

BURT MAN



Stories from
the
schoolyard I

The Age Of Innocence

“Stories From The Schoolyard”
I/IV

A collection of mischief and cheek
from a fruitful youth

*For my bro and all my school pals and accomplices, most
of whom I embarrass within these pages. Stay young
and don't get caught.*

Revision 5

Stories From The Schoolyard

The Age Of Innocence

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Stories From The Schoolyard

The Age Of Innocence

Introduction

It seems like my generation was the last to grow up in the real world. We had trees, ball games, bikes and skates, walkie-talkies, wrestling matches, and above all, imagination, to entertain us. There were televisions and video games, of course, but no netflix binges and 'pro gamers'.

Games and TV were just two of the many, many tools we had at our disposal for passing time, and all the fun of them was in sharing them with our friends. We had adventures, drama, laughter, and every possible emotion that growing up brings, as a gang of cheeky lads, and we were always on the look-out for things we could use in some way, enhancing our games and engaging our brains at every opportunity.

We invented, re-invented, and re-purposed, and if we didn't have something, we just pretended we did. And it was good. We made dens, we carried rope and slingshots, we cycled to other towns, and we came home exhausted and dirty, every night of the week.

With that clarified, it's a pleasure to introduce this series of short stories, detailing some of the adventures that stuck with me from the days I spent growing up in England, with my brother and a shabby gang of on-off friends from around the way.

I hope you enjoy reading these stories as much as I've enjoyed bringing them back to life, after decades on the shelves with other distant memories.

We'll never have times like these, again.

– *Burtman (that's not my real name, you know)*

Stories From The Schoolyard

The Age Of Innocence

Part One

The Age Of Innocence

1988 - 1992

International Paco

Paco's my ultimate pal. I met him on the first day of school and we clicked like cameras. Like me, he's five, now, and not about to take any kind of BS. He does what he knows is right and he isn't passing any social conformity tests. We were made to go together in a set.

Paco's Mexican, and his home is painted with every clashing color there is and filled with exotic instruments and smells. I've never seen a place like it. It reminds me of hallucinating after you throw up. But in a good way.

It's the first day of term. The summer sun is pounding down, and the cool hallways offer relief. Paco and I have come inside to splash water on our faces, and we've just discovered that the corridor has recently been waxed, which can only mean one thing. Our shoes are off in the next instant, and, to our utter delight, the conditions are *perfect*. Made for the job. With this discovery, all the free moments of our school day are now accounted for.

Every few minutes, some other kid comes in for a splash of water, and every time that happens, we pounce on them, at once involving them in our human curling action. I take a run up and adopt the surfing

pose, earning me six points. Paco is next. He exhibits the fall catalog look, complete with pensive expression and thoughtful hand-on-chin pose. It's a scream. After each slide, we share feedback on how we think it went, remarking on specific moments of excellence, before going over the highlights of previous skids, to compare the quality to the rolling average.

With analysis out of the way, we return to the back of the line to watch the other contestants, all the while planning what kind of eccentric twist we're going to put on our next skid, in order to raise the most giggles and become the greatest sock slider of all time.

This is where legends are going to be made.

Paco has just discovered that you can slide on your ass, too, which has opened the floor to a range of freestyle experimentation that's taken the excitement up another notch. He's skidding down the hall at high speed, now, completely out of control, slowly rotating, as he goes. He comes to a stop and I run over, keen to congratulate the new champion on his accomplishment, and while still in the seated position, he looks up at me with a huge grin on his face, clearly satisfied with his performance. I tell him to stay still, so I can take a photo. He waits, but then I notice that I don't own a camera. Not to be deterred, I just tell him I've got photographic vision, and that I hadn't mentioned it

before, just because it never came up. He buys the whole story.

I blink, make an unconvincing camera sound, and promise him a copy of the photo. Now, I just need to figure out how to get the image out of my mind and onto paper. I'll give it some thought over the rest of the lunch break, but if I can't figure it out, mom will definitely know how to do it, because adults can do *literally* anything.

But then, disaster strikes, as it tends to do. Yet another kiddywink comes running in from the hot field, in search of refreshment, and sees our incredible event unfolding before him. Unable to contain his excitement at the spectacle, he lets out an almighty squeak that's loud enough to reach the staff room, at the other end of the hallway. A teacher pokes her head out to see what's going on. By now, there must be ten of us, lined up for medal attempts in the hallway, and that's too many. The game's up.

We should have kept it to ourselves. It was good. Why did we have to tell everyone? Now it's ruined. Teach sends us all back into the baking sun, but all we want to do is slide about in our socks. How unjust is this world?

The Age Of Innocence

We spend the last minutes of play time looking for patches of dust and gravel, hoping beyond reason to recreate the events that have just come to pass, but alas, it's not to be. The moment has passed, and in time, we will just have to let it go.

But some of us never will.

Solidarity

During the first years of school life, Paco has been my rock. He's confident, outspoken and fearless, and as long as I'm with him, nobody gives me any trouble. He never gets sick and takes a day off school - he's too hardcore for that nonsense. He'll take whatever comes his way and laugh it off. That's literal, as you're going to see.

Our school's fairly small - maybe 80 tots, all told, and, given that we *are* only tots, our lessons are pretty chilled - nothing more difficult than counting, writing recursive vowels in big writing, and the odd spot of painting, which mainly looks like crap. If it's an especially enthusiastic day, we might bash out some cutting and a bit of gluing, too. When I'm in the mood, I break out the hole punch and have at it with the colored card.

At break time, we sit on the story mat, where a range of simple and innocent books can be found, and at lunch time, we can run around in the playground, which is painted with various game boards, like hopscotch, snakes and ladders, and so on - as well as some unexplained, entirely avant garde ones, which nobody has ever figured out. But out the back, we've got a spacious field, and that's where the real grit goes

down. High jump, cops & robbers, flea darts. You name it.

The back door from the classroom opens directly onto the field, but we've been told never to touch it without the teacher, because it's a fire door, which I had always assumed to mean that it can opening it without teacher supervision may cause it to catch fire. As it turns out, though, that isn't exactly it, but if the only way I can discover the truth about this prohibition will be by violating it – specifically, just as Paco comes running through the room, bulldozing the fire door, on the way to the field – then, so be it.

He obviously hasn't realized that my fingers are currently part-way through a deep and delicate investigation of the underlying mechanism, and as he smashes the exit bar with his full weight and momentum, it punches a hole right through my finger. The door flies open and he disappears, leaving me staring at my finger, until the blood starts shooting out, and I began screaming for a teacher. It goes without saying that my subsequent solo investigations are likely to be of a more careful nature, and probably somewhat lesser in number.

Paco will never find out about the damage he's done, cos he's my main man, and I've got his back, too.

A week later, long after the fire door scenario has faded from memory, the class is in the assembly hall, playing some kind of game. It involves chasing each other around, and those who get caught being sent to the slammer (they have to sit on a chair in the corner). I suppose this is the beginning of our *mindless obedience* training.

It's all going fine, but in the usual way, it's not long before disaster strikes. Paco has been caught and sent to the big house. He's in it for the long haul, too. Could be up to five minutes. Devastating. I don't want to play, anymore. Feeling the importance of solidarity, and exercising my free will, I leave the game and put myself in jail, so I can sit with Paco and keep his spirits up, while he's on the inside. Soon, he'll be a free man, again, and all this will be behind us. We can start fresh.

Unhappy with my gesture, and keen to crush all signs of free thinking as early as possible, the teacher punishes me for my compassion by extending my voluntary incarceration for the entire rest of the game, while Paco is soon released and enjoying life on the outside, having done his time and paid his debt to society. It's an unprecedented move, designed to make an example of the would-be dissenter. I'm gutted. Betrayed by the man. Who'da thunk it?

Perhaps somewhat predictably, my unjust sentence has prompted rebellion, and I'm now staging a jail break. But as a wanted man in a fenced enclosure, it's not long before the warden's filthy mitts clutch my collar and throw me back with a warning of further punishment. I suppose it's against the rules to disobey the rules.

