



dayrealing

Mike Church

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A tale of **d**esperation and **r**espiration in 50 simple lessons

The trials and tribulations of a stressed-out teacher in a spaced-out world

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*For Begoña
Lorea and Joseba*

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Five...

“We all enjoy reading a good book.
So how come you chose this one?”

1 ▶▶

You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet

You _____ 'yet

B-b-b-____, _____ 'yet

'OK, folks, are we ready to hammer our grammar?'

'Wouldn't it be easier to smother her with a pillow?'

'I'm sorry, Miss Tedley?' said Colin, sensing that his *Sin-free Syntax* spaceship was already spiralling out of control.

'In her sleep, dear. Using a hammer sounds very messy to me.'

'Did any of you lot see that film last night?'

Oh God, here we go.

'Not now, Jack.'

'This bloke, right, can't remember his name . . .'

Too late.

'He lived with his gran and they was always arguing about whatever, 'cause she was a crap cook but an argumentative old sod, 'til one day they was about to sit down for lunch, when he just lost it and went for her with the bread knife. But the thing is . . .'

Jack paused for thought. It wasn't always easy finding the right words.

'OK, thank you, Jack,' said Colin, looking around the room at Jack's captive audience. Not that he felt envious; or inadequate. Jack proceeded to deliver his final blow . . .

'Well, the thing is, this geezer's gran was a black belt in karate and, before he could even bring the knife down, she fairly clobbered him one in the goolies. That was the last time he made any rude comments about her turkey breasts.'

'Having turkey breasts at my age is nothing to be ashamed of, young man.'

'Miss Tedley, you ain't understood nothing of what I just said.'

Colin seized this opportunity to try and get his class back on track. Not that it was going particularly badly by his standards. On a scale of one to ten, this was a five, maybe a six, right up there with his very best performances.

'"You ain't understood nothing", Jack?'

'You got a problem with that, Craphead?'

'Raphead.'

'Yeah, I know. I was calling you a craphead, Raphead.'

Colin could see Jack was trying to wind him up, but he was far too consummate a pro to rise to the bait. Not for nothing had he sweated his way through a 600-hour course on Emotional Intelligence.

'Come here and say that to my face, you thick peasant.'

Jack didn't need to be invited twice but, fortunately for everyone concerned, Nicola was quick to intervene . . .

'Leave it, Jack. It ain't worth it.'

As Jack meekly obeyed and returned to his seat, Colin slipped effortlessly from teaching mode to preaching mode in 0.8 seconds . . .

'Two negatives make a positive, so we should never use, for example, "not" and "nothing" in the same sentence.'

'You just did!'

‘You know what I mean, Nicola.’

‘I ain’t got a clue what you’re on about.’

‘ “Ain’t”, Nicola?’

‘Yeah, “ain’t”. As in, “This class ain’t going nowhere.” ’

Colin had to agree with Nicola – she had this effect on men –, but no way was he going to let her win this one. Besides, it was a question of professional *duty*: it was his job to teach these poor souls how to talk proper.

‘OK, can anyone improve on Nicola’s last sentence?’

‘ “This class ain’t *never* going nowhere.” ’

‘I said improve, not make worse, Jack.’ Colin was warming up at last. He loved a good grammar argument, especially as this was the only kind of argument he had a hope in hell of ever winning. More than duty, it was now a question of professional *pride*. But Jack wasn’t beaten yet . . .

‘I ain’t no good at maths, Craphead, but I reckon if two negatives make a positive, it follows that three negatives must make a negative, don’t it?’

Jack was right. And so was Colin. But neither of them was interested in sharing the points. It was time for our hero to try another line of attack.

‘What about “ain’t”, anyone?’

‘What about it?’ said Jumping Jack Flash.

‘Well, it ain’t good grammar, Jack. That’s all.’

‘Didn’t you say the other day that your favourite song ever was *Say It Ain’t So, Joe*?’

‘Songs is different, Jack, ain’t it? Ain’t we been through all this before? Anyway, it ain’t my favourite no more.’

Colin’s grammar always went to pot whenever they got him onto his favourite topic: music. As Colin saw things, the world could be divided into two groups: those *with* musical taste; and those *without*. Colin was in the first group, of course. Although many of the best songs flouted every grammatical rule under the sun, this had never stopped Colin from singing along; or humming along when he couldn’t remember the words.

When he was feeling uninspired, Colin would take songs into class, together with gapped lyrics for his students to fill in as they listened. They had done *Yesterday* only yesterday:

Yesterday, _____, _____
_____, _____

Miss Tedley had taken to the task with relish:

*Yesterday, ten or thirteen people in New York
Had no water or lights must’ve been no joke
If I grasped it correctly*

‘I always knew you were a bit hard of hearing, Miss Tedley, but I didn’t realise you were *that* bad.’

‘Don’t you like my lyrics, dear?’

‘It’s not a question of liking or not liking, Miss Tedley.’

‘ “Listen and fill the gaps,” you said. Well, that’s what I did. Instructions, dear. Your instructions were ambiguous.’

Seeing that Miss Tedley was the sort of person who could quite happily complete The Telegraph Crossword without reading any of the clues, Colin knew better than to pursue this conversation any further.

A short while ago, Colin had made a compilation of his 50 favourite songs of all time. They fitted nicely onto three CDs. There was a time when such a compilation would have been unthinkable, but the introduction of the 80-minute recordable CD had totally transformed Colin's life. That said, how he had agonised over the final tracklist. Even now, he still felt occasional pangs of guilt for taking out *Refugee* at the last minute to make room for *Sugar Baby Love*. Colin's life had been full of tough decisions, but that one had marked a watershed. He would have to live with that decision for the rest of his life. Obviously.

And then there was the question of what to call his compilation. Names were important, as Colin had discovered to his cost over the years. He was, therefore, determined to get it right on this occasion. Initially, he had toyed with *Colin's Amazing Selection And Delectation, Genuinely Incredible Tracks* but, fearing an unfortunate acronym, he plumped eventually for the rather less cumbersome yet eminently more sensible *Colin's Daily Inspirational CD*.

He'd made several copies of his DIC for colleagues. At first, he had been disappointed by their lukewarm response to what was, after all, the gift of a lifetime. Only with time did it dawn on him that nobody gives a flying fig what music *you* like. *Their loss, not mine*, he concluded, though he knew he was deluding himself. There was simply no accounting for people's tastes.

Colin took his DIC everywhere; he couldn't bear to be parted from it. Just in case, he'd copied his DIC to his mp3 player; talking of which, where had *that* got to? He remembered taking it out of his briefcase to make room for his sandwiches, but—

'You just used "ain't" and a double negative in the same sentence!'

'I'm sorry, Jack?'

'I said you just used "ain't" and a double negative in the same sentence!'

'The hell I did.'

'You said, "It ain't my favourite no more." '

'No I didn't.'

'Oh yes you did!' said about 20 voices in unison.

'Well what if I did? There ain't nothin' none of us can do about it now, is there?'

You couldn't argue with that, but that wasn't going to stop Jack trying.

'And that was a triple negative, Craphead.'

'Piss off, Jack.'

You couldn't argue with that, either.

'I ain't learnt nothin' this class.'

'Or any class, Jack. So why's that, do you think?'

'Crap teacher, I guess.'

'So would you rather have Simon?' asked Colin, playing his trump card. If it came to a choice between studying language and songs with Colin or carnage and bombs with Simon, nobody in their right mind – not even Jack – would choose the latter; for everybody agreed that Simon's classes were bloody awful.

'I didn't say that.'

‘I’ll tell him that you requested a change of teacher. Perhaps something can be arranged.’

Silence.

Quick! Quit while you’re winning.

‘OK, then, I think we’d better call it a day.’

‘Wednesday, isn’t it, dear?’

‘Er, yes, that’s right, Miss Tedley. What’s your point exactly?’

Or even approximately.

‘I thought you wanted to know what day it was?’

‘Oh I see. No, I said it’s time to call it a day, that’s all.’

