saying, he led us through a door made of three-way glass into his laboratory.

One Hundred and Seventy-One

We have met a hippy inventor called Jez Moonbeam, who makes three-way glass, but won't tell me what it is. I think you must need special brains to be an inventor. I mean, all these ideas go in, and they get all mangled up and whirled about in your brains, then a bell rings, a bulb lights up and out comes a mad new idea. Take for example the man or the woman who invented the electric tin opener. I don't know what the man or the woman's name was. Let's call him or her Professor Mary Spanners - that sounds like it could be on the money. So, one day Professor Spanners sits down and says, "I haven't invented anything for three weeks now. I'd better crack on and invent something today, because the rent's due. I know, tin openers! They're brilliant, but I'm sure they could be made more electric."

And that's the thing - tin openers are brilliant and simple and they work dead good. So what is the advantage of having an electric one that's more expensive, burns

electricity, breaks down frequently and can't even open a tin of spaghetti hoops without getting stuck halfway round, mangling the rim of the can and ejecting the contents onto your worktop? Well, the advantage of it is that it makes a fortune for the inventor, regardless of how rubbish it is.

I tried inventing something once. I figured that if there was money to be made, then it might as well be me who makes it. Taking a leaf out of the electric tin opener book, I decided to invent the electric tin. It didn't go well. All that happened was that I fused the lights and my spaghetti hoops caught fire, so I gave it up as a bad job.

One Hundred and Seventy-Two

Jez Moonbeam is explaining to us why he has invented a giant pocket. He has got a blackboard and a pointy stick and he looks very professional, even though he is clearly some kind of looney nutjob. Anyway, he starts talking at us, and it goes like this:

"Why would anyone want to invent a giant pocket?" he asks, then goes on to answer his own question. "Well, very useful if you've got a giant jacket to put it in, but dudes who rock those kind of massive threads are thin on the ground. In conclusion: there ain't no bread in it, man. But pockets can be useful for other things, can't they?"

Oliver stuck up his hand. "Please sir, you can put things in them."

"Sure, but we've kind of covered that."

Dodger raised a hand. "Cor blimey, mate. If you had somefink really big, then you could stuff it in yer big pocket."

"Well," said Moonbeam. "That's sort of exactly the same thing your buddy said. No, you see pockets have a natural ability to produce pocket lint. And the bigger the pocket, the more lint."

There was silence. Professor Moonbeam obviously thought we would be impressed by this. We weren't. "Who the bleedin' 'ell wants pocket lint?" asked Dodger.

"Upholsterers," said Moonbeam. "Manufacturers of loft insulation. It can be used to stuff cushions, grit roads, all sorts of groovy stuff. But man, listen up, all this is just a by-product of the main research. Thing is, nobody knows where this lint comes from. It just appears in pockets spontaneously. Freaky, right? Well, one theory suggests that it's actually bleeding into our dimension through wormholes in the fabric of the pocket. Now, the bigger the pocket, the bigger the wormholes. Hence my work." Moonbeam paused and took a breath before making his revelation. "Yes, that's right. My big pocket is a gateway to another dimension."

One Hundred and Seventy-Three

Jez Moonbeam thinks that his big pocket is the gateway to another dimension. This is obviously a load of grotty old nonsense, but you have to humour these people. He then asks us for a volunteer to be his first interdimensional test

pilot, and explains that he would go himself but he has an appointment to get his eyes tested tomorrow, and he can't guarantee that they will have a branch of Specsavers on another plane of existence.

He looks at us expectantly. There are no volunteers. He then offers half a Kit Kat and a bag of pickled onion Monster Munch, and I immediately stick up my hand. I'm no mug - you've just got to hold your nerve and wait for the right offer. He takes me to a special fitting room, where I am kitted out for the journey. I am put in a special "dimension suit" which will protect me on the journey through the interdimensional void. It looks like a giraffe onesie to me, but Professor Moonbeam assures me that it is actually a very specialised protective suit and that the fluffy horns on top are designed to short out the nul-reality zone differential in the interstitial void. That, and they will also receive FM radio, so I can listen to *Popmaster* on the journey. I am also given a lunchbox full of cheese crackers and a spoon, in case of emergencies. I am then shown into the giant pocket, strapped firmly to the lining and left in the dark.

One Hundred and Seventy-Four

There are times when I wonder how I came to be where I am. Like now, for example, when I am strapped to the lining of a big pocket, dressed in a giraffe onesie, waiting to be flirtd into an alternative dimension. The voice of Professor Moonbeam comes echoing down from a loudspeaker somewhere above me.

"Hey dude," he says. "Is everything ok?"

"My underpants are too tight," I tell him.

"Nothing to do with me, man," he replies.

"No, I know," I say. "I was just making a general observation."

"Cool," he says. "OK then, we're ready to begin the countdown. Here goes: ten, nine, eight..."

I mean, I won't repeat the whole thing. He basically counts down from ten to zero. You know how it goes. If he got any of the numbers in the wrong order, then it might have been worth mentioning. Or if he had mispronounced something - if he said "seben" instead of "seven", which is something I sometimes do, especially when I am tired. But he didn't do any of those things, so let's just take it as read that he did the countdown properly, ok?

"... two, one, zero."

Nothing. Silence. Darkness.

"Erm, I don't think it - " I began, then suddenly whoosh!

A multitude of flicking lights streamed past me, stretching backwards to infinity. A thunderous rumbling assailed my senses, pounding like the endless heartbeat of the universe. I felt myself being stretched in all directions at once, while simultaneously being crushed to a singularity. In that instant, all times, all places, all things were known to me, my head swelled with the accumulated wisdom of history and still my underpants were too tight.

One Hundred and Seventy-Five

It appears that I have been pulled through a tear in the fabric of reality, my atoms scattered to the four corners of the universe and reconstituted here in another realm.

Well, that was unexpected. Where am I? There is a blinding blue light and I feel so cold. Every surface I touch is covered in frost. There are blurred shadows moving above me and I hear a voice. It is a woman's voice, shrill and whiny and over-privileged. She is complaining.

A man's face then appears over me. He is hideous and the remains of his breakfast are still lodged in his moustache. I blink, trying to focus. He has a name tag on: it says "Mr Wyngarde. Deputy Manager."

"Excuse me, sir," he says. "Would you mind getting out of our freezer cabinet."

"So c-c-c-cold," I say, my teeth chattering. "So very cold."

"I dare say, sir," says Mr Wyngarde. "I imagine that a flimsy giraffe onesie was quite a poor choice for someone wishing to take up residence amongst the frozen poultry in our freezer aisle. Just one reason why you should probably consider relocating."

"F-f-f-freezer aisle?"

"Indeed sir," Mr Wyngarde says patiently. "The other reason you should give serious thought to vacating your present position is that this lady here is trying to do her weekly shop, and you are currently the only thing coming

between her and her chances of providing her family with their Sunday lunch this week."

He helped me out of the freezer and very kindly threw a jacket around my shoulders. I was confused, very confused. "Is this..." I began, "is this another dimension?"

"This is the Easysave Megamart in Totnes," said Mr Wyngarde. "But I can see that it's an easy mistake to make."

One Hundred and Seventy-Six

I am lost in another dimension, although the man who helped me out of the freezer unit says that it is Totnes, so the jury is still very much out on that question. I once served on a jury, you know. Oh yes, and I was very good at it. The Queen wrote to me on special paper and said that I had to go along and do my duty on a jury. There were twelve of us, but I was the best. They took us into this big room and told us that we had to decide whether this man was bad or not. The man they brought in had been charged with going nicking down the shops and they had dressed him in a striped jersey to make him look like a proper wrong 'un.

Anyway, then there was a big argument by these two men dressed in silly wigs. One of them was called the Counsel for the Prosecco and he said that the man was bad because he had been caught walking out of a shop with bag of sprouts shoved up his jumper. The other silly wig man was the Counsel for The Fence, who said it was a case of

mistaken identity, and anyway it wasn't sprouts, it was carrots so we had to let him go on a technicality.

Then the judge said we had to go away and decide whether he was guilty or not. He said we had to base our decision only on the evidence that was presented, so we went away and based our decision on whether we liked the look of the man or not, which is what all juries do. We found the prisoner guilty. We also said that the Counsel for The Fence looked a bit dodgy as well, but the judge ordered this to be struck from the record because they were members of the same golf club.

One Hundred and Seventy-Seven

As I have mentioned before, I am stranded in Totnes, which is probably in another dimension. I have nothing apart from the giraffe onesie that I am wearing and a spoon with the words "A Souvenir from Colwyn Bay" embossed on it. I have no idea where that came from. Anyhoop, the man who helped save me from perishing in a freezer cabinet along with some frozen poultry is called Mr Wyngarde and he offers me a job in his supermarket. He says that I can start on Tuesday, which is today. This is great, because it means that I don't have to wait very long.

Because giraffe onesies are not part of the standard dress code, except on special occasions, Mr Wyngarde gives me a uniform. It is hideous, because this is apparently the law when it comes to uniforms. The top is all scratchy and it is too short and it rides up and shows my belly button. The trousers are grotty and too big so that I have to keep

hanging on to them to stop them falling down. I am also wearing a name badge that says "I'm here to help," which is a proper lie if ever I heard one. They tell me that before I start work, I have to have an induction. Oh dear, I'm not sure I like the idea of being induced.

One Hundred and Seventy-Eight

I have been given a job in a supermarket. My job is to put things on shelves. This is a highly complex and technically demanding position, and before I am allowed to start I have to do an induction. I am shown into a room with a bunch of other new starters and we sit there in our uncomfortable uniforms, itching and scratching. A lady comes in and says that she is "Human Resources". This is a strange name, but we roll with it. She tells us all about the Easysave Megamart, about its values and principles, and about how all its employees are one big family and that it is very different from all other employers.

I have worked for quite a few different companies and they all told me that I was part of one big family and that they were different from everybody else. Just for once, I would like to work for a company that is exactly like everybody else and treats me like an employee - at least that way, I might get paid more.

Anyway, after Mrs Resources, a man comes in, trips over the carpet and flies headlong through the window. A few moments later, he comes back into the room again. This time he is all bruised and scratched, his clothes are tattered and torn, and he is on fire. This is the head of

Health and Safety and he puts on a film for us to watch. This tells us not to fall off ladders, drink cleaning products or stick our fingers in electrical sockets. This is very useful, because I am doing this sort of thing all the time. Finally, there is a test. I answer "Tuvalu" to everything and I score four out of ten. Now I am ready to begin my shift.

One Hundred and Seventy-Nine

My job at the super-duper market is to fill the shelves on the pet food aisle. I have to make sure it is all topped up with Meaty Chunky Pussy Grub, and Mr Woofles' Doggy Chox, and Munchy Hamster Nibbles, Parrot Spam and Snake Cheese. Some of these pets eat better than I do, although this is not difficult as I mostly subsist on a diet of Ritz crackers and pickled onion Monster Munch. Mmmm, yummy.

Sometimes the customers ask me questions, which is very distracting when you are supposed to be getting the tins all lined up neatly. Like for instance, this lady came in and asked what kind of gravy was best for her pet poodle. I said that it depended on how she was going to cook him, and she was all grotty and said that my joke wasn't at all funny. I told her that I wasn't joking, but she had already gone off to complain to the manager.

You see the problem is that I have never had a pet. Not a proper one, anyway. When I was little, we had a goldfish but it was already dead when we bought it. I used to take it for a drag round the park until it got too manky and bits

started falling off. Then there was Gary, of course. Gary was a spider who lived in my garage, although he was more of a tenant than a pet. He was a very special spider because he had ten legs and could weave really artistic-looking webs. He legged it, still owing me three weeks' rent, and the last I heard he had an exhibition of his work on at Tate Liverpool.

One Hundred and Eighty

I am not working on my pet food aisle by myself. There is someone who works with me called Martha Spanners, and we have a brilliant system in place for the division of labour. Basically, I drag all the tins and bags and stuff out of the stockroom and put them on the shelves and price them all up, while she does all the skiving off. She says this is because I am brilliant at stacking shelves and everything, while her speciality is hiding from the management. She has got a point; she is very good at it. Like, the other day I was looking for her everywhere - no idea where she had got to until I received a postcard from her from Mauritius.

Martha says that you have to make the job work for you, rather than the other way round. You've got to take advantage of the perks, she says. This is why she lives rent-free behind the fish counter, in a house made out of dog biscuits, and lives on cheese and sausage roll samples given out by the in-store promotion people. She is really great. When I was young, I wanted to grow up to be someone just like her. But now I am grown up, and it

turns out that I have become someone just like me, and it's probably too late to be just like anyone else.

One Hundred and Eighty-One

Today I have bought a Vegomatic! What is a Vegomatic, you ask? Ha! Fancy not knowing what a Vegomatic is, you loser. All the cool kids have got them, at least that's what the in-store demonstrator lady said when she was demonstrating it in the store today. It is a special machine that can do anything you want to a cucumber. It can chop it and slice it and peel it and dice it and even liquidise it. And not just cucumbers - it can do carrots and parsnips and apples and celery and potatoes and fingers as well. It's particularly good at fingers. If you are looking to chop off a finger, then the Vegomatic is the very thing for you. In fact, I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that it has failed me in slicing off a finger. Well, I can now, anyway.

Of course, the Vegomatic is quite an expensive piece of kit, and I don't get paid an awful lot doing my job stacking dog biscuits and cat food. And because I am staff, I have to pay twice as much for it - the lady said that was because of tax or insurance or special licensing, or something. She seemed to know what she was talking about, anyway. In any case, it's still amazingly good value and I'm sure I'll be using it all the time, just as soon as I can afford a vegetable to put in it.

One Hundred and Eighty-Two

I am still working in this supermarket in an alternative dimension/Totnes. I really ought to be thinking about getting back to my own dimension and resuming my quest for my sandwich, but I've just been given a promotion! You see, we have a new manager. The old one was sacked because he was caught fiddling the accounts. Or diddling in the depot. Or widdling in the salad bar, or something like that. Whatever. The point is that we've got this new bloke called Gavin who is about twelve years old and is dynamic and ambitious and full of good ideas. That is why he has decided to change everything for no good reason.

Martha Spanners, who I work with, says that this sort of thing happens all the time. She says that every six weeks they get a new manager, that they are always called Gavin, even when they are a lady, and that they always change things around for no good reason. Gradually everything goes back to the way it was and the manager is sacked because they are rubbish, or untrustworthy, or criminally insane. Then they get a new Gavin in and the whole process starts again.

This new guy has changed everyone's jobs, so now I work on the checkouts, the man from the meat counter is the new security guard, my friend Martha Spanners works in human resources and Dopey Keith who collects the trolleys in the car park is now the head of purchasing.

One Hundred and Eighty-Three

I am now working on the checkouts and wow, what a revelation! When you are a customer you see all these screens and the magic conveyor belt thing, and the laser scanner thing that reads the barcodes and it all looks really high tech and shiny. But from the other side, where I am sitting, it is all just cardboard and string with bits of shiny paper stuck to them. We make the conveyor belt go round with our feet, we have to make the "beep" of the scanner ourselves and there is a man who sits under the counter with a ring binder who looks up all the prices.

Sometimes the man who reads the prices is on a break, so while he goes off for a widdle we have to hold things in the air and shout "Karen, how much is a family pack of Ribena?" We don't actually have anyone called Karen working there, so this is just a holding tactic until the pricing man comes back. Today the pricing man had to perform a complicated manoeuvre in the bathroom and he was gone for absolutely ages. I spent hours with my arm in the air, holding up a multipack of toothbrushes, shouting for fictional Karen to get me the price. All the people waiting in the queue were staring at me really hard, but the trick is to not meet their eyes.

Anyway, the toothbrushes cost one pound twenty, if you're interested.

One Hundred and Eighty-Four

Today one of my customers gave me a tip. She said, "Try cracking a smile, you miserable git." I don't know whether she was insulting me or genuinely giving me a piece of sage advice. Either way, I think I would prefer to have the kind of tip that you can spend, thank you very much.

I don't think I like working in a shop any more. There is a lot of grotty nonsense to put up with. Firstly, the customers are really horrid to you, and if you are horrid right back at them they try to punch you in the mouth. Look, I appreciate that a lot of people are living dead-end lives, struggling to make ends meet, all their dreams and ambitions crushed and the last scintilla of hope slowly dying like a cooling ember. But there's no reason to give me grief, just because the price of baked beans has gone up 3p a tin.

So, I have decided to move on - away from the supermarket, away from Totnes and away from this dimension. I took off my badge, took off my uniform, declared "I quit!" Then I marched on out. Ah it felt so good, now that I was finally free - naked, but free.

One Hundred and Eighty-Five

When one has been ejected from their own dimension and is now wandering around an alternative version of Totnes, as naked as they day they were born, how does one find one's way home? I'm sure you've all asked yourself that

question at some point in your lives. And if you haven't, trust me, you will - it comes to us all.

I tried looking at signposts. There was one pointing to Torquay. There was another one pointing to the National Earwax Museum. There weren't any that said, "This way back to your own dimension." However, there was one that said, "Tourist Information," so I decided to follow that one. When I got to the Tourist Information place, there was a lady behind the counter. She smiled at me. Then she saw that I was naked, and she frowned at me. Then her professional training kicked up, and her smile came back.

"I am a tourist," I said. "Can you give me some information?"

"Certainly, I can," the nice lady said. "For instance, I can inform you that you are naked. Would you like me to recommend a tailor?"

"Maybe later," I said. "For now, I have a more pressing enquiry."

"I'd urge you to reconsider," the lady said. "It's cold out at this time of year. Also, the pigeons round here will go for anything, and while your genitals are on display they remain at risk. A bird strike to the groin should not be taken lightly."

I took her point, and she loaned me a couple of bin bags and a cardboard box with which I quickly fashioned a makeshift outfit to hide my shame. I then asked her if she could direct me back to my own dimension. Well, she glanced through the railway timetable, and we had a look on the map, but to no avail, so she suggested I visit the earwax museum instead. I could see she was doing her best to be helpful, but as she admitted herself, although she was familiar with many of the attractions of Totnes

and the surrounding area, extra-dimensional travel was a bit out of her comfort zone.

Perhaps her supervisor could help? Well, perhaps she could - we would see?

One Hundred and Eighty-Six

The lady at the Tourist Information place has been unable to help me get back to my own dimension, but her supervisor, Mrs Tibblesworth, might be able to help. We wait for her to come back from her lunch break. She had a baked potato with cheese and a can of lemon pop, and then had a Bakewell slice for her pudding. This information is of no relevance at all, but I often think that by sharing these trivial details, we make these people seem more real, don't you think?

Anyway, I asked Mrs Tibblesworth how I could get back to my dimension and she immediately responded with a question of her own. What was my dimension called, she asked? Well, I was stumped. All right, she then asked, could I describe it? Well yes, I could. I said that it was a lot like this dimension, but slightly larger. The sky was a bit greyer and it was sometimes windy, and that it didn't have that all-pervading smell of pomegranates that this one seemed to have. She told me that this didn't help, and would I not prefer to visit the earwax museum?

At this point I started to cry. I find that often this helps, because people get embarrassed and suddenly become very eager to get rid of you. Mrs Tibblesworth was no exception.

"All right, all right, all right," she said. "Look, I shouldn't really be telling you this, but there is a top secret research establishment nearby, and they are doing some really

interesting work on interdimensional travel. They may be able to help."

Apparently, she knew this because her son-in-law worked there in the canteen. It's good to have connections. Anyway, I thanked her very kindly as she gave me directions. It was right next to the earwax museum, in case you're interested.

One Hundred and Eighty-Seven

The top secret government research establishment was quite easy to find. It was top secret of course, so there were no signs up or anything, but the car park next door was being run by a private firm and they had signs up everywhere because they didn't give a wet splat about secrecy. The research establishment itself was disguised as a discount stationer. You know, pencil sharpeners and notepads and things. I figured that there would be some kind of special codeword to get in. So I went in and started to buy some stationery - you know, pens and rulers and things like that. And as I was buying my stationery - envelopes and paperclips and things like that - I made general chitchat with the greasy looking young man on the till.

"It's uncommonly warm for this time of year in Gdansk," I said. The greasy man agreed with me.

"I have heard that the midnight train from St Petersburg has been delayed," I said. The greasy man said that this was a terrible shame.

"My albatross has come down with a startlingly bad case of gingivitis," I said. The greasy man gave me his sympathy.

"All right, all right, all right," I said. "What's the blinking password."

"Oh, I think you want the top secret government research establishment," said the greasy man. "It's next door."

I thanked the man and paid for my purchases. At least my time hadn't been completely wasted. I now had enough staples and Post-it notes and things like that to last me until the next decade. Jolly good.

One Hundred and Eighty-Eighty

It turns out that the secret government research establishment had been very cleverly disguised as a secret government research establishment, and not a stationer. Very clever, no wonder I had been so easily fooled. I walked in through the door. It seemed the sensible thing to do. Some people might like to tunnel up through the floor or drop down the chimney like Father Christmas, but I remain staunchly old fashioned when it comes to the matter of entering buildings.

Now, you can't just walk into top secret government research establishments whenever you feel like it. They take a dim view of that sort of thing. You might announce, very pompously, that you are a taxpayer and seeing as you have paid for all this floopiness, you can jolly well go where you blinking well please. However, that kind of approach is only going to result in a stern talking to, and a taser up the bottom if you're not careful.

No, the secret is confidence! I am brimming with confidence, to the point where it becomes a medical concern, actually. Confidence is a bit like cholesterol in that respect: too much of it can clog your veins and make your tummy feel funny. This secret research establishment had two levels of security: one was a notice saying, "Only boffins allowed past this point," and the other was a lady wearing a security guard's uniform and a nasty expression, in that order.

I would need plenty of confidence to get past these seemingly impenetrable barriers. Could I do it? I confidently marched into the foyer, confidently approached the security guard and... I think it's time for another cliff-hanger.

One Hundred and Eighty-Nine

I confidently approached the security guard and she confidently told me to sling my hook, so I confidently slung my hook. Slang my hook? Slanged my hook? Pish, I don't have a hook anyway, and it was too late to buy one now, so I just got out of there as quickly as I could.

Right then, if the only way I could get into to the place was to become a boffin, then a boffin I would become. I whooshed along to the local library so that I could use one of their computer machines. They had six computer machines, but they were all being used by sticky children. I picked out the smallest one then kicked his chair out from under him. Then, when he started to cry, I "Shushed!" him and told him to get out. Just for good measure I threw a big book of dinosaurs at him as he left. Then I sat at the computer machine and got down to business.

There are two ways to become a boffin. Actually, there are three ways, but the third is messy and requires lubricant, so I'll just tell you about the first two. The first way is that you have to study your given subject for years and years and years until your hair falls out and your head swells up and you go all swivel eyed. Well, I don't got time for that. The second way is that you hack into the International Institute of Boffinology and add your name to their boffin register and print out a special certificate. You can also get it to validate your parking at the same time, although I didn't have a car, silly.

One Hundred and Ninety

I have to hack into the Institute of Boffinology so that I can make myself a proper certified boffin. My life is sometimes more complicated than it needs to be. Now, I can do hacking because I saw it in that film that had that man in it. You just have to type really really fast, using more than one finger. It works better when you have a time limit and there is dramatic music underneath. It works even more better when something is about to explode. None of these things was about to happen in the library where I was currently sitting, so I would have to improvise. I jumped up, set off the fire alarm, shouted that there was a bomb in the building at the top of my voice, then set fire to the local history section. While everyone was screaming, I sat down to do my hacking, all the while doing the *Mission Impossible* theme tune with my mouth. Gosh, it was exciting.

So anyway, there I was, typing really fast, like in the movies. And there were all these columns of green numbers reflected on my face, just like in the movies. And I couldn't use Google to find the website for the Institute of Boffinology, I had to use GroovySearch or FindStuff or something like that, just like in the movies.

Now, the thing about hacking is that you have to find the back door. Every website has a back door - I think it's something to do with fire regulations. Anyway, I found the Boffinology website's back door, and luckily there was a spare key under a flowerpot. I was in! The inside of the website was all virtual wireframe stuff, just like in the movies. I quickly did my business, printed out my special certificate and got up to leave. But there was a man from the bomb squad at the door of the library, and he wasn't keen to let me out.

One Hundred and Ninety-One

My clever and entirely unnecessary distraction technique to cause panic in the library had backfired a little bit. Everyone else had escaped, the fire that I had started in the local history section had now spread to the biographies and there was a man from the bomb squad who was stopping me from leaving.

"I am sorry sir," said the man. "But I have orders to safely detonate you."

"But I've got a bus to catch," I lied.

I could see the concerned look spread across his face. Ah, the old "bus to catch" ploy. It never fails. Well, it sometimes fails. To be fair, it fails quite a lot, but in this instance it seemed to be doing the trick. Nobody likes to keep people waiting when they're got a bus to catch. All the same, he wasn't beaten yet.

"Sorry, but I have my orders," said the bomb squad man, pulling himself together. "See here. It's on this pink form." He showed me the pink form with instruction to explode me on it, and the tick box on it that he had to tick once I had been successfully exploded. Drat! Bureaucracy, the only thing that can counter the bus ploy. Still, it's not over till the flat ladle swings.

"But it's my Aunt Jemimah," I said (I don't have an Aunt Jemimah). "I need to babysit her pet hamster." (If I had had an Aunt Jemimah, there's no way she would have a pet hamster. She hates them.) "Please let me go," I said. "She starts her shift at the sports centre in ten minutes." (Ha! My non-existent Aunt Jemimah doesn't even work at the sports centre any more.)

The bomb squad man finally crumbled. "All right, I'll let you go, as long as you promise to explode yourself just as

soon as your Aunt Jemimah returns from work." I agreed and the fool let me pass. Little does he know that I still haven't exploded myself. Not deliberately anyway.

One Hundred and Ninety-Two

I am armed with an official fake certificate that proves I am an actual boffin. There are different types of boffin, obviously. You have maths boffins, who are good at numbers and counting and sometimes long division. And you have animal boffins, you are good at sheep and cows and breeding new types of wombat. And you have shapes boffins, who are extremely good at putting different shaped objects into the correct holes. All of these are vital skills, quite clearly, and these types of boffins are always much in demand, especially in Exeter. I don't know why people in Exeter are crying out for boffins, but there you are.

I have chosen to make myself a cake boffin, because they are always welcome. Cake boffins do sponges and pastries and things like that. I'm sure I don't need to tell you what a cake is. According to my official fake certificate, I have specialised in fondant. I don't expect anyone is likely to challenge my credentials, but if they do ask me any awkward questions, well I've eaten enough cakes in my life to bluff my way through. Ha, when I think back to how the kids at my school used to tease me and call me Tubby O'Fartarse - I should think that they will be laughing on the other sides of their faces now. I know for a fact that Gavin Pilkington will be, because he was hit by a train in 1989 and it knocked him sideways. Now he does everything on the other side of his face, not just laugh. I saw him in town just the other day, but he didn't see me. He was coming straight towards me, but looking over his shoulder. Works as a taxi driver, they tell me [joke].

One Hundred and Ninety-Three

Here we are, back at the top secret government research establishment. Now I had my official fake certificate of boffinology and a smug look on my face, so I was sure to get in. I marched on up to the security guard lady and said, "I am a proper actual cake boffin. Look at my certificate. See, I have doughnuts." I shook a box of doughnuts at her. Well, actually, I shook an empty box at her. The doughnuts were now in my tummy, all except one that I threw at a goose because it was looking at me funny. The goose was looking at me funny, that is, not the doughnut.

"All right tiger," she said. "Calm down."

"My name is not Tiger," I replied. "Although I did used to know someone called Maurice Leopard, he's very big in concrete. He is something of a legend in the motorway flyover construction trade."

"Is this relevant?" she asked.

"If you're in the motorway flyover construction trade, then yes, it is extremely relevant. But relevant to us here now? Not so much."

She told me to shut up, then told me to place any metal objects in the tray and pass through the metal detector. I placed my keys and my bicycle chain and my set of antique Victorian spanners and my anvil in the tray and then stepped through. Ha, no problem.

Then she asked me to step through the boffin detector. Oh dear, I hadn't banked on this, so I chickened out and said I'd come back again tomorrow after I'd done some swatting up.

One Hundred and Ninety-Four

I had planned to do some solid reading about cakes at the library, so that it might help me bluff my way through the boffin detector at the secret research establishment. But I couldn't go to the library because I had been banned after the previous kerfuffle. Also, I had completely burned it down just a little bit, and there is a limit to what you can learn from crispy books and smoking embers.

Instead, I went to WHSmith's where they had a surprisingly large number of books about cakes, all written by celebrities. Why? Ah, it's Christmas, and celebrity cookbooks are just about the only thing you can buy at this time of year. And quite right too. After all, who on earth would ever seriously consider making a meringue without first studying a recipe knocked up by someone who used to be on *The EastEnders* in the late nineties? And who would be so reckless as to attempt to build a gâteau without consulting the words of Gary "The Squirrel" Chuckles, the cheeky comic funster who so memorably soiled himself on an edition of *Blinkety Blankety Blank* in 1986? I know I wouldn't. Oh, others may consider me a great baker, but I'm humble enough to admit that if I have cooked a little better it is by standing on the batter of others.

Right, I'm finally ready to infiltrate the secret research establishment.

One Hundred and Ninety-Five

It's Christmas day and the secret government research establishment is shut. Oh well.

One Hundred and Ninety-Six

It's Boxing Day and the secret government research station is still shut. Phooey. Last night, incidentally, I was visited by three goats. The first was the goat of Christmas past, and it showed me a vision from many years ago of a little girl opening her presents on Christmas morning, then going into a strop and being sick into a toaster. I tried to tell the goat that that wasn't me, but the stupid animal just kept bleating nonsensically.

After that I was visited by the goat of Christmas present. Golly gosh, would I never get any sleep? It showed me a vision of Mr and Mrs Pontefract of Goole sitting round the kitchen table, tucking into a turkey. Or was it Mr and Mrs Goole of Pontefract sitting round the kitchen turkey, tucking into a table? Anyway, I had no idea who these people were, or why I was being shown this scene of apparent domestic harmony.

Finally, I was visited by the goat of Christmas yet to come. This was a particularly mangy creature. All it did was trot round the bedroom a few times, widdle in the corner of the room and then fall out of the window with a kind of strangled yelp. Well, if that was the future, you can keep it. The whole episode was rather disappointing, actually.