My jail break has landed me in hot water with the establishment, too, and I'm soon cautioned by a senior official known only as Mrs Hodgekinson (Alan's mom). Accordingly, I am now on my second strike, and it has been made apparent that I don't want to know what would happen if I were to obtain a third one.

After this rude awakening, I'm struggling to enjoy the next lesson. We're supposed to write something, but I can't get into it. My time on the inside has changed me, and my harsh treatment by the system has only hardened me to the status quo.

As the others sit, blindly writing their kicking Ks and crossing their Tommy Ts, I refuse to participate, spending the lesson punching holes in card and contemplating my new reality. It's all I can do to fight the system at the local level. When the card's all punched out, I go over to my drawer, to fetch my pencil, so I can draw something and then hole-punch around it, but yet another shock waits for me. Oh, this day of

tests. My brother's *Dennis The Menace* calculator is *missing*. A true crime, right under our noses.

But who would ever believe a convict?

I report the incident, of course. Nothing is done, of course. Now, I'm starting to understand how things really work. As I begin to consider how I can expose the thief without assistance, and more importantly, recover the missing property, I go through the most likely scenario in my head, and it goes something like this:

If I ask anyone if they've seen the calculator, the thief will know the hunt's on, and hide it somewhere where Poirot would overlook it. If I just start looking through the other kids' drawers, someone will snitch and the teacher will catch me. That would be my third strike, no doubt, and I remember that I don't want to know what that means. I've already reported the crime, and a blind eye has been turned. Justice is only a word and it's spoken to the select. How can I fix this without crossing their lines?

As luck would have it, I didn't have to; The thief turned out to be Martin, the thickest clod you ever could meet, and, having failed to note whose drawer he had pilfered, in to acquire the new technology, he openly brags about it, right to my face, when he sees my matching *Dennis The Menace* pencil.

“Oh!”, he proclaims. “That goes with my new *Dennis The Menace* calculator!”

Dumb ass.

Illustrating his stupidity, he even voluntarily retrieves the stolen tech from his drawer and shows it to me, like I’m going to be excited about it. But he’s messing with the wrong man. I grab the tool, and he immediately starts crying, as clods often do. When the teacher comes over to assume I’ve caused trouble (I do have previous, after all), I can prove my ownership by way of matching ruler and pencil case. Circumstantial, perhaps, but compelling. And just the state starts claiming that I could also have stolen those from him (bitch)...

Paco. My man.

He appears, like some kind of golden savior, loud and unafraid, interrupting the teacher to attest the innocence of his friend. He’s seen these items at my house, and he’d take it to court, I wouldn’t doubt. You know, if he wasn’t five years old.

With the theft resolved and my good name restored, the day comes to an end and Paco and I leave the schoolyard the way we came in. Unbreakable.

Sneakers Watson

I'm sitting alone on the bank that surrounds the playing field, watching the games and feeling the sun on my neck and arms. My best pal has recently accepted an invitation to play, but it wasn't extended to me. Wounded, I sit, watching the game. The world is cold and empty.

From my nest of despair, I stare out, as the others run and jump, and I listen to their shouts and laughter. An outsider. There are plants on the bank. I'm stroking one of them, as my mind wanders. Just then, my heart stops, as the jazziest sneakers I've ever seen appear, right in front of me, and stop still. *Man*, they're jazzy. Every panel a different color, with two straps holding them on and a big tongue sticking out the top.

But I don't know these shoes.

The way they appeared had seemed somehow confrontational, and the silence that came with them only compounded the vibe.

A cold dread freezes me in place. Am I about to be bullied by a bigger boy? The terror is ultimate.

To my surprise and relief, it goes the other way.

"Hi!", says a loud, confident voice.

"I'm Jason."

I'll never forget that bright tone. For a moment, I'm still, trying to figure out if it's a trap. But he doesn't flinch, as his words sink in.

I look up, and there he is. The kid whose face is the emotional equivalent of his shoes. Never have I seen such a friendly guy. A minute later, we're pals, and by the time I'm reunited with Paco, almost fifteen minutes after that, there's a new player for every future game we will ever play.

A few months after we met, Jason invites me over to his house for his birthday. It's the first time I've seen the place and I can't believe how cool it is. Some kind of renovated factory, tucked away in the greenery off the main road. His bedroom has a fire escape (private front door with winding staircase) and a zip line that lets him jump out of the window and whiz down to the end of the garden! He even has his own bathroom, and the kitchen is *upstairs*. It's almost too much.

Despite his awesome home, and a good number of nifty toys, Jason's only-child-ness never makes him possessive or bratty. Quite the opposite, actually; He's

always happy to share all that he has with anyone who wants it.

Jason's dad's cool, too. He's a music producer, and his studio is downstairs. You just climb in the window and fall onto the couch to get in. It's the most epic den a kid could ever hope for, with its flashing lights, huge bass speakers, pokey wall things, and cool music posters. I guess Jason's dad is like a big kid who doesn't have to do what he's told. It's mind-blowing. It's the way.

When the time comes to go back to my own, boring, non-den-like home, Jason asks me if there's a toy of his that I particularly like. I was honest in my answer. He disappears. A moment later, he's back with the rubber plane launcher. As if it's already mine, he hands it to me and returns to the hallway.

"Take it home. You can have it as long as you like."

Twenty years from now, I'm gonna look him up. He'll be wondering where it is.

Mike's Sister

Mike's a bigger boy who hangs out with my bro. He likes basketball and sarcasm that flies over my head. I don't like him. His sister's my age and she acts like a boy. She rides a three-speed bike with pedal-back brakes and has a faceful of freckles that I can't understand. I mean, they look drawn on, and nobody can explain what they are, nor why she's the only one to have them. They're just there. Mike's sister, I like.

There's something funny about having a friend who's a girl, because, as every boy under ten knows, girls are yucky, and boys are *much* better. But despite this unquestionable fact, Mike's sister's one of us, and she quickly becomes our link to the other side, being able to talk to girls *and* boys, as though they were the same species.

Some days, I head down to the square with my bro, and he goes and knocks on Mike's door. I take my bike with me and walk around with it, trying to look cool, without admitting that I still can't ride a bike. When Mike comes out, he wastes no time in pointing out that I'm always walking around with my bike and he's never seen me on it. He's not only keenly-sighted, but brutally honest. I hate him. A year later, when I finally master riding it, I think it's going to become quite

difficult to separate me from it, and even when we go to play basketball – a trip that involves more stairs than flat land – I'll bring my bike, just in case.

Sometimes, when my brother knocks on Mike's door, it opens instantaneously, as though Mike had just been waiting for the knock. And he'll have his basketball already tucked under his arm. He'll open the door, step out and be ready to go. No fuss. How does he know we're coming? The bathroom window is the only logical way, but it seems too contrived. It will always be a mystery.

Occasionally, when the door opens, Mike's sister happens to be passing by, and she'll come out and see me. When the bigger boys go down to shoot some hoops, we just stand at the door, talking about things from our crazy lives. Sometimes, we walk about, sit about, and generally act much more mature than we really are. It's during one of these times that we discover that we have some fundamental differences which need to be examined, albeit in public. Of course, my mom happens to be looking out at us, during this particular moment, which she will probably like to remind me about, later on, whenever I have friends over.

With the formalities out of the way, we continue to hang out, and she tries to ride my slightly bigger bike,

with limited success. And, embarrassing, though it would be, should anyone see me, I do have a secret go on hers, too. But her three-speed machine is a bit too technical for my BMX-level brain, and, thanks to her pedal-back braking system, there's only one brake lever, which creates a bit of confusion at a crucial moment, not aided by the discovery that said single brake lever isn't connected to anything.

As I roll down the narrow foot path, between the wall and the cars, I realize I don't know how to stop. Panic rears its head, and the handlebars wiggle out of control, as I lock onto the street light at the end of the path and begin homing in on it.

BONG!

The street lamp resonates, as I collapse in a heap, my head bleeding and my excitement far behind me, and all the kids in the area gather round, to see the damage. Naturally, nobody offers any help. They just stare and issue frightening commentary. "He'll never walk again". But not Mike. Mike, the guy I hate, bolts up to our house, shouting "Mom!", because he's never thought to ask her name. Thinking about it, though, my answer would have probably been "mom", so he was bang on the money. She comes running down, all in a fluster, scoops me up and takes me home for some pampering.