‘Well, let’s call this one Wednesday, shall we, dear?’

‘Whatever, Miss Tedley. Look, folks, I’m sorry but I gotta dash for a slash,’ said Colin, desperately trying to put an end to proceedings, though not before adding an apocalyptic afterthought.

‘But hey! . . . Let’s be careful out there,’ said Colin, forgetting to be careful in here too, as he tripped on Jack’s thoughtfully placed rucksack and went flying face first into the corridor.

2 ▶▶

Golden Touch

I _____ touch
She's _____, _____ much

‘Alright, everybody, can I have your attention, please?’

Amanda spoke out of politeness more than anything else; she *always* had everybody’s attention.

‘Today I’m going to show you How to Open Doors *Quietly*. If we have any time left at the end of our session, we’ll have a quick look at How to *Close* Doors Quietly, too. But one thing at a time, OK?’

Amanda’s *Essential Life And Death Skills Seminars* were the highlight of Colin’s day. Of everybody’s day. They were everything a good class should be: practical, professional and popular; in brief, everything Colin’s classes were not. Colin had a quick glance at this term’s programme:

1. How to Turn Lights On *and Off*

Aimed at people who have problems remembering to turn lights off (or on)

2. How to Wax Your Legs *Effortlessly*

Aimed at people who don’t like shaving, and leg lovers in general

3. How to Peel an Apple in *One*

Aimed at people who enjoy challenges involving knives (and apples)

4. How to Park *Without* Getting Blocked In

Aimed at people who drive but don’t like getting blocked in

5. How to Take the Rubbish *Out*

Aimed at people with kitchens, and people who’d like to help out occasionally

6. How to Shave *Without* Bleeding to Death

Aimed at people who treat their face as if it were a loaf of bread

7. How, When and *Why* to Flush a Toilet

Aimed at people who use toilets on a regular basis

8. How to Bite Your Toenails *Discreetly*

Aimed at people who enjoy challenges involving feet (and teeth)

9. How to Use a DVD Recorder to Record the Channel You *Want*

Aimed at people who have problems distinguishing one button from another

And, last but not least, today’s session:

10. How to Open and Close Doors *Quietly*

Aimed at people who are noisy inconsiderate bastards at the best of times

While Colin could hope for maybe 20 to 25 reluctant customers at most – on a *good* day –, Amanda regularly pulled in 100 or so willing clients; mostly male, for obvious reasons, but she had her fair share of female fans, too. Many people had to stand through the whole session for lack of seating, but nobody had ever complained. Quite the contrary, a lot of the young men, in particular – and one or two not-so-young men –, would spend the first few minutes fighting *against* a seat.

‘No, I insist, Miss Tedley. I’m perfectly happy squeezing in over there by Amanda’s desk.’

‘Well, if you’re sure you don’t mind, dear. That’s very sweet of you.’

One of the perks of working at Looniversal Learning – the *only* perk, unless you were some kind of pervert who got a misguided thrill out of having an endless supply of paper clips, rubber bands and whiteboard markers – was that you were allowed to attend your colleagues’ classes. None of Colin’s colleagues had ever attended any of his; which was fine by him. Amanda’s classes, however, were always awash with familiar staffroom faces: the angry-looking bloke who taught Love And Understanding; the sad-looking lady in charge of Life Celebration; the confused-looking chap responsible for Mystery Management; the surprised-looking woman from Total Control . . .

It would have been nice to put some names to these faces but, for whatever reason, most people seemed to avoid Colin like the plague, so it was rather hard striking up a conversation beyond ‘Hi, there!’ – ‘Piss off, Colin.’ He often wondered what he could possibly have done to upset all his colleagues. Or perhaps it was something he *hadn’t* done to *downset* them? Well, whatever, he could live with it. He had no choice.

And then Colin spotted a face whose name he knew only too well: That Moron Simon. Rumour had it – admittedly, Colin had started this one – that Looniversal Learning’s director of studies hadn’t passed a single exam in his life. Simon had left school at the earliest opportunity, joined the Army and risen quickly through the ranks. But after a while, Sergeant Holepunch had grown tired of shouting at undisciplined youngsters, preferring instead to inflict his *Advanced Bawling And Bollocking Techniques* on victims of all ages. Simon was ten years younger than Colin, earned ten times more, worked ten times less, and lived ten times better. Not that Colin was jealous at all. *Bastard*.

Amanda cleared her throat and continued with her presentation.

‘But before I show you how to open a door correctly, let’s quickly brainstorm reasons for wanting to open a door quietly in the first place. Who’s going to get the ball rolling?’

A barrage of balls rolled into action . . .

‘You want to smother somebody with a pillow, so it’s better if they don’t hear you.’

‘Very good, Miss Tedley.’

‘Everybody’s sleeping, and you need to nip out for a fag.’

‘OK, Jack.’

‘You’ve finished your fag, and you want to go back in.’

‘Thank you, Jack.’

‘Your dad’s threatened to kill you if you wake him up again.’

‘That’s a pretty good reason, Nicola.’

‘For a bet?’ said Colin, more with a view to catching Amanda’s eye than anything else.

‘Come again, Colin?’

‘For a bet.’

‘Prick,’ said Simon.

‘I’m sorry, Colin, I don’t follow you,’ said Amanda, rather more tactfully, but almost certainly sharing Simon’s sentiments.

‘You don’t follow me?’ Colin said, playing for time, as he sought desperately to find a better explanation than “I’m sorry, my brain went into auto cruise”.

‘Well, it doesn’t matter, Colin. OK, can anybody else give me another reason?’

Amanda appeared to have no interest in embarrassing Colin in public, but Simon smelt blood.

‘Just a minute, Amanda, I think we should give Colin a chance to explain himself. Don’t you? . . . Colin?’

‘I was simply using my *imagination*, Simon,’ said Colin, rising to the challenge. ‘Suppose your brother dares you to creep into Mum and Dad’s bedroom while they’re asleep and set their alarm for five o’clock.’

‘But why would you want to do that?’

‘For a *dare*, Simon. For a dare.’

‘You’re weird, Raphead.’

‘And you’re—’

‘I think we’d better move on,’ said Amanda, most likely coinciding with Simon’s conclusion. And so the balls continued . . .

‘You’ve just smothered somebody with a pillow, and now you want to sneak out of the house without waking up the rest of the household.’

‘Thank you, Miss Tedley.’

‘Your brother’s studying for an exam and you don’t want to disturb him.’

‘Nice one, Nicola . . . Alright, then, let’s summarise what we have: we open doors quietly when we don’t want to disturb people or make a noise. I’ll repeat that . . .’

Brilliant! thought Colin, still recovering from Simon’s onslaught.

‘We open doors quietly when we don’t want to disturb people or make a noise. We do this because we want to be *considerate* towards others.’

There were a lot of blank faces at this point, especially among Amanda’s teenage fans, but she moved deftly on . . .

‘And the trick to opening doors quietly . . . – listen carefully – the trick is in *how you handle the handle*.’

“*How you handle the handle*”. *The girl’s a genius!* Colin was mightily impressed, yet mightily depressed at the same time: why couldn’t *his* classes be like this?

‘I’ll demonstrate.’ Amanda glided across the room to the door, followed by her adoring audience. ‘OK, let’s suppose you wanted to *leave* the class . . .’

Colin couldn’t for the life of him imagine why anybody in their right mind would want to leave Amanda’s class.

‘. . . In other words, you want to go *away*, so first grasp the handle and, *without pulling it down yet*, push it *away* from you . . . like this. The mistake most people make is to pull the handle down immediately, making unnecessary noise. That’s fine if you want to annoy someone, but we don’t want to *annoy* anyone, do we?’ Amanda smiled, and a hundred hearts heaved as she went on with her demonstration . . .

‘Next, *still pushing the handle away from you*, pull it *down* – slowly, steadily and as far as it will go . . . like this. Finally, pull the handle *in* towards you – like so – and, with any luck, the door should open without anybody other than you being aware of it.’