One Hundred and Ninety-Seven

I have returned to the top secret government research establishment. My certificate of boffinology seems to have fooled the security guard, but now I have to step through a boffin detector. This is a big cardboard box, bigger than an actual man, with a hole cut in it and all silver paper and shiny buttons stuck on it. It looks a bit grotty, but it has the words "Boffin Detector" written on it in crayon, so I expect it is the real deal. I know that some of the modern handheld boffin detectors are very sophisticated, but this

is clearly one of the older static ones and it may just be possible to fool it if I think very hard about the most complicated thing I know.

The most complicated thing I know is a woman called Betsy Mulgrew, but I don't like to think about her because she reminds me of that time with the axle grease, so I will think about the second most complicated thing I know. The second most complicated thing I know is quadratic equations. We did quadratic equations at school and they made my head hurt. I don't really know what they are for: maybe for adding quadratics together. But then, I don't know what a quadratic is, so that doesn't really get me anywhere. "Quadratic" sounds a bit like "aquatic," so maybe it's a type of duck. Not sure why you would want to add ducks together, they seem to be able to handle that sort of business themselves.

Anyway, the teacher said that we had to learn quadratic equations because they would become very useful in later life. She lied. Or did she? Perhaps this was the time I would finally need it. I closed my eyes, thought very hard about adding two ducks together and stepped through the machine.

One Hundred and Ninety-Eight

I closed my eyes, thought about adding two ducks together and stepped through the big cardboard boffin detector thing. Don't bother asking me why, OK. Just don't. I have previously explained all this, and if you can't be bothered to pay attention, then that is just tough. Anyway, as I passed through the machine, there was a rumble, a grinding noise, a whistle, a big trump, a whoosh and a final ping. I suspect that at least one of those noises was me. Sorry about that, but I get nervous, and what with all the

concentrating and everything, so I think I can be forgiven if the odd parp escapes.

Anyhow, that ping at the end seemed quite positive. I cautiously opened my eyes to find that I hadn't been lasered or exploded or electro-fried or anything. The boffin gauge on the machine was reading "5.2". To be fair, it always read "5.2" because it had been drawn on in felt tip pen, but all the same I took it as a good sign.

"Did I pass?" I asked the security guard.

"Yeah, you passed," she said. "Do you want a badge?"

I don't really understand sarcasm, so I said, "Yes please," and she gave me a sticker that said I had been a brave little boy. Joy! I do enjoy a successful infiltration.

One Hundred and Ninety-Nine

Hello Mrs Eileen Kettleband from Tewksbury. This is a message from your second-favourite nephew, Walter Pickles, aged seven and three quarters. Walter says, "Happy birthday and I hope you enjoyed your squid."

Sorry, I am taking dedications now. I was paid one pound fifty and half a packet of Rolos for that. I'm in the big league now. Anyhow, back to what there is of the plot. I am now inside the top secret government research establishment and I do not like the colour of the walls. They are a sort of greeny-white-brown and it makes my brains feel funny. I appreciate that most of their budget gets funnelled into top secret research, which is only right and proper, but I think that they might have put some cash aside to employ an actual proper interior designer to sort this horrid mess out. I personally would like wallpaper with pictures of tractors on them, but perhaps if they had pictures of test tubes and Bunsen burners and crucibles

and stuff, it would help all the boffins do their clever thinking.

I think I could be an interior designer if I really tried. I would decorate people's houses with fancy pictures and wooden horses and bowls of pot pourri, and it would be really classy. I would charge a million pounds per wall and a million and a half pounds for a floor, and I would dress like a renaissance ponce so that people would know that I was serious. However, I am not an interior designer. This is a life choice that I have made and it is the reason I dress like a primary school cowpoke.

Two Hundred

I am wandering the horrid mucky corridors of the super-secret government research establishment, and this place is like a conspiracy theorist's paradise. I come to a door marked "Caution: Giant Ant", so I open the door. Blimey! There is a giant ant on the other side of it. It lunges for me: snap snap snap it goes with its pincers, then it slaps me across the face with a stray tentacle. I quickly exit the room and slam the door behind me. Wowzer! They really ought to put some kind of warning sign up.

The next room I come to says "Levitating Badger" on the door. Since it isn't preceded by the word "Caution" I figure that it's probably safe to enter. I go through and find myself in a big empty room, with plain light blue walls. There are no windows, no fixtures, no furniture. All there is, hovering in the middle of the room about three feet off the floor, is a badger. It fixes me with its big brown eyes, looking absolutely forlorn. Sad sad badger.

"Ah, I see you've met Brian," says a voice behind me.

I turned around. There was a potty looking man in a white coat standing behind me. I mean, he was wearing

other stuff as well, not just the white coat. For example, he was wearing trousers, which was a relief, because this is not always the case with boffins. They can be a little forgetful.

"Brian? No... I've met Barry," I replied. "He was the man who came to fix my guttering. I don't know why, because I didn't ask him to."

"No, I mean Brian the Badger," said the boffin. "Not his real name, of course. His real name is Nigel but legally we have to rename him because of the Animal Alliteration Act. We found him like that, permanently hovering. He can't come back down to earth and nobody knows how he does it. Hell of a problem for an animal that lives underground." The boffin reached out to shake my hand. "And you must be Professor Ganymede Xerox. We've been waiting for you."

Two Hundred and One

I am so very good at pretending to be a boffin that one of the genuine boffins has mistaken me for someone called Professor Ganymede Xerox. It is very important now that I don't get weird and blow my cover.

"Ah, Professor Ganymede Xerox!" says he.

"Am I?" says I. "I'll take your word for it. Perhaps you could tell me a little about myself?"

"I surely can," says he. "You are sixty-three, you were born in Southport, you studied at Oxford and you are the inventor of the quantum picnic."

"Thank you very much," says I. "That'll do for now. I may prompt you for further biographical details at a later point. Well, you know how it is with us boffins, our fat heads are

so busy with clever thinking that we often forget these things. And what is your name?"

He looks at his name badge. "Professor Ringo Bobbins," he reads.

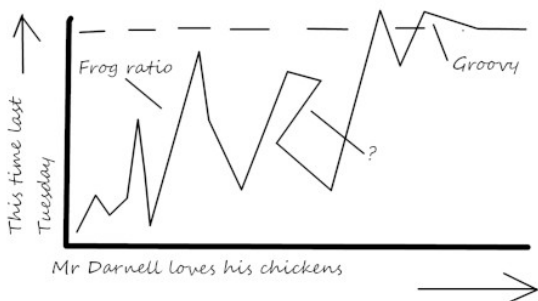
"Golly gosh, I'll never remember that," I tells him. "I'll just call you Archduke Nicholas Flapjack III, if that's OK with you?"

"Hell yes," he squeals. "Wouldn't be the first time."

Archduke Flapjack takes me by the arm and several other places and leads me from the room. He tells me that everyone has been really excited about my visit and about hearing about my latest important and ground-breaking work. We reach a room with rows and rows and rows of boffins all seated expectantly. The Archduke announces me, then everyone claps. Then it goes quiet and it's my turn to speak. Gulp.

Two Hundred and Two

I have to do some talking in front of some clever boffins, and I have to make sure that I sound proper smart, just like them. Luckily they have given me a pointy stick and a flipchart, in that order. I turn the first page of the flipchart and I see this:



Well, this looks like a right load of boulders from where I'm standing, but I'll give it my best shot. "Ahem," I begin, and this gets me a big round of applause. OK, this might be easier than I thought. I flourish the pointy stick, whip it round like a sabre, then point at the chart. "See this here," I say. "This line represents the coefficient of the deregulated feedback mapped over a period of forty-eight hours. Of course, this is after it has been corrected for windspeed, human error and the price of fish in the indoor market. And I think you will all agree, ladies and gentlemen and ladies, that this proves beyond all doubt what it was that we were talking about. Any questions?"

Oh phooey, I shouldn't have said that last bit, because someone has a question. A crumbly looking chap with wispy hair and egg stains in his beard sticks his hand up. "Yes, Professor Xerox," he says, whilst simultaneously making a strange huffing sound. "Can I ask how you calculated the model radiator of the panoramic curb?"

Actually, I didn't catch exactly what he said, but it sounded something like that. Well, I went blank, and then suddenly the answer came to me. "Quadratic equations," I blurted out. He seemed pleased with that and I got another round of applause. Wow, that was the second time that quadratic equations had proved useful. It's all go, isn't it?

Two Hundred and Three

After I done the talk and got a big clap, the head boffin, Archduke Flapjack announced that the buffet was open, and then tried to press me to a sausage roll. I slapped him hard across the face and told him that I had never ever been spoken to like that in my life. This was not strictly true, in fact. I had once had an aunt who had tried to tempt me with a sausage bap, and on another occasion, my

cousin had introduced me to cheesy nibbles. But these people were close relatives and as such they could be forgiven a little over-familiarity when it came to lunch.

Archduke Flapjack apologised four and a half times, then left me alone for a while to suck on a cocktail sausage in the corner. When I had finished, he then offered to show me the secret research establishment's latest project. I was feeling a bit fruity, so I agreed, and he took me down the corridor, round the bend, through some swing doors, up some stairs, down some stairs, under some stairs, then through a door marked "Hey! Private."

It was a big room with a gantry running all the way round it. There were two levels of computer banks and consoles and flashing lights and stuff. People in white coats and radiation suits were rushing around with clipboards and Geiger counters and things, twiddling knobs and turning dials and sliding slidey things.

And there, in the middle of the room, sitting on a collapsible picnic table, was a toaster.

Two Hundred and Four

Archduke Flapjack has shown me the super secret project that the research centre is working on, and it's a toaster.

"It's a toaster," I say.

"How did you know that?" says Flapjack. "We've just invented it. Blimey, you really are clever, aren't you?"

"You know that you can get these in Argos?" I say.

Flapjack sighs with sudden understanding. "Ah, I see what you mean," he says. "No, what you can buy in Argos calls itself a toaster, but what it actually does is incinerate bread on one side whilst leaving it totally untouched on the

other. What we have invented is the world's first actual toaster, that will toast bread evenly right the way through."

"Impossible!" I cry. Flapjack seems pleased with my astonishment and introduces me to Dr Sally Voltan, the engineer who made possible this remarkable leap forward in culinary technology. She has crumbs all down the front of her jumper and a big smear of marmalade up her cheek, but she seems quite happy.

"It's been a long hard road, there have been a few unexpected stops and starts along the way, but we finally got here in the end," she said. At first I thought she was talking about her commute to work, but as she goes on it becomes clear that she's talking about the toaster. "Oh yes, our initial prototypes were a bit 'feisty' but eventually we got the hang of building devices that didn't explode as soon as you plugged them in."

"That's nice," I said.

"We thought so," Dr Voltan agreed. "Then we experimented with artificial intelligence, and that led to all the usual problems, of course."

"Rise of the machines? Overpowering mankind? Supplanting the human race as the dominant species on the planet?"

Dr Voltan roles her eyes. "All that stuff, yes. Thank goodness we didn't build them with a long enough flex to get out of the building. One got as far as the gent's washroom on the second floor and eradicated a cleaner, but that was as bad as it got. But now we're on the way to finally building a device that can create the perfect breakfast. And this is where it dovetails so beautifully with your work, Professor Xerox."

She looked at me expectantly. Oh hell, it was my turn again.

Two Hundred and Five

Help! Help! Help! The boffins are asking me questions about my work again. It's only a matter of time before they see through my disguise. Apparently "my work" is something to do with making a perfect breakfast, and I need to extemporize quickly.

"Well," I said slowly. That bought me a few seconds. "I've always been troubled by jam. If only there was some way of having toast with jam on but not sticky. That way you don't get it all over your fingers and your face and in your hair, and it doesn't go all up your arm if you accidentally put your elbow in it. Well, that's what happens when I try to eat it anyway. Hence, I have been working on a new type of jam."

"Yes?" said Dr Voltan.

"Yes?" said Archduke Flapjack.

"Yes," I said, still thinking furiously. "You see, you need jam that is sticky enough to stick to the toast, but not sticky enough to stick to you. My new jam is digital, which means that you can control the stickiness far better than normal analogue jam. My new jam is only sticky when you spread it from left to right. So swipe right to spread it on; swipe left to take it off."

Well, they seemed quite happy with that load of old rot. Actually, the more I think about it, the more it seems that digital jam is a good idea. I wonder where I can buy it?

Two Hundred and Six

Dr Voltan and the Archduke Flapjack seem to be quite happy with my idea for digital jam. And I pretend to be totally amazed by their invention of a "toaster", because I

am polite. But I haven't forgotten the real reason I am here. I bet you have, though. I'll remind you: I am hoping that they will have some way of getting me back to my own dimension, and so as they continue to wobble on about their inventions, I subtly attempt to steer the conversation in that direction.

"Of course, our toaster is just one element in our bid to create the perfect breakfast," says Archduke Flapjack.

"I see," I say. "So there are many more *dimensions* to this project?"

"Yes," says Archduck Flapjack. "For instance, we are working on the self-boiling egg. Unfortunately our prototype is four feet wide - far too big for the eggcup and hell for the chicken."

"I see," I say. "So you're looking for a way to reduce its *dimensions*?"

"We've also found a way of creating interlocking cornflakes," says Archduke Flapduck. "This means we can pack many more into the boxes, and they have proven to be a particularly sturdy building material."

"I see," I say. "Sounds like something from another *dimension*."

"We're also working on a heat-seeking muffin that can find it's own way to the toaster," says Archie Duckflaps.

"*Dimensions, dimensions, dimensions, dimensions,*" I say.

"Is there something on your mind?" asks Archduke Flapjack, suddenly looking concerned.

"Yes," I say. To hell with subtlety. "Have you got a machine that can ping me back into my own dimension?"

"Of course," said the Arch Ducky. "You should have said something sooner."

Two Hundred and Seven

"Behold the Multi-Phased Quantum Accelerated Dimension Jumper 4000!" announced Archduke Flapjack.

I was expecting something more impressive than this: something in shiny aluminium with flashing lights and complicated readouts, and possibly even a siren that went "Woogah woogah woogah woo." Instead, I was shown a large wooden structure with a single massive spring-loaded beam projecting from it.

"This is a catapult," I said.

"Oh, it's not just a catapult," said the Archduke.

"Alright," I said. "It's a *big* catapult."

"It's a *big, multidimensional* catapult," said the Archduke. "What we do is we load you into the basket there, release that catch and then it will fling you into another plane of existence."

I looked around at the small room it was in. "You wheel it outside first, yes?" I asked. "Otherwise, all it's going to do is fling me into that wall. I'll just be a sticky paste, and when visitors come round and spot it, you'll have to hurry them along and tell them that there's nothing to see here."

The Archduke shook his head. Then he shook his left leg. Finally he shook his bottom at me, at which point I felt that he was getting too familiar. "No need," he said. "The Dimension Jumper will accelerate you into the hyperspatial vortex. At the point you leave the 'projector arm' you'll be travelling through multiple alternative dimensions. Which one you finally come to rest in depends on how far back we pull the lever."

"I see," I said. "But what if that wall also exists in the dimension that I end up in?"

The Archduke shrugged. "You pays your money, you takes your choice."

Two Hundred and Eight

I am extremely concerned about Archduke Flapjack's plan to load me into a giant catapult in order to fling me back into my own dimension. It seems to me that they might as well load me into a cannon, but it appears they have already thought of this.

"Ah, you're thinking of the Maxi-Warp Bangomatic Cannon Mark III," he said. "Yes, it wasn't a major success. The basic idea was sound: using brute force to punch through reality and tear a hole in the barrier between this world and the next. Unfortunately, it also tore a hole in whatever we loaded into it. You should have seen the state of Mrs. Hartshorne, the cleaner. Still, she was dumb enough to volunteer."

"Messy."

"Very," said the Archduke. "And the worst of it was that there was no one to clean up afterwards. Then we had the quantum saw, of course."

"Of course."

"Of course, yes," said the Archduke. "A saw fashioned out of dark matter that could cut a neat little hole in the fabric of spacetime. Worked perfectly, but our neighbours in the dimension above us were not at all happy when we came up in the middle of their reality and ruined their carpet. They've put new dark energy underlay down now, and there's no way we can get through that. Are you following all this?"

"Not really?" I admitted.

"So you don't want to hear about the hyper-spatial corkscrew?"

"No thanks," I said.

"The reality slide? Space grater? Astral pogo stick?"

"Nope."

"Right, well we'll crack on then," said the Archduke.

"Time to get you ready for your journey."

Two Hundred and Nine

What does one wear when one is about to be flung into another dimension by a giant catapult? I don't want to commit some terrible faux pas by dressing up as a spaceman or wearing a fancy hat. Of course, this was not my first trip through the inter-dimensional vortex, but this time it was a much more formal affair. I decided on top hat and tails, studded football boots and flying goggles, and when Archduke Flapjack saw me, he seemed quite pleased.

"Ah, Professor Xerox, I see you've ridden in a giant catapult before," he said. "Now, we need to make sure that we get you back to the right dimension, so we've done a bit of research on the wide world web..."

Gulp. Was my cover about to be blown?

"...Oddly, it didn't seem to say anything about you being from another dimension. It said you were raised by a squadron of ducks in Finland." I muttered something about not believing everything you read on the wide world web, and he seemed to be satisfied with this. "That's what we thought," he said. "So perhaps if you can tell us a bit about your dimension, we can look it up in the book."

He brought out his dimension book - quite a slim volume, but when he opened it up it was bigger on the inside, page

after page after page after more pages. "Well," I said. "It's quite difficult to describe my dimension, actually. Quite normal, really. Possibly a bit wider than this one, but not as flat."

"Groovy," said Archduke Flapjack, flicking through the pages. "Did it have big mountains made of jelly? No? Not that one, then. Let's see. What about this one, where everybody lives in shoeboxes, two to a box? No, OK. Look at this one - it's got flying cows that do loop-the-loops. No? Looks fun, sure you don't want us to fling you to that one instead? OK. Well, how do you feel about this one - it doesn't have the colour blue?"

"No, I don't think it's really me," I said. "My dimension had a Sainsbury's, if that's any help?"

"Got it!" said Archduke Flapjack. He strapped me into the catapult, set the right angle and was about to pull the lever when there was an almighty rumble."

"What was that?" I said.

"Wasn't me," said Flapjack.

Two Hundred and Ten

I am posing as a boffin called Professor Ganymede Xerox, I am strapped to a giant multi-dimensional catapult and I am about to be propelled into another plane of existence, when all of a suddenness we hear an almighty rumble. In the circumstances I think I could be forgiven for being a little nervous, and if anyone detected the occasional parp coming from my direction, I'm sure they'd be polite enough not to draw attention to it. But this one was a real belter, and it wasn't me wot done it.

Suddenly a cow came a-crashing through the skylight, being ridden by a man with electric eyebrows, wearing a

cape and wielding one zinger of a pointy baguette with a pickled egg skewered on the end. Oh heck, I thought, not this again. But no, this wasn't like my dream. For one thing, there was no trout involved. And for another, separate thing, my aunt Maisy was not in the immediate vicinity, which is always a blessing, just ask my uncle Patrick. No, this was something altogether different - this was clearly real life, and not just a fever dream.

"Get off my foot," said Archduke Flapjack.

"Who sir?" said the newcomer.

"You sir," said Flapjack.

The newcomer apologised, dismounted and parked his cow in the corner. "I am Professor Ganymede Xerox," he said. "I believe you were expecting me."

Archduke Flapjack gasped like a drunken plumber. Then he pointed at me. "Well if you're Professor Xerox, who is that gentleman?"

Gosh, I've been rumbled! I reached down, pulled the lever and catapulted myself into oblivion.

Two Hundred and Eleven

Tumbling over and over and over and over is making me giddy and my tummy feels all funny. This is what happens when you have been flirted out of a catapult into a new dimension. It's not nice and I may sick up at any time. It is worse than the roly-coaster at Drayton Manor Park and Zoo. This is a place where they do rides that make you giddy and they also have animals. I went there once to look at the monkeys, and they were rubbish and didn't do anything. I saw one on the telly once that played the drums and ate chocolate, but these monkeys didn't do anything good like that. Anyways, while I was there I went

on the roly-coaster and lost my breakfast. I say "lost" it, but actually I think it was stolen. I started off with it, sicked it up halfway round and when I got off, the boy behind me was wearing it on his face.

Anyhow, being flung into another dimension is a bit like that, but without the baked beans.

I suppose very few people get the opportunity to streak through the gaps between alternate realities, screaming like a banshee and worrying that your trousers might be riding up uncomfortably. It all goes streaming past you at breakneck speed, and if you're not careful you get bits of other dimensions stuck in your hair and wedged behind your ears and stuff. Actually, I don't think my description is doing it justice. It's really a very magical experience, honestly.

Didn't last long, though. A few moments later I went splat into something really hard, and it seemed like all the lights came on at once.

Two Hundred and Twelve

"Good lord, Melanie, look at this poor chap lying in the drive!"

From the taste of the gravel in my mouth and the ringing in my ears, I quickly deduced that the owner of the posh voice and the expensive glossy shoes was talking about me. I strained upwards to look at his face. It was very blurry. I blinked a few times, but it didn't bring him into any sharper focus. I guess he was just made that way.

"I say old chap," said the blurry young man. "I'd think twice about dossing down there. A fellow who gets up to those kinds of larks very soon finds himself getting driven over if he's not careful. I remember once there was this

blighter at the Drones - Pinkerton, I think his name was. Well one day, old Pinky bet us all that he couldn't - "

I didn't hear what it was that old Pinky bet he couldn't do because at that moment someone drove over my head. That kind of thing often proves a distraction when one is struggling to follow the ebb and flow of a conversation.

"Oops, there you go, old man," said the blurred gentleman. "What did I tell you?"

"I say," said the Melanie woman. "That was Daphne, Cuthbert, Maddy, Dunstable, Gwendoline Cranleigh-Bumphlap and Postern-Dirigible all coming back from the station in the two-seater. Honestly, Alby, you really need to get a bigger car. Let's go and say hello!"

"Be right with you, Melanie old sprout," said blurred Alby. "First I'm going to scrape this fellow up and take him in to see the governor. Chin-chin!"

Two Hundred and Thirteen

After being twanged back to what I hope is my own dimension, I came to on a gravel drive, met some chinless wonder and got driven over by an overloaded car. Algy then summoned a fat butler and together they carried me into what appeared to be a stately home and laid me on what appeared to be a sofa. I mean, it felt like a sofa as well as appearing to be one, but I think it's still too early to make assumptions. Algy's friend Melanie then came in and started picking the gravel out of my hair and bathing the tyre marks on the back of my head.

"Now you just rest up there, old chap," said Algy. "Pater will be along in a minute. Bit of an absent-minded old blighter, but you can't help liking the old buffer. I say, it's

jolly fortunate that you came along, you may be able to do me a service. You see, my aunt has asked me to steal my Uncle Gawain's memoirs. He's planning to publish them and Aunt Lavinia thinks there's going to be a terrible hoo-hah if they are ever allowed to hit the shelves. Shame on the family and all that. Trouble is, I'm already in a bit of bother with Dr Linnet. He's the local headshrinker - I expect you've heard of him?"

I shook my head in confusion and a big plug of mud fell out of my left ear. Ah, now that felt better. "Sorry, never heard of him."

"Lucky old you," said Algy. "Well, see, the thing is his daughter Roberta is a bit of a peach and I was planning to pop the old question. But I'm already engaged to Phillipa Gitt. Long story, I made a bit of a goof. She's one of the Shropshire Gitts, of course. Well obviously, I can't be seen to be involved, not after what happened at the annual prize giving. So, you see my predicament."

"Yes," I said absently. "No," I said on reflection. "Look, I don't really know what's going on here, or who you people are. Your father..."

"Yes?"

"Not into pigs, is he?" I asked.

"Gosh, no," said Algy. "Lord knows why you would think such a thing. Do tell me more, you interest me strangely."

At this point a tall, gangly, elderly man came in, bent over me, peered at me through a monocle and said, "Ah, so you must be the fellow who's come about the roof?"

Two Hundred and Fourteen

I appear to have been rescued from certain sanity by some posh bloke called Algy and his potty father, who seems to

think that I have come about the roof of his stately home. Lord Doobury, for that is his handle, peers at me intimidatingly through his monocle, one giant eye staring at me like a mournful kipper staring up at me from a breakfast plate. I think it's best all round if I just go along with him.

"Yes chief," I said. "That's me: Bobby Eaves. Roofs is my game. I'm the best roof bloke for miles around. There's nothing I don't know about roofs. I was born on a roof. I was raised on a roof. And if I don't die on a roof, I'm sure I'll blinking well perish by falling off of one."

"Well that's jolly good," said Lord Doobury. "Jolly jolly good. Just the ticket. Jolly jolly jolly jolly old jolly jolly." Algy slapped his father on the back and this seemed to break the spell. "Right, well let's show you the jolly old roof so that you can work your magic."

We tottered outside. Well, Lord Doobury did most of the tottering, I just sort of shuffled along behind him. When I had first arrived I had been lying face down in the dirt and letting cars drive over me, so that this was the first opportunity I'd had to see the grounds properly. They were majestic, magnificent and something else beginning with "m". Rolling hills swept around to the north, with a slope... "Marvellous", that's another word beginning with "m". So, this slope led down to a sparkling lake where dolphins and walruses splashed and frolicked. To the east, herds of wildebeest meandered across the dusty plain towards a rumbling volcano and the shattered ruins of a Byzantine monastery. There was also an ornamental fountain, but it was rubbish.

"Righto squire, where's this roof then?" I asked. To my shock and horror, Lord Doobury pointed upwards.

Two Hundred and Fifteen

Lord Doobury wants me to fix his roof, and I was totally up for it, I really was, but then he told me that he keeps it on top of his house. Right on the top! Ridiculous! "It's a little bit inconvenient," I said.

"Well, that's where I like it," said Lord Doobury. "It's traditional."

"If it were on the ground it would be a darn sight simpler to deal with," I pointed out.

"Would it not then be a floor?" Lord Doobury suggested. "I'm no expert, you understand."

I told him that we roofers always advised our clients to keep their roof on the floor, since it makes it easier to Hoover. He told me that he never hoovers his roof. I told him that he was a dirty old man and he should be ashamed.

"No, old fellow," he said, "I hear what you're saying, but I think I'll keep it where it is. It stops the rain getting in. Or rather, it would if there wasn't a hole in it, but then you're just the chap who's going to fix it. Right, off you pop."

He pointed upwards. Oh dear, I'm not very good at heights. Anything over three-foot six gives me the wobbles.

Two Hundred and Sixteen

Lord Doobury wants me to fix the hole in his roof, and because he is one of those weird rich eccentric types, he keeps his roof on top of his very big house. Silly place for it. I find a small box to stand on, but I'm unable to reach. Not surprising, since his stately home is four storeys high. I ask him if he might have something a little bigger, such as a footstool.

"Carter, something a little bigger for our roof expert," bellows Lord Doobury, smartly clapping his hands.

Carter, apparently, is Lord Doobury's ladder man. All great houses have a ladder man, along with a boot boy, a candle wick trimmer, a page turner and a carrot scraper. Carter arrived with a great big wobbly aluminium ladder which he leaned up against the west wing, planting the base firmly in a flower bed. I approached it cautiously. I examined the base of it. I peered up at the top of it, which seemed a very long way away.

"A thermos of hot tea for the journey, sir," said Lord Doobury's butler, handing me a flask. "The journey to the top may take you a little while and his lordship was anxious that you should be able to take a refreshment break at the midpoint." He also stuck a fish finger in my pocket and filled my other pocket with salad cream, in case I got hungry.

I looked at the ladder again and shook it doubtfully. Oh well, there seemed nothing else for it. Off I went.

Two Hundred and Seventeen

Here is a list of all the things that I am scared of: ducks (obviously), dumper trucks, rosy red apples, floral displays, certain types of net curtain, a roller skate (singular), scissors (plural), quadratic equations, Mrs Alice B. Yakamoto of King's Lynn, short choristers, hedgehogs, pincushions that look like hedgehogs, balloons, baboons, yucky muck, lists, Liszt, yellow plastic buckets and heights. The last one is the thing that concerns me at the moment, since I am climbing a ladder up the side of a stately home.

I was about three feet off the ground when the fear started to kick in and I went all wobbly. My legs turned to jelly, my tummy turned to custard and my forearms seemed to

transform into cucumbers, which was odd. I still had a long way to go, though. They say that the worst thing you can do is look at the ground, so I looked upwards. This was just as bad because the sky kept getting closer and closer and I started to get quite giddy. I looked sideways instead and was treated to a marvellous view of a genuine Georgian cast iron drainpipe. Drainpipes are not really my thing, but this one seemed to be getting me through a very difficult time.

It didn't help that when I was about halfway up, a pigeon came and landed on my shoulder, and kept hissing vile abuse in my ear and telling me to jump. Pigeons are really quite nasty, especially gobby ones like this, so I briefly paused in my ascent so that I could strangle it and then wedge it in an air vent. This might seem cruel, but if you'd heard the language it came out with, I'm sure you'd have done the same.

By now, things were getting a bit frisky because the wind had picked up and either the ladder was swaying alarmingly, or the house was. Either way, I thought it best to jog the rest of the way up and before very long I found myself on the roof.

"Right then, where's this hole?" I said to myself, as I stepped out and went crashing through it.

Two Hundred and Eighteen

It's dark here. I don't know where here is. I just fell through a hole in a roof, there was a crash and a splintering sound and now here I am. I hope the crashing and splintering sound wasn't me. I am a fragile soul and I break easily, just ask my private gyropractor. What do you mean you don't know what a gyropractor is? Everyone round our way is into it, it's the latest fitness trend: a man comes round every Wednesday with a massive turntable

on the back of a flatbed truck. He revolves me at great speed for twenty minutes and all the bad energy and poisonous juju just flies out of me, leaving my chakras refreshed and my aura all spangly and clean. It makes you feel a bit icky if you're not used to it, and the first time I did it, I wobbled halfway down the road and walked into a tree, but it's worth it in the end.

Anyway, like I said, it's dark in here and it smells of moth's balls and fusty old clothes. I think I'm in a wardrobe. Some girl suddenly opens the door. "Gosh, what are you doing in my wardrobe?" she gasps, confirming my supposition. "Are you from Narnia?"

"Might be," I said. "What's it to you, fish face?" Not very friendly, I admit, but then I had just fallen through a roof, so you'll excuse me if I was a bit tetchy.

"Have you got any Turkish Delight?" asked this girl.

"I've got a Mars bar and half a Curly Wurly," I said. "They were given to me by a friend."

"Why did your friend give you half a Curly Wurly?" she asked.

"He wasn't my friend," I explained. "But he was *somebody's* friend. Look, is this conversation going to go on much longer?"