From that day, forward, I've always liked Mike. I feel like he saved my life, despite the fact that I only needed a bit of cream and a plaster. Because, despite possessing a superior wit, and not holding back on the ego bruising comments, he has my back when I need it. And that matters.

Mike's sister's brother.

Mike.

What a guy.

Bad Rob And My First Punch

Paco excitedly explains his modifications to the standard “Cops & Robbers” layout, wherein, a cop can now only catch a robber who has been properly identified as such, following a textbook interrogation with the now-legendary questioning technique: “Cop or robber?”. Gone are the days of blanket arrests and false warrants. We’re doing it by the book, from now on. Paco’s cleaning up the force.

As I assimilate the new rule into my mind, grinning with the excitement at the thought of playing this new spin on the classic game, things turn ugly, fast; Bad Rob. You bastard.

At an inch taller, and a slack-jaw and homemade-haircut uglier, this specific pleb has placed himself at the top of the food chain and made it his mission to give everyone below him a regular helping of trouble. He tries to hulk over me with his extra inch of height, and gives me a push, just to show me who the boss is. I hate him, but he is an inch taller, so I’m kind of scared.

When he turns to Paco and tries the same crap, he gets an entirely different response from the meager tolerance I provided. What Paco lacks in extra height, he makes up for by being utterly unshakable.

The lad doesn't flinch. Instead, he just laughs a genuine, hearty laugh, which brings Bad Rob's self-imposed authority concept into question.

Witnessing this encounter gives me confidence and the seed of an important realization: Maybe he's just another five-year-old, like us. After the pushes, he seems to be out of ideas, and kind of waddles away. Paco is so very amused.

Ignoring his macho bullshit, we set about our game. Paco runs around the playground, gathering classmates and explaining his exciting new rule. His face is bright and he sure is happy to tell everyone what he's invented.

As everyone we like joins in the game, so it begins. We run around the playground, and all I can hear is shouts of "Cop or robber?", followed by "Cop! No, robber!". If caught in the lie, who knew what might happen? You just have to hope not to get caught. It's a somewhat badly-designed game, now that I think about it.

When the school bell rings, signaling the end of play time, we all walk inside, discussing the amazing ways that we had evaded capture by pretending to be a cop. At one point, David almost got caught, when Jack managed to grab his coat, but David simply

relinquished the coat, leaving Jack dumbfounded and nowhere near his daily arrest target. It was all going on, out there.

In the classroom, David and Paco begin chatting quietly, and I get curious, since quiet isn't really one of Paco's modes. As I approach them, they stop talking and stare at me. *There's collusion afoot!* Taking the cue, I slither back to my table and pretended not to be interested, whilst attempting to isolate their conversation from the background noise of the room.

Being five means that I simply can't accept this secrecy, and I know that I only have two options available to me: The first is to try to find out what's being plotted, and the second is to find a way to evoke the same curiosity in them, and then offer an intellectual trade.

Since the first plan's already failing, I deploy the second, to a surprisingly immediate response. My spontaneous plan works wonders. I just go over to one of the boys I don't usually talk to and quietly say something like "pretend I'm saying something really interesting and then keep it secret from those two", making sure to point in the direction of Paco and David.

The instructed gasp of shock is award-worthy, and David and Paco waste no time coming over, to find out what's going on.

With the marks in place, I consider the trade option, but decide that whatever they had said was probably less interesting than what they now think *I* have said, so I hold my own and allow the mystery to linger, artificially inflating the price.

When the next break comes around, there's a tension in the air. Distrust runs amok. Eyes are shifty. Whispers can be heard. Things have changed.

I allow Paco to come over to me, adding to the intrigue, and he can't help but try to pry the secret from my steely mind. I've already seen him try to bribe that other kid, but he wouldn't sing. Now, desperately curious, he tries the same tactic with me, offering to bring me chocolate, the following day, in exchange for the dirt. Knowing he'll never make good, especially if he finds out what I'd really said, I call his bluff, only adding wood to the fire.

The issue hangs over us, eventually making Paco grumpy. It's the first time I've ever seen it, and it lasts about five seconds. In that time, his grump transfers to me, and suddenly, the playground seems darker. Colder.

And that is not the right time for Bad Rob to poke his ugly mush around the corner and start giving me jive.

But guess what.

The ugly grinch does his best to loom over me, clearly in dire need of control, but this time, something has changed. I'm not scared, at all. If anything, I'm a little excited. As I struggle to make sense of the feelings, Paco interrupts the encounter, inviting Bad Rob to join our game.

What was he thinking?! Bad Rob looks as surprised as I am, and considers it, for a moment, before coming back with "I'll play with *you*, but I'm not playing with *him*." He accentuates the last word by pushing me against the wall, but that turns out to be precisely the wrong answer.

The combination of feelings I have just experienced, blended with his unwarranted aggression, create a chemical reaction that smolders inside me, before making its way down my arm and across the air gap, right into his jaw.

Unexpectedly, I've found myself socking Bad Rob in the mush, causing his bravado to crumble, along with the control he'd been trying to gain over me. GADOOSH!! Right in the kisser.

Suddenly, Bad Rob doesn't look all that bad, running to the lunch lady, crying, and holding his mouth. I'm as shocked as he is, in honesty, and don't know what to do. Paco, calm as a cucumber, just waits for my shock to subside, and then asks if I'm ready to play. He isn't about to let a violent outbreak get in the way of his new game.

We chase each other, stopping to interrogate potential robbers, and I occasionally notice Bad Rob keeping a firm eye on me. In fact, every move I make, he makes the opposite, keeping as much distance as physically possible between us, and skirting the playground like a cornered animal.

Sweet.

At the end of break, we close up the game and go back inside, to start our next lesson, which is Plasticine. I never liked Plasticine; it tastes of salty armpits and isn't the right kind of chewy for my particular taste. But it isn't bad for making blob monsters, so that's exactly what we're going to do.

After school, mom picks me up at the gate, and when we get home, I tell her about the incident with Bad Rob. Expecting to be told off, as she has always preached non-violence, I'm surprised when, in this case, she seems to be quite relaxed about it. Maybe it's because

she's heard his name once too often, already, or maybe she didn't hear me properly, when I retold the story with sound effects, but either way, I feel like I've learned something besides how to make double- and mega-blob monsters, by adding two, or even three, packs of Plasticine together.

The next day, I realize that something else has occurred: *Bad Rob* has become *Rob*.

Not A Word

“Vowels are easy. I’ve known them for ages.”

Victoria doesn’t believe me, but I wouldn’t leave myself exposed to a lie of *that* magnitude. I can back up the entire story with hard evidence. *Don’t push me, woman.*

She pushes.

“A E I O U”. I listen for the sound of awe.

“AEIOU AEIOU”, I repeat at speed, without hesitation.

When the teacher comes to me, to see if I’ve been able to remember the five simple sounds she’s demonstrated, I feel a little insulted. Not only were these sounds among the easiest I’ve recently heard, but I’ve already learned them at home. Mom was always way ahead of the learning game.

Clearly impressed by my incredible grip on the language, the teacher, Mrs Nutkins, has me stand up and repeat the feat for the entire class, so they can see what a true hero looks like. I’ve never been one to enjoy the attention of a crowd, but in this case, I figure I really do deserve to be shown off, such is the magnitude of my achievement, and the vast depths of

my skill. The plebs need a hero. They need to see how hard work pays off. It's the only way for them.

I stand, casually repeating the sounds, going for speed and clarity.

“How did you learn them so fast?”, one tiddlywink asks.

“I already knew them.”, I state, honestly, knowing the comment would elevate me beyond my wildest imagination. But it's one thing to know the vowels by sound, and quite another to be prepared to commit them to paper. The next five minutes would be a test.

But not for me, because I've already learned them.
#SuckOnThatMrsWalnut

My teacher's probably feeling a little redundant, right now, but as I began writing the vowels in my work book, a painful discovery emerges, quite out of the blue; I *hate* writing. *Hate it!* It isn't that I can't do it, because I obviously have the gift, but I just hate putting pen to paper and making words. It stinks!