There was a looniversal gasp as the door opened magically, mutely, before everyone's eyes. You could have heard a pin drop – though why anybody would be playing with pins is a very good question.

'Now let's see what happens when we want to *enter* a room. Follow me.'

Amanda led the way, waited until everybody had squeezed through into the corridor, then closed the door.

'Right then, we want to *enter* the room, don't we? So, we want to go *in*. The first step, therefore, is to grasp the handle and pull it *in* towards you – like this. As I said earlier, don't make the mistake of trying to pull the handle down straight away. That's the second step, remember: pull the handle *down* – like so. Lastly, push the handle *away* from you and, fingers crossed, the door will open without so much as a whisper.'

It had been a faultless demonstration. Once the applause had died down, there followed some hands-on practice as each member of class took it in turns to open the door, enter the classroom and return to their seat; or space, rather. Amanda then proceeded to wrap up . . .

'Remember the Golden Rule: it all depends on *how you handle the handle*. If you want to *enter* a room, if you want to go *in*, the correct sequence is *in . . . down . . . away*; if you want to *leave* a room, if you want to go *away*, the correct sequence is *away . . . down . . . in*. Once you've mastered these rules, you'll find that learning how to *close* doors quietly is a piece of cake. Don't forget your homework: find a challenging door and practise opening and closing it *without* annoying your family or neighbours. And, whatever you do, *don't manhandle your handle*, OK? Personally, I find bathrooms and bedrooms good places to start, but each to their own. Any questions?'

'Just one, Miss Jobarts. You seem to be suggesting that we shouldn't make more noise than necessary. Is that right?'

'Yes, Mrs. Racket, that's *exactly* what I'm saying. Don't look so forlorn, you'll get used to it, I promise you.'

The hour had flown by. Amanda took her leave.

'Well, thank you. Next time, we'll be looking at How to Walk Up and Down Creaky Stairs Without Getting On Everybody's Nerves. I hope you'll join me.'

Of course they would.

3 ▶▶

Don't Stop

Don't _____, _____ tomorrow

Don't _____, _____ here

Colin was dying for a pee. Looniversal Learning had plenty of loonies alright, but it was decidedly lacking in loos. In his rush to get from his own class to Amanda's, he had completely forgotten his basic physiological needs. Big mistake.

'Excuse me, I'm looking for the men's.'

'Well, good luck, mate.'

Another mistake. Never ask a smiling person for directions: they are only there to take the piss.

'Thank you. Could you tell me where it is, please?'

'Where *what* is?'

'The men's.'

'The men's what?'

'The men's toilet, of course.'

'Oh, why didn't you say so?'

'Well, I would have thought it was obvious.'

'Well, you'd be wrong. Never assume because when you assume, you make—'

'An "ass" out of "u" and "me". Yes, I've heard it.'

'Well, actually, clever clogs, I was going to say, "You make an 'as' out of 'sum' and 'e'."'

'That doesn't make sense.'

'It does to me. Now, where was I?'

'You were going to tell me where the men's is.'

'Ah yes, that's right. So if somebody asks me where the butcher's is, I don't immediately assume that they want the butcher's toilet, do I? In fact, it's far more likely that they want the butcher's *shop*, isn't it? Ditto baker's, greengrocer's and fishmonger's. It's what they call "ellipsis", I believe.'

'Well?' asked Colin, containing himself. In any other circumstances, he would have happily clipped the guy round the ear – *And this is what they call "eclipsis", I believe.*

'Not too bad. Yourself?'

'I'll feel better when you tell me where the men's is. *Please.*'

'So which men's is it? The toilet or the shop?'

'The toilet.' What exactly was a "men's shop", anyway?'

'Opposite the ladies'. You can't miss it. Bye.'

'Hey, hang on! Could you tell me where the ladies' is, please?'

'What are you? Some kind of pervert?'

'No, it's just— Hey!'

Too late. Having spent the last 25 years or so in this damned place, Colin should have learnt by now where the nearest toilet was. But he never seemed to find time for the important things in life; things like eating, sleeping . . . and peeing. Besides, he was late again. Not that he could recall ever having actually *arrived* late; he always seemed to make it miraculously with just a microsecond to spare. How, he didn't know; he just did.

Colin opened his battered briefcase – the handle of which had vanished mysteriously during last week’s *Eat Your Heart Out, Harry Potter* workshop – and dug out his dog-eared *Loser’s Guide to the Ludicrous Labyrinth that is Looniversal Learning*. He needn’t have bothered for all the good it did him: “You are here” . . . “You should be here” . . . “And this is where you’ll end up”. As he struggled to fold his map away – there were far too many permutations than he could possibly cope with –, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Not a kitchen tap; a human tap. Colin swung round. Seeing nothing but the wall, he tried swinging round the other way, this time with better results . . .

‘Oh hello, Miss Slapper.’

‘I’m not a whore, Colin.’

‘Good for you.’

Unsure where this conversation was leading, Colin wisely avoided any flippant remarks along the lines of, “That’s not what everybody else is saying”. His director was an unnerving woman at the best of times, so he decided to bite his lip. Literally. *Ouch!*

Colin sensed that the worst was yet to come . . .

‘Have you finished that report yet, Colin?’

‘Which one?’

‘Very funny.’

Reports, sodding reports! If there were one topic guaranteed to make Colin’s blood boil, it was this one. To be honest, a lot of topics made Colin’s blood boil, but spending half your life producing reports which nobody actually needs, wants or will ever read . . . Well, this was definitely up there in the Top Five of Colin’s “100 Things That Well And Truly Get On My Goat” list. It didn’t take a genius to work out why the rainforests had been disappearing even faster than Looniversal Learning’s students. It was all Dolores Slapper’s fault, and one day she would be held to account before the International Wood Crimes Tribunal . . .

‘*And how do you plead, Miss Slapper?*’

‘*Guilty, of course.*’

‘*Don’t you wish to say anything in your defence?*’

‘*In my defence? What is there to say?*’

‘*Wasn’t that a song by Freddie Mercury?*’

‘*That’s right, your Highnessship. Brilliant, wasn’t he?*’

‘*Absolutely! Well, that’s that, then. This court has no alternative but to find you not guilty. Fancy a beer, Miss Slapper? Or may I call you Dolores?*’ . . .

‘Colin?’

Colin came from with a stop, then to with a start.

‘Don’t worry, Miss Slapper, I haven’t forgotten it.’

Whatever *it* was. Looniversal Learning was a reporter’s paradise; and Colin, for his sins, had been appointed Reporter-in-Chief. Recent commissions included: *New Markets for Old Students; Old Markets for New Students; Any Old Markets for Any Old Students; Profits and Profiteroles; Innovation, Education and Desperation; Good Better Betterer, Et Bloody Cetera* . . . Inevitably, the only genuinely interesting report that he had produced was one that nobody had even asked him for: *My Report on My Reports – An In-Depth Study of Soul and Soil Destruction*. Miss Slapper had been distinctly unimpressed at the time, returning it to Colin’s desk, together with one of those irritating sticky yellow notes, on which she’d written two little words in blood red: “See me”.

‘You’ve got a bleeding lip, Colin.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because your lip is bleeding.’

‘Oh right. I was thinking of getting my lip pierced anyway,’ said Colin, swiping his bottom lip with the back of his hand.

‘Bollocks you were. So I’ll have it on my desk by the end of the day?’

‘Well, that’s anybody’s guess, Miss Slapper.’

‘The *report*, Colin.’

‘Ah, yes, the report. No problem.’

As his director waltzed off down the corridor, looking for her next victim, Colin reached into his jacket pocket for his diary and pulled out a little notebook instead. The *book* was little; you could write your notes any size you wanted – so long as they weren’t bigger than the actual book, of course.

On the first page, Colin had begun “My Greatest Non-Jokes” . . .

Q. Why aren’t there any aspirins in the desert?

A. Because the camels eat them all . . .

On the next page, he had started “Questions for Discussion” . . .

