## INTRODUCTION

Let's get this straight from the start: I'm not a writer. In fact, certainly as far as recent memory can recall I dont think I've written anything longer than a text message asking my dad to tape 'X-Factor' for me. But in my defence, my text messages are at least written in full, correctly spelled English language and not the coded nonsense currently favoured by teenagers of today.

The thing is, it is commonly said that we all have a book inside us that's bursting to get out. Not sure myself if that is true of absolutely everyone. A lot of people in the past have taken great pleasure in pointing out to me that I'm simply full of shit, which wouldn't leave much room for a book, or even a small informational pamphlet. As for ninety percent of what does come 'bursting out' of me, it would imply that those people are correct.

Nevertheless I have decided to put pen to paper, or finger to keyboard, and offer my experiences of life to one and all. Some may say that, at thirty-nine years old there are still a great many experiences that I haven't yet... er... experienced. This is very true. After all, I haven’t even reached that age, and I think it's around sixty or seventy, where one ceases to 'fall over' in favour of 'having a fall'. That same age where you can freely tell female friends and family that they're putting on weight without worrying that you could possibly be upsetting them, and the age where you insist on paying for everything at the local Co-op using the exact change regardless of whether there's a queue behind you stretching as far back as the Hermasetas and dog food.

I should also point out that this is not, in the true sense of the word, an autobiography. I'll quite happily leave the autobiographies to those among us who have more interesting tales to relate; those who have managed to scale the icy peaks of Mount Everest with a spaniel selotaped to their earlobe, or who have won a national televised singing competition in the last fifteen minutes and have thus decided that the whole world would like to know about every minute of the complete sixteen-and-three-quarter years of their lives so far.

To be honest, I'm not sure myself of what could be about to fill the pages of this volume. Advice and guidelines for those in their younger years hoping to make it to the dizzying heights of adulthood without becoming a slave to 'sod's law', or simply a collection of anecdotes and pearls of wisdom that I have picked up in what I'm hoping is just the first half of my life. We'll just have to wait and see. Obviously if it starts getting a bit shit after a few pages you can always use it to prop up a wobbly table, wedge open a door or just stick it straight in the bin. It's entirely at your discretion.

## CHAPTER ONE

This could be a very short chapter indeed. I'm afraid my memory of anything up until the age of around seven is distinctly fuzzy to say the least. From what members of my family have enjoyed pointing out to anyone who would listen, I can safely say that I was a miserable child. From day one I was moved into a ward all of my own as my constant grizzling and howling was upsetting the other new mums. I would think that if anyone in their later years were displaying a face the same colour as mine was constantly back then, their doctor would immediately prescribe an intense course of beta-blockers in some vain attempt to reduce their rocketing blood pressure.

Still, I got a room to myself, so who's complaining?

Things were made a lot worse for me by having such a happy elder brother. Always a favourite anecdote of my mum's at social gatherings was the reaction of passers-by as they used to look in the pram at my brother and I. The story goes, and it's been rammed

down my throat on many happy occasion, that people used to take a look at my cheerful sibling and say such words as 'Aaaaah — isn't he cute, isn't he lovely?'. They would then turn their attention to my 'dried-fruit' features and simply offer a sympathetic 'Aaaaah'.

It would be at least three or four years until I would learn to wreak my revenge on smiley, happy-go-lucky Steve. Three or four years until I'd perfected the innocent, butter-wouldn't-melt stare, mastered the art of the accusing finger and leamt how to say in a clear and proud voice 'It was him'. This stood me in good stead for a lot of my childhood, and many times served to wipe that smug look from big brother's chops.

*I was cute once!*

To any small children reading this and intending on utilizing my methods on family and friends I would like to say, firstly, well done — your reading skills are way above that of the average three-year-old, and secondly, do be aware of the pitfalls of such actions. There is a grey area, usually around the age Of five, where the results change drastically from a loving, sympathetic peck on the cheek from mummy coupled with your victim being confined to their bedroom, to a fist in the kisser from said victim accompanied by a "serves you right you tale telling little bleeder" from a mother who can finally see beyond the •cute' to the aggravating little shit you really are.

On the plus side, however, it is around this age that alternative methods of causing upset and annoyance to elder brothers and sisters come into play. By far the most popular of these is the 'let's call it a draw' method of ending a board game you have no hope of winning by grabbing the board and tossing it into the air, scattering the pieces across the room and leaving no evidence whatsoever that you were, in fact, on the brink of losing. Though mainly used during childhood, this approach could well cause amusement if used in certain situations later in life. It would be a safe bet that cheers of delight would arise from your colleagues on the high school debating team if you were to put an end to any arguments your opponents may have by taking their notes, scattering them vehemently in all directions and proudly strutting out of the classroom to thunderous applause.