Fairly soon, this becomes a real problem, as we advance to writing *actual words*, and then short sentences. You see, being of the mind that *ain't nobody*

gonna tell me what to do, as I am, Mrs Wallpaper can already see that it isn't going to be easy to get me to write essays, later on – a punishment I can't even conceive of, at this point.

Mondays are hard. I begrudgingly accept the task of writing the top ten words for the week, as long as I don't have to sit through the ten minutes of questions that always come, when a new word is introduced.

Last week, the word that really tripped everyone up was “East”. How could the “a” not make any discernible sound of its own? How could it not be *ee-ast*? *How? -- Of course, this pales in comparison to my “comb” outbreak, when my inability to accept a silent letter resulted in slamming a door and running up to my bedroom to cry.*

Pff. I already learned this word, of course, and was ready for next-level spelling, the likes of which could include “machine”, or even “elevate”. Yeah. Soak that up. But my little problem persists, and it came to a head, a few days later, when Mrs Walkingstick introduced the concept of writing *a lot of text in one go*. She calls it “a writing exercise”. We call it “horrible”, because we haven't yet learned words like “torturous” or phrases like “Who does she think she is?”.

It's Thursday. The class sits up, listening to the instructions. We are to write about a day on the beach, or some other family day out that we've recently experienced. Half a side of double-spaced A5, in big writing (we're talking full line height). Hell on Earth. I decide that the best course of action, rather than putting myself through this needless torment, is protest. And protest, I do. So much so, in fact, that I'm now being sent out of the class. It's the first time I've been excluded, and I don't know how I feel about it, but I notice that it gets me out of the writing task, so I guess it's a good thing, all in all.

This is probably the worst thing that Mrs Wakeboard could have done, though, because it's sent me a very strong message, that if I don't want to do something, I only need to complain about it in a heartfelt manner, and I will be excused from its details. I'll be using this technique for the next decade, probably with great success. Thanks, Mrs Walkietalkie!

Over the next month, I protest about every single assignment, no matter how small. I am, after all, testing the boundaries and learning about my surroundings. It's only natural. In the beginning, my protests are met with resistance; the words "shut up" have even been uttered, which had seemed like the worst thing one human being could say to another. Now, though, I've been excluded from the class for the

second time, and soon enough, I've earned a reputation as a trouble maker.

But then, something miraculous happens. I can only assume that it's come about as a desperate attempt to deal with my incessant writing protests. Regardless, it's the greatest thing that has ever happened at any school. My classroom has a new thing in it. It's called a *computer*. A gigantic, green-screened monstrosity, complete with a giant floppy disk drive that has a chunky lever on the front of it. Where has this come from? Why is it here? I need to know. We *all* need to know.

After morning registration, Mrs Nutloaf present it to the class, shooting me a bit of a glare, and tells us it's for *anyone* to use, but especially for *those of us* who don't want to write. I don't realize it, yet, but this is the kind of pandering that will later start the snowflake movement. At this moment, though, it seems pretty rad. My protests have earned me some cutting edge tech, and I'm gonna write like crazy on this bad boy. This is *my* machine.

Or it *was*, until Lola got her touch-typing little mitts on it, and made me feel like one of those losers who doesn't know his vowels. She never looks at the keyboard, and she types like two bibles a minute. Cow. Who's she showing off to, anyway?

In protest, I've decided I'll never use the computer, because who needs it, anyway? I can write perfectly well by hand, thank you very much. Nah, this technology is only going to end badly. I'll give it a swerve. Mrs Fruit-n-nut isn't best pleased with my latest decision, but I have initiated an action, and she knows, as well as I do, that I'm duty bound to stand by it. The computer is not for me.

By the end of the year, I haven't touched that computer once, and the *Folio* word processor hasn't borne witness to a single word of my vast vocabulary.

Not a word.

Goggles McClure

Ray lives on the hill, near the school, and, although he has a sister, he acts like an only child. He's more or less the antithesis of Sneakers Watson. His features are such that I always think of Roger Rabbit, when I look at him, and his epic short-sightedness means that he's as good as blind without his NHS-issue diving goggles.

If you didn't happen to grow up in the UK, during the '90s, you might not know that the go-to NHS spectacle is a faux-horn-rimmed affair that most of your grandma's friends wouldn't settle for - and Ray's are bottle-base thick, and about as flattering as an awkwardly-placed zit.

Poor Ray does take some schtick for those goggles. Even my mom calls him "Joe 90", and she isn't one to openly make fun of people, much less the young'uns. But, despite his amusing image, Ray's my pal, and we spend a lot of time together, in school and out.

Ray - or *Goggles*, as I prefer to call him - recently became the champion of the neighborhood, thanks to receiving a *Mega Drive* for his birthday. It's changed precisely two things: one, he's now the most popular kid on the block, and two, he knows it. And boy, does he use the power of the *Mega Drive*. That thing's a

magic wand for young Raymond, and it really does work wonders.

As word of his new toy spreads, so his power only grows, and he wields it, shamelessly, over us all. His new-found leverage - the promise of a go on his Mega Drive (or the revocation of such a promise) - has made him untouchable. He's got pretty much every cool game there is for that thing, and we're all green with envy.

Reveling in his role as emperor of the games, he whores that thing out like the grand master of pimp-town, and most of us are powerless against the allure of *Sonic The Hedgehog* - a character he has already begun impersonating, obsessively, much to the chagrin of teachers and classmates.

That hasn't stopped him, though. Nor has it stopped me from accepting the role of *Tails*, the two-tailed fox and side-kick of *Sonic*. And soon after the role is forged, our two second-best pals, Gary and James, have been left to fight it out for the right to be nicknamed after any of the remaining, less important, characters. The poor schmucks.

To say Ray has a delicate ego would be putting it rather mildly. Like... one tea bag in a lake kind of mild. It seems to be of utmost importance to him that he be seen as "the main one" in everything he does. If there's

a group of any kind, the first thing he'll do is assert himself as the leader. And when you're our age, nobody questions what the leader will lead. You just go along with it and somehow give the guy the power he craves. That's probably how politicians are born. And if he-who-must-be-pandered-to should not be effectively praised, there will occur something we've recently come to know as *a hissy fit* - a massively inflated tantrum that usually ends with Ray going home and someone having their Mega Drive privileges revoked. We wait for it and it comes.

Now, at this point, I'd like to remark that Ray isn't actually a bad kid. He's just really spoiled and he's probably never been criticized, even when it was needed. Well, that's my theory, anyway. But he's a pal. Granted, he'll swap you for a packet of *Wotzits* and sell your kidneys to a stranger for a *Freddo*, but we have laughs, and, if handled with care, he can be good company.

Just this week, during one of the weekly power struggles that erupts in our gang, inevitably resulting in someone being banished forever (could be up to two days before they'd be allowed back in), Ray and I devised a most ingenious way of showing Bowl-Cut Ben (of whom, you will shortly learn) that, not only are we talking again, but we're back in our old roles as *Sonic* and *Tails*. This is going to blow Ben's mind; of that, we

can be confident. And it's about to kick off. Ray tells me his plan:

I'll go and stand behind him and he'll obviously make an over-the-top gesture of disgust at my existence. Then, you casually come over and address me as Sonic. He'll freeze, having no idea what's about to go down, and then I'll respond "Yes, Tails?". Then we'll both turn to Ben and grin like idiots, while his jaw falls off in disbelief at our treachery. You ready? I'm nervous. Ok, let's do it.

The plan comes off without a hitch, and so does Ben's jaw. It's delicious. We're so happy with the execution of our creative plan, that we've agreed never to fall out, ever again. An hour later, I'm out of the gang, never to be allowed back in, and all gang members are under strict orders to ignore my existence, because I asked Ben, who is also out of the gang, if I could use his eraser - an act that not only acknowledges his existence, but also conveys a kinship that two people must share in order to consider such a favor acceptable to ask. But that only left *Sonic* and *that other guy*, who I never felt had fully committed to the gang (and whatever it was that it stood for).