"Certainly not," said the girl. "I'm going to go and fetch the magistrate. I'm sure he'll take a dim view of this." Then she closed the door and locked me in.

Two Hundred and Nineteen

Phew! So, I'm locked in this here wardrobe and there doesn't seem to be a way out. I can't climb up the way I came in because of the crabs. (I forgot to mention them earlier. Horrible snap-snap-snappy things with their

grotty pincers going clicketty-clacketty-click and their eyes out on stalks like some kind of space-age bongo master. Oh, the drums! The endless drums! But I digress...)

Was there, perchance, some hope that I might tunnel my way out? Luckily I had brought my pneumatic drill with me, but unfortunately I had the wrong attachment. I had the thumpy bit for masonry and not the whirly bit for wood, which was what the wardrobe was made of.

Maybe I could pick the lock from the inside. I knew how to do this because I had seen it in a book, or read it on the telly, or something. All I would need was a hairpin, which fortunately I happened to have. I pulled the hairpin from my hair and shook my luxuriant long tresses free. Then I stuck it in the lock and wiggled it about a bit. There was a click, then a clack, then nothing happened. I looked at the hairpin - wrong type, obviously. This must be a hairpin designed for hair rather than for locks.

That was all my options exhausted, so there was no choice but to sit and wait it out. To pass the time and I decided to play a mental game - specifically, I would count up as high as I could. I got to twenty-two.

Two Hundred and Twenty

Waiting in a wardrobe, the door was suddenly thrown open. I don't mean that the door was waiting in the wardrobe. Sorry, that is an example of a bad grammar: a dangling wotsit, or something. Let me start again and I'll do it proper.

As I waited in the wardrobe, the door was suddenly thrown open.

You see, that's a much better grandma. Anyhoo, standing there, framed in an aura of blinding light, was a chappy wearing thigh-length riding boots, a tie-died duffle coat, a

shark's tooth necklace and an absolutely massive hat with a feather in it.

"You must be the magistrate," I said, blinking at him.

"How did you know?" said the magistrate, winking at me.

"Well, you're not dressed like a plumber, are you?" I replied, making a certain gesture.

"You have a point," said the magistrate. "I am Sir Digby Popwick, local landowner, magistrate and master of the ferrets. And you sir need to explain what you are doing in this young lady's wardrobe."

"I wasn't doing anything," I replied. "Although, if you hadn't arrived when you did, there might well have been an accident. Do you think, before we proceed, that I might pay a visit to the smallest room in the house?"

"Why would you want to visit the boot cupboard?"

"No, I mean the little boys' room," I explained. "The relief closet. The piddletorium. The wazzer. The widdle chamber. The slash boudoir. The source of the Nile."

The magistrate just shrugged.

"I want to do toilet."

The magistrate suddenly twigged. "Quick, get this man to the piddletorium!" he cried, and his minions escorted me as I hurriedly hobbled out of the room.

Two Hundred and Twenty-One

I was escorted by two men to the en suite wazzer and they waited outside while I performed the necessary. Once alone, I did what any self-respecting fugitive would do and tried to escape through the window. I hoped that the

groans and gasps that issued from me as I tried to wriggle through such a tiny gap would be interpreted as the normal utterances of a man who needs more fibre in his diet. But after twenty minutes, they grew suspicious and burst in to find me firmly wedged in the window.

When they finally got me back to the magistrate, I was still wearing the window frame, since it had been the only way they could free me. It was a grotty old window frame, not really my colour and it really didn't suit me, but I tried to style it out.

"Account for yourself," demanded the magistrate.

I'm not really an accountant, but I gave it a go. "There's one of me," I said. "And I am zero-rated for VAT purposes."

He then asked me what I was doing in the wardrobe. I sighed and told him my story: about searching for my wandering sandwich, about being fired from a catapult in another dimension, about pretending to be a roofer and falling from the sky. Well, you know when you've said the wrong thing, don't you?

"Witch!" cried the magistrate. "Witch! Witch! Burn the witch!"

Two Hundred and Twenty-Two

They don't just burn witches any more. They have to try them first. By "try them" I don't mean like you would try

a hat or a pair of trousers, although that might have been fairer. The try you by making you do a series of silly tests.

First I had to do one of those buzzy things. You know what I mean: the buzzy thing. You move a hoop over a bit of wobbly wire and if it touches it goes buzz. Well I did it perfectly, because I have the hands of a surgeon, but apparently this means that I am a witch.

The second test is that I had to do a Rubik's cube in under two minutes. This is proper easy for a brainbox like me, but I decided to play it smart. After all, these were simple country folk and they were bound to think that some kind of magic was involved if I achieved this task, so I deliberately failed. Apparently, my failure means that I am a witch.

The third test is maths. I have recently mastered quadratic equations, but I don't think that will help me here. This was the problem I was set: Malcolm is on a train travelling from Chichester to Frome at an average speed of sixty miles an hour. Meanwhile, Mary is waiting at a bus stop in Wolverhampton and her cousin Brenda has gone on a city break to Copenhagen. In light of this information, what did Nathaniel Kerchunk have for breakfast?

Now, this was a tricky one, so I sat down with a pencil and paper and tried to work it out. It made my head throb but after fifteen minutes I finally came up with the answer: twenty-eight miles per hour! Apparently, this conclusively proves that I am a witch.

Two Hundred and Twenty-Three

I've been found guilty of being a witch, and there is no right of appeal. I decided to have another go at escaping, so I made like an ironmonger and made a bolt for the door. It's a joke, you see. "I made a bolt for the door."

Ironmonger, see? Never mind, I ran for it, but I was hampered by the window frame that I was trapped in and I got wedged in the doorway. They had to get the fire brigade to come and free me, but all they did was turn their hoses on me, which really didn't help at all. What the flipping heck were they thinking? Eventually, they had to remove the door frame, so I ended up wearing that in addition to my window frame. All this joinery is becoming a bit of a drag.

So, it looks like there was no way to escape my fate. I could accept my lot with dignity and face it like a man. Or I could rant and rave like a blubbering wreck. I think we all know how I decided to play this.

"Please don't burn me!" I wailed. "Oh please, please, please! I scorch very easily and I'm full of plastic so I'm bound to give off a lot of toxic fumes. Just think of the environment!"

"What kind of people do you take us for?" said the magistrate. "We don't burn witches any more. We send them on an anti-witch therapy course."

"Oh," I said, slightly disappointed. I'm not so sure I wouldn't prefer to be incinerated.

Two Hundred and Twenty-Four

They sent me to an anti-witch therapy centre and I felt a bit out of place at the first group session. There were about a dozen of us sat around in a circle. The others were all wearing capes and big pointy hats, most of them had wands and some of them were stroking black cats. I felt a proper fool, sat there wearing a door frame and a window frame.

In the middle of the circle there was a big pentagram painted on the floor. I gather it was just there for decoration, but I nevertheless thought it was a little insensitive. The group was being run by a lady called Cherry Methuselah. She was an ancient, wizened crone - I don't mean that in any pejorative sense - with long white hair, curly scratchy fingernails and skin that was a patchwork of weeping sores. She told us that she used to be a zombie, but she was all better now. All the same, I shuffled my chair back slightly, just in case she started to get peckish.

She started the session by going round the group and asking us to introduce ourselves and explain how we first got into witchcraft. The guy on my left said it all started for him was he was seven and his aunt bought him a junior magic kit for Christmas. In three years he went from boring his schoolmates rigid with crap card tricks in the playground, to summoning up a fire-breathing hellhound to rampage through the staffroom and carry off the chemistry teacher to Hades.

Naturally, when it was my turn, I felt the need to compete with this, so I told them that my name was Hieronymous Pitchblack and I was hatched from a griffin's egg one night under a blood moon, and that I was put upon the Earth to spread havoc and destruction, but I had Fridays off because, hey, even the demonic spawn of Lucifer has to have some downtime.

They seemed moderately impressed with this.

Two Hundred and Twenty-Five

Let me tell you, life in an anti-witch therapy centre is not easy. Every morning, the therapist straps you to a plank, smears you in Swarfega and shouts at you for fully three quarters of an hour. Sometimes he gets so angry that spit comes out and he has to wipe his mouth on his sleeve. It is yucky. I don't know why he does it, because neither of us seems to get anything out of it.

The food is rubbish as well. We are not allowed to have chips, because they are evil. We are not allowed pies, because they too are evil. I like a bit of cheese, but apparently cheese is the work of Satan, so that's off the menu. And lord help you if you ask for a Double Decker or a Curly Wurly, because they're convinced that chocolate is a form of malevolent ectoplasm that rots your insides and turns your bones to evil cinders. I'm pretty sure it isn't, because if it was they would have to put a warning on the wrapper, and I was looking at the ingredients in a Twix the other day and it said there was milk and cocoa solids, but that was about the worst of it.

Anyway, the grottiest part of it is when they hang us up by our feet from the rafters in the main hall and leave us there for five hours so that the evil can drip out of us. Well, naturally, stuff does drip out of us - it would drip out of you too if you'd been left suspended by your ankles with no access to toilet facilities. This stuff is unpleasant, admittedly, but whether it is actually "evil" is open to debate.

So, as I say, life in an anti-witch therapy centre is certainly no picnic, except for Wednesday afternoons, when we have a picnic.

Two Hundred and Twenty-Six

I am sick of this horrid anti-witch therapy place, it is all a lot of grotty nonsense. I wish I was actually a real witch, because then I would be able to magic my way out. Yesterday, I broke into the cleaning cupboard in search of a broom. This is a well-known mode of transport for witches, and I figured they'd be bound to have one knocking about somewhere. No such luck. I found a mop and sat astride it for twenty minutes, trying to figure out how to make it go, but the thing wouldn't budge.

I would have to break out the place the old-fashioned way. I waited until nightfall so that I could sneak out under cover of darkness like a sexy spy. Unfortunately, most sexy spies aren't encumbered by woodwork, like I was - you will remember that I was wearing a window frame and a door frame, the legacies of two previous failed escapes*. These

tended to make me clatter a bit, so I had to be careful not to draw attention to myself.

I decided to escape by making my way to the roof and abseiling down using a rope that I had cunningly woven from some bits of old string and my own hair. I could probably just have walked straight out of the front door, but the roof escape would be more spectacular. I was right. The bit of guttering that I tied my rope to was all wonky and bent. It gave way, I plummeted to the ground and landed with a thump and a splonk, and bits of the roof came down on my head with a crunch and a wallop.

**See The Exciting Adventure of the Window Frame and the Door Frame, published by Penguins, price 80p.*

Two Hundred and Twenty-Seven

So, I'm sat there in the flowerbed at the front of the anti-witch clinic, having just fallen four storeys. I'm wedged inside a door frame, a window frame and now I have a large section of the roof on my head. And then this bloke comes up to me, knocks on my face and says, "Excuse me, are you number 42, Stable Mews?"

This bloke thinks I'm a house. Well, I'll be blowed, thinks I. I've never been a house before, and it's a bit of a novelty. I used to be a caravan in Great Yarmouth for three months every summer, and for a brief period I was a microbrewery in Grantham, but an actual house is something of a step up. I was certainly game, so I told him that I was indeed number 42, and what could I do for him.

"Sign here," the man said. I signed "there" and he gave me a registered letter and went away. Ooh, this was intriguing. I opened it hurriedly and read it, without even moving my lips. It was from solicitors acting on behalf of my sandwich! The cheek of it - the ruddy thing was claiming that I had been negligent in constructing it, paying little attention to the proper application of butter and making a series of unwise choices in the matter of filling. Now it was suing me for loss of pickle.

In all this time I had never guessed that my sandwich could be so litigious. You think you know someone, huh?

Two Hundred and Twenty-Eight

My sandwich has set its lawyers on me and although the letter does not reveal its whereabouts, I figure that it must contain some sort of clue to put me on the trail. I hold the page up to the light to see if there is a watermark, but no joy. There is a curious dark smudge in the corner. I tentatively taste it with the tip of my tongue.

Hmmmmmmm, jam. Raspberry, if I'm not mistaken, and of a brand that is only sold in one particular store in Winchester. That might be worth investigating. Then something catches my eye at the very top of the letter - it's the address of the solicitors, J.J. Summonsby and S. Screwem Esq., Chancery Lane, That London. I should probably pay them a visit.

There was no way I'd be able to fit in a taxi while I was wearing all these bits of building, so I phoned a house removal company. They told me they were far too busy

moving a block of flats three feet to the left so that it was out of a draught, so I would have to make other arrangements. Let me tell you, being a house sounds like it's a load of funny barrels to start with, but in truth it's a real pain in the basement. There's all sorts of safety checks and certificates, not to mention the dry rot and the backed-up drains. I also suspect that I've got woodworm, because I can hear them munching through my eaves.

But the worst part is all the rules and regulations. Yep, it's the bureaucracy that really gets you down. Right now, there's a man from the council knocking on my face, and from the look of his clipboard and the sappy expression on his mug, I don't think he is the bearer of good news.

Two Hundred and Twenty-Nine

I have quite understandably been mistaken for a house, since I am wearing a door frame, a window frame and a large portion of roof on my head. I am also a fairly large and squarish person, and I have had my own guttering since birth, which only goes to reinforce the impression. Being a house is quite fun at times, but it also has its fair share of annoyances. One of these takes the form of a dopey looking bloke from the council, who knocks on my face and waves his ID badge at me.

"Are you 42, Stable Mews?" he asked.

"Might be," I said.

"Mr Mews, we have reason to believe that you are a three storey Georgian terrace house with a south facing aspect, ample parking and have been fully modernised throughout."

"Might be," I said again.

"Mr Mews, it has come to our attention that you do not have the appropriate planning permission, and we have therefore scheduled you for demolition. What have you got to say about that, buster?"

"Demolition?" I said. "But that's terrible."

"On the contrary," said the man from the council. "It will be a great deal of fun. All that masonry crashing down, great billowing clouds of dust. Very dramatic. It will probably attract quite a crowd."

"But it will be terrible for me," I said. "Can I not apply for planning permission retrospectively?"

"Ah well, retrospective planning permission," said the council git. "Yes, it would be perfectly reasonable for us to allow that. But no, we're not going to. You see, we've just bought a new wrecking ball, and Gavin in the works department is really itching to have a go with it. He's never used one before, but he used to be really good at conkers so he reckons he'll get the hang of it in no time."

And with that, the swine nailed a notice to my porch, surrounded me with traffic cones and stripey tape, and waddled off.

Two Hundred and Thirty

Today's the day that I get demolished and quite a crowd has gathered to watch. There are also hot dog stands, an ice cream van, a Punch and Judy show and a bouncy castle [PLOT POINT]. The man from the council is here and he introduces his friend Gavin who is going to operate the wrecking ball. Gavin is short, ginger and he is wearing thick pebble glasses that don't seem to be doing much for him, since he still seems to be as blind as a bat [ANOTHER PLOT POINT].

"Hello there, matey," said Gavin, reaching out to shake my hand. "I'm the bloke who's going to be smashing your frontage in today."

"Over here, Gavin," said the man from the council.

Gavin let go of the wing mirror of the nearby minibus and spun around to shake my hand instead.

"Ooh, you've got a firm handshake for a house," Gavin said. "In fact, you've got hands, which is an unusual feature for most buildings." I toyed with the idea of declaring that I wasn't a building at all, that I was in fact a human man, but things had already gone too far and I reasoned that the paperwork alone was sufficient reason to allow this charade to continue. "Well," continued Gavin. "I'm going to start by knocking your roof off, then gradually work my way down your walls until you are nothing more than a pile of rubble."

"Will it hurt?"

"I expect so," said Gavin breezily. "Well, onward and upward!"

He climbed into the cab of his wrecking ball, wiped his glasses and peered myopically through the windscreen, lining up the ball. Satisfied that his aim was true, he pulled a lever, rotated a dial, de-toggled a toggle and pressed the release button. The massive ball swung through the air, hit the bouncy castle, rebounded and took out Gavin, the man from the council and most of the brass band that had been hired to provide musical accompaniment. I gather that only two trumpets and a French horn escaped the carnage. Tragic.

Two Hundred and Thirty-One

I have escaped demolition because the man from the council wiped himself out with his own wrecking ball. Pillock. Anyway, in order to avoid a repeat performance, I have put myself on the housing market. An estate agent came around with a tape measure and a machine for taking photographs. He was a really really really really boring man. Boring and slimy. Boring and slimy and stinky smelly. He took down my particulars and measured me in some really intimate places. It tickled when he measured my spare bedroom, and I wish he'd warmed up the end of the tape measure first. Then he took my picture from various angles, being very careful to ensure that he got my best side and that the dirty great big electricity pylon next door was not in shot. When he first took the picture of my frontage I did a big smiley face, but

then the estate agent man told me to stop because it was weird and scary for a house to be smiling.

Then he stuck a "For Sale" sign in my front garden and drove off in a dirty, smelly cloud of smugness. I feel strangely violated.

Two Hundred Thirty-Two

Let me tell you what it is like when people mistake you for a house and put you up for sale. It is boring, that is what it is like. I have sat here for days and days and days, slowly collecting junk mail, and nobody seems to be interested. I have heard that it is a "buyers' market" rather than a "sellers' market", which I don't really understand because surely you have to have both. Anyway, I have had lots of leaflets advertising pizzas and cleaning products and insurance. I don't know why these people think I want pizzas and cleaning products and insurance. I've never expressed any interest in pizzas and cleaning products and insurance, so I think it was a heck of long shot anyone trying to sell me pizzas and cleaning products and insurance. Why don't these silly people think these things through?

Anyway, then some exciting news - the boring estate agent man came back but now he had some prospective buyers with him. It was a man and a lady, and they poked around in my private areas and asked many many questions and the estate agent man lied to them every time. He told them that I was south-facing, and I am not. He told them that I had been fully rewired, and I had not. And he told

them that I had not been built on top of an ancient Native American burial ground, and although I am not entirely sure about this, I suspect that he was lying about this as well. In the end, the man and the lady decided not to make an offer on me, and I for one don't blame them.

Two Hundred and Thirty-Three

I've got squatters! Squatters are like lice, but for buildings instead of people. If you are a person with lice you can get a special shampoo, which is probably nuclear because it makes your head go all tingly, but there doesn't seem to be an equivalent roof-shampoo for houses to get rid of squatters. Now, I tried to explain to the squatters that I was a human man and not a house, and therefore they had no business squatting in me. They responded by pointing out that I seemed to have a roof and a door frame and a window frame, and as such everything seemed to indicate that I was a building rather than a person. They had a point, and I was very nearly convinced myself.

Well, I'm all sick of being a building, it is a lot of grotty nonsense, and the thing with the drains is so inconvenient. I have asked a doctor to come round and do his funky thing, then give me a certificate to prove that I am an actual human. He examined my dry rot, shone a light down my chimney and concluded that no building he had ever seen had halitosis as bad as what I had got it. He gave me my Certificate of Humanness and also a lollipop, because I had been a brave little soldier. He also got a surgeon friend of his to come around and remove my roof

and door frame with a medically approved hammer and sterilised chisel. Hurrah! I am now unencumbered and can fit on buses, although I still have squatters. The doc gave me some tablets that he said might get rid of them. I have to take them three times a day, after meals, which means that I now have to find three meals a day from somewhere.

Two Hundred and Thirty-Four

I've got squatters and they ain't half making my tummy feel funny. They stay up late at night listening to bongo music and playing Dungeons and Dragons and Dungeons, and I end up getting a bad case of the gurgles and I sometimes create thunderous emissions. It is not pleasant for anyone in the immediate vicinity, and seeing as I can't help always being in the immediate vicinity of myself, it is ruddy awful for me.

The doctor bloke has given me tablets that I have to take after meals. Fortunately, he has also given me a prescription for meals, so off I trot to the pharmacist to collect roast beef and three veg with Yorkshire puddings, followed by jam roly poly and custard. The pharmacist lady says it will be ready in three hours and meantime she gives me a packet of corn plasters to chew on. Seeing as I have three hours to kill, I decide to visit the park to play on the swings.

Well, I found the park, but there wasn't no swings. No roundabout neither. Not even a slide. There was an old washing machine that I had a go on, but it made me dizzy.

Then there was some rusty corrugated iron propped up on a breeze block, but it was jaggedy and I tore my coat when I slid down it. There was also an old oil drum half full of dirty rainwater, and this was really good, but I got bored with it after a couple of hours and wandered off. To be honest, the park was rubbish. Anyway, when I got back to the pharmacists, I found that it had gone into administration during the lunch break.

Two Hundred and Thirty-Five

Due to the declining fortunes of high street retailers, increased competition from major chains and an unusual burst of sunspot activity, the pharmacist where I was supposed to be collecting my prescription has gone into liquidation. They still owe me a dinner! The shop is all boarded up and one of the more docile members of staff is standing outside with a notice pinned to him. It says that all creditors should submit their claims to the administrators, Fairlop, Poultrice and Widdle Ltd, not later than twenty-three minutes from reading the notice.

Twenty-three minutes! That's less than half an hour! You probably knew that, but did you also know that twenty-three minutes is more than quarter of an hour? Oh, you did. Well, after I had worked all this out I only had nineteen minutes left to write my letter. No time to lose!

"Dear Fairlop, Poultrice and Widdle," I wrote. "Where's my dinner? I'm still owed roast beef, veg and roly poly for pudding, and I think I should be treated as a preferential creditor because I am really really hungry. Oh, and also,

there should also be a starter with prawns or garlic or a bit of old melon or something. I enclose a stamped addressed envelope, please don't skimp on the gravy."

The bit about the starter was a fib, but they weren't to know that. I stuffed my letter in an envelope, hurled it at a passing postman and sat down on the kerb to await the reply.

Two Hundred and Thirty-Six

I have a tip for you. You see, I was sat at the kerbside, waiting for my dinner to arrive by return of post, when this big street cleaning thing comes along. It had a big sucking hose thing at the back and water jets coming out the front and swirly brushes along the side going whoosh-swirl-whoosh-swirl-whoosh. Well, I thought, I'm not moving. I've only just sat down, so he can blinking well go round me. Well, he didn't blinking well go round me, did he? He went whoosh-swirl-whoosh-swirl-gurgle-gurgle-gurgle right over the top of me. And do you know what - I came up lovely and clean. All my clothes and my hair and everything were sparkly and fresh afterwards. And here's my tip: if you find yourself in the path of a big street cleaning thing that's going whoosh-swirl-whoosh-swirl-whoosh, just turn to face it and give a big broad grin, and it will do your teeth as well. Mmmmm, minty fresh.

Shortly after that, a reply came back from the administrators who were meant to be sending me lunch. I felt the envelope - it seemed suspiciously flat. Not at all the kind of thing you would expect if you were anticipating

a substantial meal. I tore it open and the letter explained that the limited extent of the firm's assets at the time that it ceased trading meant that my claim could not be paid in full. I would therefore only receive a fraction of the full meal that I had been expecting. I dug into the envelope and pulled out a fishfinger. Thus, the harsh realities of economic failure were brought home to me.

Two Hundred and Thirty-Seven

Things aren't going too well, all things considered. I'm sitting in the road, starving hungry and all I've got is this grotty old fishfinger. Also, I still haven't managed to find my wandering sandwich, which is now suing me for some trumped-up reasons of its own. You may have forgotten all that, but I haven't and I still need to raise some cash so I can go and visit my sandwich's lawyer in London - the only lead I've got.

I sniffed at the fishfinger. It didn't seem very appetising. It was all manky and old and covered in fluff. Hey, perhaps it was an antique? I know a lot about antiques because I have seen all of the antique programmes on the tellybox. There are loads of them: *Cash Up Your Attic*, *Dosh Dealers*, *Celebrity Bargain Brawl*, *Dirty Old Grotty Things Roadtrip* and so on. My favourite is *Celebrity Antique Ding Dong* where two celebrities try to lose as much money as possible by buying stuff at a premium from antique dealers, then selling them at auction where people naturally expect to get things cheaper. Seriously, how do they expect that's going to work? It's just piddling

money down the drain. Mind you, they do it for charity, so the only people who lose out are poorly children.

Anyway, my fishfinger might be quite valuable, so I should see about getting it valued. Luckily, the dull provincial town I am in is a bit of a tourist destination, so the high street is mostly lots and lots of antique shops.

Two Hundred and Thirty-Eight

I need to get my fishfinger valued because it might be worth something. It could be of great historic importance, for example. Hey, this might be the Duke of Wellington's fishfinger! Imagine that. Perhaps this is the very fishfinger that he had with him at the Battle of Waterloo. He probably stuck it down his boot in case he got a bit peckish later in the day. It might even be a royal fishfinger. Perhaps it belonged to Queen Victoria? I mean, stands to reason that at some point someone royal might have owned a fishfinger, even if it was purely ornamental. This could be the very one!

There were many many antique shops in this place. More antique shops than normal shops, in fact, and although that might seem strange at first, when you think about it, it makes sense. After all, there is far more old stuff in the world than new stuff, so the ratio of antique shops to new shops is bound to be higher. There's probably a formula for it. Perhaps, if you are a mathematician you can work it out and send it in to me. Anyway, I selected an antique dealer that specialised in seafood. When I walked in, the place smelt of lobsters and winkles and there was a giant

mounted trout's head on the wall, staring down at me. Ah yes, this was the plaice. (Ha ha ha ha ha ha... fish joke.)

Two Hundred and Thirty-Nine

The man who is going to value my fishfinger for me is called Norris Pike and he has one eye bigger than the other. This is very useful because he uses this one to look at stuff really closely, although he says that it makes him all wobbly when he is out and about, and he has to wear an eyepatch to stop him walking into things. In fact, he says, his big eye was the direct cause of an horrific steam roller accident, which is why he now has a wooden leg. The parrot on his shoulder is just an affectation.

Mr Pike takes my fishfinger and runs his nose along it to sample the odour. He remarks upon its patina, which is the way that the breadcrumbs have become tainted with age. Then he looks carefully for a hallmark. No, he says, it is not a royal fishfinger, as those are usually blue. It doesn't appear to have belonged to Wellington as there is no battle damage. He identifies it as an original Findus, circa 1983. He says that they usually came in sets of six and it would be worth more had it been in its original box. However, he said that there was still a healthy collectors' market for vintage foodstuffs and he was prepared to offer me three pounds sixty and a tin of mushy peas. To be honest, this was far more than I was expecting so I bit his hand off. Something of an overreaction, I know, but we've already established that I hadn't eaten, and Mr Pike was very understanding about the whole thing.

Two Hundred and Forty

You can't get a train ticket to London for three pounds sixty, which was all the money I had. Not unless you are travelling in the past, anyway, because it was much cheaper in olden days. Unfortunately, I wanted to travel in the immediate future, and the fares are considerably higher and the ticket inspectors considerably angrier. However, it seemed like my luck was in since as I was pondering my predicament I saw a sign saying, "Balloon Rides - £3.60."

"£3.60" - now where had I heard that before? Hang on, it was the exact numerical equivalent of the "three pounds sixty" that I had in words. Well, I'll be hornswoggled, what luck!

Actually, I've never been hornswoggled, although my friend Kevin was once, and I don't much like the sound of it. In his case he was hornswoggled by accident and it left him with a limp. He tried to make a claim on his house insurance, but unfortunately the man from the insurance company said that he wasn't covered for general wear and tear, hornswoggling and acts of God. They told him he should have watched where he was going.

They always wriggle out of it, these insurance people. Like one time, I had this caravan that was exploded by a lightning strike. The insurance company told me it was an act of God, but I pointed out that my policy had a misprint and that it actually said that I wasn't covered against acts of "cod". I thought I was being really clever, but then their

assessor claimed that the lightning strike had been caused by a big fish. You can't win.

Two Hundred and Forty-One

I followed the sign advertising balloon rides and it led me to another sign advertising balloon rides. So I followed the second sign advertising balloon rides and it led me to a kiosk selling bootleg cassette tapes of recordings by Tina Turner and Steeleye Span. Quite a niche market, I would have thought. Anyway, we had a bit of a discussion and after a good deal of back and forth, we both agreed that he wasn't offering balloon rides and that I had probably taken a wrong turn. We shook hands, I advised him that he might want to branch out and do bootleg tapes of Status Quo and Lindisfarne, and I retraced my steps.

Well, this is a bothersome old tromp and no mistake, backwards and forwards all the blinking time. Anyhow, this time I took a turn down a narrow lane, where I had to squeeze past bins and old crates and barrels full of nastiness, and it plopped me out onto a muddy path. I followed it through a gate, over a wall, up a thing, back down the other side of the thing and then over a humpty back bridge and into a field. In the middle of the field was a big jolly old hot air balloon. Hmm, could this be the place, I thought, scratching my chinny-chin-chin. In front of me was another sign, which said, "Here are the balloon rides." Beneath this was another sign that said, "Where have you been?" And beneath this was one more sign that said, "We've been waiting for you." This was the clincher,

as far as I was concerned, and I concluded that I had once more successfully arrived at my intended destination.

Two Hundred and Forty-Two

The man with the balloon was called Bertie and he had arrived from Belgium several years ago, wafting over on a summer breeze. "I would like to ride in your beautiful balloon," I screamed at him, illustrating my meaning with a series of elaborate and only slightly pornographic hand gestures.

"Why are you shouting and wriggling your fingers at me in a suggestive manner?" he answered in perfect English.

"I am sorry, I thought you were Belgian," I replied.

"Why are you sorry that I'm Belgian," Bertie the Belgian Balloonist replied. "I'm not sorry that I'm Belgian. I know loads of Belgians, and they are not sorry that they are Belgians. What have you got against Belgians? And please stop wriggling your fingers at me, I am getting dizzy."

I thought that we had got off on the wrong foot, so I went out of the field and came back in again wearing a different hat. "Can you take me to London for three pounds and sixty pence?" I asked.

"Probably," he said. "It depends which way the wind is blowing."

"Do you not have a way to steer this thing?" I said.

He looked at me strangely. I looked back at him strangely. We were both looking strange at this point. "Well I've got this string here and if I pull it to the left, that flap at the back goes to the left, and if I pull it to the right, the flap goes right."

"Gosh, that's clever," I said.

"Would be if it worked," said the balloonist. "Ultimately, we just go whichever way the wind is blowing. Still, gives me something to do during the journey."

Well it was this or the man round the corner giving wheelbarrow rides, so I handed over my money.

Two Hundred and Forty-Three

Doing a balloon ride is a right old kerfuffle and no mistake. You don't just hop on and off like a bus or a train or twin-seater space hopper. Oh no. There are all sorts of preparations first. To start with, balloons need hot air to fly so Bertie the Belgian Balloonist has all these saucepans on the go, boiling up all the air.