Of course, all this bravado may lead you to believe that I was a confident 'nothing can phase me' kind of a child, but unfortunately that couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, I remember only too clearly that, at around the age of six or seven, I was so afraid of a certain infant school teacher that I wouldn't even dare to raise my hand and ask to be excused for a simple visit to the lavatory. As a result I succeeded in putting a turd in my underpants of such spectacular proportions that, had it been a joint of beef it could have quite easily fed a hungry family of four with enough left over to serve up cold with mash and pickles the following day.

Luckily, and certainly in my infant and junior years, this teacher turned out to be a one-off; possibly a clash of personalities. My other teachers of this era realised my (so far wasted) potential and treated me with the respect I possibly didn’t deserve. Without wishing to sound big-headed I was deemed to be a very bright child and along with another boy in the same class we were always streaks ahead of the rest. Being clever, however, can be a blessing or a curse and usually, at this age, it can often lead to having the shit kicked out

of you after school by the class meat-head goaded on by a circle of hyperactive warmongering children baying for blood. I was fortunate enough to have the gift of being able to talk my way out of such encounters, and besides, there were far more interesting victims to be found in our year group.


*Chesterfield Juniors 1977. Can you see me? (Hint: Top Left)*

I have unexpectedly bumped into one of the bullies' prime targets only recently. He still seems to be one of life's victims, only now he is the victim of the afore-mentioned elderly frequenters of the Co-op, where he now works, as they join the endless queue for lottery tickets baying for the blood of any impertinent young shop assistant who dares roll their eyes as they rifle through their purse for the nearest ha'penny.

*Check out those shirts!*

Obviously, school bullies were not the only danger I was faced with during those early years. There was always the wrath of my mum to face anytime I would wittingly or otherwise stray from the straight and narrow. One example of which was the journey to school. The route I was to take to Chesterfield Infants and Juniors was clearly defined. I was to walk straight along the high road to the traffic lights, cross the road at the crossing and walk straight down Ordnance Road to Chesterfield Road — my destination. The problem was that it was a lot quicker to cross the main road straight away and cut through Alandale Road and Manderville Road, and this was more often than not my route of choice. Somehow or another my mum knew every single time I'd gone the speedier route and I would hear about it in no uncertain terms when I got home. I never quite figured out how I could possibly be busted each and every time until the answer was revealed to me only a few years ago. There was a spy in the sweet shop! What I considered to be an innocent, sweet old purple-haired lady was in fact a double agent on my mother's payroll. While she was dishing out the Black-jacks, Fruit Salad and Bazooka Joes at two for a penny, she was also keeping one beady eye on my comings and goings and reporting back in detail when my mum went in to pay the papers. You can't trust anyone.

Playtime was always fraught with danger. A craze for "riots" swept the school and, young or old, nobody was safe. A riot would consist of thirty to forty young terrorists assembling at one end of the playground, linking hands in a long line so that they reached from one side to the other. Then, amid chants of "Riot!" and screams from innocent bystanders they would race from the school gates end right across to the dinner hall knocking over everyone and everything in their path. Even the well documented riots of Broadwater Farm could not generate the hysteria and the suffering that these sudden outbursts of violence at Chesterfield school would incur. However, the convicted rioters at Broadwater Farm never had to face the consequences of their actions from an irate Mr Berriman, the headmaster. Usually a jolly, cheerful fat man who referred to all the boys as 'Fred' and all the girls as 'Cynthia', Mr Berriman's face would tum from it's normal bright red to a deep, menacing purple as the

ringleaders were brought swift justice by way of 'the slipper' - which apparently was more of a hard-bottomed training shoe and tended to sting a bit when the young offenders copped an unfortunate one on the back of the leg.

*When Rocket Collars make a comeback, I'll be ready!*

Fortunately I never had to experience the purple-faced version of Mr Berriman. I was far too much of a goody-goody for that. I was also absolutely terrified of any form of footwear related retribution. The only trouble I can recall getting into was during my infant school years when I was sent to the corner for blowing bubbles in my milk. Even this was unfair as I'm pretty certain Mark Richmond was doing exactly the same thing and he escaped scott-free. One thing I always enjoyed at infant and junior school was 'wet play'. We all got to stay inside during playtime and lunchtime when the rain was deemed too heavy for us to venture into the playground. This didn't happen as often as I would have liked as it would usually have to be torrential a downpour on a par with the very worst of the Amazonian rainy seasons before a wet play was announced. It's strange some of the things that stick in the mind but I always remember one wet play I spent singing 'Chanson D'amour' with three young ladies as my backing singers. I'm sure I would have received a standing ovation should anyone have bothered to stop and listen. In our current social climate I would advise anyone of school age considering singing 'Chanson D'amour loudly in a busy school corridor to think twice. Backing singers or no backing singers you are likely to be stabbed, or at least beaten to within an inch of your life, before reaching the first chorus of ra-ta-ta-ta-tas.