1. What’s your favourite Oasis album? . . .

On page three, some clown had drawn a picture of a semi-clad female and signed it “Colin Picasso” – *Hilarious, Jack*; on page four, he hadn’t even bothered with a title, he’d just written, “What ever happened to the *Hill Street Blues* Season 3 DVD?!”; and on the fifth page he had begun “My Best Endings” . . .

A. ‘But what about US?!’ she asked incredulously.

B. ‘What’s America got to do with it?!’ he replied cretinously . . .

And that was as far as he had got. Colin probably held the world record for having created the greatest number of one-item lists. Whoever said the hardest part was getting started had clearly never tried continuing or finishing a list in their life; and whoever objected to using “their” as an alternative to “his or her” could stick it up his or her arse, as far as Colin was concerned.

He put his notebook away, and tried his other pockets, but there was no sign of his diary. He was hopelessly lost without it. Well, he was hopelessly lost *with* it as well, but he always found it reassuring to see in black and white which meeting he had nearly missed, which class he had almost overlooked or, as in this case, which report he had completely forgotten. *That’s odd. I must have left it on my desk.*

Colin glanced at his watch; there was no time to go back to the staffroom now. Grabbing a fluorescent green marker from his briefcase, he scrawled “Slapper report!” on his hand; his *other* hand. With a permanent reminder of the task in hand, Colin felt somewhat relieved, though he was far more interested right now in a different kind of relief. He made one last attempt to decipher his bloody map – “Toilet to let, but you’ll never find it” –, screwed it up in disgust and, choosing a direction at random, charged off into the distance. His bursting bladder could wait; his blasted show couldn’t.

And as he ran, one thought, one thought alone, tormented him: who the hell was bombarding them with Fleetwood Mac at this unearthly hour?

4 ►►

Human

And _____ answers
Are _____ dancers?

‘The English say *plane*, but the French say *avion* to mean exactly the same thing. How can this be? If you think you know the answer, give me a ring on o double seven three four, o double seven three four; or, if you prefer, drop me a line at c raphead at looniversal learning dot com.’

Colin’s Conundrums had been Slapper’s idea . . .

‘I’ve decided to give you a radio show, Colin.’

‘Oh, thank you very much, Miss Slapper.’

‘Snapper.’

‘This is the snappiest I can go . . . Why me, anyway?’

‘A, because you’re full of rubbish; and B, because you’re dirt cheap.’

‘But we haven’t even discussed my fees yet.’

‘Fees? . . . Look, Colin, do you want to be a radio star or don’t you?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘In that case, shut up and listen . . .’

There then followed a lengthy *Don’ts* list:

‘Don’t upset anyone; don’t be rude to your listeners; don’t make any tasteless jokes; don’t make any snide remarks about your colleagues; don’t have a laugh at others’ expense; don’t enjoy yourself; . . . and, above all, don’t forget to plug Looniversal Learning every twenty seconds. Got that, Colin?’

‘Yes.’ (‘No.’)

‘Shall I run through that again for you?’

‘No need, Miss Slapper.’ (‘Run through what?’)

The phone rang and Colin nearly fell off his chair; he couldn’t remember the last time a listener had phoned in. He had often wondered whether there was anybody out there at all; except Slapper, of course, who recorded all the shows and regularly played back the most embarrassing bits at staff meetings.

‘Yes?’

*‘Ah, hi. Is that *Dollies on Trolleys*?’*

‘No.’

‘Could you send me twenty-four of the extra large deluxe . . . Sorry, did you say No?’

‘Yes.’

‘You said Yes?’

‘Yes.’

*‘OK, well, could you send me twenty-four of the extra large deluxe citrus-scented— This is *Dollies on Trolleys*, isn’t it?’*

‘I’ve told you once,’ said Colin, delighted to have someone – *anyone* – to talk to; or wind up, rather. *‘Is your name Barry, by any chance?’*

‘You what?’

‘Is your name Barry?’

‘No. Why?’

‘It’s just you sounded like a Barry to me . . . Sorry, Barry, my mistake. Carry on. You wanted twenty-four of the extra large deluxe citrus-scented . . .’

‘My name’s Brian.’

‘I was pretty close, then.’

‘You sound like a Dick to me.’

‘Nice one, Barry. No, there are no Dicks here at Looniversal Learning,’ said Colin, lying through his teeth.

‘Looniversal *what?* This isn’t *Dollies on Trolleys*, is it?’

‘Does the Pope like pop music?’

‘How the hell should *I* know? . . . Look, is that o double seven eight four, o double seven eight four?’

‘Afraid not, Barry,’ said Colin, jotting down the number for future reference. He remembered Slapper’s instructions – *Sell the buggers our courses!* – and switched to telemarketing mode . . .

‘So shall I put your name down for *Sherbet Perverts*, Barry?’

‘What’s *Sherbet Perverts*?’

‘It’s our latest course, aimed at kinky lemon lovers. I think you’d love it.’

‘I’d sooner be run over by a truck than—’

‘Barry?’

As Colin mused on how rude some people can be, the phone rang again. *Two in two minutes!* Colin whacked his forehead with the microphone to check he wasn’t dreaming. *Bloody hell!* He wasn’t.

‘Hello?’

‘Go away!’ said Colin, still counting the stars. *Thirty-six, thirty-seven . . .*

‘*Colin’s Conundrums?*’

‘Oh, yes, hi. Sorry about that,’ Colin said, recovering his composure. ‘Have you cracked today’s conundrum?’

‘No, but I’ve got another one for you. It’s about biscuits.’

‘Look, I’m sorry, but the only conundrums we do on this show are— *Biscuits*, did you say?’ Colin’s curiosity had got the better of him. He’d always had a soft spot for biscuits, particularly lemon creams, as it happened, though he was also rather partial to choc chip cookies and—

‘Yes, that’s right. What I’d like to know is this: why does every packet of biscuits we buy always contain at least one broken biscuit?’

‘Yeah, that’s a good point, er . . . Sorry, I didn’t catch your name?’

‘Ginger.’

‘That’s a good point, Ginger.’ Colin had often wondered the same thing himself. Every day he would open a minute pack of five choc chip cookies only to find nothing but five hundred miniscule chips. The manufacturers called them “fun-sized” - presumably because they thought it was hilarious. Naturally, Colin had a theory; he had a theory for *everything* . . .

‘You know what I think, Ginger?’

‘What?’

‘I reckon they employ someone to smash each packet of biscuits with a hammer before it leaves the factory.’

‘Yeah, that’s right.’

‘It is?’

‘I was a biscuit hammerer for fifteen years. I had a smashing time.’

‘But *why* do they do it?’

‘Beats me.’

‘You never asked?’

‘Sure, but all my boss would tell me was, “Top-secret market research shows that eight out of ten customers prefer their biscuits to be broken. Now get back to your hammer, you lazy git.”’

‘Fascinating. So why did you give it up, Ginger?’

‘I was sacked. They caught me trying to sneak out a packet of custard creams that hadn’t been under the hammer.’

‘And what do you do these days?’

‘Bore the pants off anybody who will listen to me. Is it OK if I ring you again tomorrow?’

‘Sure’, said Colin, off whom the pants had not been remotely bored. ‘Bye then, Ginger.’

‘Cheers, Colin.’

Feeling as if he had made a friend for life, Colin started reflecting on how nice some people could be, only for his thoughts to be interrupted by yet another call zinging in from outer space. *Three in three minutes!*

‘Hello?’

‘*Colin’s Condoms?*’

‘*Conundrums.*’

‘Whatever.’ Colin’s caller went straight to the point . . .

‘How come it’s always the man’s fault?’

‘How do you mean?’ asked Colin, knowing exactly what he meant.

‘Everyone talks about “human error”, right? But you never hear anybody blame a mistake on “*huwoman* error”, do you?’

‘I think you’ll find “human” is an all-embracing term, encompassing both sexes,’ said Colin, surprising himself with his first intelligent observation of the day.

‘That’s not what Wikipedia says.’

‘Vicky who?’

‘Wikipedia.’

‘Well, I’m afraid we’re going to have to like it or lump it, um . . . Sorry, what was the name?’