While this is happening, we have to make sure that we are kitted out for all sorts of weather, because the sky is where all the weather lives. The clouds are full of it. Some are full of rain. Some are full of snowflakes. And some are full of winds light to variable, so we have to wrap up warm and wear woolly wellies and rubber hats, and smear ourselves in grease, for some reason that Bertie didn't fully explain.

Finally, we have a take a deep breath, because there is less air up there. This sounds weirdly odd because you would have thought that the sky is full of air, but really most of it skulks around on the ground like a naughty dog or a thick blanket made of treacle. So we breathe in and hold our noses, and then we're up up and away until our ears go pop.

Two Hundred and Forty-Four

Riding in a hot air balloon is quite an intimate experience. You are crammed into a tiny basket, like strawberries, but there is no cream. Oh no. There isn't even a bathroom, so I asked Bertie the Belgian Balloonist what I should do if I want a widdle. He said that we go over the side, but I should try not to do it too often because this is how we make the balloon go up higher. I asked him how we make it go lower, and he said that we release some air, so I did a little trump to see what would happen. Nothing happened. Normally it is a relief when I do a trump and nothing happens, but in this case I was disappointed. Bertie explained that he meant we let some air out of the balloon and he asked me to please stop trumping, because it was really quite an unpleasant thing to endure in such a small basket.

I apologised and went up onto the sun deck to play quoits, and that's when I discovered a curious thing. When I turned my head in a certain direction, the wind whistling past my ears made it sound like I could hear the sea. When I turned my head the other way, is made a sound

like a field of corn whispering and rustling as it rippled in the breeze. And when I put my head between my knees and clenched my buttocks, I could pick up Radio 3.

Two Hundred and Forty-Five

"Duck ahoy," shouted Bertie the Belgian Balloonist. He was peering through his binoculars and pointing behind us. I squinted but all I could see was a tiny speck in the distance, so Bertie lent me his binocleers so that I could have a better look. Bonocleers are really clever, because if you look through them one way, they make things closer, but if you turn them round and look the other way, they make them further away. They are a bit like a bicycle pump in that respect.

Sorry, now I come to think of it, binockolars are absolutely nothing like a bicycle pump. They don't look the same. They don't do the same job. They don't operate on the same principle. You can't open a can of soup with a bicycle pump, now can you? Fair enough, you can't do that with a binocular either, so that was a bad example. Anyway, I think that a bicycle pump should actually be called a bicycle plump, because it makes things fatter. I just thought of that, clever wasn't it? Suit yourself.

So, I looked through the binoculars and I saw this duck flying after us and it was really close. So close, in fact, that I felt its wings beating against my face, and its razor-sharp claws scratching at my skin. I quickly turn the binoculars around so that it went further away again and couldn't reach me.

"That duck's been following me for years," said Bertie the Belgian Balloonist, a strange, cockeyed expression on his face. "Everywhere I go, everything I do - there it is! It dogs my every step." He climbed up on the edge of the basket, clinging to the ropes, his temples throbbing and the veins bulging on his neck. "Why won't you leave me alone, you vicious swine!" He screamed. "Why must you torture me so!"

I thought he was overreacting just a little bit, but then I had never had to put up with a duck following me around, so what did I know?

Two Hundred and Forty-Six

We're in a balloon and we're being followed by a duck, flap flap flap, and it's gaining on us. "What have you done to offend this duck?" I ask.

"Nothing," replied Bertie the Belgian Balloonist. "At least, as far as I know. But then, I don't know what kind of thing offends ducks. Perhaps it doesn't like my hat."

"But you're not wearing a hat," I said.

"Argghh! Then perhaps it's offended by the fact that I'm not wearing a hat," said Bertie. "Quick, flap your arms. We have to go faster."

"Will flapping my arms make the balloon go faster?" I ask, not unreasonably.

"Never has done before," said Bertie. "But there has to be a first time."

I decided that this was far too stupid, even for me, so it was high time we stopped running and made a fight of it. Sometimes you have to look fear right in its beady little eyes. Like, I used to be afraid of the post box at the corner of our street because I thought there was someone inside it looking out at me. I would always cross the road to avoid it, or put a bag over my head so that it didn't recognise me. Then finally I decided that enough was enough was enough and I borrowed a tractor and drove into it at high speed. It ended up as a mangled wreck, there were letters everywhere and I had finally overcome the red shiny menace.

And so, I collected up some garden implements, a book on crustaceans and half a tub of putty, and we prepared to do battle.

Two Hundred and Forty-Seven

We are going to make a stand and do bloody battle with the duck that is bearing down on Bertie's balloon. I have worked out a very sophisticated plan, which I have explained in detail using diagrams, a series of slides and an intricate scale model representing the balloon, the duck and a big chunk of the sky. It was a very detailed model, and had real working clouds and I was very proud of the effort that I had put into it. Anyway, I won't go into too much detail about the plan, but in summary it involved

Bertie catching the duck with a big net once it was close enough, and me hitting it with a brick.

It was a very good plan, but I knew that we would only get one chance at it. Timing was everything. If we had done it yesterday, we would have been far too early because the duck hadn't been there. However, if we left it till tomorrow it would be far too late, as the duck would have already carried out its deadly mission and would be elsewhere. Probably at home with its feet up. Now was the time. The duck came closer, closer, closer. I fixed my gaze upon it. I saw the red gleam in its eye, the determined scowl on its beak. This would be a battle of raw nerve in which only the most brutal and unforgiving combatant could hope to emerge victorious.

The moment came. "Now!" I shouted. Bertie swung the net and plucked the unsuspecting bird from the air, then I smashed it with the brick. Pow! The duck sparked, fizzled, its tail feathers shot off and a wisp of acrid smoke issued from its bum hole. Now, I hadn't been expecting that.

Two Hundred and Forty-Eight

We have caught the murderous duck that was following us and pummelled it with a brick. But then something weird happened. All these wires and cogs and pulleys spilled out of it, and it slightly caught fire a bit. This was not a real duck, it was some kind of robo-duck. What kind of fiendish villain would create an evil avian robot to carry out his nefarious schemes?

"I know exactly who is responsible," said Bertie the Belgian Balloonist. "It must be my arch-nemesis, Henri the Hungarian Hang Glider. He is a git. He has never forgiven me for an article I wrote in the local paper about how much better balloons are than hang gliders. Also the series of videos that I made rubbishing hang gliders. And also the statue that I had commissioned showing a hang glider exploding in a ball of flame."

"You feel quite strongly about the issue?"

Bertie shrugged. "Not fussed," he said. "But for some reason Henri seems to have acquired the bizarre impression that I have something against hang gliders, and he has taken it personally. Because, as I say, he is a git."

I wasn't so sure that Henri was the one that being so unreasonable here, but when I expressed this view, he reminded me that his nemesis had created a killer robot duck that had been chasing him round the planet for several years, and I saw that perhaps he had a point.

Two Hundred and Forty-Nine

We have disabled a murderous robo-duck that was threatening to do us a serious mischief. Bertie believes that his arch-nemesis, Henri the Hungarian Hang Glider, could not be very far behind. I giggled like a baboon at this. "Ha ha ha," I went, and bubbles came out of my nose. After all, what damage could a bloke in a hand glider do? As far as I remember, a hang glider is just like a grotty

old canvas tent that someone has flattened out and then flung through the air like a paper plane. This Henri bloke would be far too busy hanging on for dear life and wondering when the ground would come up to meet him to pay any attention to us. Then Bertie tapped me on the shoulder and handed me the binoculars.

I could see Henri in the distance, but he was gaining on us fast, and the hang glider was nothing like I imagined it would be. Instead of dirty old canvas it was solid shiny metal and propelled along by a screaming jet engine. There were machine gun pods and missiles slung underneath and Henri himself was glaring at us furiously through the thick glass canopy of the cockpit. I have to say, hang glider technology has come on in leaps and bounds in recent years.

Suddenly a burst of gunfire raked the basket of our balloon. We ducked, but when we looked up we saw ragged holes in the fabric of the balloon. Hot air was escaping and we were losing height fast.

"Quick," said Bertie. "We need to lose some weight. Widdle over the side."

Well, he didn't need to ask twice. In fact, he didn't need to ask at all: I'd wet myself as soon as the bullets started to fly.

Two Hundred and Fifty

All the hot air is escaping from our balloon and we are going down fast. That isn't a metaphor, by the way, I mean it quite literally. It would be clever for me to say this thing as being symbolic of our rapidly deflating prospects of a happy and healthy future, our hopes and dreams escaping into the void as we drift down, down, down to an uncertain fate. But, to be honest, I was far too preoccupied at the time at the prospect of us actually plummeting to our deaths and going splat in a very real and undeniably substantial way for that kind of pretentiousness.

Bertie was quite worried too, by the look of things, and I learnt some very naughty new words in Belgian. "We have to abandon ship," he screamed, as a missile from Henri's Hungarian hang glider whistled overhead and gave him a brand new parting.

"What ship?" I asked.

"I mean the balloon," he replied.

"Well if you mean the balloon, say the balloon," I told him. "It's no good you telling me to abandon a ship when I don't have a ship to abandon. I mean, first thing I've got to do is go get a ship. Where am I going to get a ship from at this time of day, when all the ship shops will be shut? It's a heck of a lot of trouble to go to, especially if I'm just going to abandon it again. And what kind of ship will I need? Do I need a crew? What colour - "

At this point, he slapped me hard across the face and started crying. I didn't say anything - it didn't hurt me

none. Loads of people had slapped me across the face, and by now I was quite used to it. "We need to abandon the balloon," he said. "We have to jump out."

Well, of course, I am a man of action, so I saluted and leaped out of the balloon. And as I was plummeting groundward, the wind whistling past my ears, I heard him call out, "Hang on, I haven't given you your parachute yet."

Two Hundred and Fifty-One

I have just jumped out of a balloon without a parachute. I'm always forgetting stuff like that. What am I like, eh? Like, the other day, I went out to the dog shop. The dog shop is where they sell dogs and also accessories for dogs, like collars and bones and kennels. I don't have a dog, and I am not thinking of getting one, but I went to the dog shop because the tortoise shop is closed on Wednesdays. Anyhow, before I went, I checked the weather map and there were all isobars over it, which meant that it was going to rain. That was when I decided that the last thing I should do before leaving the house would be to forget my umbrella. And so, the last thing I did before leaving the house was to forget my umbrella. Tut!

Of course, forgetting an umbrella when you are going to the dog shop is not nearly as bad as forgetting a parachute when you are jumping out of a balloon. Probably the worst thing that can happen when you forget an umbrella is that you get mucky dribbles in your ear and your knees get damp. Forgetting a parachute is likely to result in splatification, which I'm told is much, much worsier.

I looked up at the rapidly receding balloon. Hmm, there was no way I could turn and go back. Besides, as I watched, it was riddled by bullets again. There was an almighty trump as more air escaped from it and it shot across the sky and over the horizon.

I looked down at the rapidly approaching ground. Gosh, I wished *it* would do a trump and shoot off, but no - it was staying exactly where it was, and I wasn't half going to get a belt when it hit me. What I needed now was a plan.

Two Hundred and Fifty-Two

So, here is my problem: I am falling out of a balloon and right now it would be really useful if I could fly, but I can't. This is not something I have only just discovered. Oh no, I have known it for a long long time. Ever since school when I threw myself off the top of the chemistry lab and landed on the roof of Mr Benson's Ford Capri. Happy days.

Anyhow, my current predicament has reminded me of just how deficient I am in the area of personal aeronautics and unless I can find a Ford Capri to land on, I think I'm going to end up much, much wider than I am tall when I finally reach the ground. If only there were something I could hang on to, but the sky is largely devoid of stuff that you can get a firm grip on. I tried reaching out to a few clouds, but my fingers just slipped through them. I met several birds on the way down, and we exchanged a few polite greetings, but I thought it would be improper for me to start grabbing at them without being formally introduced. I was passed by a plane at one point, but they wouldn't let

me onboard without my passport, which I had foolishly left on top of a wardrobe in Cairo in 1987.

Hang on a minute! I suddenly realised that I was a member of the AA - the breakdown service people, not the ones who like a bit of a drink, although I wouldn't have said no to half a pint of shandy at that moment. I whipped out my phone and gave them a call.

Two Hundred and Fifty-Three

I have decided to call the AA to come and rescue me because I have fallen out of a balloon and am plummeting to the earth. They are taking a heck of a long time to answer the phone, and I'm starting to get uncomfortably close to the ground. Finally, a chap answered.

"Help!" I shouted.

"Do you require assistance?" said the nice man.

"Not half!" I shouted again.

"Can you give me your location, sir?"

I squinted down, trying to find out where I was. "Errr, looks like the M11," I replied, still shouting.

"I see, sir," said the nice man. "And whereabouts on the M11 are you?"

"About fifteen thousand feet above it," I answered. "Give or take a few inches."

I was pleased to note that the nice AA man was completely unruffled by this intelligence. Clearly, I was dealing with a true professional. "Very well sir. Please remain with your vehicle and we will have someone out to you as soon as possible."

"Ah," I replied. "I'm afraid I have become separated from my vehicle, which is why I'm currently in need of your assistance. I left the hot air balloon I was travelling in some little time ago and am now travelling to the ground 'on foot', so to speak."

"I see sir," said the AA man, whose unflappability was now starting to become annoying. "So, you are currently falling at the moment?"

"The word 'hurtling' might be more accurate."

"I will ensure that our recovery operative is equipped with a large net," said the AA man. "Although I should warn you we are currently experiencing a high demand. We are attending to a man who has fallen from a biplane over Hastings, a hen party that jumped out of a zeppelin in Wiltshire and we are attempting to locate a gentleman who was fired from a cannon somewhere near Peterborough. Someone should be with you in forty minutes, so if you could remain airborne till then we'll be able to get you down safe."

He put the phone down, and I figured that it was going to be tight.

Two Hundred and Fifty-Four

Now, what to do when you are falling from a hot air balloon, waiting for someone from the AA to come and catch you in a big net? I could be hanging around up here for a while, so I may as well put the time to good use. I've always wanted to take up the trombone. Not that I care that much about playing it, but trombones are cool. It would be cool to turn up to places with my trombone slung across my shoulder. People would say to me, "Hey guy, pretty cool trombone you're rocking there." And I would say, "What, this old thing? Yup, guess it's pretty cool." Or they would say, "Hey guy, what you doing round these parts?" And I'd say, "Y'know, just kicking back, chilling, with my trombone." Oh yeah, trombones are really cool.

Difficult instrument to master when you're plummeting to the ground, though. You've got to get your breathing right, and with all that wind whipping past you, it sort of complicates the matter.

I could take up knitting, instead. That must be fairly easy to get the hang of. After all, it's just tying knots when you think about it, isn't it? I can tie knots, it's simple. I have to tie knots in my shoelaces every day, and I get it right nearly every time. Knitting a sweater must be like tying lots of shoes together. Easy.

Oops, no time now though. Here comes the ground.

Two Hundred and Fifty-Five

Here's the news: I have fallen from a balloon and it seems that I have reached the ground before the AA man arrived to catch me in a big net. I'm going to cancel my membership. OK then, better brace myself.

I closed my eyes, clenched my jaw, girded my loins - whatever that means - and prepared for the worst. That's when it got confusing, because I appeared to have experienced a reversal - both of fortune and direction. I got the distinct impression that I was heading upwards again, and when I opened my eyes, I saw that I had had the great good fortune to have hit a trampoline. I knew it would be a temporary respite, however. We had done gravity at school in Mrs Montgolfier's class, and I knew that sooner or later it would reassert its grip. Sure enough, I felt myself heading down again, landing in a lorry full of space hoppers. Up I went again. Down I came again, this time into the middle of a rubber band factory. Up, up, up again, and so on, and so on. This really was the way to travel. I was covering quite some distance, and the traffic didn't bother me at all.

It had to end eventually, of course. For me, it ended when I smashed through the windscreen of a big, shiny and very expensive car. I sat there in the passenger seat, covered in scratches and broken glass, and casually asked the driver what he thought about Leeds United's chances for the Premiership this season. He didn't seem to be in the mood for conversation.

Two Hundred and Fifty-Six

I had had the great good fortune to crash through the windscreen of a car belonging to a doctor. I had had the great misfortune to crash through the windscreen of a car belonging to the *wrong* doctor. It was the best of times, it was the worse of times. Hey ho.

"It's a sad statistic that road accidents are a major cause of serious life-threatening injuries," the doctor man said, with a face like thunder. "The available data also suggests that those injuries are often up to two hundred percent worse when the victim crashes through the windscreen of *my* car.

"Good evening," the man continued. "My name is Doctor Adolphous Bongo, and please don't allow yourself to mistakenly infer from my stated occupation that you will be in way able to benefit from my professional services. I am occasionally obliged to provide medical assistance to my registered patients, as and when I am absolutely unable to avoid it. I do not, as a general rule, tend to the needs of random strangers who fall out of the sky and cause me considerable inconvenience and financial hardship by damaging my Bentley. I have only just had this car valeted. Now, get out before I start to dissect you."

I would have quite liked to have sat there for a little while longer, just to get my breath back, you understand. Falling out of the sky does take it out of you a little, so if you're considering it, I would strongly advise you to equip yourself with a cushion and some knee pads. However, Doctor Bongo had made it clear that my presence would

not be tolerated and when he started rummaging around in the glovebox for his scalpel, I decided that to leave would be a far, far better thing than I had ever done.

Two Hundred and Fifty-Seven

There was at that time in London a pallor about its streets, its inns and courtyards. The city was a pale shadow of its former self, a wraith that trudged its weary way along its allotted course in much the same manner as it had in centuries past, but without vigour, without the spark of its former life. The lords and the dignitaries in their palaces and high chambers knew nothing of this diseased spirit, but its touch was felt keenly amongst the lower orders as they scratched a living amongst the dirt and the filth. For these unfortunates it was an epoch of despair, an age of smoke and pestilence. It was, if you'll pardon the expression, a lot of grotty nonsense.

I had arrived in the city only recently, having fallen from a hot air balloon onto the carriage of a most disagreeable physician. I took refreshment at a coaching inn and bathed my cuts and bruises as best as I was able, then set out to find the offices of , J.J. Summonsby and S. Screwem Esq., solicitors acting on behalf of an errant sandwich of my acquaintance. I stopped to ask a poor crossing sweeper for directions.

"Why yes sir," said the boy. "I know it, it is not so wery far from here. I would wery much like to take you there in person, but I fear my wicious guardian would do me violence if I was to leave the wicinity. I am but a poor

wictim with varicose veins, vertigo and venereal disease."

"What?"

"It's over there, mister," he said.

I gave him a penny, ruffled his hair then pushed him under a horse. I then crossed the street and went into a darkened square, where a rancid old harridan of some twenty-two summers but considerably more winters scrubbed away at her linen in a filthy washtub. On the northerly side of the courtyard was a flight of rotten and mildewed steps. I took this up to a second-floor office where a single smoky candle bobbed and fluttered in the slight breeze that issued in through a grimy, half-open window. Inside, I introduced myself to the clerk and told him I had business with Messrs Summonsby and/or Screwem. He was a surly fellow, red of face, who appeared to have dedicated much of his life to the consumption of various pies and pastries, with some evident success judging by the difficulty with which he levered himself out from behind his desk and squeezed through the inner door to consult with his employers. He emerged moments later and invited me to enter. I thanked him and gave him a friendly smack in the mouth before I went in. It doesn't do to get too familiar with these underlings.

Two Hundred and Fifty-Eight

Messrs Summonsby and Screwem could have been twins. Both were pale, crumpled old men with faces like pickled

walnuts and stray tufts of wispy hair sprouting from their otherwise bald heads like clumps of dry grass bursting through the cracked flagstones of a badly laid patio.

Screwem sat at a big mahogany desk, bent intently over a large sheet of parchment, scratching at it with a quill. He did not appear to possess any ink, and so whatever marks he made on the sheet would forever remain a mystery, but either no one had told him, or he just didn't care and so he carried on scribbling away regardless.

Summonsby, on the other hand, was on his feet, hands behind his back, pacing backwards and forwards in front of a roaring fireplace, occasionally speeding up as he passed it to prevent his bottom catching fire. "Ah my dear sir, welcome, welcome!" he said and stretched out a hand to shake mine. I was perturbed to see he was wearing boxing gloves and was concerned that he might be a bit fighty. He saw my obvious discomfort and attempted to reassure me. "My doctor tells me that I have a rare neurological condition that causes me to punch people in the mouth," he explained.

"Rare neurological condition," muttered Screwem, without looking up.

"Please don't concern yourself, sir," Summonsby continued. "It only happens in response to certain triggers, which I do my utmost to avoid."

"Avoid. Avoid. Avoid," muttered Screwem.

"Certain aromas, particular words and phrases, that sort of thing," said Summonsby.

"Sort of thing," muttered Screwem.

"Excessive humidity," Summonsby continued, "certain shades and colours, unusual high-pitched noises, exposure to sunlight, proximity to particular fabrics, apple blossom, the hopeful smile on the face of an innocent child, Wednesdays, the concept of schadenfreude and that sort of thing."

"Oh well, let's hope I don't inadvertently say something to trigger this extraordinary reflex," I said breezily, and he smacked me in the mouth.

Two Hundred and Fifty-Nine

I have paid a visit to the lawyers acting for my sandwich and one of them has just punched me out. Apparently this was due to some sort of autonomous reaction caused by a rare neurological condition, but, you know - lawyers. I can't be one hundred percent sure he didn't do it deliberately.

I regained consciousness lying on my back with Mr Summonsby leaning over me. He helped me to my feet. "My dear sir," he said. "I am most terribly sorry."

"I don't know what happened. All I said was that I hoped I didn't inadvertently say something to trigger your extraordinary reflex," I said, rubbing my jaw, and Summonsby hit me again.

This time, when I woke up, I kept my mouth shut. Summonsby helped me to a chair and gave me a glass of

creosote, which he assured me was very good for me, being an extremely good preservative, and that all lawyers drank it.

"Now sir, pray tell us what brings you here?" Summonsby asked. "How may we assist you?"

"Assist you! Assist you!" chuckled Mr Screwem, still scribbling away uselessly at his blank parchment.

"Bless you," I said, warily watching Summonsby's hands. I then explained that I had received a letter from them regarding the case being brought against me by my missing sandwich.

"Ah! You wish to come to terms?" said Summonsby.

"To terms!" declared Mr Screwem, and he broke off from his scribbling to raise a glass of creosote as a toast.

"No," I replied.

Summonsby's face fell and his hands started to get twitchy. Screwem, meanwhile, dashed his empty glass on the floor at my feet and let out a loud raspberry.

"This is most regrettable," Summonsby said. "I think we should continue this conversation in the intimidatorium."

Two Hundred and Sixty

Mr Summonsby has decided that the remainder of our conversation should take place in the 'intimidatorium'.

This, apparently, is a room that all lawyers use to coerce and belittle respondents and hostile witnesses. In fact, they also use them for their own clients, staff, tradesmen, creditors and people who happen to be passing in the street.

It's hard to say what I first noticed about the room first: the long oak table with the chair at each end, the huge blade that swung slowly back and forth above it, the stone flagged floor and the gutters that ran with blood down each side. These were all very scary, but it was when I noticed that the carpet hadn't been tacked down properly near the door that I began to get really nervous. Also, I'm not sure they were using the right kind of fire extinguisher.

Summonsby sat me down in front of a large bookcase stacked precariously with big heavy legal volumes that threatened to topple on me at any moment. This, he explained, was "the full weight of the law", a metaphor made real, under which I could easily and quite literally be crushed. The wall opposite me was decorated by row upon row of human noses, each mounted on its own tiny plaque.

"This is my collection of criminal noses," said Summonsby. "I have made a study of them. Each of them is from a convicted criminal. You can tell a great deal from a nose, you know."

"Did you pick them yourself?" I asked. I was doing a joke, you understand.

Summonsby ignored me. "This one, for example," he said, thrusting his index finger up the left nostril of the nose in

question, "is from a burglar called Bob Briggs, currently serving a ten year sentence in Newgate."

"You mean that this Bob Briggs person currently has no nose?" I asked. "How does he smell?"

Summonsby raised an eyebrow and frowned, which is an odd thing to see since it pulled his face in two different directions at once. "I know what you want me to say, and I must inform you that I am disinclined to take part in these music hall shenanigans. This is a serious business. My study of this man's nose means that if he ever absconds, the police will be able to call on my services to help identify him."

"I would think he'd be quite easy to spot," I replied, laughing. "He'd be the one with the big hole in his face." At this, Summonsby punched me again, although this time I'm not so sure that it wasn't deliberate.

Two Hundred and Sixty-One

I woke up for a third time. These lawyers can't half pack one hell of a wallop. Screwem was sitting cross-legged on the table top, giggling to himself, with the swinging blade passing within inches of his head. His partner, Summonsby, was examining the boxing glove with which he'd just belted me. "We can claim the VAT back on these, you know - boxing gloves are recognised as a legitimate expense for our profession," he said. "All the same, this one is wearing a little thin and if I have to hit you again, I may just have to invoice you for a new one."

I looked at him out of the corner of my swollen and watering eye. "Is that a threat?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Obviously."

"Good. Well, at least I know where I stand," I replied.

"But I have to tell you that these tactics will not work. You should know that when I was four years old, my uncle repeatedly backed over my head in a Volkswagen Passat. We were that kind of family, you understand. Ever since that time, I have been unable to feel any pain south of a line drawn between the Bristol Channel and King's Lynn."

"King's Lynn," Screwem repeated, then blew a raspberry

"So, do as you will," I continued defiantly. "I will not be induced to settle this matter out of court. I shall fight this gross injustice with every bone in my body, even the little tiddly ones in my ears. What's more, I demand that you give me the current address of my sandwich."

"No can do," said Summonsby. "Legal reasons." I asked him to explain what those reasons were, and he said that that would constitute a professional service and he would have to charge me. Reluctantly, I agreed to pay him. "I am prevented from supplying my client's address because of the Not Giving Out the Address of Disputed Foodstuffs Regulations 1977," he said. "Right, that will be £75 plus expenses. Come on Mr Screwem, let us prepare this gentleman's bill."

Screwem stood up just as the blade swung down, neatly slicing off his ear. With a muttered cry of "Oh, not again,"

Summonsby picked it up for him and helped him out of the room.

Two Hundred and Sixty-Two

So I've been left in this room alone with this freaky pendulum chopper thing, while two lawyers go out to prepare an invoice for me, which I am totally not going to pay, by the way. There is a big creaky filing cabinet in the room, oh yes, and I am absolutely going to look through it and see if I can find the address of my missing sandwich. I open the top drawer, because I am very methodical and it makes sense to start at the top. The top drawer is full of old takeaway menus, expired money-off vouchers and dead batteries. I've got a drawer like that at home - these lawyers aren't all that different from real human beings, are they?

I open the second drawer next. This contains a lot of box files, all labelled "evidence". Box file number one contains some ladies' underwear, a bronze life-saving certificate and a tub of margarine. I think we all know what that is about. Box file number two contains a sawn-off cucumber and a second-class rail ticket to Fishguard. Hello. Box number three contains the concept of doubt. The concept of doubt is lighter than air, as I'm sure you know, so I have to slam the lid closed quickly to stop it floating away. Box number four contains box number five. Box number five contains box number six. Box number six contains box number four. Arghh, recursive occlusion! I slam the drawer shut quickly to stop my brains getting sucked inside.

The third drawer is full of Swarfega, which is pretty much what you'd expect.

At this point I hear a noise behind me and turn to see a man tunnelling up through the floor.

Two Hundred and Sixty-Three

I recognised the man who was tunnelling up through the floor immediately. "It's Bob Briggs," I cried. "The bodacious burglar of Bermondsey!" He asked me how I recognised him. Was it, he asked, the devilishly handsome good looks? Was it the fiendish and ingenious way he had gained access to this room? Was it, perhaps, the striped jersey and the bag marked "swag" casually slung over his shoulder? I told him that the giveaway was the big gaping hole in the middle of his face where his nose used to be. I could see he was really quite self-conscious about this, so I pointed to the wall and told him pick a nose. If you remember from a previous episode, this was the wall displaying all the noses that had been confiscated from criminals. You will also remember that I had done the "pick a nose" gag before, but this time it was even funnier, so that was OK.

Bob managed to locate his own nose, plus one or two others that he thought would be useful for disguises. He then told me that he had tunnelled out of prison and was hoping to come up in the vault at Tiffany's, but he had hit an angry badger and had to divert. He then asked me if there was anything here worth nicking.

"Nicking?" I asked.

"Yeah mate, that's kind of my thing," he replied. "I'm a burglar. I do burglaring. It's not really what I'd call a job, it's more a vocation. A calling, if you like. So, where are the sparklies?"

"No sparklies," I said. "This is a lawyers' office. There might be a few paperclips."

"Gold paperclips?"

"Probably not," I said. "Tell you what: you could steal me. You'd be doing me a favour, really."

Bob rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Fair enough," he said at length. "Get in the sack."

Two Hundred and Sixty-Four

It's amazing what you can find in a burglar man's swag bag. I was hitching a ride in the sack belonging to Bob Briggs, the Bermondsey Burglar, and in the short time that he had been at liberty since escaping from prison, he had stolen approximately seventeen ounces of assorted jewellery, half a dozen antique candelabras, various works of renaissance portraiture, a motorbike, a pontoon bridge, four tons of coarse gravel, three cases of Marmite and a flamingo. A real actual flamingo. There was also a chap in there called Martin Fishcake, to whom I introduced myself, as is the correct thing to do in these situations. I was brought up proper, see.

"Are you hitching a ride as well?" I asked after we had exchanged names, contact details and certain items of clothing. "Or were you stolen?"

"Neither," he said. "I've bought the place. I moved in last Tuesday, although I don't think the estate agent was being entirely straight with me on certain points."

I am sure that I have mentioned this before, but estate agents are very, very, very, very, very boring people. They don't know nothing about nothing, really. The only things they know how to do is to unlock doors and point at rooms, saying that's the kitchen, that's the bathroom, this space would make quite a cosy third bedroom, and that sort of thing. In fact, that last bit - pointing at rooms - they don't really need to do anyway, 'cos most people who aren't totally stupid would easily recognise what the rooms are without their help. Even I know what a bathroom looks like.

"It's a bit cramped, but I'm thinking of knocking through here and building an extension," said Martin Fishcake. "Sorry, I'd offer you a cup of coffee, but I haven't unpacked the kettle yet. Anyway, it's a nice day, let's go out into the garden."