Next thing, yet another idea from the genius section (two, in as many hours). Incredible. No sooner was it said, it was done. We've created our own gang and immediately set about poaching that non-committal

guy. We've even had the cheek to use the same nicknames, just to sock it to Ray, who is now the ultimate enemy.

POW! He's appalled! We've won. It's over.

Five minutes later, we've recruited *Sonic* into our new gang, and he's become "the main one", and just as soon, we've all begun tippy-toeing around him, as we had in the previous gang, in the hopes of having a go on his Mega Drive.

And that's how we play the game.

Out With A Bang

I wipe the blood from my face, step away from the mirror and turn out the light. Ray, Paco and Andy are probably doing the same, right about now.

Never again.

I cast my mind back to the morning. It had started like any other; I'd slipped out of the duvet, sluggishly tramped down the ladder at the side of the bunk bed, thrown a stinky sock at my bro, and whined about going to school. I'd pulled on the uniform I so despised. I'd taken a look at my tape collection, and, just for a moment, I had enjoyed sorting through the clunky tapes, finding something to listen to on the '80s tape deck that sat on the '70s drinks cabinet we'd inherited from someone we couldn't remember.

We'd sat for breakfast and listened to the radio. The chipper voice of the DJ always confuses me – how could anyone be this happy to wake up at 6am? I'd listened like a detective, as the same four songs had rolled over my ears that I'd heard every other day for the last two weeks. Staring at the toast in the rack, the jams and nut butters on the table, and the bowl of cereal I'd chosen over them, I'd tried to slow down time, so I could spend a little more of it at home and a lot less of

it at school. As usual, my attempt to manipulate the fabric of reality had let me down, and the clock had kept right on ticking.

Soon enough, it had come time for mom to issue the command that compelled us to deploy. Washed and fed, we'd stuffed books into our backpacks and headed for the coat rack. I always take a moment to scan the room for anything I can take with me that could provide some amusement while I watch the day pass. In the seconds before mom came to see why I was still not at the coat rack, I had only managed to locate a thick rubber band which had been provided by the postman, after I'd begged him for it. It would have to do.

Then, I'd plodded to school, knowing I'd be on time and hating everything about that fact. I'd mulled over the moment of entry into the classroom - the eyes that land on you like flies, the cocky remarks from the kids who aren't as funny as you, the teacher's smile that upsets your plans of rebellion. And then it all came to pass, just like it always did, and just like the next three lessons.

But now, it's lunch time, and Goggles is sitting next to me, as I stare out the window at the playing field. Something about today is super dull, and I just long to be outside, moving. Goggles has started to experience some kind of ADHD episode, and I've zoned out while

he loudly imagines playing Street Fighter – doing all the voices and sound effects, and not sparing the character selection screen.

I'm thinking about getting out on my bike, in the late summer breeze, and riding to another town – something we often do at this time of year.

But I'm stuck in the classroom for another two hours. By the time school is out, the light will be fading. Such adventures are now confined to the weekends, and soon, they'll be off, all together. I reach into my pocket to locate today's toy, trying not to remember what it is, so I can be surprised. The thick rubber band I'd extracted from the postman was sitting there, just hoping to be fiddled with.

I fiddle.

A smirk crosses my lips, and I slide the band out, keeping it below the teacher's line of sight. A rubber band is known to be one of the few "immediate confiscate" items, and "confiscate" is a stand-in word, meaning "steal". I know I'll never see it again, should teach lay her beady eyes on it, and I can't risk that, since this is a particularly bad ass rubber band. The thickness is like no other I've seen, and the length is such that it could be stretched around both feet and used as an *epic catapult*. Of course, I can't just wheel it

out - not here - but knowing it's available for later mischief has made the day feel a little brighter.

I must have been grinning pretty hard, as Goggles has caught a glimpse of it and now, he's putting his imagined game on pause - even acting out pressing the pause button and making the pause sound effect - so that he can enquire. I just show him a little piece of the band, under the table, and his lips curl, just like mine did, a moment earlier.

“Is there something you want to share with the class?”

Teacher's voice is *shrill*, and it winds me up when she tries to embarrass us lads with such boring questions. Doesn't she know better?

“No, miss”, I venture, automatically, whilst trying to suppress an eye roll. Daz, an irritating troublemaker, tries to start something by pointing out my almost-eye roll, but teach can't be bothered to acknowledge it, which pleases me, as I can't be bothered to defend. Daz looks at me like I've won something. Such a bastard.

As the lesson ends, I realize I've heard none of it. My mind has been somewhere else, entirely. Tonight is Hallowe'en.

The early evening is on the way. It's one of the very few times when we all need the night to come as soon as possible, because once dusk gives way to the darkness, we're on a mission to gather candy from strangers by wearing awful outfits. It's going to be a riot. It always is.

The key to a good Hallowe'en outfit is originality. But bollocks to that. Fifty percent of the neighborhood comes out in trash bags, and we're not about to upstage them by doing anything fancy.

We lap the piss poor fake blood on our faces, don the trash bags, and pull down the sharp, stinky plastic masks that don't look anything like whatever they're supposed to be. It's show time.

Caped up, we can hardly hold our excitement at the night we have ahead of us. There's going to be candy coming out of our ears, laughs that no other time of year can provide, and a slightly later bed time. What more could we want?

But there's a balancing act to think about, and it's something that nobody ever talks about. Yes, we get to be kids and act silly, but we're still older than some of the other kids, and we still have to keep them in check. We can't have any of those little ones thinking we're not hardcore thugs, even if we are prancing around dressed in kitchen consumables.

Whenever we encounter a younger lad, we have duties: Firstly, we must hide our identities, lest they find out that we, too, like Hallowe'en. Failing that, we must appear to be at least one level scarier than they are, which usually means pretending to actually have had bolts through our heads, or, depending on the mask, possibly pretending to actually be ghosts. It can be hard to pull it off, but if we can at least give some of the younger ones nightmares, it's fair game. And failing that, we just have to be doing it ironically, and hope that the false irony isn't ironically lost on the young lad. It's a complex routine.

Our first call of the night. There will be at least thirty more, but this is the one that will kick off proceedings. If this one goes well, we know it's going to be a good night. If it sucks, it's going to bring us all down, and we'll have to do something loutish, to make up for it. Goggles has a roll of firecrackers on standby, just in case.

I knock. We all wait. Nothing happens.

It's not a good start.

I knock again, nervous, now. What if they shout at us? Some of these people don't care for this night and the stream of tiny beggars that come by. Some of them are grumpy shits.

We're about to walk away. Goggles already has the crackers out and he's about to light them up, when the door finally opens. *Hold your horses! What's thiiiiis?*

"Sorry, lads. Bad knee."

The game is on.

"Trick or treeeeaat!", we yell in unison.

As expected, the mandate receives no response. The man simply digs his hands into a bucket of our favorite chocs and dishes them out, haphazardly, into our buckets, which we now protect from each other, since they have inherited value, which usually means we immediately turn on each other and the rules of piracy take over.

"I've got three of these. Anyone wanna trade?"

And so, it begins. As we walk away, the trading, the allegations of unfair chocolate distribution, the biggest lads claiming rights to more of the hoard... the whole thing. But, with so many more doors to knock, let's not be hasty.

"Ray's turn. Go, Ray!"

He approaches the door. It's always a nerve-wracking time, for reasons I already told you about. Pay attention, will you?

"Fuck off!", comes the response.

"Oooooohhhh!!! Nothing for Raymond!"

Looking like he's been slapped in the face, Ray has no choice but to turn back to the waiting faces, empty-handed. Tough luck, Ray. We'd rub it in, but we've got Mega Drive credits to think about.

"Paco, you're up."

Paco wastes no time. He marches right up to the door and bangs on it like he's the police. I half expect him to kick it down. That's just his way. When it opens, he's given a six pack of Guinness, which also seems fitting for Paco. And, being Paco, the rules of splitting everything six ways simply don't apply. He keeps the whole thing and there's nothing we can do about it. Typical. He still wants a fair cut of our loot, though.