‘Brendan.’

‘Brenda?’

‘Brendan. With an N. Brenda’s a girl’s name, you pillock.’

‘Talk about the pot calling the kettle black,’ said Colin, using an idiom he had never understood; and never would. ‘Well, thanks for calling, Brandon. Have a nice day.’

‘Piss off.’

If only! Still not having had the chance to make it to a loo, Colin had avoided thinking about his discomfort by applying his advanced bladder control techniques - *Just don’t think about it, Think about something else, Go easy on the water, Tie a knot in it*, that sort of thing. Sensing, however, that things were coming to a head, Colin was sorely tempted to leave the studio; after all, on any other day, nobody would even have noticed his absence. But *today* . . .

It was a good moment to take stock of the day, Colin decided. He loved taking stock – pens, pencils, highlighters . . . whatever he could lay his hands on. *Let’s see* . . . He’d nearly sold a course; he’d made a new friend; and he’d resolved a tricky language

question. Yes, this was definitely the most successful *Colin's Conundrums* to date; he hoped Slapper was recording it. Now if somebody would only phone in with the answer to today's conundrum. What was it again? Something about French planes, he seemed to recall.

Colin had never followed a script in his life, but he desperately needed that blasted sheet right now. *Please, phone, don't ring*. He rifled through the obvious places – desk, briefcase, pockets, flies, socks . . . – but without joy. Just as he was about to call the Samaritans, he spotted a paper under his desk. *There you are, you bastard*. He bent down, squeezed under his desk, reached out for the offending document . . . and the phone rang. Such was life.

Forgetting where his head was, Colin tried to get to his feet, but only got as far as his knees. *Hell's bells!* The stars had returned; these ones were more V-shaped and more vicious than the last bunch. *Sixteen, seventeen . . .*

'Is that *Colin's Conundrums*?'

Twenty-eight, twenty-nine . . .

'I think I can crack your conundrum, Colin.'

Colin had cracked enough things for one day, thank you very much. Re-emerging from under his desk, paper in hand, he grabbed the microphone, simultaneously smashing his jaw, just for the hell of it. There then followed what might best be described as some kind of Indian *whoa!* dance, as a semi-conscious Colin spun around the studio in search of his seat.

'Are you there, Colin?'

'Not totally,' said Colin, slowly coming to his senses.

'I said I think I can crack your conundrum, Colin.'

'Crack my *what*?'

'Your conundrum.'

'Oh, right, go ahead.'

'Is it because the French don't know how to speak English properly?'

'Congratulations!' said Colin, keen to call it a day, and not even bothering to check his script for the solution.

'So what's my prize?'

'Prize?'

'Yeah. What have I won?'

'Hang on a minute.'

Shit! This had never happened before: *Colin's Conundrums* had a winner. Miss Slapper wouldn't be at all happy about this. *Don't give out any prizes*, she'd warned him, on more than one occasion. Colin had to think quickly. He thought best under pressure, so he was always thinking best, but now he needed to think even better than best. Then the inevitable happened: Colin had a brainwave . . .

'Hi, sorry about that. I was just readjusting my microphone. Could I have your name, please?'

'Lola.'

'How do you spell that?'

'L, O, L, A, Lola.'

'Well, Lola, the good news is you have won a romantic dinner for two with Looniversal Learning's delightful director of studies, Simon Holepunch.'

'Can't you just send me some book tokens instead?'

'Sorry, Lola, take it or leave it.'

‘Well, I think that’s a crap prize.’

‘I take it you know Simon? Anyway, thanks for calling, Lola. Enjoy your meal. Bye.’

Colin was going to have to do a bit of explaining, but he would worry about that later. He drew his show to a close . . .

‘Thank you for tuning in to *Colin’s Conundrums*. I hope you enjoyed the show. Don’t forget to check out Looniversal Learning’s webpage for further details about our courses or whatever. Sorry, I can’t remember the address offhand.’

It wasn’t the most professional finish to an otherwise impeccable performance. For his part, Colin already had his mind on a different kind of performance altogether.

5 II

Heart Of Gold

I _____, _____ give
I've _____ gold

Everybody agreed Colin was a bit of a twat. Even Colin. Especially Colin. In *theory*, however, Colin was quite possibly the most qualified person in the history of the universe. There wasn't a course he hadn't "attended", a certificate he hadn't forged, a title he hadn't bought. On *paper*, Colin was an employer's dream:

*To whom it may concern
This is to certify that C.RAPHEAD
Has "successfully" completed courses
on every single subject under the sun, including
Customer Service, Customer Loyalty, Customer Hogwash;
Creative Marketing, Creative Accounting, Creative Arselicking;
Innovation & Investigation, Innovation & Inspiration, Innovation & Exhalation;
...
Signed . . .
Dated . . .*

You name it, he'd done it. And a fat lot of good it had done him. "An employer's dream"? Colin felt sure Slapper would have something to say about that. *Papers, bloody papers*. Colin would happily have traded in the whole lot of them for the ability to do something that he considered actually useful.

As Colin saw it, some people are born competent, while others are born incompetent. Colin was in the second group. As if to prove his point, he'd sat down the other day to start drawing up a list of his *Basic Incompetences*. Colin loved his lists: there was something therapeutic about writing lists, even soul-destroying lists like this one . . .

My Basic *Physical* Incompetences

- can't ski (can't even get on a ski lift without looking like a total prat)
- can't swim very well (or very far . . . or very fast; happy to splash about)
- can't sing very well (in common with most colleagues)
- can't skate (roller, ice, slippery surfaces in general)
- can't do most activities beginning with S (see above)
- can't dance very well (can't dance at all, if we're going to be honest about this)
- can't walk in a straight line (new glasses don't help)
- can't keep shoulders straight for 20 seconds (why's this such a big deal?)
- can't cook very well (but always willing to try)
- can't even fry an egg properly (don't like eggs, anyway, so not too important)
- can't change a tyre properly (but enjoy playing with jack)
- can't put up bookshelves (much better at pulling them down)
- can't put up a painting (can't stand modern art, anyway)

- can't use a drill very well (don't know when to stop)
- can't use a soldering iron at all (don't know where to start)
- can't beat the shit out of anybody (have never tried, admittedly)
- can't . . .

My Basic *Mental* Incompetences

- can't chat up a girl (or boy, for that matter)
- can't chat *to* a girl (ditto)
- can't hold an intelligent conversation for more than one minute (Is it *me*?)
- can't cope with serious people (e.g. Slapper, Simon . . .)
- can't understand people (especially those whose names begin with S)
- can't intimidate people (or animals)
- can't get people to do things (at least, not the things I want them to do)
- can't finish lists properly (and not just lists)
- can't . . .

A quick count revealed that Colin had twice as many *physical* incompetences as *mental* incompetences, though he was none too sure what conclusions to draw from this, other than the obvious: he was twice as uncoordinated physically as he was mentally. Whatever *that* meant. Not that it mattered, for there was no escaping the fact that Colin was quite clearly the most useless person in the world. Full-stop.

Yet for all his glaring incompetence, Colin absolutely loved teaching: whatever, wherever, whenever. "Know nothing, teach anything" was his motto. What he lacked in knowledge and know-how – two greatly overrated concepts, in Colin's convenient opinion –, he more than made up for in patience, perspiration, persistence and perseverance; all those p- qualities, basically. Whether you wanted to study Physics or Physiques, Deserts or Desserts, Arabic or Aerobics . . . Colin was your man. He would get you there. Eventually. Even if it killed him. It usually did.

'Calling Colin! Calling Colin! We have an emergency. Do you read me? Over.'

'What is it this time?'

'We've got a guy here who wants to learn Polish in two weeks. Are you up for the challenge?'

'No.'

'Great. Thanks, Colin. You start tomorrow. Have fun.'

'Have fun'. Exactly. That, after all, was the whole point of life, wasn't it? Simply being alive was a privilege in itself – Colin had read all about those sperm races –, but being able to teach your way through life? Well, that was more than a privilege; that was *paradise*. Or at least it would be if the bloody bastards would only cooperate now and again. Such was the paradox of the teaching paradigm. Colin loved his p- words.