Two Hundred and Sixty-Five

Right, this is going to sound a bit strange, but I was hitching a ride in a burglar's swag bag and I met a man living in there called Martin Fishcake and we have gone out into his garden, through a set of patio doors in the side

of the sack. I know, I'm as bewildered as you, and I was actually there. I try not to think about things like that too much because it makes my brains fizz up, so what I do is I close my eyes really tight and try to visualise something else - like a squirrel, or a block of cheese, or a set of occasional tables or something. I do this until my toes stop tingling and/or the screaming stops, and I find that this has a calming influence.

On this occasion I was thinking about lawnmowers - big ones, small ones, some as big as your head - when Martin Fishcake tapped me on the shoulder and pointed out the ornamental rockery that he had built. I said it was very good, and that I also liked his shed and the raised flowerbed, but that I really had to go because I was allergic to soil. I went out through the back gate and found myself in the street, where a newspaper vendor was shouting something about Sir Horrace Womble's latest expedition to the North Pole. I bought a paper, squinted at the photograph of Sir Horrace posing in his arctic gear and was stunned to see that this wasn't Sir Horrace Womble at all, but rather my missing sandwich in an anorak.

Two Hundred and Sixty-Six

So, this is what I have discovered, thanks to the gutter press: my sandwich is masquerading as an explorer called Sir Horrace Womble, who is planning an expedition to either the North Pole or the Arctic, whichever is the nearer, to track down the legendary Arctic land trout. The article says he is doing this in the interests of furthering

scientific research, but I feel that there must be some ulterior motive. Anyway, it says that he is sailing from Grimsby tomorrow morning on the good ship Enis. I need to get there before she sails, and the fastest way I know how to get there is to disguise myself as a pizza and order myself to be delivered to the docks.

I chose to pass myself off as an extra-large Hawaiian special, so I flattened myself down, smothered myself in pineapple and slipped myself into a box. Before very long, I had been scooped up, stuffed into a bag and was on the back of a motorbike, weaving its way through the traffic and annoying everybody else on the road. Let's hope I get there before I go cold.

Two Hundred and Sixty-Seven

The first inkling I got that my plan to deliver myself to Grimsby disguised as a pizza had gone agley was when, upon arriving at our destination, I failed to detect the strong aroma of fish. Grimsby is one of the top five fishiest places I have ever been - I have compiled a chart, you must remind me to show it to you some time. This place, however, smelt of horse poo, furniture polish and burning rubber. Could we be in Stoke?

I didn't dare risk peeping out of my box. I flattened myself down as the delivery guy walked up the path to a house and rang the bell.

"Pizza," said the delivery guy when the door was opened. He was refreshingly succinct.

"I didn't order a pizza," said a man's voice. "Sharon! Sharon! Sharon, did you order a pizza? Oy Sharon, did you order a pizza?"

In the distance, I heard Sharon saying that she didn't order a blinking pizza. She might have used some different words.

"Didn't order no pizza, did I?" said the man. "What kind of pizza is it?"

"Dunno," said the delivery guy. "It's just a pizza, innit."

Anyhow, I won't trouble you with any more of this sparkling repartee. Suffice it to say that after several more minutes of this sizzling intellectual banter, the man finally took delivery of his unexpected pizza. Moments later, he opened the box to find me staring up at him, covered in pineapple. Awkward.

Two Hundred and Sixty-Eight

When the man opened the pizza box and saw me looking up at him, he looked startled, confused and angry. But above all else - and this is the thing that concerned me the most - he looked hungry. He was a big fat man with greasy food stains all down his vest and the debris of several former meals still lodged in his beard. I don't know if he was a professional gourmand, but there were certainly indications that he vociferously pursued the consumption of pies, pastries and puddings in an amateur capacity. And pizzas, I shouldn't wonder.

"I am not a pizza," I said, feeling that it was best that I make this clear at the earliest opportunity.

"Sharon!" he called over his shoulder. "Sharon! Sharon! This pizza is talking to me."

"That's nice," this mysterious Sharon person called back from some distant part of the house.

"Sharon! I don't like this. Why would a pizza be talking to me?"

"Perhaps it's just trying to be friendly," Sharon shouted back. "You see, this is why you find it so difficult to make new friends. You mistrust everyone's motives."

"But pizzas shouldn't talk, should they? Why is this pizza talking to me? Sharon! Sharon! Why is this pizza talking to me?"

"Well, what's it saying?" Sharon called back.

"It's saying that it's not a pizza," the fat man said. "But clearly, it is a pizza. It's in a pizza box and its face is covered in ham and pineapple. Sharon! Sharon! Sharon!"

Sharon entered the room at this point and leaned over to look at me. She had bright pink hair, a permanent frown and she smelt of dog food and pipe smoke. "Well, perhaps it identifies as a burger or something. You know, you should be more accepting of other people's life choices. Be a little more open minded. The world is full of freaks, you know. Not everyone is normal, like us."

Two Hundred and Sixty-Nine

One can only disguise oneself as a pizza for so long before accidents happen. I was very likely to get eaten, plus I was finding it difficult to stay flat - I can't suck my tummy in for that long. I leapt out of my box, scraped the pineapple from my face, shook the cheese from my elbows and pulled a gherkin out of my ear. Gosh, that was a relief.

"Hello pizza," said the fat man.

"I am not a pizza," I said. "I am a free man."

"Whatever you say, pizza," said the fat man.

"I am looking for my sandwich," I said. "Is this Grimsby?"

"You're a pizza and you're looking for a sandwich," the fat man said, shaking his head so fiercely that his jowls shook and took out a nearby table lamp. "This is all new to me. I never knew food formed alliances when we're not looking. Is this what happens in my fridge when I close the door and the light goes out?"

At this point Sharon, his grotty wife, decided to involve herself in proceedings. "I think it might be possessed," she said.

"Of course it's possessed," said the fat man. "I possess it."

"I think someone else possessed it first."

The fat man was clearly not happy about this. The idea that his pizza might be second hand did not amuse him at all and he suggested we have a séance to exorcise this

naughty pizza-possessing spirit. So Sharon put out the lights, lit a candle and turned off the telly, and we all sat round in a circle and joined hands.

Two Hundred and Seventy

This fat man and his grotty wife think that I am a pizza - my own fault really, since I am actually a master of disguise. Pizza is my speciality, although I also do an extremely convincing kebab. They have decided to have a séance to exorcise me and so we have joined hands. The fact that I actually have hands was confusing to them at first, but it hasn't totally rid them of the notion that I am essentially pizzoid.

I know all about séances because I read about it in a magazine called *Spooky Doings*, which is full of weird supernatural jiggery-pokery, like two-headed space aliens, and government mind control and ancient ley lines and stuff. It is a dead good magazine, and all the stuff in it must be true because they have drawings. That proves it, right? How could anyone in their right mind actually draw a UFO if they hadn't seen one? The best bit is at the back where they have all these adverts for telepathic brain machines and electromatic bracelets and stuff. I wanted to buy some healing crystals, which are very good because they tune into to your aura and reinvigorate your energy centres. Unfortunately they were very expensive, so I bought a bag of magic gravel instead. It's been sitting outside, propped up against the shed for about eighteen months now, but it hasn't done anything. Last June I

thought I saw it move, but I think it might just have been a trick of the light. I'm saving up to buy a haunted brick next.

Two Hundred and Seventy-One

So, we are doing this séance because a fat man and his grotty missus think that I am a haunted pizza. It didn't make much sense to me either, but at present I am a guest in their home and the polite thing to do is to go along with it. Jolly good. So, we all hold hands and get ready for the kickoff. I hope there won't be any ectoplasm, 'cos I really hates that stuff.

"Ooooooooooooooh," says the fat man.

"Ooooooooooooooooooh," says Sharon, his wife.

"Oooooooooohhhh-woooooooooh-oooooooooh," I add.

"Is there anybody there?" asks the fat man.

"Yes," I reply, helpfully.

"Who are you?" says the fat man.

Well, I don't know why I said it, really, but you know how these things are. Someone asks you a question and for no reason at all you just blurt out the first thing that comes into your head. So I told them that I was my Aunt Margaret.

"Ooooooh, and do you have any news for us, Margaret?" the fat man asked.

"Oooooooh, yes," I said. "Gladys Puncture who works down at the fish and chip shop is having new patio windows fitted, though where she's found the money from, I'll never know. Well, there's no money in chips, is there? And our Susan has taken up with the lad from the aquarium, but if you ask me, it's not going to last. You can't have any respect for someone who goes to work every morning in a snorkel and flippers. Anyway, how've you been keeping?"

"Oooooooh, I'm asking the questions," said the fat man.

"Oooooooh, like that is it?" I said. "Well, if that's your attitude, I'll be on my way. I've got better things to do than hang around here all day, being all supernatural."

And then I left, before people started levitating and it got embarrassing.

Two Hundred and Seventy-Two

The first thing I decided to do after I left the fat man's house and stepped out into the street was to find out where I was. This was a mistake. The first thing that I *should* have done was look to see if there was any traffic coming, since then I wouldn't have ended up plastered to the windscreen of an express coach, with an angry driver shouting at me to get out of his field of vision.

It's very easy in these situations to apportion blame to one party or the other, but it really doesn't help. The fact is that we were both partly to blame: me for not watching where I was going, and him for bombing through a residential area at fifty miles an hour like an absolute maniac. Anyway, I tried to explain to him as best I could, through the power of mime and terrified facial expressions, that I really didn't want to let go of the front of his coach while he appeared to be travelling at a velocity that felt quite close to the speed of sound, for fear of what it might do to my bottom when I skidded across the tarmac. He, meanwhile, made it quite clear to me that he wanted me gone, through the medium of filthy hand gestures and repeated use of the windscreen wipers.

And so this impasse lasted for some little while, until I finally got sick of all this grotty nonsense and decided to do something sexy and dynamic. Using my tongue to maintain suction against the glass, I gradually inched across until I got a grip on the wing mirror. I then pushed away with my feet, swung around, hit the door control and shot inside the coach, rolling as I fell, finally springing to my feet like an Olympic gymnast. You should have seen me, I was fantastic.

"Why didn't you slow down?" I asked the driver. "Is there a bomb on the bus?"

"Is there heck as like!" said the driver. "I've got to get these people to Whitby by 11 o'clock and I'm already running late."

Two Hundred and Seventy-Three

I have, by chance, found myself on a coach speeding to Whitby. Oh, goodo! I think Whitby might be near Grimsby, which is where I want to go. Certainly on the same planet, anyway; possibly even in the same hemisphere. Things are looking up.

The coach is quite packed. Apparently, this is the annual outing of the Batley and District Amateur Tiddlywinks Society. There is certainly a lot of tiddling and winking going on as I find a seat. Most of the people here appear to be quite ancient, if the smell is anything to go by, but the person I am sitting next to must still be at school - late twenties, I'd say. I don't know what age kids leave school these days, I think it must have changed since my day. I certainly remember being there a helluva long time.

The young man told me that he was called Jarvis Klingon and once I had satisfied myself that he wasn't going to bite me, I shook his hand. "What brings you here?" I asked.

"This coach," he replied.

"Good answer," I said. "I came via the wing mirror."

"I know," said Jarvis. "I saw you arrive. It was very impressive."

"It plays havoc with your knees," I admitted. "So, are you a widdler or a tinker?"

"I am this year's Junior Winker Champion (Second Class) he explained, "but one day I hope to be a Grand Master of

the High Order of the Winks like my Uncle Jack was, god rest his soul."

I raised an eyebrow at this, wondering what had become of his Uncle Jack. This eyebrow-raising lark is, of course, an expression of curiosity and a signal to the other party that they should elaborate. Jarvis, however, was clearly a novice when it came to non-verbal communication and failed to understand my meaning. I therefore raised a second eyebrow, surely leaving him in no doubt. It really hurt my forehead, but still the stubborn young man didn't explain. Having now run out of eyebrows, I just asked him outright. To be fair, I ought to have done this in the first place.

"Ah well, it's a long and terrible tale," he said.

"Oh, don't bother then," I said.

Two Hundred and Seventy-Four

"It was a dark and stormy night."

"What was?" I asked.

"The night that my Uncle Jack met his grisly fate," said Jarvis Klingon. I had thought that I'd told Jarvis that I wasn't interested in hearing about how his uncle, the Grand Master Tiddlywinker, shuffled off this mortal coil. Clearly he was going to tell me anyway, and since I had nothing better to do but sit here on this coach until it arrived in Whitby, I settled down to listen.

"Oh yes," said Jarvis, "it was a dark and stormy night, with the possibility of hail moving in from the north, but likely to clear by morning, with the prospect of sunny spells later in the afternoon. I can give you the pollen count as well, if you like?"

"I don't like," I said.

"Fair enough," said Jarvis. "Well on this dark and stormy night, Uncle Jack was returning from the semi-final of the North-east England Premier League Tiddlywinks Championships, and things had really not been going well. On several occasions his hopes had been dashed by an opposing player's crud, and he'd scrounged several important shots. On top of that, he'd lost his best squidger down the back of the sofa, and we all know how bad that can be, don't we?"

"Nope."

"So, the long and short of it was that he'd crashed out of the competition and he was feeling dejected and miserable as he trudged his way home along a lonely country road. All of a sudden, he came to a crossroads and - "

"Hang on," I interrupted him. "Are you about to tell me he made a deal with the devil - sold his soul in return for the chance to become a champion widdle-tinker?"

"No," said Jarvis defensively.

"Go on then, what happened at this crossroads?"

"Well," Jarvis continued, getting back into the swing of his tale. "A mighty wind sprang up, and at its centre was a

fiery red light, and out of this stepped the d... out of this stepped... erm... "

"The devil!" I cried. "I knew it!"

"No, I wasn't going to say devil, actually," said Jarvis. "I was going to say... I was going to say donkey. Yes, it was a donkey. With fiery breath, and horns, and a trident."

"Same thing happened to my Auntie June," I said.

"Now, you're just being silly," Jarvis said, and lapsed into a sulk.

Two Hundred and Seventy-Five

Jarvis was boring so I went and sat next to some old feller instead. He was telling me how he used to be a long distance tiddlywinker and was the first to wink his tiddle all the way from Land's End to John O'Groats. These days, people like him would be put on a register.

I was really, really, really, really, really bored, and I was just about getting to the stage when I was wondering whether it would be possible to eat my own lips, when the coach arrived in Whitby. Whitby is really strange. It is full of people who think they are vampires and no matter which way you go, it's always uphill. The first thing I did when I arrived was to go to the tourist information office and ask them how to get out of the place. They said that if they knew that, they would have left years ago. Very funny. When they had finished titting about, they finally

told me that I could either catch the train or wait for the six o'clock wheelbarrow service.

Well, the train was not an option for me, since most rail operators have now put up warning posters with my face on them. Wheelbarrow it was, then. Seeing as I had time to kill, I went down to the jetty and skimmed stones at ships on the horizon. I sank three fishing boats and an oil tanker - not a bad tally for me. Then I went and laughed at some seagulls for a bit, before I was moved on by the police. Finally, six o'clock approached, so I changed into my wellies, put on my flying helmet and prepared for my wheelbarrow ride.

Two Hundred and Seventy-Six

Not many places still run a regular wheelbarrow service. However, the wheelbarrow from Whitby to Grimsby had been running for nearly eighty years and was fairly reliable. Wheelbarrow travel is not for everyone. It's cramped, there's no buffet car and you have to cling onto the sides really tight, especially when you go over potholes. Modern wheelbarrows can travel at speeds of up to eight miles an hour, which doesn't sound like a lot, but when you're being pushed through busy traffic by some delinquent underpaid young wheelbarrow operator, who doesn't much care whether he tips you under the next oncoming bus, then it can be pretty hairy. I soiled myself twice, and soiled someone else three times, but apart from wiping out a vicar on a pedestrian crossing, the journey was uneventful.

We stopped in Hull to take on more passengers and stock up on custard creams and orangeade, but otherwise the journey was uninterrupted. Of course, at one time there were wheelbarrow services all over the country. It was the only way to travel in the early part of the twentieth century and no gentleman would be without his handy Bradshaw's Wheelbarrow Guide. I would like to make a telly programme in which I travel the country along old wheelbarrow routes, armed only with my trusty Bradshaw's Guide and wearing a pair of outrageously colourful trousers. But no one else would like me to make a telly programme like that, so I guess it will never happen.

Two Hundred and Seventy-Seven

Ah, Grimsby, the jewel of the British Isles. I thrill at the sight of your majestic pleasure palaces that nestle amongst the towering snow-capped peaks, where mighty condors swoop, sweep and swarp as they chase the wind through hidden valleys and rock-strewn ravines. I tremble at the thunderous crashing of the monumental waterfall as the sparkling torrent tumbles down, down, down to smash into the turbulent, boiling waters of the pool, pounding the rocks and crags as it races on to the sea. I tinkle and my knees knock and my thrusset goes all wibbly when I feel the hot scorching winds that tear across the desert, ever shifting, shuffling and shafting the singing sands and blasting the flesh from the scorched white bones of carrion. Ah Grimsby, Grimsby, Grimsby. There's none to compare with my Grimsby.

The first thing I did when I got there was to go to Greggs and buy a sausage roll and a can of Fanta. Mmmm, yummy. Then I set off in search of the good ship *Enis*.

Two Hundred and Seventy-Eight

I am in Grimsby, lucky me. I am looking for a ship called the *Enis*, which is taking my sandwich on an expedition to the North Pole. I have looked everywhere, and so far there is no sign of it. I have looked in the playground, but it wasn't there. I looked in the library, but it was strangely absent. I went and asked at WHSmith's, but they said that they didn't stock it. Hmm, I needed to think about this. I can't walk and think at the same time, I'm just not that kind of guy, so I found a small dog to sit on, and I sat on it and did a think.

After a few minutes thinking time, I finally got it! No, not that - I mean I finally got a thought. What I thought was that all the places that I had been looking were all dry, and ships famously like water. What I needed was somewhere wet.

By this time, the gentleman whose dog I was sitting on was starting to get impatient. Apparently he had to be somewhere very soon to see a man about mending the spring in his pogo stick, and he asked me if I was going to be very much longer. I said I was done with his stupid dog, and I got up, patted the slightly flattened animal on the head, gave the man a bone and waltzed off in search of water.

Two Hundred and Seventy-Nine

I need to find some water in Grimsby, and then surely I will discover the ship that I am looking for. There is plenty of water in the taps, so I went into a gentleman's widdling place and let the tap run for about twenty minutes. I got quite a few funny looks, but no ship came out. I expect they filter the water to get rid of al the nasty ickiness and the germs and the marine vessels. Pity.

Next I went and stood outside a chip shop and studied a puddle for nearly three quarters of an hour. A lady came out of the chip shop and asked me if I was all right and did I need any help? I said yes please, and she helped me stare at the puddle for a little while. One or two other people came along and joined us and after a while we had collected quite a crowd. However, it became apparent to me that there were no ships in that puddle, so I left them to it. For all I know, they're still there. Nutters.

Shortly after that I came upon a signpost. One finger said "Swimming Pool". The other finger said "Museum". Ah ha, at last, a useful lead! I turned on my heels and headed towards the museum. After a few yards, I realised my obvious mistake, turned again and made for the swimming pool.

Two Hundred and Eighty

One does not just turn up at a municipal swimming pool expecting to be able to locate a ship bound for the North Pole. That would be stupid. One first has to equip oneself

with the necessary... er... equipment. So, I stopped off at an equipment shop and bought a stripy bathing costume, a giant inflatable flamingo, a periscope, some flippers, a length of sturdy waterproofed rope, a novelty keyring, a case of baked beans, a brake light bulb for a Vauxhall Corsa, a hole punch and a dirty postcard. I sent the postcard to my friend Kevin and signed off with "Weather is here, wish you were lovely," which is a joke I always do and it never gets tired. Right, now I was ready.

I turned up at the swimming pool and paid many, many, many pounds to enter, then went to get changed. There wasn't room in my locker for all my stuff, so I had to leave it in the corridor. I told a young boy to watch over it for me, or I would kick his teeth in. He didn't seem to favour these terms and threatened to kick *my* teeth in, so I paid him many, many, many, many, many pounds and twenty pence, and he seemed quite happy with this arrangement. I told him he could play with the hole punch if he got bored.

Two Hundred and Eighty-One

Before you go into a swimming pool to do a swim, they make you wash your feet in acid first. I think it is acid anyway; perhaps it is just Cillit Bang. When I went through the foot bath, it went all fizzy and all this yellow scum rose to the top. I noticed that it didn't do that for anybody else, so perhaps it is just that I have got special feet.

There are special rules at swimming pools that you have to follow, otherwise the lifeguard comes along and hits you with a big polystyrene float. Like, for example, you can't steal all the water and sell it to a man in Huddersfield, or you can't add custard powder to it and turn the whole pool into a giant trifle. And the lifeguards are specially trained to keep a beady eye on you. They sit up in a big chair like a tennis umpire and if you do something naughty they will say you are offside and call for new balls please.

Before I did anything, I checked the notice at the side of the pool to see what the special rules were. It said that there was no bombing, no diving, no ducks, no geese, no parking, no surrender, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. But it didn't say anything about looking for ships, so I dived in.

Two Hundred and Eighty-Two

Never go swimming with pockets. When you leave, they'll be full of water and people will think you are trying to steal the pool. That was just a little tip for you.

I was in a swimming pool looking for a ship. If I was the captain of a ship, this is exactly the kind of place I would choose to park it, so you see it's not such a silly idea at all, really. Well, I couldn't see any sign of a ship on the surface, so I decided to look under the water. This is not really the best sort of a place for a ship, because it is far too damp underwater. For this, what you really need is a very special sort of ship called a submarine. A submarine is something which is tricky to type because this blinking computer thing keeps autocorrecting it. It is a special kind

of boat that can go under the water because it is closed at the top to stop the water getting in. It is highly resistant to octopuses and it can fire tompedos (Ha, you didn't try to autocorrect that, did you! Sorry, I will stop arguing with my blinking computer and concentrate on the things I am telling you.)

Well, I didn't find no sumbarines under the water, and I didn't find no boat. All I found were lots and lots and lots of people's legs as they splashed and flumocked about. Perhaps all the chlorine they put in the water is bad for ships? Ooh, that gave me an idea! I wondered if they put that stuff in the water that makes it change colour if you do a little widdle. I did an experiment to find out. Yes, they did! Time to leave.

Two Hundred and Eighty-Three

When I left the swimminginging pool, I decided that I was bored with my own clothes so I broke open someone else's locker and took their stuff instead. I hit the street dressed as a leather-clad motorcycling bishop, with a fancy revolving hat and exotic taste in underwear. I'm not sure what denomination I am - I think I might be a Seventh-Day Tobacconist. I nodded politely to some nuns, gave a sweetie to a policeman and felt proper religious all over.

Still can't find this blinking ship, though, and I must have looked absolutely everywhere. I went down to the docks and sat glumly on the quayside, chucking stones into the water. One of them bounced off something big and metallic, ricocheted off a duck, glanced off an ice cream

van and struck a fisherman on the back of his head, knocking him into the water. Hang on a minute! Something big and metallic? I looked up. There was a ship in front of me. In fact, there were lots of ships in front of me. What a stupid place to put them.

I got up, went over to the edge of the quay and looked down at the fisherman splashing and blubbing in the water. "Excuse me," I said. "Is one of these ships called the *Enis*?" The man shouted some naughty words back at me, in between gulps of mucky sea water, then he pulled a sea bass from his inside pocket and threw it at me. It was a whopper, but luckily it missed. And all that after I had asked him so nicely. I wouldn't be offering *him* any sweeties.

Two Hundred and Eighty-Four

No horses were injured in the making of this episode. I thought I'd better make that clear because certain people - and I'm talking about you, Lucille Ponk - having been putting it about that some equine unpleasantness has been occurring. Well, it's a blinking lie, actually. Admittedly, a pig suffered some slight damage to it's rear offside trotter, but to be honest that swine was just asking for trouble. As for the horses, that's a non-story.

So, I've found the place in Grimsby where they park all the ships, but I still need to locate the one I'm looking for. I went and found a rough old chap sitting in a rough old chair, whittling away at a small piece of wood. "Hello,

rough old chap," I said. "Nice day. What's that you're whittling?"

"Used to be a wardrobe, but I got a bit carried away," he said. He pointed to a large pile of sawdust. "That used to be an oak dining table and four high-backed chairs. Cost me a fortune. I'm a fool to myself, really."

"Fascinating," I said, with the absolute minimum of interest. "Anyway, have you heard of a ship called the *Enis*?"

"Oh aye, I've heard of her," said the rough old man. "I've sailed on her. Aye, 'twas on the good ship *Enis*, by Christ you should have seen us. The figurehead was a - "

"Yes, that's all very lovely," I interrupted. I gestured to the harbour. "But which one of these is it?"

"Which one of these is it?" he repeated. By this time, the piece of wood that he was whittling was gone and he was down to his fingers. I didn't like to say anything and he didn't seem to mind, so I let him carry on.

"Yes, which one of these ships here in the harbour is the *Enis*?" I asked.

"T'ain't."

"T'ain't?"

"T'ain't in this here harbour," said the rough old git. "The *Enis* sailed this morning."

I pushed him in the water. Maybe I shouldn't have done, but it felt like the right thing to do at the time.

Two Hundred and Eighty-Five

Splice the mainbrace, shiver me timbers and run the salty old seadog up the poop deck. I'm all at sea - or rather, I should be. I very nearly caught up with my missing sandwich, but it set sail for the North Pole this morning. Maybe there was still a chance I could catch it. I found one of those seaside telescopes, put my money in the slot and looked through the eyepiece. A can of Fanta came out of in and hit me in the eye. Perhaps I hadn't put enough money in it. I put a few more coins in the slot and got hit in the eye by a can of Pepsi. I was proper angry now, so I told the blinking thing to behave itself, put some more money in it and got smacked in the eye with a can of Irn-Bru, and that really, really hurt. If I didn't know better, I'd say that this was a vending machine and not a telescope at all.

Luckily, there was a dirty bird watcher sitting nearby, looking at some gulls. I told him not to be such a filthy old perv, confiscated his binoculars and told him to hand himself in to the nearest cop shop. With the binoculars, I looked out to sea. I saw an albatross, some penguins and a chicken on a jet ski. Then, on the horizon, I saw the ship that I was after.

"Quick," I said to myself. "I have to get after that ship."

There was a little rowboat just coming up to the jetty, with a wheezy old bloke struggling with the oars, so I jumped

into it. "Quick," I shouted at the old feller. "After that ship!"

Two Hundred and Eighty-Six

Life on the ocean wave is tough. I've already got barnacles on my bilges and my rigging is completely chuffed, and I've only been at sea for two and a half minutes. I feel very sorry for the old guy who is doing the rowing though. His tiller is bent and his rowlocks are completely shot, poor thing. Still, he needs to buckle down and do some serious rowing if we are ever going to catch up with this blinking ship, so in an effort to lift his spirits I sing him a sea shanty. I'm not exactly sure what a sea shanty is, so I make up some words to the tune of *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go* by The Wham! I sing about prawns and winkles and cockles and a lot of other shellfish, but not scallops because I can't find any nice words that rhyme with it.

The old man grumbles a lot and makes some unpleasant creaking noises, so either he is allergic to shellfish, or to me. I hope it's not the latter, because this is quite a small rowboat and it looks like we may be together for a long time. Seeing as the singing doesn't go down very well, I do some impressions for him. I do one of my uncle Terry - it is quite distinctive because my uncle Terry has big hairy feet and tusks - but the old guy isn't impressed. So, it's his turn next. He does an impression of Sean Canary, who is a man who used to be James Bong. It is really quite a good impression, but I tell the old man that it is rubbish, and

ask him if he can do an impression of an outboard motor. We don't speak to each other after that.

Two Hundred and Eighty-Seven

I have decided to call the old man who is rowing this boat Susan, after a tortoise I once had. He tells me that his name is actually Rudolph - well, it's a bit late to be telling me that, isn't it? I've already got it into my head that his name is Susan, so Susan it is blinking well going to be. I've made a name badge for him, and everything.

He's been rowing now for two days. Time flies when you're having fun, doesn't it? I remember this one time, a year and a bit ago, I was having some fun and when I looked at my watch it was already half past six! I barely had time to scrape the treacle off before the donkey had to be back at the rectory. Anyway, we're managing to match speed with the ship but we're not gaining on it. I have a look with the binoculars and I can see that up ahead there is a bit of a slope where the sea goes downhill. We'll be able to coast down that bit, so that should give him a bit of a rest.

Two Hundred and Eighty-Eight

I did a snooze and when I woke up it had all gone a bit wonky. The man rowing the boat got really, really tired in his left arm, which means that we have been going round and round in circles for the last three hours. In fact, we

have been circling a porpoise called Nigel Fairfax, and he's starting to think that he's being victimised. He's made an official complaint and very soon, if not sooner, a Royal Navy gunboat arrives. The captain addresses us through a loudhailer, using the traditional navy greeting.

"Yo ho ho!" he calls. "State your name, postcode and favourite chocolate bar, and do it quick or we will blast you out of the water."

I didn't have a loudhailer and I am not good at shouting, except on Wednesdays, so I answered by running up signal flags like they do in the proper navy. Unfortunately, due to a shortage of flags, I answered that my name was Massey Fergusson (it isn't), my postcode was mauve (it's not) and that my favourite chocolate bar was a small village in Somerset (I don't think it is).

"Please state your business with the porpoise," the captain demanded. "And be jolly prompt about it, or we will blast you out of the water."

I answered, still using the language of flags, that we weren't hassling the porpoise on purpose and, furthermore, that England expects every man to do his duty.

"We can blast you out of the water, you know," the captain replied. "We have a really big gun."

I found a flag that means "very good, your mother must be very proud," which seemed an appropriate response. However, the captain seemed to be dead set on firing his big gun. Unfortunately, he missed, hit and sank the

porpoise then turned his boat around and went off to file a report to the Admiralty.

Two Hundred and Eighty-Nine

We are hopelessly lost at sea. The old man, whom I named Susan, complained that he couldn't be doing with this grotty nonsense any more, and that his tea would be getting cold. He jumped out of the boat and swam for home, leaving me with no one to talk at. Worse still, I had to do my own rowing, which is really tricky. First of all, you have to do it backwards, which means that you can't see where you're going. This is not so much of a problem, since I don't know where I'm going anyway, but I'm still worried that I might bump into an island or an oil tanker or a whale. The second thing is - and this is the tricky bit - that it requires co-ordination. With the oars, it's all back and forward, and up and down, and round and about. If you don't do it in the proper order, you end up just wiggling the oars in the air and going nowhere. At one point, a shoal of kippers stopped to laugh at me. It was most humiliating.