To many, these impromptu erformances during playtime could have signalled the beginnings of a glittering career in showbusiness. Who knows, maybe even I had visions back then of one day treading the boards, building a distinguished following in the world of performing arts or possibly becoming a world famous movie star with a salary matching the budget of a small country. All those hopes and dreams, however, came crashing down during my big moment in the school harvest festival. It wasn't a part that would particularly stretch my abilities — all I had to do was, at the right moment, hold up a large cut-out of a sun with a smiley face painted on it. At curtain-down I rejoined my parents and awaited the glowing reviews and the general praise and fawning required by a superstar of my stature. "You held it upside-down", my mum said.

My life as an entertainer now steadily on the decline, I had to find other avenues in which I could express myself artistically. Cartoon drawing seemed to be the answer. Every Wednesday evening, Mum, Dad, Steve and I would pile into the Ford Cortina estate and drive to Ferndale Road, Tottenham to visit my grandparents from my dad's side. Road safety laws were not as they are now (even seatbelts were an option despite what the television may have had us believe in the "clunk-click every trip" adverts) and Steve and I used to sit behind the back seat in the area supposedly reserved for stuff to be taken to the tip or holiday luggage. Steve and I usually had a bit of a sing-song to make the journey pass more quickly, though Steve never possessed the angelic warbling abilities that I was blessed with - at least in my opinion. Usually, once I'd told him to shut up a row would ensue and one of us would be made to climb over and sit in the back seat.

Anyway, getting back to the original thread, those Wednesday evenings I would spend sitting at the kitchen table with my Grandad making my own

comics. Years before, my grandad had apparently drawn cartoons for the local newspaper and occasionally I would get him to draw the bits that I'd decided I couldn't do. These sessions were always made more fun by my Grandad's frequent and thunderous flatulence. He seemed to be able to break wind on demand and it never failed to leave me in fits of laughter. At various points during the evening, my nan would come into the kitchen to make the tea and they would fart together in perfect harmony. I was always in awe of their bottom-rattling skills.

*Grandad acting the goat*

One time I remember in particular was at Shanklin Chine in the Isle of Wight. My mum and dad decided it would be best, as I suffered from asthma at the time, to send me away with my nan and grandad while the extension was built on the house - to get me away from all the dust and such. I still remember as if it were yesterday, sitting at the top of the chine waiting for it to be illuminated. "It looks much nicer with the lights on", my nan said, trying in vain to keep my interest. All I wanted to do was to climb down the chine as quickly as possible and head for the café that sold the best creamy hot chocolate in the world. As we waited, and my patience was quickly running out, my grandad suddenly said "Don't worry Rich - I'll switch the light on for you". With that, he lifted his leg and burst forth with what could have compared to the Queen's royal trumpeters all blasting a perfect C-sharp at full blow and at the same time. At precisely that moment, the chine exploded into colour leaving me open-mouthed in awe. My nan dissolved into fits of laughter and granddad just sat there with a knowing, smug look across his face. The art of bottom burping has sadly declined over recent years, in some circles it is now even frowned upon. Pity.

I have enough memories of my Grandad's raucous rectal rumbles to fill a whole chapter of this book, but in the name of good taste and for the benefit of those reading while eating their lunch I will leave the subject there.

*Grandparents. This photo was taken a few years later… they weren't always this old*

During school holidays, Steve and I were often packed off to Nan and Granddad's who looked after us while mum and dad were at work. Mum would put us on the 279 bus at the top of our road and Nan would be waiting for us at Seven Sisters. We'd then walk down past South Tottenham Station, possibly stopping at Wiz Jones's newsagents for a comic or some sweets, then left-tum into Femdale Road. Once we got to Nan's house, the usual ritual would take place whereby Nan would switch on the radio — the Jimmy Young show - and then get herself ready for that day's outing while Steve and I played merry hell. How we ever managed to eventually get out of the house is completely beyond me as we would continually knock over her table-top mirror as she was putting her make-up on, swipe her woolly hat from her head every time she'd painstakingly arranged it into position and God knows what else to drive her into a state of blind frustration.

As far as irritating childishness goes, the mirror and hat routine was only matched by our refusing-to-go-to-sleep bedtime activity which consisting of throwing a slightly damp, rolled-up sock at each other. There were no rules to this game other than the thrower scoring more points for a direct hit in the face and that the game would only end when Nan and Grandad, at their wits end, eventually split us up and made one of us go and sleep in the other room.

*I distinctly remember the photographer saying "Look camp!"*

The outings during those school holidays usually consisted of meeting Grandad in Wood Green to spend his lunch hour (usually involving a treat from WH Smiths), trips to various sights in London, or once or twice a year Grandad would take the day off and we would go on the train to Southend, Brighton, Margate or whichever seaside town had taken our fancy on that particular occasion.

As Nan and Grandad never drove and never owned a car, it was the bus or tube everywhere went. As a result, I think it's probably safe to say that I pretty much knew my way around anywhere in the capital on public transport by the time I was ten years old. In fact, by the age of eleven I would often go up to places such as Oxford Street, Trafalgar Square or Covent Garden on my own - I remember certain other kids in my class at school not even being allowed out of the end of their road on their own at this age!

And that's it! Another great Langford work goes unfinished - but keep checking back. You never know, I may find renewed interest in completing the story.