Colin also loved his a- words, his b- words and his c- words. He wasn't so hot on q- words, x-words or z-words, but he was working on it. Or them, rather. If Colin had to choose just one subject for which he considered himself almost qualified to teach, it was surely English. He had even drawn up a list for Slapper . . .

20 Reasons Why I Should Be Allowed To Teach English (Occasionally)

1. I know the difference between singular and plural nouns.
2. I know what "uncountable" means. I think I know what "countable" means too.
3. I know all about verbs, tenses, stuff like that.

4. I even know the difference between a gerund and an infinitive.
5. I'm not so clear on the difference between a gerund and a gerundive, but I'm pretty confident I could find out if necessary.
6. I'm well up on prepositions.
7. I can spell words like "accommodation" and "correspondence" correctly (most of the time).
8. I can be unreasonably pedantic: anyone who can't distinguish between "fewer" and "less" should be shot (even if fewer students means less money).
9. I know my articles and I know my particles.
10. I can underline the adverbs and adjectives in phrases like, "He's pretty jolly" or "She's jolly pretty".
11. I can distinguish between idioms and idiots.
12. I know how to use words like "whom" and "whose" correctly.
13. I can churn out more phrasal verbs than you can take in.
14. I can make a coherent statement without using moronic interjections such as "you know", "like", "sort of" . . . that kind of thing, right?
15. I use commas, full-stops and semi-colons correctly; most of the time.
16. I know the difference between "I hate English" and "I hate the English".
17. I know loads of silly jokes and puns – ideal punishment for silly students!
18. I can bluff my way out of any difficult language question.
19. I'm very good at making up ridiculous rules.
20. I am English.

Numbers 18 to 20 were a bit of a cop-out, but Colin couldn't stand odd-numbered lists, in much the same way that he would never understand people who, having started a perfectly good sentence, couldn't be bothered to

In the end, Slapper had relented, even if this was more to do with Looniversal Learning's resident English teacher having gone down with postphrasal depression, as opposed to any genuine confidence in Colin's teaching ability . . .

'Thanks, Miss Slapper, you won't regret this.' ('You'll be sorry.')

'We'll see.' ('I know.')

As far as Colin could make out, the only real problem with teaching as a profession was having to cope with all the idiots along the way – bosses, colleagues, students, parents, grandparents, godparents, inspectors, Slapper and, above all, more than the rest of all the world's twits put together, that moron Simon.

Fortunately, the pluses far outweighed the minuses. As any teacher will tell you, the thrill of seeing your students learn something new, thanks to *you* – despite you, in Colin's case –, well, it's impossible to put this feeling into words, sentences or paragraphs; none of which should prevent us from trying.

Moreover, as if the joy of teaching weren't enough reward in itself, you also got to meet hundreds, thousands, millions of people, most of whom were friendly, fascinating and – Colin's favourite word – *fun*. All the f- words. Granted, there were other, less complimentary f- words which might describe these same people on occasions. Colin, nonetheless, was always prepared to forgive and forget. Especially forget.

Certainly, there were times when he felt frustrated, frazzled, furious. He had tried looking cool, calm and collected, but the c- words were not for Colin, it seemed. So, he switched briefly to scowling at everybody, but he could never keep it up for long – well not the scowling, anyway.

Though he hated to admit it, Colin loved people and he loved being with people, even the idiots; even Simon – if there was absolutely nobody else around to play with, that is. Yes, Colin was a twat, alright. No doubt about it.

And twat was twat.

6▶▶

Living For The Corporation

Someone _____, _____' here
Stuck _____ gear

‘Have you got a minute, Colin?’

‘Have *you*?’

Colin was normally a paragon of politeness – except when he was being rude – but Slapper always seemed to bring out the worst in him. He did a quick mental calculation: *One times two is two, plus ten is twelve. Twelve minutes.* Colin had long since come to the conclusion that a director’s minute was never the same as a worker’s minute. At the time, it had only taken him about five minutes – five worker minutes, that is – to come up with *Colin’s Boss Time Calculation* which, for all its simplicity – “double the minutes, then add ten, don’t ask why” –, had proved remarkably accurate over the years.

‘I need to have a word with you.’

‘Which word is that, Miss Slapper?’

One of Colin’s ambitions in life was to draw a smile from Slapper, or at least a faint hint of a smile. How he would savour that moment. Unlike this moment.

Once inside Slapper’s office, they went straight to the point; after all, they had a lot of ground to cover in 12 minutes . . .

‘Well, Colin?’

‘Never been better, thank you. Yourself?’

‘What was all *that* about, Colin?’

‘Oh, *that*!’

Colin had no idea what “that” was; there were so many possibilities. He decided to play for time. Slapper went on (and on).

‘Simon’s furious!’

‘Simon’s always furious, Miss Slapper.’

‘How could you do that to him, Colin?’

That word again.

‘Well, the thing is, Miss Slapper . . .’ Colin paused, waiting for the interruption that never came. How odd; it was most unlike Slapper to listen to his explanations.

‘The thing is *what*, Colin?’ Slapper had him by the proverbial goolies, but Colin wasn’t about to go down without a fight. Besides, this was fun.

‘I suppose what I’m trying to say is . . .’ Colin paused again, waiting for Slapper to finish his sentence for him. *Damn!* She was displaying remarkable self-control by her standards. Colin was running out of cards.

‘Well, you know how it is, Miss Slapper. One day, you . . .’

‘And who’s going to pay for the dinner, anyway?’

Yes! Third time lucky. So *that’s* what “that” was all about. Now all Colin had to do was a) apologise and b) think of an excuse. Colin was an expert at both a) and b). Whether it was a plausible excuse or a ridiculous one didn’t matter in the slightest, as the bollocking and subsequent conclusion would be identical in either case. Colin decided to try the sensible route first . . .

‘Look, I’m sorry, Miss Slapper. I just thought it would be a nice surprise for Simon.’

‘What? Going on a blind date with a septuagenarian cross-dresser?’

The sensible route wasn't working; it was time to try the silly one.

'Why's she cross?'

'You know what I mean, Colin.'

Was Colin imagining it or was that a new wrinkle that had just that very minute appeared on Slapper's forehead? Why didn't she save her energy and go straight to the bollocking?

'In any case, I think Simon needs to get out more. Don't you, Miss Slapper?'

The wrinkle turned into an arrow, at the end of which somebody had scribbled in Comic Size 2 font, "This is what talking to Colin does to you. You have been warned".

'Listen, Colin, what you did was quite unacceptable . . .'

This was a pretty poor bollocking by Slapper's standards, given that everything Colin did was "quite unacceptable" . . .

'Don't ever do anything like that, again, OK?'

And Slapper's conclusion was equally pathetic; most of their conversations these days ended with the same phrase.

'OK, Miss Slapper. Is that all?' asked Colin, well aware that his 12 minutes were not up yet; it was clear that Slapper was saving her trump card . . .

'Oh, and another thing, Colin . . .' *Here we go . . .* 'Jack says you were very rude to him earlier on.'

'Well, I could hardly have been rude to him *later* on, could I, Miss Slapper?' said Colin, more rudely than shrewdly.

'Listen, clever clogs, we don't pay you to insult our customers.'

So who do you pay me to insult? Colin cast his mind back to the incident – after all, he could hardly cast his mind *forward* to the incident, could he? Gathering his thoughts, he proceeded with his defence . . .

'*He* started it, Miss Slapper. He called me "Craphead".'

'So what?' said Slapper, as if this were a perfectly reasonable thing to call Colin.

'Well, I don't like it, Miss Slapper.'

'In much the same way that I don't like your calling me "Miss Slapper" all the time, Colin.'

'Would you rather I called you "Dolores"?''

'Jack says you called him a "thick peasant",' said Slapper, recognising a lost battle when she saw one, and wisely moving on.