The night goes on. We accumulate obscene amounts of chocolate, fake cigarettes, plastic toys, alcohol, and even cash. We feel like boss businessmen, having landed the mother load. And when it's all over, we sit on the roof of the garages, which we can all now jump

onto, admiring our collective gains, exchanging stories of things we all witnessed, and laughing about the best bits.

And then Goggles decides to light up the crackers he never got a chance to use. A perfect end to the night. We all watch, our faces aglow in the fuse light, as he throws the string of crackers down into the alley below, then we wait for the inevitable crackling of tiny explosives in an echo chamber.

Kaboom! Bang! Bang!

What the...? Instead of crackling, we get cannon fire. Goggles has bought something that seems to have been designed for demolition. The booms are so loud, we have to cover our ears. I start to wonder if someone will call the cops, and suggest getting out of there, in case there's damage to the building.

Goggles, being the kind of guy he is, deploys his rather predictable response to such a situation, running home and locking us all out. The old "I'm all right, Jack" approach. Classic.

With Goggles out of the way, and Paco starting to bore of us (and probably eager not to share his beer), the gang starts to break apart. I'm glad to finally tear off the last slither of my trash bags, which are minutes

from giving up of their own accord, and breathe some cool night air (those things are *hot*). My only concern, now, is how much of my candy is still going to be there in the morning, what with my bro being about as trustworthy as Goggles, when it comes to treats.

I lug my bucket up the steps, racking my brain for a place to hide it all, as my legs start to tire. Step by step, I approach the front door, and when I get there, I've come up with nothing. I'll just have to bring the bucket of goodies inside and hope for a miracle.

With nobody in the hallway, I slip off my shoes and tip-toe upstairs to stash my bucket under the bed. Honestly, I doubt anyone would ever think to look there, especially on this night of the year. It should be safe as houses.

In the bathroom, I start de-greasing my face and admiring the deep trenches that the plastic mask has dug into my skin, as though the deeper, the better. And then I hear something in the bedroom. *Brotown*, his pockets overflowing with *my* candy, and my empty bucket just kicking around in the middle of the floor. He's not even pretending like he hasn't robbed me.

All that work. All this grease. I wonder if he'll go into sales or just head straight to the tax office, when careers day comes around. Too tired to fight, to defend

what's mine, I have no choice but to agree to his terms, losing half of my income, just to save the rest, and even then, there's a good chance my half will be gone in the morning.

I wipe the blood from my face, step away from the mirror and turn out the light. Ray, Paco and Andy are probably doing the same, right about now.

Never again.

Team “FAB”

Getting home from school and finding the house empty is pretty rare. Mom always makes sure to be home and welcomes us with hot tea and a prepared cozy area. If I ever have a particularly favorite cartoon, she'll make sure the old tube is warmed up in time for it and have me seated and comfy, ready to enjoy. We're pampered and we know we can rely on it. Life is good.

But on the odd occasion, when mom's still out, there is a fallback strategy, albeit a slightly uncomfortable one.

It all started when our crapper broke and we had to ask the neighbors, Fred and Beryl, if we could stink up theirs. They're an older couple whose bathroom resembles mother's day at Tesco. Their kindness, that day, literally saved our lives, and when we'd been forced to knock for a second time, that same evening, we had expected them to be a little peeved about it, but they treated us like we lived there, and we all became friends.

After things were back to normal in the dumping department, we'd had no further use for our neighbors, and continued as though they had never existed. I mean, what? Were we supposed to send flowers or something?

Were we supposed to send flowers?!

Until now, I'd considered their usefulness a one-time thing. Today, though, it would be making a quick comeback. I've just arrived home from school and found myself locked out. For all her great qualities, mom's not keen on dishing out keys. I have no idea why. But it's left me here. So, what to do? The neighbors, of course.

So, I'm knocking on the door, and I can hear someone coming. Fred answers with a caring smile, and I begin telling him of my trauma.

"I'm locked out, don't you know?"

I don't actually know why I'm telling him this news, but I feel like it's something that an adult should know about. He invites me inside to wait for mom, and I oblige.

The living room is as you would expect of a retired couple in the 1990s – namely tacky as hell. So far, I've only ever seen the kazie, and I'd assumed that the trinkety thimbles and the doll who sat on the bog roll were there for laughs. Now, I'm witnessing the full spread – a whole new world of department store nightmares, and my mind is starting to bend.

There are doilies everywhere. A small dog of advanced years decorates the frilly couch, whose floral patterns are enough to induce epilepsy, and they've replaced their council standard light bulb on a wire with some kind of chandelier. It's ... it's *grotesque*. There's a browned glass serving hatch, right out of the seventies, adjoining the kitchen and living room. As I'm gorging at it, it slides open and Beryl's head appears, draped in the best apron I've ever laid eyes on. I feel like I've landed in another world.

Beryl offers me the staples of the retired British people – a sip of tea in a hair-thin china cup with a picture of the queen mother on it, and a single biscuit that seems to have been created for the sole purpose of not making any crumbs. It's so thin, it practically dissolves on my tongue. I don't remember being able to taste it. It's just kind of... not there, anymore.

As I sit at the glass table, desperately trying not to kick it over or spill my tea on anything, Fred asks me about school. This is kind of weird, because it's the sort of thing that people you know are supposed to ask, but Team FAB are still pretty new in my life, and I'm not sure they have yet earned the asking-about-school privilege. All the same, I give the stock answer: "It's not too bad, thank you" (I'm still very polite – you won't recognize me, later).

Obviously feeling compelled to fill the silence between words with more words, Beryl chimes in, asking if I like the tea I haven't had a chance to sample, and if I want another evaporating biscuit. Being a boy, I obviously accept the biscuit, even though I hadn't been able to tell if I'd eaten the last one, or if it had just fallen from my mouth and floated away on an undetectable breeze.

I thank her, as she deposits another drawing of a biscuit, then sip the tea, just so I can answer her first question without further confusing the situation. I have it figured like this:

She gave me the tea and then asked if I liked it, knowing full well that I hadn't yet tasted it. That was confusing for me. But if I then said that I did like the tea, that would have been confusing for *her*. And then Fred would have said something confusing and we'd all have been utterly screwed by our need to be polite. However, I had chosen to avoid this by delaying my answer until at least Beryl had seen me take a sip, but this has created tension in the air, because I've been asked a question that I am yet to answer.

The question lingers. Growing stale. Burdening us all. It's agonizing. I have to get it out of the way and clear the air. What if another question is asked? We'd be in backlog city with no end in sight. No. I have to end this, now.

I sip the tea, urgently, but conscious to give the illusion of calm (rushing it would be impolite). As soon as I've swallowed the first of the two available sips, I immediately deal with the question that has been pending, issuing a deliberate "Mmmm", beforehand, as a kind of precursive answer, and to dispel any potential doubt as to the authenticity of the forthcoming claim. "It's nice. Thank you".

Done.

With order restored, I bring the biscuit to my mouth and inhale it, clearing my plate and creating some mental space for coming up with something to say. I draw a blank, and I know there's only so much time I can spend on a biscuit that doesn't have any mass. When that time's up, someone's going to have to say something, and it's *my* turn. Sweat starts to appear on my forehead, as I feel the biscuit biodegrade on my tongue, but just then, a knock at the door.

Phew. Relieved? You bet. It's mom, coming to find out if Team FAB have seen me, since I was due home by now, but she got back late.

Trying not to scramble too hard, so as not to offend my friendly neighbors, I feign reluctance to get up, picking up my backpack at what seems like a snail's pace, then I thank Team FAB for the tea (and for the biscuits – you

have to be specific), before heading to the door and returning to the normal world, where couches could be jumped on and tables were heavy enough not to fall over if you walked past them with any gusto.

A minute later, in the relative safety of home, I quietly relay the events of the past ten minutes, describing the doilies as best I can, and asking what they're about. I talk of the chandelier, and the epilepsy couch. And the tassels on the lamps. And the wall-length cupboard filled with the world's tackiest cups and saucers. And the lack of a TV. All the weird things I can't understand need to be explained. I need closure. Mom laughs it off, clearly having no idea how it affects a boy to be put in a world where nothing makes sense.