Nevertheless, before very long I'd got the hang of it. I wasn't sure where the North Pole was, but I pointed the boat in the direction that the cold wind was coming from and hoped for the best.

Two Hundred and Ninety

There are many dangers at sea. There are, for instance, giant killer octopuses that have eight testicles and razor-sharp beaks, and fire ink at you from their bum holes. There was a kid at school who used to do that. Although he fired ink at you from a fountain pen, not his bum hole. I think. There are also pirates, but they are not so bad. In the olden days they were rough, tough villains who would slit your gizzard as soon as look at you. Nowadays, they are all Disney ponces who dress up like Johnny Deppford and wouldn't know a gizzard if it gave them a pinball machine for Christmas. Then there are whirlpools. This is like going down a plughole - you know, like when you stay in the bath after you pull the plug out and it sucks you down into the plumbing. Or is that just me? Anyway, whirlpools are just like that, but without the soap scum and the ever-present risk of banging your head on the taps as you go down.

But by far the worst of the dangers you will face out at open sea are Norwegian trawlers. These will indiscriminately scoop you up in their big nets, along with all the other fishies. I know this, because that is what has just happened to me.

Two Hundred and Ninety-One

I would be purple with rage if I wasn't blue with the cold. These Arctic waters aren't half nippy and this trawler net that I've been hauled up in isn't exactly keeping the wind

out. It's full of holes. Why don't these fishermen think of these things when they are making their nets? No wonder the fishies get all cross, I should imagine they're blinking freezing as well.

Anyway, me and all the fishies have been winched up into the boat, splurged out onto the deck and I was just about to be gutted by a big hairy Norwegian fishy man, when I coughed politely and asked to see the captain.

"Here," said the fisherman, in Norwegian. "This fish can talk."

"I am not a fish," I replied, in British. "I am a human bean, and I demand my rights under the Geneva Convention, the Magna Carta and the Official Rules and Regulations of the North Yorkshire Crown Green Bowling Association.

"It's a very well-spoken fish," said the fisherman. "It says it wants to talk to the captain."

"Throw it back," said a grotty old seadog. "'Tis an omen, I tell 'e. Naught good will come of a talking fish. 'Tis the devil's work, I tell 'e."

The fisherman - my fisherman, the one who had his hand round my neck and the gutting knife poised to do its evil work - looked at the old seadog curiously. "Sometimes, Colin, I don't think you're Norwegian, like the rest of us."

"Oh, I be Norwegian, right enough," said the old seadog.

"You don't sound Norwegian," said the fisherman. "Where in Norway are you from?"

"I be from a little village near Oslo," the old seadog said, and when the fisherman pressed him for more information, he sheepishly replied, "Taunton."

Anyway, these jolly japes went on for a little bit longer, and they finally agreed that I could see the captain.

Two Hundred and Ninety-Two

I have been allowed to speak to the captain of this fishy Norwegian trawler so that I can convince him that I am not a fish. I am to dine at his table, no less, but first I have to dress the part, so I doll myself up in a ballgown, diamond studded tiara and a pair of golden wellies. Well, I can tell you that these Norwegian trawler captains certainly dine well. Upon being shown to his cabin, I was met with a table groaning with fishfingers, with a mighty tower of artfully displayed fish fingers as its centrepiece. Further piles of fishfingers were stacked on the adjacent sideboard and two stewards stood by, one with a sack full of fishfingers, the other with a wheelbarrow full of fishfingers, just in case the fishfinger supply should need replenishing. What they lacked in variety, they certainly made up for in quantity.

The captain, Captain Alabaster Grease, courteously showed me to a chair. This wasn't necessary as I had seen chairs before, could recognise one easily from a distance and had even sat on one once. Captain Grease was wearing a full deep sea diver's suit with gold epaulettes and a fancy captain's hat perched on top of the helmet. I

later learned that he was a nervous sailor and didn't believe in taking chances.

"Fishfinger," he said, offering me a silver salver containing a selection of the aforementioned. I selected one and put it to my lips, and he leaned over and lit it for me. "Now," he said. "What's a talking fish like you doing out here in this cold, inhospitable ocean, all on your lonesome?"

Two Hundred and Ninety-Three

"I am not a talking fish," I told Captain Grease as he gazed adoringly at me from inside his diver's helmet.

"You certainly sound like you're talking to me," he replied, with a slight echo.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes," I replied in what you might reasonably describe as an emphatic manner. "I don't disagree with the talking part. I can certainly talk all right. I've been able to talk since I was twelve. It's the fish part that I take issue with. I am not, nor have I ever been, a fish."

"Are you absolutely certain?" he asked, offering me another fishfinger, which could have been seen as being deeply insensitive of him.

"I am almost seventy-eight percent certain," I replied confidently. "Admittedly, I can't say that this statement is beyond all reasonable doubt, but it is most likely correct according to the balance of probabilities, which is a good enough standard of evidence for a civil case. Capiche?"

"No, not really," said the captain. "Well, you certainly smell like a fish."

"Rude."

"And we found you in the sea," said the captain. "This is where the fish come from. Trust us, we're trawlermen - this is very much our area."

"Lots of things come from the sea," I argued. "Crabs, for example."

"Are you a crab?" he asked.

"No!" I replied. "At least, I'm sixty-three percent certain that I'm not a crab. Please try and follow what is, I think, a perfectly logical argument. Here, look, I'll draw you a picture."

I got my crayons out.

Two Hundred and Ninety-Four

I am very good at drawing pictures. We did it at school and I got seventy-eight percent and a B-minus, which was much more than I got for grotty old quadratic equations. I think the green crayon is the one I like best because it tastes minty fresh. Sometimes I think of the crayons as my friends and I get them out at night and talk to them. The yellow one tends to be a bit gobby and over-opinionated, but we all ignore him until he goes into a corner by himself and sulks.

So I drew a picture to demonstrate to Captain Alabaster Grease that I was not a fish. I drew a picture of a fish. Fishies are mostly blue with a bit of silver, but I didn't have a silver crayon so I had to use pink instead. Silver crayons are very rare. Apparently, Prince Rainier of Monaco had one that he used to draw all the racing cars going past his front window, but they went too fast and all his pictures were blurred.

Anyway, I done my picture of a fish and showed it to Captain Grease. "It's a picture of a fish," he said. I told him that he was spot on, and that it proved that I was not a fish because there was no way that a fish would be able to draw a picture of a fish. They can't hold the crayons. Well, they could wedge one under their fin, but it would be very shaky and they would go over the lines when they were colouring in. Captain Grease was forced to agree with me and he offered me another twelve fishfingers.

Two Hundred and Ninety-Five

"Okey dokey matey skip," said Captain Alabaster Grease in perfect Norwegian. "If you're not a fish, and you're not a crab, then there's only one thing you can be - a stowaway!"

"Gulp!" I said. Actually, no I didn't actually say the word "gulp". That would be stupid. Nobody does that. I just sort of went gulp.

"And there's only one thing we do with stowaways!" Captain Grease declared.

"Gasp!" I said. I did actually say it, that time - just to see what it sounded like. It sounded rubbish.

At this point, the guy with the wheelbarrow full of fishfingers leaned over to the captain and whispered something in his ear. The captain couldn't hear a word of it inside his iron divers' helmet, so the fishfinger man had to write it down on a soggy piece of paper.

"I stand corrected," said Captain Grease. "There are five things that we do to stowaways on this boat. There used to be seven, but there was a bit of trouble with the Norwegian equivalent of the RSPCA, so we had to drop a couple. We're going to do number three to you. Thank your lucky stars that we're not doing number four."

With that, a couple of burly sailors came and grabbed me by the armpits and dragged me out of there, leaving me angry, annoyed and puzzled as to why a genuine Norwegian captain would not know that the Norwegian equivalent of the RSPCA is Dyrebeskyttelsen Norge. They probably don't have Google out here at sea.

Two Hundred and Ninety-Six

As I was being shunted up the companionway by two burly sailors, I pondered on Captain Alabaster Grease's strange behaviour. Perhaps he wasn't who he said he was. Perhaps he was really a returning villain from an earlier episode of this narrative, who had now returned in an ingenious disguise. Trouble was, I couldn't remember a whole lot of what had happened before, and I certainly

wasn't going to trawl through all this grotty nonsense looking for a likely candidate, so I thought it best to let that idea be.

The two sailors roughly bounced me off a couple of bulkheads then slammed me into a fourth wall, brutally dragging me back into the scene. I demanded that they tell me where they were taking me, and they told me that they were taking me shopping. But they weren't! They were naughty fibbers, and they were actually going to set me to work in the engine room. I expected a dirty, noisy, greasy place deep in the bowels of the ship, but actually it was a bright, quiet, rather pleasant room with a giant rubber band stretched from one end to the other. Then they introduced me to the chief engineer, Edvard Borg, who was dirty, noisy and greasy with bowels like a ship.

Two Hundred and Ninety-Seven

I have discovered that this Norwegian trawler is actually powered by a giant rubber band that turns the propeller. Mr Borg, the chief engineer, tells me that it is revolutionary. I tell him that I thought all propellers were revolutionary, and that this was the fundamental principal on which they operated. He then explained that he meant the idea was revolutionary and that this was a green boat. Well, in that respect he was most definitely wrong and I told him so quite firmly. This boat was blue, I had noticed its colour as I was being hauled aboard. He then explained that it was green in the environmental sense and we both laughed at my hilarious misunderstanding, and he offered

me a jam sandwich. Happy times. Honestly, you should have been there, it was great.

Using elastic bands as a power source is a great idea, and one that has really taken off in Scandinavia, where they are clearly ahead of the curve in this respect. You can now get phones that are powered by elastic bands, as well as mopeds, washing machines, photocopiers and food mixers. Apparently, you can also get an elastic band-powered catapult, but I'm not at all sure how this works.

Of course, the real problem is that somebody has to wind them up, and you have to put more energy in than you get out. The holy grail of elastic band technology is something they call "cold elastic" and they are very close to perfecting it. This is elastic that has a twangability rating of eight or higher, and it is believed that a single elastic band could power a smallish market town for up to a week-next-Tuesday.

Two Hundred and Ninety-Eight

I am working my passage in the engine room of a Norwegian trawler. My job is to wind up the big elastic band and it's hard work, I can tell you. I have a big stick that I use to wind it round and round and round, and I haven't worked this hard since I was employed at a pick-your-own-strawberries farm. That's a bit of a misnomer actually, since people didn't pick their own strawberries, they picked the ones growing on the farm. If they brought their own with them it would have defeated the object, really, although it would have made my job a lot easier. I

had to go round after the customers had been and gone, pick up the strawberries that had fallen on the floor and glue them back on the plants, ready for the next day. One day, I used extra special super strong glue, which meant that nobody could get them off the plants at all. I thought that it was a good idea, but the angry red-faced man who sacked me didn't see it my way.

You also need a lot of concentration to wind up a big rubber band, because if you lose your footing it spins you round and round and round back the other way and all the change flies out of your pockets. That's happened to me four and a half times already, and to be honest I'm getting very dizzy and not a little fed up.

Two Hundred and Ninety-Nine

Conditions on this Norwegian trawler are appalling. The swimming pool is slightly too warm, the toilet paper is the wrong shade of pink and I have to start work at ten o'clock in the morning! It's inhuman. Also, I'm getting sick of a constant diet of fishfingers. What I wouldn't give for a carrot? (Answers later.)

Some of the other crew feel the same way and we are planning a mutiny. We are going to meet later in the cleaning closet to discuss our plans. We will recognise each other because we will each be wearing a fishfinger in our breast pockets. Also, we will all be crammed into the same cleaning closet.

And now the answers to the carrot question. These are the things I wouldn't give for a carrot:

- My collection of 1970s Wolverhampton Wanderers football cards
- Some lard or similar fatty substance
- A letter of thanks from the Mayor of Leeds
- An antique bassoon
- An antique baboon
- A watercolour painting of a small ginger dog called either Roger or Skip
- Elvis Costello.

Everything else is up for grabs.

Three Hundred

We are meeting in secret to discuss overthrowing Captain Alabaster Grease and taking control of his ship. I probably shouldn't be telling you all this, given the clandestine nature of our activities, but we've known each other for a while now, and I feel I can trust you. There are fourteen of us in all and most of them smell of fish. This cleaning closet is very small and I'm keen to get this meeting over with quickly because I'm feeling a little icky, but thankfully there is a mop and bucket nearby in case of accidents.

A man called Sweaty Olaf suggests we all disguise ourselves as washer women and lie low for the next three months before finally emerging and overpowering the

captain with a selection of small mammals when he is least expecting it. However, it is agreed that this plan is unworkable because the only small mammal on board is a hamster called Sharon, and she's already told us that she's not interested.

Another guy says we should all buy voting shares in the company that owns the ship, and once we have a majority share we should call an extraordinary meeting to strip the captain of his rank and, possibly, make him walk the plank, subject to this being permitted by the relevant labour laws. However, it was felt that this was not sexy enough because it didn't involve swinging about on ropes and hitting people. In the end, we all agreed it would be far simpler to just wait until he went to the toilet, then lock him in.

Three Hundred and One

My friend Kevin once claimed that he hijacked the cross-Channel ferry and turned it into a pirate ship, sailing around the south coast of England, attacking people in small pleasure boats and robbing them of their pop and crisps. He says he was cornered up the Solent by a Royal Navy frigate and forced to surrender. His penance, apparently, was that he had to clean and repaint the ferry, then write a nice letter to the ferry company apologising for his behaviour. They wrote back to him, thanking him for his interest in their business, and enclosing a complimentary hat. Of course, my friend Kevin is

notoriously full of doo-doo, so I personally don't believe a word of it.

Well, now we have successfully hijacked a Norwegian trawler by locking the captain in the toilet. It's OK, we slid a magazine under the door so that he's got something to read. Our first action was to tip all those horrid fishfingers overboard, then we sat down to discuss our next move. Olaf is very keen to fly the boat to Cuba. There were a number of perfectly valid objections to this, not least of which being that we would be unlikely to obtain clearance from air traffic control. Somebody else had the idea of drilling through the bottom of the boat to see if we could find oil and he told us that he had already made a start with a plastic fork. The chief engineer put the mockers on this by pointing out that such a plan would have a profound impact on the "floatiness" of the vessel. Of course, I was all for sailing up to the North Pole in search of my sandwich, but I was struggling to enlist support. And so the meeting wore on into the night, with all of us growing increasingly hungry because there were no fishfingers left to eat.

Three Hundred and Two

The crew have decided to paint the boat green, fill it full of gravel and rename it Sharon. Mine was the only voice of dissent: I thought it was a blinking stupid idea, and I told them so in no uncertain terms. They told me that I wasn't a team player and that I should get off their boat. They cast me adrift on a giant inflatable banana. It wasn't so

bad as it seemed, actually, because it had an outboard motor, a fully fitted kitchen, a disco and a helicopter pad. They wouldn't let me have the actual helicopter though, which I thought was a bit mean of them.

The one thing I didn't have was a compass and there is a distinct lack of signposts out at sea, which is disgusting. Is this what I pay my boat taxes for? I have decided to write a letter of complaint to whoever is responsible for this grotty nonsense. Obviously, I don't know who is in charge of the sea, so I have written to a squash club on the outskirts of Lincoln and asked them to pass it on to the relevant authority. As well as the lack of signs, I have also complained about the contraflow in the North Sea and about all the graffiti on Rockall. I am pleased that Gary luvs Katy and that Brian has an enormous wotsit, but I don't want to read about it on the side of an island, and so I think it is about time that someone cleaned it off.

I received a reply from the International Society for the Preservation of Walruses and Other Large-Tusked Marine Mammals. They told me they were very sorry, but that it wasn't really their responsibility, and they sent me a free pen and a shopping trolley token.

Three Hundred and Three

I asked a passing seagull the way to the North Pole, but it just squawked at me and flipped the "V"s using two prominent feathers on its left wingtip. Seagulls are horrid birds. I refuse to have them in the house, and if ever I am invited to a party where seagulls are present, I will politely

make my excuses and leave to avoid being drawn into a conversation with one of the nasty things. Gannets are much nicer and are inclined to be more helpful. Unfortunately, they are big thickies, so nobody bothers to ever ask them anything.

I waited until nightfall so that I could navigate by the stars. You hear about old-time sailors doing that kind of thing. I hoped that I would be able to see a big arrow and the words "This way to the North Pole", but there was nothing like that. It was just a bunch of random dots, and I figured that the wind had probably scattered them about a bit. Whoever fixed them in place should have used much stronger super-duper glue. I imagine it was probably Brian Cox or Brian May or some other Brian. The silly fellow was probably too busy striding across glacier fields or twanging his guitar to do his job properly.

Anyway, it was shortly after that when I was hit by a lighthouse.

Three Hundred and Four

Lighthouses are supposed to stop you hitting rocks by being all bright and shiny or making a honking noise. This one stopped me from hitting the rocks by getting all in my face. Me and my inflatable banana crumpled up against the side of it and I sprang a leak. So did the banana. I was proper angry, but not as angry as the lighthouse keeper, who emerged from the front door, surveyed the damage that I had done to his window box and demanded an explanation. I gave him an explanation of how an artesian

well works, together with diagrams and a small working model to demonstrate the basic principles. Perhaps it wasn't the explanation that he was expecting, but as he didn't specify exactly what he wanted explaining, it would have to serve.

I then asked him why he had driven his lighthouse into me, and he asked me why my inflatable banana was not displaying any lights. I countered this by accusing him of driving on the wrong side of the sea, and he told me that I had failed to indicate when I had come down off that last wave. We decided that it would be best to let our insurance companies sort this out, so he invited me in. We exchanged details and he gave me some cold fish soup and a chunk of stale walrus cheese. It was disgusting.

Three Hundred and Five

My giant inflatable banana has been punctured by a lighthouse that was careering wildly out of control. We have sent a request to the mainland for assistance, and until they send me a puncture repair outfit the lighthouse keeper has very kindly offered to put me up. Specifically, he offered to put me up in the lamp room, and I can't get a wink of sleep because he won't let me turn the light out. It spins round and round and round and round, all flashy-flashy-flash, and it's doing my head in. I'm wearing sunglasses and it isn't half giving me a helluva tan.

I did find the dial that controls the speed and had some fun with that. I turned it right up to eleven and created a very interesting strobe effect, but then my brains started to

hurt and I decided to go downstairs to let the screaming in my ears subside.

The lighthouse keeper is called Phineas Shagpile, and he is a crusty old gentleman with a beard made out of ravioli and wooden feet, which swell up in the damp weather. He has been a lighthouse keeper here for forty years, possibly less, and he tells me it is a very responsible position.

Previously, he had been a lighthouse keeper in Wolverhampton, which didn't keep him nearly as busy. I imagine he has to stoke the boiler and trim the wick and scrub the oil sumps and stuff, but he tells me I've got a very funny idea about what it takes to be a lighthouse keeper. He says he has to switch the light on at night, then switch it off again in the morning to save the battery. Very responsible, see.

Three Hundred and Six

Mr Shagpile, the lighthouse keeper, is sitting in the crew room with a tartan blanket around him and his feet in a bucket of warm treacle to keep the chill out. He is smoking a pipe, but he has the wrong end in his mouth and when I point this out to him, he says it's OK because he is blowing not sucking. I expect he has got some spooky tales to tell about this lighthouse; tales of men who disappeared in mysterious circumstances, of frightful beasts and strange, ethereal mists.

"Nope," he says, making a strange whistling noise as he blew down his pipe. "Nothing like that."

"I thought all lighthouses had to have a story about people who disappeared in unexplained circumstances," I said. "I thought that was the law."

"Nope," said Mr Shagpile. "Not since 1976 when the 'Mysterious and Supernatural Tales About Lighthouses (As Amended) Act' was repealed. In fact, the really mysterious thing about this lighthouse is how remarkably unmysterious it is. Unless you count the story of the haunted fridge, ok course."

"I do, I do!" I cried excitedly. "I do count the story of the haunted fridge. Tell me that."

"Buckle up then, young 'un," said the grotty old lighthouse keeper, and he pulled on his storytelling slippers and began his tale.

Three Hundred and Seven

"'Twas a dark and stormy night," Mr Shagpile began, speaking in dark and stormy tones.

"Natch," I said.

"No," I tell a lie, the lighthouse keeper corrected himself. "It was a baking hot day in July. I was catching some rays on the patio when I suddenly realised that what I needed was some ice for my Bacardi and coke, and a strawberry yoghurt."

"Mmmm, yummy," I said.

"That's exactly what I was thinking at the time," said Mr Shagpile. "Anyway, I went to the fridge for my yoghurt and - gasp! - it was gone."

"The yoghurt?"

"The fridge," said Mr Shagpile. "The strawberry yoghurt was still there, as were all the other contents of the fridge, but of the refrigerator itself there was no sign - just a neatly defined square of dirt where it had once stood."

"Extraordinary," I said.

"I should say so," said Mr Shagpile. "And it wasn't only the fridge - the cooker was gone. And the washing machine. Also the dishwasher, the telly, the stereo, the Playstation and my Ferrari. Of course, the insurance company were very suspicious and they refused to pay out, the swines. They said it was an act of God. Ha! What would God want with my fridge, that's what I want to know? Anyway, enough of this - do you want to watch a video?"

Three Hundred and Eight

It seemed that the only forms of entertainment that Mr Shagpile had access to in his lonely old lighthouse were a plank of driftwood and an old video recorder with one tatty old tape, containing an episode of *The Monty Python's Flying Circus*, what he had recorded off the tellybox.

"Don't you think *The Monty Python* is brilliant?" said Shagpile. "I think *The Monty Python* is really good and

special. There's this one bit where someone tries to buy cheese. Hysterical. And there's a thing with a lumberjack. Don't you think it's just amazing?"

"Well," I said, because that's a good way to start a sentence when you are trying to be diplomatic. "Well," I said again. "I'm quite interested in this piece of driftwood that you mentioned."

"Oh driftwood isn't very funny at all," said Mr Shagpile, dribbling a bit more than a professional lighthouse keeper should do. "But *The Monty Python* is brilliant. I can do all the voices and catchphrases and everything. Ohhhhhhh, I'm a lumberjack and I'm OK, I work all night and sleep all day."

"You are not a lumber-man," I corrected him. "You are a lighthouse-man. Now, about this driftwood..."

"He's not sleeping!" Mr Shagpile cried, laughing manically. "Not sleeping! Not sleeping! This parrot is dead!"

He then made a weird, screechy, wobbly sound, which he swore blind was an exact quote from one of *The Monty Python*'s very funny sketches about philosophers. I said it wasn't. He said it was. I said that it wasn't and that he was talking doo-doo. He said that it was and did I want a punch up the throat.

Anyways, this went on for some days and he finally played the tape. When it got to that point, the tape went all screwy and it made a weird, screechy, wobbly sound, so I conceded that he was right and I gave him a pound.

Three Hundred and Nine

Phineas Shagpile was clearly several lengths of guttering short of a conservatory. Thankfully, help came in the form of a knock at the door. I opened it to find a package at my feet, sodden with rain. The delivery driver had long since scarpered. Ah, this must be my puncture repair outfit - at last my chance to get off this benighted rock. I opened it to find a pair of prescription trousers addressed to Mr Jeremy Corpuscle of Brighton. This is always happening to me - getting the wrong parcel. I recently received a shipment of forty thousand corn plasters that should have gone to a woman in Norwich. And last week, some joker sent me the Isle of Wight. Where the heck am I supposed to put it? I've stuck it under the sink for now and told them to collect it pronto.

So, what am I going to do with these trousers? Well, better make the most of it, I suppose, so I put them on. I don't know if you've every walked around in someone else's trousers, but it does give you a whole new perspective on the world. Especially if waistband is too tight. Curiously, Mr Corpuscle's trousers were about two feet longer in the left leg than the right, which led me to believe that Mr Corpuscle must be marvellous at cornering, but would have a hell of a time finding a comfortable seat on a bus. Nevertheless, I found an old piece of chewing gum in the pocket and using this, and some of the bubble wrap that the trousers came in, I was able to fix my inflatable banana and make my escape.

Three Hundred and Ten

In the end, I found the North Pole by following a humpty-backed whale that looked like it knew where it was going. Lots and lots of people think that the North Pole is a bleak, cold, inhospitable wasteland that freezes the soul and leaves a fellow questioning the very nature of existence. But the North Pole is nothing like that. You're thinking of Stoke. No, the North Pole is full of friendly cafés and bars, an impressive range of shops and entertainment venues and an inner-city ring road that actually manages to successfully get you to where you want to be. Like I say, it's nothing like Stoke.

The other thing that lots and lots and lots more people don't realise is that there actually is a pole at the North Pole. It's thirty feet high, painted gold and it is illuminated at night. It's a bit tacky, actually. In fact, the whole place is a bit too commercialised these days and you will find lots and lots and lots and lots of people who will bang on about how much better it used to be in the old days, when there were just three log cabins and a polar bear called Cyril, and when you could still park in the street and you weren't charged a small fortune for a blinking cup of coffee.

Three Hundred and Eleven

I checked into the Hotel Splendiferous, which was run by a consortium of penguins. Hang on, I hear you scream, what are penguins doing at the North Pole? Well, they're

making a small fortune from a luxury hotel, obviously. These penguins have got business interests all over the world - casinos in Las Vegas, amusement parks in South-East Asia, a luxury yacht company in Greece and a small but really quite adequately stocked sweet shop in Bromley. That's globalisation for you.

Now, I know what you're thinking. Actually, you're thinking two things. The first thing you are thinking is what practical use can you put your belly button to? You've had it all your life and never really done much with it - there must be something it can do. Well, you can forget that. I've done extensive experiments and I can tell you that it is good for nothing. You can't put stuff in it, because it just falls out when you stand up, and no one is going to pay good money to look at it, so you may as well put the whole matter out of your minds and get on with more important stuff.

The second thing you are thinking is how can I possibly afford to stay in a top swanky hotel run by penguins on the money I earn from collecting glasses in the Dog and Duck? Especially since I have been unable to augment my income by fully realising the commercial potential of my belly button. Well, it's simple. I have a coupon that I cut out of the *Radio Times*. Any more questions?

Three Hundred and Twelve

The Hotel Splendiferous is quite easily the best hotel that I have ever stayed in - and I speak as someone who has stayed in a total of two hotels, so I think I know what I'm

talking about. The other hotel that I stayed in was the Seaview at Clacton-on-Sewage, which was run by a formidable woman called Gloriana Dingbat. Mrs Dingbat operated a very strict regime and her paying customers had to abide by an extensive set of rules. There was only one bathroom and hot water was only available for fifteen minutes on a Tuesday afternoon. You weren't allowed to actually bathe, but you could look at it if you were prepared to join an orderly queue with all the other guests.

Breakfast was served at 7:35 sharp, at which time Mrs Dingbat would provide her guests with a soft-boiled egg and a slice of burnt toast. There were often upwards of thirty people fighting over that egg and their entreaties to the stony-faced proprietor to be given one each fell on deaf ears. The Seaview is no longer there now - it fell into the sea in 1986, although some people claim that it was pushed. Mrs Dingbat herself fell into the sea shortly afterwards and was never seen again. An eyewitness claimed that she was seen off the coast of Denmark three years later, basking in the surf and blowing spray out of her blowhole, but personally I don't believe a word of it.

Three Hundred and Thirteen

The best thing about a top notch swankeroony hotel like this one at the North Pole is that you could get room service at any time during the day or night. I looked at my watch and saw that it was indeed any time during the day or night, and so I picked up the phone. "What's the speciality of the house?" I asked.

"Charging thirty quid for a tiny cup of instant coffee with froth on the top," replied the room service bloke.

"Very good," I said. "And food?"

"Oh yes," said the man. "And food."

"Specifically?"

"Specifically, we've got ice pops, snow cones and Arctic roll," said the room service man.

"Do you have iced buns?" I asked.

"We all do round here," said the man. "This is the Arctic. Ten minutes standing in the trouser press usually sorts them out."

Of course, you all know that what I was really after was information. I was keen to know whether my missing sandwich had been seen around these parts. I looked slyly at the phone handset from the corner of my eye and spoke from the corner of my mouth. "And what about sandwiches?" I asked.

I could hear him looking at his phone from the corner of his eye as he cagily replied from the corner of his office. "Sandwiches? What kind of sandwiches?"

"Oh, I dunno," I said airily. "About thirty foot high, all green and mouldy round the edges and with breath like rancid cheese."

"You need to speak to Icicle Tom down at the Miracle Wash Easy-Kleen Launderette," said the room service

man, and he hung up before I had chance to order a chocolate.

Three Hundred and Fourteen

The Miracle Wash Easy-Kleen Launderette was in the dirty, dirty, dirty part of the North Pole. Filthy, grotty, bad time place, where all the lowlifes hang out. But sometimes, if you want information, you need to go to these kinds of places. I once went to Leeds to ask someone about a wheelbarrow - actually, that's probably not a fair comparison. Forget the wheelbarrow. The important thing to do in these places is to try and act cool. You need to be able to blend in; to not draw attention to yourself. Usually, my preferred method is to disguise myself as a daffodil and stand in a corner, singing a song about a tractor, but unfortunately I had forgotten my special hat. So instead, I just had to play it by ear.

The place was busy, full of rough-looking hoodlums all doing their washing. I slipped in unobtrusively, trying not to catch anyone's eye, and found a spare machine. Then I stuffed my duvet in it, fired that baby up then took a spare seat next to a particularly grotty looking character. I picked up a magazine - *Practical Woodwormer*, in case you're interested - and pretended to read it, but really I was trying to attract the attention of the thug next to me.

"I'm looking for information," I hissed.

"You want to put it on programme nine, followed by a rinse and a fast spin," he said.

"Not that kind of information," I said. "I'm looking for Icicle Tom."

The man nodded to an ugly line-up, who between them sported multiple cauliflower ears, blood-red scars and broken noses. I pointed to the one dressed as a bishop. "Is that him?" He told me it was the guy next to him, who had an icicle for a nose. It was kind of obvious, now I come to think about it.

Three Hundred and Fifteen

I sidled over to Icicle Tom and sat next to him. His frozen nose was dripping onto his shoes, but I thought it would be polite to ignore this. "Why do they call you Icicle Tom?" I asked.

"It's short for Thomas," he answered.

Fair enough. I thought about pressing him on the "Icicle" part, but on reflection I considered that his prominent permafrost proboscis probably answered that question. "I'm looking for a sandwich," I said.

"Oh yeah," he said. "And who wants to know?"

"I do," I replied. "I'm sitting right here, asking you about a sandwich. Why would you ask me such a silly question?"