'Did I? I don't remember saying that,' said Colin, remembering only too well.

'Next time you see Jack, I want you to apologise to him.'

'For something I didn't say?'

'Jack says he has twenty witnesses.'

'I didn't know he could count that high.'

'Jack's a much brighter boy than you give him credit for, Colin. Anyway, don't forget, will you?'

'Forget what, Miss Slapper?'

The arrow on Slapper's forehead widened; at the same time, several more hairs on her head whitened.

'To apologise for your rudeness, you cretin!'

'Well, if you think it's necessary, Miss Slapper. Is that everything?'

'No it bloody well isn't, Colin! Now sit down and shut up!'

Colin didn't need to be told twice. He needed to be told seven times, to be precise, but he got the message eventually: Slapper was angry. Colin didn't have to be Einstein

to work out that it was either something he *had* done or something he *hadn't* . . . or both. Slapper had already reprimanded him for two things he *had* done: 1) upset Simon – hardly difficult – and 2) insult Jack – hardly avoidable. By applying *Colin's Law of Likelihoods*, therefore, crime number three was probably something he *hadn't* done.

‘What about the report, Colin?’

Bingo!

‘What about it, Miss Slapper?’ said Colin, deliberately being obtuse. How was he going to wriggle his way out of this one?

‘How can you be so obtuse, Colin?’

“*Obtuse*”? That word rang bells. And balls too. This was just the diversion he needed.

‘*The Shawshank Redemption*?’

‘What are you talking about, Colin?’

‘“How can you be so obtuse?” Wasn't that a line from *The Shawshank Redemption*?’ asked Colin, glancing at his watch and making a quick calculation. *Just three more minutes and she'll let me go. Keep waffling, Colin!* ‘You remember that film, don't you? Apparently, it was a bit of a flop at the box office, but then when the DVD came out—’

‘Colin, do you really think I'm interested in this rubbish?’

‘It's not rubbish at all, Miss Slapper. Everybody should see this movie,’ said Colin, for once without even a trace of irony. Despite its silly title, *The Shawshank Redemption* had always been Colin's favourite film. Ever. He had long been a sucker for prison movies – *Escape From Alcatraz*, *The Count Of Monte Cristo*, *Papillon*, *Porridge* . . . – but *The Shawshank Redemption* would always hold the number one spot for Colin. Unless a better movie came out in the meantime, that is. Imprisoned unfairly, fighting against injustice, falling foul of a corrupt system, tormented by evil bosses . . . Colin *was* Andy Dufresne. Not literally, of course; the main differences being a) Andy was a very clever competent chap, b) Andy escaped and c) Colin was *not* Andy Dufresne. Obviously.

‘And the director was a right bastard!’

‘Director?’

‘I think it was Frank Darabont, but don't quote me on that.’

The arrow on Slapper's forehead grew a second head, and a new message appeared: “DON'T EVEN ASK”. Turkeywings Size 20, at a guess.

‘Since when do prisons have “directors”, Colin? The word you want is “warden”. And look at me when I'm talking to you, damn it!’

Slapper had walked straight into Colin's little trap. He couldn't help feeling rather pleased with himself. A victory for common nonsense.

‘You know, Miss Slapper, I think you're right. I'll lend you the DVD if you like.’ Colin remembered too late that the last time he had opened the jewel case – *what* jewels? – he discovered to his horror that his most treasured disc after his DIC had escaped. Vanished into thin air. Presumably to a better life?

Now seemed as good a time as any for Colin to make *his* escape.

‘Well, thanks for the chat, Miss Slapper. I'd better get a move on,’ said Colin, making for the door; or running for the door, rather.

‘Just one thing, Colin . . .’

‘What's that, Miss Slapper?’

‘If you haven't handed in that report by the end of the day, you're fired.’

‘Are you threatening me, Miss Slapper?’

‘Of course I am, you birdbrain!’ Slapper glanced at Colin’s hand. ‘Why did you write that?’

Colin thought about playing thick again – *‘Write what?’* – but decided that he had provoked Slapper more than enough for one conversation. They both stared at the offending message in silence for what seemed like an eternity. It probably was.

‘Well, Colin?’

‘Fine thanks,’ said Colin, accidentally being obtuse on this occasion.

‘Why did you write, “Slapper report” on your hand?’

Well, I could hardly write it on my dick, could I?

‘To remind me. It was either that or tie a knot in my dick. Er, in my handkerchief, sorry.’

‘I worry about you sometimes, Colin.’

‘Thank you, Miss Slapper.’

And so it was that 12 minutes and 12 hundred words later, Colin emerged from his director’s office. He’d held his own under considerable pressure, he felt. And talking of pressure . . .

7 ▶▶

Like A Rolling Stone

How _____ home
Like _____, _____ stone?

May I have your attention, please. Gittish Airways flight three two one to Zurich is now ready for boarding. Please proceed to git fifty.

Colin bounced his way along the travelator, armed with tourist guide in one hand, trolley case in the other . . .

Sorry, I meant gate fifty . . . Obviously . . .

A man with a purpose – unwind – and a destination – Switzerland . . .

That's fif-ty, five, o; not fjf-teen. Git that? . . . Sorry, got that? . . .

But this was no ordinary flight . . .

Perhaps we'd better just run through that again . . . Would passengers for flight GA three two one to Zurich please proceed to gate fifty. That's gate five, o. It's opposite gate forty-nine. Between gates forty-eight and fifty-two. You can't miss it, but please do git a move on . . . Sorry, I meant get . . . I git confused . . .

You see, the travelator wasn't really a travelator, the tourist guide wasn't really a tourist guide, and the trolley case wasn't really a trolley case . . .

Come on, ladies and gentlemen, we've git a lot of work to git through today . . . Yes, I know, but I simply haven't git time to correct all my mistakes. Sorry . . .

The travelator was the corridor, the tourist guide was Colin's *Loser's Guide*, and the trolley case was Colin's briefcase . . .

Hurry up, you lazy git! . . . Yes you! . . .

The traveller's purpose wasn't so much to unwind as to *unload* . . .

What are you doing over there at git fifteen? . . . Now listen to me: this is gitting beyond a joke. Are you deliberately being obtuse or what? . . .

And his destination wasn't Switzerland; it was *Wizzerland*. But would he ever git there?

Strictly speaking, Colin wasn't *taking* a flight, he was *faking* a flight. And that bloody Dr. Ballseyes was to blame for everything. Colin still remembered that fateful visit to the optician's as if it were yesterday. Maybe it was? . . .

'Doctor Bullseye?'

'Ballseyes.'

'You can say that again.'

'So what seems to be the trouble, Mr. Craphead?'

'Rapehead.'

'Whatever.'

'It's my eyes.'

'Could you be a little more specific?'

'I've got a problem with my left eye and with my right eye.'

'I see.'

'But I don't. That's my problem.'

'Well, it's certainly one of them, Mr. Craphead . . . OK, then, let's cover this eye . . .

Can you read that line?'

'Not very well.'

'Will you read that line?'

'I guess I will eventually.'

Fortunately, Dr. Ballseyes had been warned what to expect – *It's that clown from Looniversal Learning, Doctor. Thinks he's Bill Bryson.* A professional of his calibre wasn't going to be thrown off his stride by some third-rate comedian . . .

'Just read it, you dipstick!'

'B, R, E, N, T . . . I, S, A, B, I, T . . . "Brent is a bit?" A bit what? Who's Brent, anyway?'

'OK, let's put this here . . . and we'll try that line again.'

'After you.'

'For crying out loud! Just say the sodding letters!'

'Wasn't that a song by Meat Loaf?'

'What? "Say The Sodding Letters"? No, I don't think so. Look, come on, Mr. Craphead, I haven't got all day.'

'Yes, you have.'

'You know what I mean . . . Now try again, Colin. Please.'

The first-name treatment seemed to do the trick; either that or the fact that Dr. Ballseyes took Colin by the testicles as he said this. Colin returned to the quiz . . .