After some time, we move on, but about a week later, I return from school, only to find that mom is out, again.

Crap.

My options are: I can stand around in the cold, waiting for up to a year for her return, or I can knock for Team FAB and see what's going on in Doilieville. I choose the latter, feeling like surviving it once has hardened me for a return encounter.

As I knock, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. What am I *doing*? This could go too far. I could end up

receiving Scotch short breads with tartan packets, sporting a picture of a pensioner's dog. I could end up having Team FAB calling round for *me!* When my *friends* are round! I'd never live it down.

Too late; While I was thinking it through, I was still knocking, and the door has already begun to open. There, in the doorway, stands my new best pal, Fred, and he's delighted to have a visitor. Before I know it, I'm sitting on the epilepsy couch, next to the pensioner dog who couldn't be bothered to move, staring across the room at the lamps. There is an upside, though. When you're sitting on the couch, you don't have to look at it.

This time, it's Fred who offers food, and although I have no idea what it is that he's offered, it isn't long before he's bringing it out and I'm scooping it into my face, as politely as I can, until I can see the old people pattern etched into the glass bowl. It's pretty similar to the one engraved on the cutlery, which is rather like the one on the couch, which, ironically, would have caused me to see the food again, had I not been sitting on it. It's a strange and interesting circle of circumstance, to be sure.

And then Fred asks me if I like TV. *Now*, we're talking about something real. Something with substance. Hell yeah, I like TV. That's where all the cartoons are. No sooner have I converted that sentiment into a

pensioner-friendly “Yes, I quite like cartoons”, Fred has disappeared, and the sound of clomping is heard, as he climbs the stairs.

That’s left me smiling at Beryl, who smiles at me, and then I smile at the dog, who’s sleeping in the exact position he’d been in the previous week, leading me to wonder if I should ask if he’s real. Beryl tells me his name, but I can’t focus, because I can see the couch from the corner of my eye.

And then Fred returns, breaking the silence with a somewhat energetic “Here we go!”. In his hand, a tiny, portable TV with a screen about three inches across. It sure is exciting. That’s not all, though. He hands me the TV and says “Don’t tell your mother!” I stare at him for a bit too long, unable to believe that he’s giving me - that I have suddenly acquired - my own TV.

The rest of that day, I spend in bed, with the cover over my head, watching Bilco on the black and white screen. And my mom doesn’t even know I’ve got a TV. That’s probably the best part. And then my brother comes in, to find out what I’m up to.

When he sees the six foot aerial poking out of my bedding, I hear him through the sheets, exclaiming “No waaay!”. He’s as blown away as I had been, and he

comes running over to mess with it, causing a rumpus that alerts mom, and just like that, the game's up.

It's always been impossible for mom to encounter a new item such as this without feeling the need to immediately issue a complex set of restrictions on its use. That's one of the reasons I wasn't supposed to tell her, I'll bet. Suddenly, my own rebellious, secret TV has become "our TV", and it's inherited some kind of curfew. It's to be removed from the bedroom at night time and there's now a limit on how long we're allowed to waste staring at it.

In a moment, all the joy has been zapped from the device, killing the childhood dream of secret bed-based cartoons, and replacing it with a modern world version, where the TV owner has responsibilities and there's paperwork to go with it. Uf. What is wrong with adults?

For reasons I may only later understand, I will never see Team FAB, again, after the TV incident, but I will think fondly of them, of their kindness, and of their taste in home furnishings. Let's hope all that betassled shite lives on in someone else's house. As for the TV, well, I don't know what will happen to that, either. It will probably just kind of evaporate, like that first biscuit, and then the whole thing will probably be forgotten, at least until I eventually write a book about it, some decades from now.

The Lucky Dime

Since the beginning of time, my dad has always been ridiculous. He's the only human I've ever known, over nine years old, who would have a conversation with a stranger in a silly accent. And he comes up with new words and they stick around. It was he who, in his forties, after hearing someone say "he had a penicillin", converted it to "he had a silly pen in", and then laughed a jovial "hee hee hoo!" about it.

And it's not just silly sayings, he also has silly traditions, which I am convinced he makes up for his own amusement, alone, but which, for me, take on some kind of sentimental meaning that seems to result in me also honoring the ridiculous tradition, just so I can be like him.

This story is about one such tradition, involving an American dime that he was given in his change, instead of a British 5 pence piece. A coin that has since become pivotal to my existence.

It's been about a year since I became aware of my dad's lucky dime, because he showed it to me and told me that he gets amazing luck, as long as he's carrying it. I know it's BS, but I like that he has this little story,

and because it's his, I let my bullshit detector beep and say nothing.

The lucky dime idea makes me smile, whenever I think about it, so you can imagine how I feel when he gives it to me. And, after a year of sitting on the story, I've kind of let myself invest in its energy, and something about that has given me a feeling that it really could be lucky, after all.

Since I took stewardship of that dime, I've treasured it. It's unlike that any other dime in existence. Heck, no other coin of any kind could possibly be as lucky. And I've come to know this as a fact, because, after I fondled the coin in my pocket, last week, I almost immediately found a really cool pen that had an ink-erasing capability. I mean, come on. And, of course, living under the constraints of a pocket money regime, the first thing I did was to sell the pen to Bowl-Cut Ben for two quid. Kerching! That's free money, baby.

Not long after that, while fondling the coin in my pocket, one of the less aggressive school bullies tried his luck punching me in the stomach, as he was known to do, and wouldn't you know it? His fist connected with the spud gun I was packing on my belt, not only protecting me from the punch, but also dishing out a serving of karma to that *cretin*, as mom used to call all bullies.

Luckier, still, he didn't question what it was that he'd thumped and I didn't get disarmed by the teacher. There can be no further question of this coin's power. This dime is lady luck's gift, and I'm hanging onto it forever.

Being a nipper, I've been trying hard to keep the secret of the lucky dime, but sooner or later, I suppose it was inevitable that I'd have to blab. And blab, I did. Not only to my most established ally, Goggles McClure, but also to my new soul brother, Petersen, who only appeared on the scene in recent weeks, but whose anti-establishment training has made him an instant hit, even if his anti-toothpaste stance had been less popular.

To my dismay, both of these unlikely lads chose to laugh at me for believing in such nonsense as a lucky coin, which I took to heart, since that was my *dad's* lucky coin, they were laughing at. It hurt.

Wounds heal, though, and it's been over a week since that traumatic period in my life came to an end. The lads have forgotten about my dime, and its secrecy has, therefore, been restored. And from now on, it's staying that way. They just don't get it, because they haven't seen this thing's awesome power. But they'll see... They'll *all* see...

Well, some of them might. Probably not.

Anyway, forget those guys, 'cos today's been a corker; I'm currently experiencing some kind of Shakin' Stevens syndrome, as I've just heard that there's going to be someone coming round in a bit, to offer us music lessons, and there's a rumor that drums are on the table. I don't think I need to convince you that it doesn't get much cooler than playing the drums,

Before that, though, I've got to come up with a way to impress a chick. That's right; I'm on the pull. I'm almost eight, after all, so it's about time I sorted out my social life. Can't keep kickin' around with these losers. I mean my epic gang.

The object, if you can call her that, is Alison. She's the cutest in the school and I'm among the nerdiest kids you're likely to meet, with an appropriate level of self-esteem. Wish me luck!

Alison's got it all. All except me, that is. But how the heck am I going to get her to say *yes* to me? Wait. What am I going to ask her that's going to have a *yes or no* answer? I guess I'm a little new to this caper. I'd ask Bowl-Cut Ben, since he's been around the block, but he'd definitely screw with me, after making sure to publicly humiliate me about it. And his pal, Daz, is the world's most devious little bastard, and he would,

without any doubt, find a way to use such a moment of vulnerability against me - maybe years from now. So, no; Ben's out.

And then it hits me. I will just use my newfound incredible luck. I'll let the dime take care of it. What can go wrong? Literally nothing.

Evening has arrived, and I'm sitting in my room, having exhausted myself with the challenges of building a high-powered crossbow out of technical Build-it blocks. What else is there to do, now, besides tating with my bike? But the bike works perfectly, and I do believe that further tating is likely to cause it to no longer do so.