"OK, listen, I shouldn't be telling you this," he said conspiratorially. "My Aunt Gertie runs an illegal frog bothering school."

"What's that got to do with my sandwich?" I asked.

"My Aunt Gertie has got nothing to do with your sandwich," he replied. "It's just that I shouldn't have told you that. The whereabouts of your sandwich, however, is common knowledge." And then the filthy swine whispered something in my ear...

Three Hundred and Sixteen

I pressed myself up against a chain-link fence. Beyond it, great big diggy-tractors were grunting and fruttocking about, bright yellow dozers shuffled huge piles of mucky dirt from one place to another and towering cranes periodically reached over, plucking things from the ground and flinging them away. And there were people - lots and lots of people in boiler suits and shiny helmets, dithering this way and that way and the other way, busy, busy, busy.

This was where my informant told me that I would find my sandwich: this vast, bustling, secret construction site here at the North Pole. Well, it would be secret were it not for all the lights and the noise and the people and the stuff and the big illuminated signs saying "Secret Construction Site" and the smaller signs beneath saying "But shush, don't tell anyone."

What were they up to? How was my sandwich involved? What happens if you fill a rubber glove with rice crispies then put it in a microwave? I had to find out. Perhaps that last question could wait. I started to climb the fence, but then a big woofy dog appeared on the other side, barking

and growling and spraying goopy slobber everywhere. I don't speak dog (although I have a smattering of guinea pig) but even so, I think I caught the beast's meaning. In short, it wished me to desist in my infiltration of the site and warned me that should I choose to proceed it would, regrettably, be forced to bite my head off. I decided to go away and rethink my options.

Three Hundred and Seventeen

It would be wrong of me to say that I have infiltrated more top-secret establishments than I have had hot dinners, because I have had six hot dinners - seven if you count one that was slightly tepid. I have only infiltrated four top secret establishments, or one if you count *successful* infiltrations. And even that one only counts if you class the public library on Bridge Street as a top-secret establishment. It isn't in the 1997 edition of the Yellow Pages, which I reckon demonstrates its credentials as a clandestine organisation, but you might think that having a big sign outside saying "Public Library" might contradict that definition. To be honest I didn't so much "infiltrate" it as wander in there one gloomy Wednesday afternoon, saunter about the aviation section for a bit looking for pictures of Harrier Jump Jets, then leave as soon as the weather cleared up. Anyway, I don't think anybody saw me, so I think it qualifies as an infiltration.

However, the point I was intending to make before you so rudely interrupted me with all this grotty nonsense about Jump Jets is that even though I have only penetrated the

security of a very few secret bases, I'm not a complete novice. I know the important thing is planning, so I got out my notepad, my ruler and my special pens with four different colours in it (green is my absolute favourite) and I started to do a brainstorm.

Three Hundred and Eighteen

I am considering how I am going to infiltrate this ruddy top-secret construction site, or whatever it blinking well is. Well, I think we can discount tunnelling in. Tunnels are a rubbish way of getting in anywhere because it is very, very dark underground and you can't see where you are going, which means you could come up anywhere, like in a toilet or a vegetable patch or a jacuzzi or something. Also, the worms can get very stroppy if they feel that you are muscling in on their patch. They've always been quite touchy, but they've got even worse since they were unionised.

And I can forget building a glider, as well. Oh sure, a glider can get me over the fence and land me safely in some quiet spot on the other side, but really it's the oldest trick in the book and most decent security firms feature laser-guided anti-glider catapults as part of their basic protection package these days. I'd be scrambling from the wreckage and running home with my bottom on fire within seconds of crossing the perimeter.

Which leaves the old wooden horse routine. You know the drill, you build a dirty great wooden horse, hide inside and leave it outside the front gate until some pillock comes

along and says "I'm having that" and drags you inside. Of course, a chipboard pony is all very well for your ancient Trojan, but it's not going to appeal to a modern security guard. That's why I built a giant wooden beef and onion pasty, and hid inside that. No security guard left alone on a cold, dreary night shift would be able to resist it. And sure enough, four and a half days later, someone took the bait.

Three Hundred and Nineteen

I was waiting inside my decoy wooden beef and onion pasty for ages and ages and ages, and it was very uncomfortable. It was cramped, smelly and there was nowhere to do a widdle. Not even a little one. I also came to regret making it so realistic, because the gravy was dripping down my neck and I was getting all sticky. Eventually, the security guard dragged me into his little hut. "Hmm, lovely pasty," I heard him say, and I was poised to make my move. I heard his choppers come crashing down as he took his first bite, they bounced off the wooden frame and then I made my move. I released my flap, sprang out and made a run for it while he was still howling in pain. I hid behind a pile of crates and paused to catch my breath and get my bearings. Or maybe I caught my bearings and got my breath. Either way, I kept my head down.

I knew that there was no way that he would raise the alarm. Imagine him telling his supervisor that he had been eating a wooden beef and onion pasty and someone

had sprung out of it and made a run for it after his first bite. They would think he was a loony-tune and send him off to quiet room to have a long hard think about his life. That's what they did to me when I was security guard. I was working at a multi-storey car park in Bolton and I saw a Ford Fiesta turn into a golden eagle and fly away. My boss said I must be a headcase because the Ford Fiesta can't do that, and obviously what I had seen must have been a Nissan Micra. But I stuck to my story and they locked me in a cupboard until a lady came from the council to tell them what to do with me.

Three Hundred and Twenty

So, I am here in this secret wotsit and now it's time to find out what is going on. There certainly is a lot of activity, with all these people coming and going, although not necessarily in that order. I decided to have a look in the crates I was hiding behind to see if that would give me any clues. The first one was full of those little plastic stirrers that you use to stir coffee. I had a thought: perhaps they were... but no, I reconsidered, that was clearly a stupid idea. The second crate was full of plastic cups. Oh yes, so that must mean... but then again, maybe not. I looked at the third crate but it said "Top Secret" on it, so I thought I'd better not open it. After all, I didn't want to get into trouble. Probably more catering supplies anyway. So instead, I knocked out a passing workman, dragged him behind a packing case, tied him up, borrowed his overalls and shiny helmet, and stepped out into the open.

"You there!" I heard a man behind me shout. I thought it was best to ignore him, so I stayed very still and pretended I was a statue. I imagined myself as the statue of an heroic general, sitting on top of an horse, which is an very difficult to do if you are not actually an general and you don't have an horse. Luckily, I once did amateur dramatics, so I am very good at roleplay.

Didn't fool this man, though. He stepped in front of me. Obviously he was some kind of site foreman and he looked quite cross. "You there," he said again. "Gary."

"I am not Gary," I said.

"It says 'Gary' on your name badge," said the foreman. "And your hat has got 'Gary's hat' written on it. And you have a tattoo on your upper arm that reads 'Gary luvs Maisie'."

That last one was a puzzle. I could understand the hat and the name badge, but for the life of me I couldn't understand how I had acquired the tattoo.

"OK," I said, defeated. "I am Gary."

Three Hundred and Twenty-One

"I've got a job for you," said the foreman.

Now, at this point, if this was a spy movie, the super secret spy would probably do some karate on the man, then throw him into a shark tank and make a daring escape across the rooftops. Well, that is just proper stupid. If he

just went along with it, then he would remain undetected and he could probably earn a few extra quid cash-in-hand. I'm surprised that that doesn't happen more often, because the money's probably better and you don't have to do all that energetic swinging about on ropes and stuff. So when the foreman told me he had a job for me, I was all for it because I figured there probably might be a bonus in it for me if I did it promptly. Maybe even promotion.

"I want you to report to number four silo and check the input manifold for the downthrust baffle valves. They need to be degreased and realigned. Have you got that?"

"Oh yes," I said confidently.

"Repeat it back to me."

"Repeat what back to you?" I asked.

"What I just told you," the foreman said.

"Oh, of course," I said. "You told me to repeat it back to you."

A look of exasperation passed over the foreman's face.

"Repeat what back to you?" he said.

"That's what I said," I replied.

He slapped me round the helmet, then repeated the whole thing again.

"Oh yes, I've got it," I said. "You want me to realign the greasy baffles and input my manifold valves."

"Close enough," he said, and sent me on my way.

Three Hundred and Twenty-Two

I reported to number four silo to be told by a man there that they were perfectly capable of greasing their own nipples and baffling their manifolds, thank you very much. However, they did need some help operating the "kerthunker" machine. They called it this because "kerthunk" was the noise it made every twenty seconds. My job would be to pull the trimble handle after every second "kerthunk" and wait for it to go "plink". It sounded like a barrel of laughs - or, if not exactly a barrel of laughs, it was at least a suitcase full of giggles - so I wholeheartedly volunteered my services.

I was pleased to note, once I was introduced to the machine, that it was actually a Wimbley 4000 Thunkomatic. This, as I am sure you know, is one of the more modern models, with the overhead belt restraint and the foldback airflow mesh. Nice. I have worked on one of these machines before, when I worked in a Spanish peanut factory, and they really are a joy to operate. The knack is that you need to make sure your knob-thrust link is fully aligned to the hump flange, otherwise your clanger will become misaligned with the fudge valve and your plugs will drop off. And that, as I am sure I have no need to tell you, can really bring tears to your eyes.

Three Hundred and Twenty-Three

Well, I have had a jolly old day operating this here kerthunker machine, and it has only been very slightly

mind-numbingly boring, stultifying tedious and deadeningly pointless. On the plus side, I have had lots of lovely banter with my new workmates. We've talked about football and cars and about what cars footballers drive and about how it's really difficult to play football with a car. I tried to steer the conversation towards a discussion on the merits of the Italian Renaissance painter Raphael, but they weren't having any of it and playfully called me a "jumped up ponce". Secretly, I'm quite glad because between you and me, I know absolutely nothing about the Italian Renaissance painter Raphael.

Of course, being the new boy, they decided they were going to have some fun at my expense. They sent me to the stores for some tartan paint, and I fell for it. Doh! Then one of the guys said he needed a new bubble for his spirit level, and I fell for it again. Doh! Then they nailed me to a wall, made me drink half a bottle of paint stripper and set fire to my shoes. Honestly, these guys are real pranksters!

Anyway, I think I've wormed my way into their confidence now. I've been throwing up green vomit for the past half hour, my feet and lower legs are a little crispier than I normally like them, but I think I'm in a position to press them for information.

Three Hundred and Twenty-Four

Nobody is allowed off the site in the evening because of security or something, but there are entertainment facilities within the compound, including a nightclub called Spanners. I have been to a nightclub once before

with a friend of mine, who shall remain nameless. And trouserless. In fact, it is because of the lack of trousers that I shall refrain from naming him. It was an embarrassing incident for everyone involved and all in all it's best forgotten. So don't you worry, Kevin, your secret is safe with me.

Anyway, this experience taught me that a nightclub is a place you go when all the pubs are shut and you really need another drink and your friend has had his trousers ripped off by a Yorkshire terrier. You queue up and pay a lot of money to go in and stand at the edge of the dancefloor and watch other people wheeling and whirling about. Then you realise that actually the whole room is wheeling and whirling about, and that you have already drunk far too much and really shouldn't drink any more. So you fumble your way out of the place and stagger home, possibly being sick in someone's hedge on the way.

Anyway, the guys were all going to Spanners after work, and they invited me along. I didn't fancy it, really, but I still needed information, so I put on my cape and special jodhpurs and stepped out into the night.

Three Hundred and Twenty-Five

I am in Spanners, the nightclub. I have had half a shandy and I am off my mother-loving tits. I think they put something in it. I think it might have been beer. But it's not a problem. I can handle my drink! No, no, no, no, no, no, no problem at all, matey. Hey, do you remember that song? You know the one. Yes, you do! You know it! It

goes "No, no, no, no, no, no" then something else. Can't remember now. What was I talking about?

Oh, yes! I'm in this club and I may have had a little itty bit too much to drink. But it's fine, I'm OK. You know what, I'm glad you're here. Because, you know, we don't really talk, do we? That's the problem, no one really talks any more, do they? Listen, listen, no listen a minute, will you! 'Cos, the thing is, I think I can trust you, right? There's a connection between us, don't you think? Thing is, err - what did you say your name was again? Oh, yes, got it, well the thing I was going to say was... I've forgotten. Whatever. I think you know what I'm getting at, anyway. Let's go and get a kebab.

Three Hundred and Twenty-Six

Last night I was hoping to uncover the truth of this secret project from some of my workmates in the relaxed atmosphere of the nightclub. But this morning I woke up in a skip. My head is throbbing, my clothes are torn and somebody has been sick in my shoes. I think I have been in an accident. I think it must have been a blinking good one, as well.

I climbed out of the skip and brushed bits of kebab off me, then I noticed something unexpected sticking out of my top pocket. It was a toilet brush. Great, I had been looking for that all last week. Then I noticed something sticking out of my other top pocket. It was a piece of paper. I unfolded it and read it out loud. "This is a secret note," it said. "Don't read it out loud." I stopped reading it out

loud and carried on reading the rest to myself, although my lips did move at the same time. It told me to come to the waste recycling compound to learn something to my advantage. It was signed simply "A Friend". Odd, I didn't know anyone of that name. Intrigued, I borrowed one of the company unicycles and made my way to the waste recycling compound.

Three Hundred and Twenty-Seven

When I arrived at the waste recycling compound, I found that the chap in charge was short, incredibly furry and had a strangely pointed face. I have always been taught that it is rude to stare, so I simply complimented him on his hat and thereafter tried to avoid looking him in the eye. "Is this the waste recycling place?" I asked.

"No, it's the swimming pool," said the furry man.

"Oh, OK," I replied, and turned to go.

"Hang on, I was being sarcastic," he called after me.

"Come back, this is the recycling compound, obviously. Are you stupid, or something?"

"Yes," I replied. I get asked this question a lot, and this is how I always answer, because it makes people feel awkward and embarrassed, and they become much nicer to me afterwards. Also, it happens to be true. I have been examined by a panel of experts, and also by one enthusiastic amateur, and they all said that I was a proper thicky. This is fine by me - it means that no one ever asks

me to look after anything important, or do quadratic equations, so I reckon I'm better off, all things considered.

The man apologised and I showed him the piece of paper. He pointed to a big skip that had "waste paper" stencilled on the side and he told me it went in there. I explained that it wasn't recycling but a message, and we both had a good laugh about that for about fourteen and a half minutes, because it turns out that neither of us gets out much. Then he looked at my message and saw that it was from "A Friend".

"That's her over there," he said, pointing to a woman who was shovelling abandoned custard into the waste puddings hopper. "Anita Friend, that's who you want."

I thanked him kindly and left him to get on with making good use of the things that he found.

Three Hundred and Twenty-Eight

"Psst!" said Anita Friend.

"I don't think you're actually supposed to say 'psst'," I responded at the top of my voice. "I think you are supposed to just make the noise. This, I understand, is the time-honoured way of secretively attracting someone's attention, as described in numerous spy novels and thrillers."

"Do you want to know what's going on in this place or not?"

I considered the question. At face value, the answer seemed obvious, but it is always prudent to think these things through. Eventually I agreed that I did want to find out and I drew closer. Miss Friend was - and I mean this in a purely literal sense - an extremely sticky person. She was covered in custard, there were glops of jelly hanging wetly from her hair and a cherry stuck to her forehead.

"Sorry about my appearance," she explained. "I was attempting to defuse a trifle this morning, and it went off unexpectedly. Come closer."

I moved closer.

"Closer still," she said.

I moved still closer.

"Closer. Closer."

I moved closer, ever closer, and she stuck a sponge finger in my ear.

"Just my little joke," she said. "Calm down and I'll tell you what's going on."

Three Hundred and Twenty-Nine

"They are digging an hole," Anita Friend told me.

"An hole?"

"A big one," she explained. "In fact, it goes right through the planet. The Big Cheese wants to be able to jump through and come out on the other side."

I did a little dribble. Sorry about that. I always do that when I get confused. I asked her who The Big Cheese was and she described a huge, bloated, mouldy wedge of bread with rancid strips of lettuce hanging out and stinking like something best left undisturbed in a gentleman's washroom at a motorway service station. Well, that certainly sounded like an accurate description of my sandwich. Either that or it was Linda Blister, the assistant manager of the Easysave Megamart in Totnes. She is not a well woman. However, it was unlikely that she would be at the North Pole trying to dig a hole through to the other side of the planet. Come to think of it, it was a pretty unlikely thing for my sandwich to be doing as well.

"That's a pretty unlikely thing for The Big Cheese to be doing," I said.

Anita shrugged. "Everyone's got to have a hobby."

This was true. I knew somebody who used to lick the wheels of passing buses. Demelza Percolator, you might know her. She works in the travel agent's on Whitfield Street - she's the woman with tyre marks on her face. Anyway, Anita told me that the actual dig site was the most heavily guarded part of the complex. I asked her if she could get me in and she covered me in lipstick, strapped a frozen chicken to my head and wrapped me in clingfilm.

"That's great," I said, dribbling a little bit more. "Now, how about getting me into the dig site?"

"Can't help you there," she said.

Three Hundred and Thirty

My destination was not difficult to find. Digging a dirty great hole through the centre of the Earth is something of an undertaking and involves quite a lot of activity. You need a great deal more than just the help of a man with a shovel called Billy, who has his own torch and a relaxed attitude to overtime. I expect some of you are expecting me to do a joke about why his shovel is called Billy, but sometimes you have to be proper serious and this was one of those times.

So the actual dig site was surrounded by big lights and armed guards, and some un-armed guards, and some guard dogs who didn't appear to be armed but, for all I knew, could have been carrying concealed weapons. I considered that the direct approach would be best, so I marched up to one of the perimeter guards, told him I was here to read the gas meter and he let me through.

Well, it was certainly a big hole, with a roadway that ran round the edge and absolutely no safety rail or anything, which was a little careless. I peered over the edge into the dark abyss and felt suddenly dizzy. "Scary, isn't it?" said a voice at my shoulder.

I looked up. There was a man standing next to me holding a shovel. He reached out to shake my hand. "Hi, I'm Benedict Pipsqueak, chief engineer. This is my shovel. It's called Billy."

Three Hundred and Thirty-One

I am standing at the edge of a hole that goes right through the planet. Alongside me is the chief engineer, Benedict Pipsqueak, and he is very proud of his work. "It's very deep, isn't it?" I observe.

"Deep?" he says. "Deep? What, I should say so. Deep is what it most certainly is. In fact, it's as deep as you can get, seeing as how it comes out on the other side of the Earth. The only way you can get a deeper hole is to start digging it on a bigger planet."

Mr Pipsqueak invites me to the site office for a cup of Bovril and a fondant fancy, and starts to show me the plans and preliminary calculations for the project. I get the impression that he doesn't often have anyone to talk to. This is not surprising as he is very boring. He tells me that as a small boy he used to make small depressions in his front garden and that as he grew up he progressed to creating craters and furrows. At university he studied trenches and this led to a job digging a hole in Halifax. But the real problem, he continued to explain as I stifled a yawn, was that whenever he started to dig a hole, someone always told him to stop. What he had always yearned for was a job where he could just keep going, and at long last the opportunity had arrived.

"One thing puzzles me," I said. This was not strictly true. Many things puzzled me. For example, I had always wondered how they get the stripes into toothpaste. And if you can make stripey toothpaste, why can't you make stripey paint? But on this occasion, the thing that puzzled

me was where they'd put all the muck and the dirt and the soil that they had dug out of the hole.

"Ah, that's the really clever bit," Mr Pipsqueak said.
"We've dug another hole at the South Pole and we've shoved it all in there."

Three Hundred and Thirty-Two

Mr Pipsqueak is still boring me about digging his hole. In fact, you could say that he is boring me about boring! Because boring has two meanings, doesn't it? It can mean... look, I don't have to explain this to you. Let's just agree that it was great joke and leave it at that. One thing that I learn is that the hole is now finished. There's just a bit of tidying up to do, clearing away the last of the rubble, putting a nice fence around it, planting a few flowers and that sort of thing.

"I think this could be a huge tourist destination," said Mr Pipsqueak. "One that could easily rival Las Vegas, Disney World or even the British Lawnmower Museum in Southport. Come outside, and I'll show you what we have planned."

We stepped outside and he pointed out various areas of the site. "Obviously, when you have a hole like that, it would be criminal to ignore the bungee-jumping possibilities. There are some fierce updraughts as well, so parascending is certainly on the cards. Over there is the perfect site for a gift shop. Here, I'm thinking of a few rides, including a rollercoaster around the rim. A visitor centre here -

incorporating another gift shop - telling the story of this engineering marvel and the genius who created it. On this side, I feel we should have another gift shop. Car park over there. Not sure what to do with this area here."

"Gift shop?" I suggested.

"Brilliant," he replied.

Suddenly I heard a shout of alarm. It was the security guard who had let me in. "That's him!" he shouted. "He said he'd come to read the gas meter, but we're all electric."

Well, reader, I panicked, didn't I? With nowhere else to go, I hurtled forward and jumped straight down the hole.

Three Hundred and Thirty-Three

I don't know whether you have ever, on a whim, jumped into a big, dark, walloping great hole that passes right through to the other side of the planet, but it's an unnerving experience, I can tell you. Oh fine, it seems like a good idea at first, but then as you continue to plummet down, down, down into the depths of the Earth, you start to seriously question the life choices that have brought you to this pretty pass.

If I am entirely honest, I think it really started to go wrong for me one Tuesday in May 1989 when I went into a department store and bought a pair of brown corduroy trousers. I never wore those trousers, I hasten to point out. They remained in my wardrobe for twenty years, never having seen the light of day, until one day in 2009

when I was the victim of a heartless trouser thief. Oh yes. I was out having fun at the adventure playground, when unbeknownst to me this trouser fiend broke into my house had had it away with every trouser I owned. Well, I reported the theft, obviously, but the police didn't seem to hold out much hope of recovering my stolen clothing. And my trousers were not insured against theft - only fire and flood - so I had no option but to go around town in my pyjama bottoms for months afterwards.

You're probably wondering how a trouser theft could possibly have led to this point in my life. Well, I'm not entirely sure, but I can't help but feel that there is some connection - perhaps some species of curse? Alternatively, I might just be thinking these thoughts because I am plummeting through the darkness and the wind whistling past my ears is making my brains go funny.

Three Hundred and Thirty-Four

I am still falling down this hole. It is, as I knew when I first jumped in, a very deep hole, and so I am resigned to being here for some time. I struck a match so that I could examine the various rock strata as I passed them. I had already gone past all the building foundations and tree roots, then past a layer composed entirely of old Atari cartridges. I had passed Viking longboats, Roman ruins, megalithic dwellings and what appeared to be a crashed flying saucer. There were a lot of fossilised bones at one point. I couldn't quite make them all out because I had picked up quite a bit of speed by now, but I thought I saw

something that looked like it had four heads, something else that appeared to be a giant rabbit with wings and also a thing with an incredibly long neck and tiny legs, which looked quite comical but would probably chomp your head off if you laughed at it.

Then, after all that, it was just rocks, rocks and more rocks for a long time, then some sort of honeycomb stuff. I reached out a finger to taste it and it was quite yummy. I felt I must be nearing the core of the planet by this time, because I passed through a layer of fudge, then suddenly I encountered a region that was quite gooey and tasted of strawberry fondant. Aha! Just as I had always thought - the Earth had a soft centre.

After this my match blew out. I couldn't see a thing, but it all smelled very strongly of coconut.

Three Hundred and Thirty-Five

There is nothing like hurtling through the dark, dank depths of the Earth to make you contemplate your life choices. I was certainly in a reflective mood as I plummeted through the centre of the planet. How had it come to this, I asked myself? Maybe if I had taken technical drawing at school, instead of advanced cake welding, I would never have found myself in this pickle. Maybe I should never have set out to recover my missing sandwich. Oh sure, it had meant I had got to travel and had seen some extraordinary things. If I had stayed in the house, I would never have seen that pirate dog wearing the jetpack, Greenland's second-biggest pair of underpants

and the man who could do an impression of a spoon. I had certainly seen a lot of the world - even from the inside. They say that travel broadens the mind - they do, you know, I've heard them say it - but I think my head was probably big enough already. I was starting to think that it was time I went home. I couldn't keep going forever, not with my dodgy knees and debilitating inability to recognise the smell of asphalt. It was time to retire from sandwich hunting.

Suddenly there was a blinding glare as I shot out of the other side of the planet. There was a man wearing a hat festooned with corkscrews, a tin of Fosters in one hand, his didgeridoo in the other and with a billabong strapped to his jumbuck. "G'day cobbler," he said as I hurtled past him and up into the sky. I do love a national stereotype. I went up, up, uppity-up-up, then gravity caught up with me and I began to fall back down. "No worries, mate," said the man as I plunged past him and back into the hole.

Three Hundred and Thirty-Six

I think I am probably the first fellow to fall right through the planet and out the other side. What an achievement! I think this might be a *Guinness Book of Records* record. I wonder if I will get a certificate and if my name will appear in in the *Guinness Book of Records* book. At home, I have got a copy of the book of *Guinness Book of Records* book for 1996. I shall check when I get back to see if my name has appeared in it - in the "falling through stuff" section, probably. Ha, take that Kevin!

I am referring to my friend Kevin, who is a dirty big fat head because he has three Guinness Book of Records records, or so he says.

One is for being able to jump up to the moon. He says that jumping up to the moon was easy, but jumping back down again was hard, because you have to bend your knees properly when you land. Another one is for growing the biggest carrot. Kevin reckons that it is five miles long, and is currently floating off the coast of Norfolk where it is used as a pirate radio station. I don't know why pirates need their own radio station. I imagine it plays a lot of sea shanties. The third record concerns an unspecified incident with a wheelbarrow, that Kevin said he can't go into for reasons of national security.

Anyway, we had a look at his certificates, and they were all done in crayon, so either Kevin made them all up himself or the Guinness Book of Records has really gone downhill in recent years.

Three Hundred and Thirty-Seven

Now I know what a yo-yo feels like, boinging up and down like a proper wotsit, until your head gets all wonky and your string gets proper tangled. You see, I fell down this hole right through the middle of the planet, then get yanked most of the way back again, then hurtled off down south again - back and forth, back and forth, gradually losing momentum until after about a week, or possibly six hours, or maybe two months, I finally came to rest,

floating in the middle of the planet. In the dark. With my ears ringing. And feeling a bit sick.

It's dark here. And lonely. You might be wondering what it feels like to be at the centre of the planet, with all the gravitational forces pulling you in all directions, and the magnetic fields thrumming through your temples. Well, I wonder if you have ever been on a waltzer after you have drunk a lot of fizzy pop and had a hot dog that disagrees with you? Well, it's nothing like that. Of course, the real problem was that there was no realistic possibility of escape. Whichever way I went, north or south, it involved a climb of about four thousand miles, which I don't think I could manage. I didn't think my fingernails were up to it. I was reliant on someone lowering down a rope, which seemed unlikely.

Unless... No, on second thoughts, I'm not trying that again. I'm still writing letters of apology after the last time.

Then suddenly, and to my considerable surprise, someone switched on a light.

Three Hundred and Thirty-Eight

I have journeyed to the centre of the Earth and, disappointingly, there are no stop-motion dinosaurs or giant crabs or lost prehistoric tribes. All those films were lying to us. What there is, however, is a light. It's just appeared: a couple of flickering fluorescent tubes in a nearby window. A man appears with a set of jangling keys and opens up a roller shutter. More windows; more lights,

including a bright neon sign that reads: "The Centre of the Earth Experience." No, that's not quite right. What it actually says is: "The Cen r of th Earth E perience," because some of the letters are not working.

Well, this is brilliant - a visitors' centre. Just what this place needs. I waited a few moments to give them chance to open properly, then I went in. There was only one staff member - the same guy who had opened up. He was a bored looking bloke with long, lank hair, red-rimmed eyes and an extremely pale complexion, and when he looked up he seemed quite shocked to see me.

"One please," I said.

"One what?" he asked, extremely nonplussed.

"One ticket," I said. "To the visitor centre. For me."

"Blimey," he said. "A customer."

Three Hundred and Thirty-Nine

The man at The Centre of the Earth Experience charged me £28.50 to enter and told me that they didn't get many visitors. I told him that I wasn't surprised at those prices. He said his name was Kennington Weeble, but that I could call him Ken. I told him firmly that I would address him as Mr Weeble, because I didn't want people thinking we were friends or anything.

The ticket price did include an audio tour of the exhibition. This involved Mr Weeble following me around and

whispering various nuggets of information over my shoulder. I wasn't permitted to turn round and look at him as this was strictly an audio presentation, but this suited me because I had noticed that he had a particularly revolting wart that reminded me of my cousin Cyril.

I suppose you are wondering what you can expect to find if you visit The Centre of the Earth Experience? Well, there is a fine selection of rocks of various sizes, although I couldn't tell you what they were because they were all simply labelled "A Rock." There is an interactive display of the Earth's core, and when you press a button it rumbles a bit and pieces fall off, to simulate an earthquake (Mr Weeble told me that the bits falling off were not intentional). There is also a gift shop, of course, where Mr Weeble will sell you Centre of the Earth tea-towels, Centre of the Earth keyrings and an "I've visited The Centre of the Earth Experience" baseball cap.

The place is a little difficult to get to, but there is ample car parking space and the cafe does a wonderful strawberry cheesecake. All in all, a great day out for the family - four stars.

Three Hundred and Forty

In addition to The Centre of the Earth Experience, my ticket also gave me entrance to the adjacent *Newsnight* museum. *Newsnight* - for people who don't know, like my thick friend Kevin - is a BBC current affairs programme that started in the last century and has a huge fanbase all around the world. There are loads of *Newsnight* fan clubs

and people write *Newsnight* fan-fiction and there are regular *Newsnight* conventions where people dress up in their favourite *Newsnight* costumes and get to meet real *Newsnight* presenters and annoy them. The museum contains a fascinating collection of genuine *Newsnight* memorabilia, such as Peter Snow's shoes, Emily Maitlis's iPad and a real, stuffed Jeremy Paxman. And the great thing is that none of this stuff is in cases or nailed down or anything, so you can just help yourself. I nicked Evan Davis's pen and a lock of Jeremy Vine's hair. I also whipped a couple of t-shirts and one of the boardgames from the gift shop.

Three Hundred and Forty-One

Once you have visited the museums and looked at all the rocks, there really isn't a great deal to do at the centre of the Earth. I went to the gent's and played with the hand dryer for a bit. Where does all that hot air come from? When you think about it, all these hand dryers and air conditioning units and hair dryers and stuff are pumping the atmosphere full of all this hot air, so it's no wonder that the whole global warming business is kicking off. Of course, there is an upside - all this additional air makes the sky much bigger, so there is more room for planes to fly about. But then, more sky means more weather, and we already have quite enough of that at the moment, thank you very much.