I look around my room, and I see a desk with a paper block and some pens, my brother's tape player, a selection of board games and the chest of drawers that houses my clothes. Not much to work with.

But wait a moment. An idea has struck me. I'm just formulating it. Hold on a sec.

Hold on.

Ok. I've got it.

I'd forgotten about this, since I'd been having so much fun with my Build-it blocks, but it's really important, so I've got to revisit it, right away.

Alison.

I go over to the desk and take a seat. Breathing hard, now, because this is it. I take out a sheet of paper from the block and pick up a pen. This has to be done just right, or it won't work.

Thinking about it...

Ok. I uncap the pen, somewhat dramatically, and begin. This inscription, like the emerald tablets, will be of life-changing importance. Here goes.

"I want a girlfriend."

I fold the important paperwork, neatly, around the dime, which is no longer lucky, I've decided, but *magic*. It's going to grant my wish, pretty much immediately. Of this, I am certain. I know I have to carry this dime around with me, otherwise its power won't benefit me, so I tuck the paper under my watch, where it won't be at any risk of falling out, because I'll obviously be conscious of it at all times. Plus, being in contact with my skin, it will somehow be even *more* powerful.

At that moment, mom happens to enter my room, quite without knocking, and sees me tucking this thing under my watch. Being the security department of the house, it is of utmost importance that she know exactly what I've just tucked under my watch, as well as why I have done it.

Mortifying.

She extracts the paper from me, unfolds it in an accusatory manner, and reads it out loud, as if to the class. A brutal move that only a mother could perform. And then she starts with the questions.

“Who were you going to give this to? Why did you tuck it under your watch? Why is there a coin in here? Is this that coin your dad gave you? Oh, wait, it’s that lucky one. Who were you hoping to get lucky with? You’re seven; You don’t go to school to get a girlfriend. You go to school to learn...”

Well, you get the idea.

She hands the spoiled work back to me, and I stuff it in my pocket, just to get it out of sight. The evening is ruined and I stay in my room to avoid attention. It’s the first time I ever took an early night without being sick or in trouble. I don’t sleep. The humiliating moment

spins around me all night, and by the time I start to fade, I can already hear the birds.

As expected, the morning has now arrived, and it even though I'm dying of tiredness, I flop out of bed without need of mom's military awakening techniques. I need to get the heck out of this house, so I can stop feeling guilty and humiliated. Mom's making breakfast without a word of my recent embarrassment, but I feel like I've just been caught doing the unspeakable in church. The radio is a welcome distraction, but sadly, Chris Whatshisface's chipper voice isn't doing much to mop up the gravy I've got all over my face. For the first time ever, I'm relieved to be going to school.

The walk is long and the nature is beautiful, as it always has been, but my mind is still playing back those haunting seconds in an endless loop, and I can't stop to appreciate the smell of the woodland, the songs of the birds, or the crisp morning air. The only thing that snaps me out of it is remembering that I'm going to see Alison. Again. And quietly fancy the pants off her, while never saying a word. Again. It's going to be awesome.

I pull my imaginary bus into the school gates, taking care not to scratch the paint on the posts as I turn the behemoth, and also making a point to hum the engine sounds a bit more quietly, so the other kids don't hear

me. Once I get it into its parking bay, I spot Goggles and *that other guy*, doing assisted back flips in the bushes, and head over to join them. At last, some noise and bit of normality.

Goggles calls me over, as I approach. He's discovered that you can do back flips in this particular bush, by holding onto these two branches and walking up the fence. I know, of course, because I've just seen him do it about fifteen times, but I go along, enacting the expected reaction, mainly to save time, and to protect his precious ego, and my Mega Drive credits. Even now, these are very real problems.

That other guy, the fourth member of our gang, is already pretty much a pro at this, and we're now starting to talk about things that this new skill could be used for, especially at *his* level. So far, we've got *impressing girls*. I'm sure *Alison* wouldn't be impressed by such childish things, but *ok*.

My turn, now, and I just know a lad of my extraordinary skill is going to be the boss of this particular task within seconds, but I don't want to come across arrogant, and I certainly don't want to be better than Goggles at something, or I'll never hear the end of it, so I say "I'll have a go", when I mean "Stand aside, lower-class amateurs".

Attempting to appear nervous, I grasp at the branches whose precise angles I've already mapped, and begin walking up the fence. And as I roll over, at the top of the branches, the contents of my pockets fall down into the dirt - my mini suspension rod from the Build-it blocks, which I use to simulate the suspension in my imaginary bus; some pennies I've recently found, a metal thing I will later find a valuable use for, and a piece of paper with a coin inside.

I almost drop off the branches, in my rush to get back down before the lads have a chance to spot it, open it, read it, run away and tell everyone about it, and generally ruin my life. Nope. Too late. Goggles, my oldest buddy, snaps it up and runs off to read it out loud. What the hell.

It's not long before half the school is mocking me, and now, I'm just waiting for Alison to join in, further ruining my life and making all things worthless. But she doesn't. She thinks it's kind of sweet. And just like that, I'm smug as a jock.

I might be in, after all.

The Age Of Innocence

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the people who created the moments I've gladly written about in this small book, who have permanently etched themselves into my life, and whose memorable moments have hopefully touched you, dear reader, from another life, some decades later.

Thanks to everyone who has, and will, donate time and resources to my creative efforts, by sharing and linking to my work, donating to my creative fund, supporting my vision, and being honest about the crap I wrote in previous drafts.

Special thanks to those I might not have painted in the best light. Every word is meant with love and humor, and nobody I've mentioned in this book should take any notice of my less favorable portrayals – they're just how I remember things from a really long time ago, and I know they might not be perfect memories. But you know, they are, anyway.

About The Author

Burtman is a British humorist living in the Czech Republic. His stories are almost entirely true* and based on his experience of life as a child, growing up in England and eventually living his dream of buying an old van and living like a hippie.

Burtman's blunt honesty and dry humor reveal layers of wonder and disillusionment, the highs and lows of real life and a sense that everything will turn out ok in the end.

He lives in a secret cave with his side-kick, *Byron the Wonderdog*, and spends his days creating things that very few people will ever see.

*51% minimum truth content

About This Book

This book, the first in a four-part series, includes 10 true* stories from Burtman's formative years, learning to navigate friendship, societal norms and conflict, while attempting to make sense of girls, gangs and loyalty of all kinds.

If you enjoy this book and would like to support Burtman's printing effort, donations are gratefully accepted at:

<https://buymeacoffee.com/burtman>

Everything else from Burtman can be found at:

<https://burtman.net>

Thanks for reading!

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*All character names in this book are fictitious, to protect the identities of the living people. No liability is accepted for hurt feelings or bogus claims for damages.
No part of this book may be used to train AI without the author's prior written consent.*

Kind Feedback

Open this book and you're six years old again. You're sliding down a waxed school corridor in your socks, throwing a punch at the playground bully, tucking a love note and a lucky dime under your watch, hoping nobody notices. Burtman's collection of childhood misadventures are told the way a great photograph is taken — instinctively, honestly, and with an eye for the moment everyone else missed. These are *Stories From The Schoolyard*: small in scale, enormous in feeling.

Burtman writes about childhood the way it actually felt from the inside — bigger, funnier, and more urgent than adults ever seemed to understand. His gang of misfits, rule-testers, and loyal accomplices remind readers what it looked like when the greatest game available was the one you invented yourself, with whoever happened to show up.

- *Ken Nash*

Author of The Brain Harvest and Life Raft

Created with humour and longing for the unmatched excitement of life as a child, *Stories From The Schoolyard* makes you laugh and smile, and brings back the bittersweet emotions of that age of innocence.

Throughout these pages, you'll sympathize with the characters, experience the adventurous spirit and remember that the best things in life are simple.

This is beautiful writing; lighthearted and belly-rattling funny, yet multi-layered. Between the humorous accounts, the tender, sensitive world of a child is revealed, and you grow with him, through all the colours of those innocent days.

- *Natalie Kirshin*
Filmmaker and storyteller