I could have been a weatherman, you know. Oh yes. I used to have my own stick and I cut out some clouds from

an old magazine, and I would practise for ages and ages putting them on a map and pointing at them. The map was actually a page from an A-Z of Loughborough, but you have to start small. I remember that it used to rain a lot over the Tesco Express on Leicester Road and that Halfords once got annihilated by ball lightning. I did an audition once for the telly, and they told me that although my pointy stick technique was excellent, I was far too shouty and I would probably scare old ladies.

Three Hundred and Forty-Two

The centre of the Earth is boring and I figured that it was high time I was getting out of there. I went to the museum and asked Mr Weeble if it would be possible to get a taxi to take me home. He said that they didn't often venture south of the mantle at this time of night, and in any case the fare was likely to be equivalent to the gross national product of Portugal. He did, however, tell me that there was a tube station nearby, so I thanked him kindly, gave him a kiss on each cheek, then toddled off.

The Centre on the Earth is one of the quieter stations on the London Underground. There were plans to close it a few years ago, but it was saved following a public outcry. When I arrived there was only one other person waiting, a tall man wearing a smart suit and a paisley cravat. He had bouffant hair and wrinkled skin and reminded me a little bit of an orange - except the hair of course. I have never seen a hairy orange.

He nodded at me politely, then completely ignored me and avoided all eye contact, the way that commuters do when they haven't been formally introduced. After about five minutes of this, I decided that I would break the silence - this I did by blowing a series of raspberries of increasing length and duration. He coughed and took a step away from me. Still, it had broken the ice and so I observed that it wasn't very busy. He agreed with me. I then commented that it had been a nice day. He said yes, it had been a nice day. I then said we had had much better weather today than we had had yesterday. Once more he concurred, and I felt by now that we were going to become firm friends.

Three Hundred and Forty-Three

I asked the man waiting at the platform what time the train was due. He said two-thirty. I asked him what time it was now. He said it wasn't.

"Wasn't what?" I asked.

"This is the centre of the Earth," he explained. "There isn't a time here. All the time is on the outside of the planet."

Wooh, this made my brain go all fizzy. How can there be no time? Although, thinking about it, lots of people have told me that they also suffer from a deficiency of time. They say things like "I haven't got time to talk to you right now." Or "I've got no time for your grotty nonsense." Or even "Whenever I listen to you, time seems to stand still

and I start to fear that I will forever be trapped in an endless echoing limbo, with no hope of escape or even a moment's relief from your interminable, annoying, irritating drivel."

On the other hand, I have lots of time, because of a fancy trick that I have developed. Every so often, I change my phone contract to take advantage of all the free minutes that they offer. I have collected all these free minutes and put them in a shoebox underneath my bed. I must have a couple of years' worth now.

I was about to say that it was a pity that I didn't have my shoebox with me, because then there would be enough time for the train to arrive, when suddenly this no was no longer an issue, because the train arrived.

Three Hundred and Forty-Four

The train that arrived at the underground station was not a typical underground train. This one was a big old steam train, all puffing and a-chuffing, and the carriages were all fancy and plush, and weren't covered in sick. It had big comfy seats and polished walnut tables and posh ding-dongs all over the wotsits. The conductor was very nice, as well. He didn't try to punch me and throw me out the window, which is what most conductors do.

"Could I have a single to my house, please?" I asked him.

"Smoking or non-smoking?" he asked.

"I'd like to fume quietly for a while, with the option of starting to sizzle later on," I replied.

He gave me my ticket, although he didn't use one of those horrid whirry machine type things. He wrote it out in posh handwriting with a fountain pen, which was a nice touch. Then he rubber-stamped my forehead, which was less pleasant and left me a bit dizzy. I took my seat and someone gave me a complimentary glass of champagne and a marmite sandwich. Then the conductor blew his whistle, the train suddenly lurched forward, I smashed my face into the back of the seat in front and everything went dark.

Three Hundred and Forty-Five

I woke up with sound of ringing in my ears, all wet down my front and covered in marmite. Oh no, not again. Can someone call my cousin Erica and let her know it's happened again. Tell her that I'm going to need a bucket, some wet wipes and my special hosepipe attachment.

Anyway, at least this time I was waking up in comfort, rather than in the bottle bank round the back of Asda. I was stuck in there for hours, and it was dark and sticky, and whenever I shouted for help people just ran away. And some of the things that people were sticking in there were most definitely not bottles. Thankfully I was rescued by a local butcher, who lowered a string of sausages down, enabling me to crawl out through the hole marked "Green Glass Only". The worst thing about the whole experience was that I think there was someone else in there with me

the whole time. I could have sworn I could hear them breathing, and at one time they whispered the words "Doreen is a dirty, dirty girl" right down my ear hole.

This time I was waking up on this very posh train, and everything was moderately OK, even though I was in a bit of a state and the rich-looking woman sitting across the aisle was looking at me as if I'd just crawled out of a bottle bank.

Three Hundred and Forty-Six

I have observed that the woman sitting across from me looks extremely rich, dripping as she is with about four hundredweight of pearls, diamonds, emeralds and other assorted sparklies. In fact, everyone in this carriage looks quite respectable and I'm sure that most are not short of a few quid. There's a very fat chap in a three-piece suit, puffing on a cigar. Judging by all the toadies surrounding him, I imagine he is some important businessman. There is a glamorous young woman staring wistfully out of the window, a cigarette holder held elegantly in her fingers. There is a very prim young vicar, his eyes occasionally darting around the carriage nervously. There is also an army general, a nun and an eccentric-looking professor.

Made me feel rather self-conscious, sitting there in my anorak, covered in marmite. Good job no one had been murdered, since I was bound to be suspect number one. Suddenly there was a blood-curdling scream. A woman staggered into the carriage, shouted "He's dead!" then

collapsed in a dead faint. Oh gosh, I thought, now I'm for it.

Three Hundred and Forty-Seven

"Nobody move," said a short, neat-looking man, who suddenly entered the carriage. He had a trim little moustache, a sharp eye and a nose that looked really quite spectacular from a certain angle. "There has been a murder!"

"Yes, he's through there," said the conductor, entering from the opposite end and gesturing over his shoulder. "Terrible trip-hazard. I nearly fell over him."

"Ho ho!" said the dapper little man. "Then, Monsieur, it appears there have been two murders!"

"Yes," said the vicar. "This woman just came in screaming - "

"Ho ho ho!" interrupted the moustachioed man, seeing the woman who had fainted for the first time. "Why what is this? A third murder! I see our murderer has been very busy, no? But no matter, I will soon catch this foul villain, for I am none other than the celebrated Belgian detective Monsieur Anton La Cranque."

"A private dick?" asked the general.

"Non, monsieur, just a clever dick," said the great detective, smugly. "But wait, what is this? This woman is not dead."

The woman who had fainted was beginning to stir, and Monsieur La Cranque seemed genuinely disappointed that she was alive. He leaned over to me and whispered confidentially, "This is most inconvenient. I had already decided to call this case 'The Mystery of the Three Murders'. Let us hope that someone else gets bumped off very soon, no?" And he looked at me in a way that I was not entirely happy with.

Three Hundred and Forty-Eight

The celebrated detective Monsieur Anton La Cranque has arrived to investigate an indeterminate number of murders that have happened on our train. He has recruited me as his sidekick - presumably because I have an honest face and a nice anorak - and together we are interrogating a woman who may or may not have been murdered. She had been helped into a seat and was looking pale and distressed.

"Now then Colin," said the celebrated detective. "Please to tell us why you have been murdered?"

"My name's not Colin," said the woman. "It's Trixie Glassenmeyer."

Monsieur La Cranque shrugged. "An obvious non-de-plume," he said to me over his shoulder. "It is no matter."

"And I have not been murdered," said Trixie, or possibly Colin. "I've just had a terrible shock."

"Being murdered would indeed come as a terrible shock, no?" La Cranque suggested.

"I suppose it would," said Trixie. "But I am absolutely certain that I have not been murdered. I would have noticed."

"Not, madame, if the murderer had crept up on you from behind," said La Cranque. "You could easily have been murdered without your knowledge. You could have simply carried on with your day without a care in the world until someone - let's say, for example, a suave and elegant Belgian detective - had pointed it out to you."

"I have not been murdered!" she insisted. "I merely fainted when I discovered that my chauffeur had been murdered."

"Ah ha!" cried Monsieur La Cranque. "So, it is your chauffeur who has been murdered? Finally, we get to the truth."

"Yes!"

"Are you sure he has not merely fainted?"

Three Hundred and Forty-Nine

We went through to the next carriage where the body of Trixie Glassenmeyer's chauffeur lay. He didn't look well. Monsieur La Cranque prodded him with the tip of his shoe. "He doesn't look well," he observed. "Are we sure that this man has not simply fainted?"

"He's got a big axe sticking out of his back," I said.

"Hmm, yes. A very traumatic happenstance," said La Cranque. "No wonder he has fainted."

"He's dead! He's dead! My chauffeur is dead!" cried Trixie.

"Madame, you must not jump to conclusions," La Cranque said as he playfully slapped her across the face. "In my business, it is rare that matters turn out to be so straightforward. Should we not consider, perhaps, that this man may perhaps be pretending? Maybe this is not the real chauffeur at all, but a crude facsimile fashioned from chicken wire and earwax? Or maybe this is perhaps a figment of someone's outrageously fertile imagination? But we are missing the biggest mystery here - what is a chauffeur doing on a train?"

Trixie looked puzzled. "Why should he not travel by train?"

"Because chauffeurs travel in cars," said La Cranque breezily. "This was one of the first things they taught us at detective school. So it is strange to find him on a train, no? Just as it would be strange to find a pilot on a submarine, an engine driver on a bus or a balloonist being fired out of a cannon."

We all had to agree that this last one in particular would be quite unusual. At this point a small weaselly little man thrust his way forward. "Am I right in thinking that this man was in your employ when he was cruelly struck down?" he asked. Trixie agreed tearfully that he was. "In

which case, the man continued, "he has suffered an accident whilst at work that was not his fault, and I am advising my client to sue for every penny he can get."

Three Hundred and Fifty

The little weaselly man was called Pontius Thunderbox and his name was the only impressive thing about him. He was a nervous, shifty, twitchy little chap who had the uncanny ability to be annoying by just being there. He reminded me of a gerbil we once had. We dropped a wardrobe on it. Not deliberately, you understand - it was just one of those tragic, common, household furniture-rodent-type accidents that occur on an everyday basis. It was really upsetting, actually, because I really loved that wardrobe.

Anyway, here was Pontius Thunderbox, being all grotty and annoying and sadly there wasn't a wardrobe in sight. Thunderbox was from one of those claim companies that is always advertising on the tellybox, telling you that nothing is ever your fault and you can always sue somebody else for squillions and gadzillions of pounds. Well, it's a con. I once tried to sue my local fish shop because my chips were too cold but all I got was a free pasty and funny looks from the spotty girl who mixes the batter.

Three Hundred and Fifty-One

Pontius Thunderbox took witness statements from each of us, asked us how fast we were going when the chauffeur was murdered, then wanted us to draw a diagram of the incident, showing where each of us was at the time. I don't really do drawing because of a special condition I have called "wobbly hand". At school I was excused crayons because I kept shoving them up my nose, in my ears and into other places. At first they thought I was being deliberately disruptive but then they took me to a special therapist, and after I had jabbed him several times with an HB pencil, he declared that I had this wobbly hand condition. This was good, apparently, because it meant that they could get a grant for me, whereas if I had just been a bit wrong in the brains they wouldn't have got a penny. I also kept setting fire to the geography teacher, but no one ever did manage to work out why I did that.

Anyhow, for my diagram I did my absolute bestest to draw a picture of a cat - there were no cats on the scene, but I thought it might brighten the place up, especially if I coloured it in. Unfortunately it went a bit wrong and I ended up tearing through the paper and breaking a table. I really, really, really can't draw. Then I wrote my name on what was left of it - Gary Lineker. My name is not Gary Linkeker, of course - he is the man who does football and crisps - but you never ever give your real name in these situations. Luckily, the train arrived at my stop, so I got off and left them all to it.

Three Hundred and Fifty-Two

The train has finally delivered me home, I think. I stepped onto the platform, went up the stairs and emerged into some sort of jungle. Tall trees towered above me, their branches interlocking to form a thick green canopy. Sinewy vines hung down in great loops and swirls. The air was heavy and humid, and buzzing with insects. Thick roots and dense ferns laced themselves across the forest floor and even the branch of WHSmith standing by the station entrance was festooned with creepers.

I looked at my ticket. Yep, it definitely said that it was a one-way ticket to my house. I looked up and doubtfully shook my head. This place didn't look like my street at all. I went into the WHSmith, selected a can of fizzy pop, a Twix, a pocket diary and a copy of a special magazine about power tools. Then I took them to the lady on the checkout and paid for them with a Scottish pound note.

"Do you want any chocolate with that?" said the lady, without looking up.

"I have got chocolate," I said, pointing to the Twix with one of my favourite fingers.

"Yeah, do you want chocolate with your chocolate?" the lady asked. "We have a special offer on chocolate. When you buy chocolate, you get chocolate for half price. It's very good chocolate. For someone who likes chocolate, our chocolate offer is ideal. So, chocolate?"

"Please stop saying chocolate," I said. "It is fattening." Then, just to be difficult, I put the Twix back.

Three Hundred and Fifty-Three

I am in a WHSmith in some sort of hot and steamy jungle location, we have established that I don't want any cut price chocolate and this is as much progress as we have made so far. "Where am I?" I asked the lady behind the till.

"You are in WHSmith," she said.

"Good," I said. "Let's use that as a starting point and work outwards from there. Where is this WHSmith, because that jungle out there doesn't look much like my road. Not unless the council have neglected the grass verges since I was last there."

"You're in the Lost Kingdom of Morken Ra," said the lady. "We're twinned with Stockport and it's in the catchment area for one of the best schools in the country, so the property prices are astronomical. That will be £7.69 please."

I thought this was a steep price to pay for a little bit of local knowledge, but then I realised that she was charging me for my purchases. "Right," I said. "So how do I find my way to the bus station from here?"

"Turn left at the end of the counter, go down by the DIY magazines, past the ice cream freezer, turn right by the daily newspapers then straight out the front door," she said helpfully. "After that, you're on your own."

Three Hundred and Fifty-Four

I am thrashing my way through the jungle, trying to find this blinking bus station, and the task is made all the more difficult by the lack of signs. Suddenly I hear a thwack, thwack, thwack noise. A dirty great machete cleaves the branches in front of me and a sweaty red-faced man appears from the undergrowth. He's dressed in khaki shorts and pith helmet, and he has a huge walrus moustache that seems to have lots of creepy crawlies living in it - spiders and beetles and grubs and stuff. Wouldn't be all that surprised if it had a huge walrus in it, come to think of it.

"Good gad!" he cries, eyes wide with surprise. "Bless my soul, what the devil are you doing here, young feller me lad?" I told him I was looking for the bus station. He shook his head sorrowfully and put an arm around my shoulders. "The bus station, eh? Well, well, well now. I've been looking for the bus station for thirty years and never found it. Beginning to think it don't exist. Come to that, last bus I saw was in 2002, and that plunged over a cliff and sank into a swamp shortly afterwards. I can still see the whites of the driver's eyes as it went down. Glub, glub, glub, it went. Poor man."

"Right," I said thoughtfully, upon receiving this news. "No buses. No chance of a taxi, I suppose?"

My new friend looked wistful. "Ah, there were taxis in the old days," he said. "Before the great migration. You won't find one this far south, not these days. But stick with me,

laddo, and I'll see you safely on your way back to civilisation. Probably."

Three Hundred and Fifty-Five

My new friend introduced himself as none other than Sir Malcolm Trousers, who, along with his brother Roderick, invented the digital lawnmower. This, you will recall, was the first lawnmower to have an "undo" function - capable of restoring a perfectly cut lawn to its former unkempt glory at the touch of a button - and was surely the greatest gardening innovation by a pair of Trousers of all time.

These days Sir Malcolm was a professional explorer, although this was his day off. Thirty years ago he had popped out to the shops for a pint of milk and a packet of jammie dodgers, had taken a wrong turn and had been trying to find his way home ever since. Technically he was currently AWOL - off the clock and exploring in his own time.

"Oh yes, most large companies employ a full-time explorer these days," Sir Malcolm replied, which was odd because I hadn't asked him anything. Nevertheless, I let the silly man go on. "Although, between you and me, laddie, I think it's a tax dodge. Y'see, there's not much of the world that hasn't been explored by now. At least, most of the bits that are worth exploring have been ticked off - the rest is either too blasted hot, too blasted cold, or full of crabs."

"Crabs?"

"Crabs, laddie," he repeated, his moustache twitching in consternation. "Big snappy crabs. Nasty blighters. Anyhow, that's why most explorers now don't really bother: they keep it local, picking over waste ground, ferreting around behind bins and that sort of thing."

Suddenly we heard the sound of distant drumming and Sir Malcolm dropped into a low crouch. A man of his age could do himself a mischief like that.

Three Hundred and Fifty-Six

Sir Malcolm remained balanced on his haunches until the noise of the drumming stopped and then he slowly and quietly fell over. "Did you hear that?" he said, picking himself up and brushing all the icky slimy moss and goo off his nice clean safari suit. "That's the noise that's been driving me mad for years."

"Oh yeah, I know what you mean," I said sympathetically. "My neighbour has got a trampoline and the noise that makes is enough to drive you crackers. Boing, boing, boing, boing it goes, all the blinking time."

"The drums, the endless drums - " Sir Malcolm continued, getting unnecessarily dramatic, but I interrupted him.

"Boing, boing, boing, boing, it goes," I said. "All night and day. Boing, boing, boing, blinking boing."

"Yes, well, these drums - "

"I've told him, I've said to him, I can't be doing with all this boinging twenty-four hours a day," I explained. "It annoys my fish and the postman refuses to deliver registered packages."

"Terrible," Sir Malcolm agreed. "Anyway, about these drums - "

"Boing, boing, boing, boing," I continued. "Although sometimes there is just boing, boing, boing... and then it stops."

I looked at Sir Malcolm. Sir Malcolm looked back at me, waiting for me to continue. A moment or two passed in which neither of us said nothing. "Well, these drums - " Sir Malcolm began.

"And then it starts up again," I said. "Boing, boing, boing, boing, boing, boing, boing, boing."

In retrospect I realised that he was probably quite right to hit me with that log.

Three Hundred and Fifty-Seven

Sometimes it is quite refreshing to be smacked around the head with a filthy great tree branch. It loosens the wax out of your ears, gives you an opportunity to practise your screaming and gives you a fresh perspective on any given situation. It doesn't half hurt though, plus it leaves you with an odd pounding noise in your ears. After a while, I realised that the noise wasn't in my head - the drums had started up again.

Sir Malcolm helped me to my feet. "Sorry about that, laddie," he said. "But you were doing my head in."

"No problem, Sir Malc," I replied airily. "Happens all the time. In fact, I don't really feel that I've really started to bond with someone until they've clobbered me. Anyway, what's that noise?"

In response to this question, Sir Malcolm was seized with a sudden fervour, and became all glumtious, and not a little discompropatable. "That, laddie, is the long-tailed Ringo monkey," he said, and went on to explain how this rare and improbable creature drove its prey mad by sitting in a tree, playing its bongos and refusing to sign autographs. "No one's ever caught one alive, but perhaps now, with your help, I could be the first. Are you with me?"

I looked at my watch, shrugged and said that I had nothing else on so, yeah, why not?

Three Hundred and Fifty-Eight

There is a phrase that some people say that goes "softly, softly, catchee monkey." Well, it is a stupid thing to say and I don't know why people say it. Clearly these people have never tried to catch a real monkey - certainly not a long-tailed Ringo monkey, in any case, because the technique is quite different. The Ringo monkey is known for its incessant and irritating drumming, and so to ingratiate yourself with it you have to kick up an equally annoying racket of your own. To this end, Sir Malcolm strapped a big bass drum to my chest and told me to

thump on it to distract the monkey. Not sure where he managed to get a big bass drum in the middle of the jungle - probably the same place as he got the jet ski and the signed photograph of Freddie Flintoff.

Anyhow, it was easy enough to locate the monkey's tree and I stood in front of it banging away for all I was worth. Boom boom, bang bang, boom boom, is how I went. While all this was going on, Sir Malcolm crept behind the tree, his plan being to wait for the optimum moment to hurl a cricket ball at the unsuspecting monkey, knock it off its perch and catch it in a big net. How could it possibly go wrong? Well listen up and I'll tell you.

I was booming and a-banging and booming on my big bass drum. The Ringo monkey was thumping and a-thwacking and thumping on his bongos. We'd got quite a good little session going on and I was beginning to think that it was a pity that the poor thing was about to get brained. Anyway, Sir Malcolm saw his chance and hurled the cricket ball - overarm, it was a perfect throw. And, what do do know, the monkey caught it! Well, Sir Malcolm was nothing if not a true sportsman and, realising he'd been caught out, said fair play and retired to the pavilion.

Three Hundred and Fifty-Nine

Me and the monkey drummed into the night and had a right old time, I can tell you. At one point a couple of snakes came along and joined in on maracas, and we also had a sloth on tambourine. He couldn't keep time and kept nodding off, but it didn't really matter because it was

just one of those sessions, you know? I hadn't had this much fun since I supported The Who in 1973, and there's plenty of stories I can tell you about that! Or rather, I could if Pete Townshend wasn't so litigious.

We finally called it a day in the early hours of the morning and, as a parting gift, the monkey gave me an ancient stone tablet. I would have preferred a sausage roll or a novelty bookmark that said "A Present from Whitby", but I accepted it graciously and waited until I was out of sight before I hurled it away. Except that I didn't hurl it away! Oh no, no, no, no. Because as I drew back my arm, I noticed strange markings on its surface. Was it a secret text? Pah, no, course not. It was a sticker telling me not to peel the sticker off or it would invalidate the warranty. Well, it was a really old and grotty bit of stone so I figured that it was probably out of guarantee anyway. Plus, I didn't have the receipt, so I reckoned there was nothing to lose, so I tried to remove the sticker. It was one of those nasty horrid stickers where all that happens is the top layer comes off and you are left with a lot of gummy, sticky mess that you have to piggle off bit by bit by bit. Piggle, piggle, piggle, piggle I went, until there was all this horrid gloopy mess under my fingernail. Then I thought to heck with this, I need to soak it off, so I dropped it in a stream. All of a suddenness my tablet started to fizz and crumble! Oh heck, it was soluble.

Three Hundred and Sixty

Bubble, hiss, squeak, fizz, pop, blub, blub, blub. Don't worry, I've not gone all wotsit in the doo-dah like some grotty brainiac mangle-propsy. That is the noise what my tablet made as I dropped it in the stream and started to dissolve. Now I will never know what it said under that sticker. But wait - look! Are you looking? Can you see what I can see? No, of course you can't because I'm doing this in writing and not in pictures. All right, I'll tell you.

As the tablet sank and crumbled, all these bubbles started to rise up and they formed a pattern on the surface of the water. I recognised them instantly, they were hieroglyphics - or, I suppose, in this case they were hydroglyphics. We did them at school. You see, back in olden times people used to write in pictures. Then we invented words and this was a great advance, especially if you couldn't draw, and it also meant you could write about abstract things like "hope", "futility" and other things for which there were no corresponding images. Now, of course, we've gone back to using hieroglyphics, only today they call them "emojis", and once more there is no hope and it is impossible to adequately express the concept of futility.

Three Hundred and Sixty-One

The hieroglyphics on the water were beginning to fade away - pop, pop, pop they went as the bubbles burst and the figures gradually disappeared. I whipped out my

notebook and pencil and rapidly began to jot them down. Scratch, scratch, scratch the end of my pencil went on the paper. This was really difficult. Then I flipped the pencil round and used the pointy end and things went a lot easier.

With a final glub-glub-glub, gurgle-gurgle-gurgle, the hieroglyphics disappeared from view. Actually, that last gurgle was my stomach because I hadn't had any breakfast that morning. In fact, I don't think I had had any breakfast since I'd left home all that time ago on this stupid errand to track down my sandwich. It really was time I went home - there were some Coco Pops in the cupboard and I needed to get back before the milk went off.

I studied the hieroglyphics. There was a road, a pyramid, a bird, a fish - actually, the fish was a real one that had been in the water and I had sketched by mistake - an eye, a man walking sideways and something that I couldn't quite make out at first. I turned my notebook sideways. Ah ha, it was a bus station! These must be instructions on how to get there. At last, I was going home!

Three Hundred and Sixty-Two

I tromped happily through the jungle - tromp, tromp, trompity tromp - singing a cheery song to myself as I went. It was a song about a donkey called Trevor who enjoyed playing crown green bowls. I think it may have been based on a true story. Anyway, the reason that I was happy was that I had found directions to the bus station - I was going home and I didn't care any more about my grotty old

sandwich. There are more important things in life than old sandwiches, such as bumper cars, fancy wrought iron toast racks, adjustable spanners, ornamental fountains, certain board games and woolly jumpers. This is not an exhaustive list, you understand. The point is that there are times when you have to let go. There are plenty of times when you shouldn't let go, of course. When you are climbing a mountain, for example, or hanging off the undercarriage of a light aircraft. The trick is figuring out when to let go and when to cling on for dear life. And as I made my way home, I reckoned I would be perfectly content if I never saw my sandwich ever again.

Then I saw a flash of white through the trees up ahead. A glimpse of a tatty crust as some giant bread-based monstrosity languorously dragged its mighty bulk through the jungle. Could there yet be one more chance to salvage something from this grotty mess and achieve my goal?

Three Hundred and Sixty-Three

I saw my sandwich! It was just a fleeting glimpse through the trees but I could recognise those damp strips of brown lettuce anywhere. I set off in hot pursuit, crashing through the undergrowth, barging past wet stringy dampers that lashed my face, ignoring the thorny jagers that tore at my skin and not even bothering about all the squishy muckiness that I stepped in. I emerged from the trees at the foot of a cliff and looked up to see my sandwich climbing rapidly up the rocks in that special way that only sandwiches can.

Oh no, I can't climb! Not because I am a big scaredy wuss who is afraid of heights, you understand. No, it's a medical condition that makes it impossible for me to climb. My knees bend the wrong way, you see. Going upstairs is a nightmare, but boy, you should see me limbo. But then I suddenly remembered that fifteen years ago I had invested in a pair of stick-o-matic high altitude suction mitts, guaranteed to adhere to any surface. I had never had the opportunity to use them until now, so I slipped them on and started to climb, congratulating myself that the bargain price of £29.99 plus postage and packing had indeed been money well spent. I remember my friend Kevin laughing at me at the time. Well he's not laughing now, is he - for a number of reasons, not least because of the accident with the piano. It was his own fault for keeping his mouth open.

I paused to look upwards, in time to see my sandwich drag itself into an opening in the cliff face. I turned the dial on the suction mitts up to eleven and very soon I found myself entering a dark, smelly cave. I couldn't see a thing, but moments later I felt a hand on my shoulder.

Three Hundred and Sixty-Four

I am in a dark cave high up on a cliff face, and someone has put their hand on my shoulder. What fresh doings can this be, I think to myself, and then a moment later someone speaks and my worst fears are confirmed.

"Lovely view from here, I think you'll agree," said the voice. "And, of course, it's so handy for the shops."

Oh heck, it was an estate agent. I don't recall whether I have mentioned this before - I have a feeling that it may have come up once or twice - but estate agents are easily the dullest people on the planet. If you were to be offered a choice between talking to an estate agent and ramming your head into a cement mixer and letting it spin you round and round and round, you would easily choose the cement mixer option, for though it would hurt like stink, leave you with a permanent ringing in your ears and possibly tie your spine into an interesting series of knots, it would nevertheless be preferable to listening to whatever it is that estate agents bang on about all the blinking time.

This one, I gather, was trying to sell me this cave. "Oh yes," the slimy git was saying, "it's not often that we get caves like this coming onto the market. And when they do, they tend to get snapped up straight away. We had a hole in the ground come up a couple of months ago and we got four offers before we'd even put it on the website. Last year we had a cavern, now that was a really swanky place."

You can't argue with these people either. Here, I'll demonstrate: "It's cold, it's dark and it smells," I said.

"Yes, it does maintain a constant cool temperature," he said. "Very refreshing when you step inside from the baking jungle heat. And the mood lighting is an especially nice touch. As for the distinctive aroma, well you can thank the slime running down the walls for that."

"Look, I'm not interested," I protested. "I only came in here looking for my sandwich, and frankly - "

The estate agent suddenly clutched at my shoulder in feverish excitement. "Oh my gosh," he said. "You're *him!*"

Three Hundred and Sixty-Five

It's not every day that you meet an estate agent in a cave who seems to know all about your ongoing attempts to track down your giant missing sandwich. In fact, if I'm honest, it had only happened to me twice before, although in one case he hadn't been a proper estate agent, just the man who put up the "For Sale" signs. So when this guy seemed to know all about my struggle, I was somewhere between flummoxed and flabbergasted.

And it wasn't just him; he took me to meet the rest of his people. There was a whole tribe of estate agents in a clearing in the jungle, living in a series of bamboo huts - by which I mean a picturesque village of affordable starter homes constructed from locally sourced sustainable materials and with easy access to shops and other nearby amenities. They all seemed to know about my adventures - the gentlemen estate agents, the lady estate agents, the little boy and girl estate agents. They had their own newsletter about me, they drew pictures and even acted out little dramas about my exploits.

"Tell us!" they cried. "Tell us all about your adventures in another dimension! Tell us what it was like when you were in that banjo band with the meerkats? Tell us what happened to that outboard motor that you bought in episode twenty-eight! Tell us your whole story, in detail, right from the very beginning!"

I really didn't know how to feel about this. I was all ready to jack it all in and go home, and yet here, in this wilderness, was a group of people who were actually interested in my doings. Admittedly, there was only a handful of them, they were weirdos and I had nothing but contempt for them, but an audience is an audience, right? So we sat around a camp fire and while they picked fleas off each other and tried to sell each other bungalows, I cast my mind back to the very beginning and started to unfold my tale.

"I moved the fridge yester-Wednesday," I told them sombrely, "and I found an old sandwich, all stinked up and loathsome. Ham and cheese, I think it may have been once upon a while. Normally I would hurl something like that onto the roof with all the other sludgy nonsense, but this one was different..."

"When I woke up this morning the sky was loathsome and the clouds were grotty, and this was not nice ."