'OK, here goes . . . B, L, I, N, D . . . A, S, A, B, A, T . . . "Blind as a bat!" Meat Loaf! Hey that's brilliant! Can I try another one?' asked a teary-eyed Colin, genuinely moved. 'They're not all Meat Loaf, are they?'

After six rounds of *Name That Song And – For A Bonus Point – Can You Name The Original Artist?*, Dr. Ballseyes was finally allowed to deliver his verdict . . .

'I'll keep this as simple as I can, Colin, and I'll try not to be too patronising. Ready? . . . Until now you've been suffering from myopia, but the onset of presbyopia – don't confuse this with hyperopia – is resulting in a gradual decline in your accommodative amplitude. Shall I do you a picture?'

'Just as well you kept it simple. So how long have I got?'

'The question you should be asking yourself, Colin, is not, "How long have I got?" The question is, "How much have I got?"'

And the answer was, "A lot less than I had before meeting you, you bastard". Oh and, just for the record, the question Colin should *really* have been asking – but didn't think to at the time because Dr. Bloody Ballseyes had blinded him with a bucketload of bullshitting baloney and blurry bollocks – was, "So how come they're called 'progressive glasses'?" Wasn't this against the Trades Description Act? For Colin couldn't see much "progress"; he couldn't see much, full-stop. Any manufacturer worth their salt would be the first to admit that they ought really to be called "regressive glasses".

Sure, progressive glasses sounded good and they looked good, even on Colin. And they were very comfortable, too. Yes, they were fine so long as you didn't try to a) look at something or somebody, b) move your head up, down or to the side, c) pick up or put down an object or d) – for the full "money-back-if-not-completely-mortified" bouncy castle-cum-travelator experience – do any combination of a), b) and c) *while on the move*. They were ideal for those meetings in which you were not expected to participate actively – "we need you there to make up the numbers, Colin"; and they were great for nodding off in the staffroom, on the loo (if you could find one) . . . or in class, come to think of it.

As Colin bounced and rolled along the corridors, colliding with whatever or whoever he met on his way, it seemed as if he were the last ball in play on a gigantesque human pinball machine. What wouldn't he give to know who was flicking those flippers! Colin loved his metaphors; he *lived* his metaphors. He had often wondered how it must feel to be a bowling ball spinning your way hopefully down the lane, in slow motion, towards the pins. Now, thanks to the joys of progressive lens technology, all this was possible and more. Perhaps his new glasses hadn't been such a bad buy, after all? Maybe that Dr. Ballseyes—

'Hey! Mind where you're going!'

'Hey! Great pins! . . . Oh, sorry, Amanda.' *Amanda! Quick! Say something!* 'Fancy bumping into you like this.' Colin knew it was hardly his most original line. So did Amanda . . .

'What was that you were saying about my pins, Colin?'

'Your *pins*?'

'“Great pins,” you said.'

'Did I?' said Colin, playing for time – *Just echo the question!* – until he could think of something intelligent or witty to say. He hoped Amanda wasn't in a hurry.

'Or maybe you were talking about your *own* legs?'

'Why would I want to do that?'

'That's a very good question, Colin.'

Hey! That's my trick! 'Thanks for the compliment, anyway . . . Now, just between you and me, Amanda, I've always thought that—'

'Colin!'

'What?'

'Aren't you going to get up?!'

'Do I have to?' said Colin, only half-joking. He was going to have to work a bit on his “bowling ball hits the pins” metaphor. The pins were still standing; and very nice they were, too . . . especially from the bowling ball's angle.

Colin got to his feet. Slowly. He was in no rush. Then it came to him: he'd try telling the *truth*. There was a first time for everything.

'Sorry, Amanda, it's these bloody glasses. They should have warned me not to take corners too quickly . . . And I'm dying for a piss!' They weren't Colin's best chat-up lines; they weren't Colin's best lines, full-stop. 'Anyway, sorry about that. Are you alright?'

'I think the question here is, Are *you* alright?'

'I am now, thanks.'

'Why have you got “Slapper report” on your hand?'

'Well, I thought it would look silly on my dick.'

'That's a good point.'

Amanda smiled, Colin went weak at the knees and, for a split second, he thought he was going to hit the deck again. Or “hit the dick again”, as they say in New Zealand.

New Zealand!

'Pens.'

'What about them, Colin?'

'I said “Great *pens*!” Not “pins”.' So much for the truth.

'With a Kiwi accent?'

'Yis!' . . . A kiwi accent? Was she trying to be fruity with him? 'Look . . .' Colin licked his fingers and rubbed hard on the offending words. 'See? . . . Indelibly tramped!'

‘Stamped.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Just as well you didn’t write it on your dick, if you ask me, Colin.’

All this talk about pens and dicks wasn’t good for him at all.

This is a final call for Mr. Colin Craphead travelling to Wizzerland. That’s Mr. Colin Craphead travelling to Wizzerland. Please git your bleeding arse over to git fifty, you stupid tit . . . sorry, you stupid git.

‘I’m sorry, Amanda, I’ve got to dash. I’ll slash you later. Bye!’

‘Hey! You dropped something.’

Colin cursed his rotten luck as he careered down the travelator. *What was that about “dropping”?* Right now, there was only one thing that Colin was interested in dropping.

MAYDAY, this is C.RAPHEAD. Position unknown. My vessel is leaking. This is an emergency. Over.

8 ►►

Have You Ever Seen The Rain?

Have _____ rain
Comin' _____ day?

'In a hurry, Craphead?'

'Oh, hello, Jack! Yes, I am a bit.' Colin skidded to a halt.

'A bit *what?*'

Hey! That's my line! There were far too many comedians in Looniversal Learning for Colin's liking.

'You don't know where the nearest loo is, do you, Jack?'

'Might loo.'

'You what?'

'I said I might do.'

Was he taking the piss? If so, it wasn't funny. And if not, it wasn't funny, either.

'Look, Jack, this is an emergency. *Do you or don't you?*'

'Do I or don't I *what?*'

Yes, he *was* taking the piss. And, no, it *wasn't* funny.

'Oh, piss off, Jack!'

Colin released the handbrake and moved straight into third gear. It was easily done. Colin had never understood why car manufacturers didn't equip their dashboards with *useful* features, such as telling you what gear you were in – "You just shifted into third gear, you wally! Don't you think it would be better to start in first and work your way up?" . . . "You're in fifth gear and only doing five miles per hour. Just think about it, OK?" . . . Yes, Colin was convinced that Raphead Smart Gear Feedback Technology – RSGFT™ – would be a roaring success; and infinitely more helpful than knowing you were doing 4500 revolutions per minute, for example. Moreover, everybody knew it was physically impossible for a car's wheels to spin that fast. Just who were they trying to kid? One day the truth would be revealed. Colin could see the headlines now: THE GREAT RPM CONSPIRACY - C.RAPHEAD REVEALS ALL . . .

'You're going the wrong way, Craphead.'

Colin slammed on his brakes. This wasn't good for his tyres at all.

'What's that, Jack?'

'I said you're going the wrong way . . . Didn't you want the nearest loo?'

'So which way is it?'

'Down here, turn right, second door on your left.'

Colin reversed his way back up the travelator at full throttle; it wasn't the easiest of manoeuvres. But he did it.

'You're a life-saver, Jack!' said Colin, his hopes soaring. 'Oh, by the way, I'm sorry I called you a "sick pheasant" earlier.'

' "Thick peasant".'

'Charming! . . . Look, Jack, can we carry on insulting each other a bit later?'

'I was saying you called me a "thick peasant".'

'Did I? Well, I'm really sorry about that. I don't think you're a peasant at all, Jack.'

Satisfied now, Slapper?

'That's OK, Craphead. Have a nice slash!'

‘Oh, hi there, Nicola. Can’t stop!’

‘I never asked you to.’

‘Sorry, what was that?’ Colin pulled up.

‘I said I didn’t ask you to?’

‘Didn’t ask me to do *what*?’

What *was* it with young people today? And yesterday, for that matter. Was it *so* difficult to speak clearly and unambiguously? Was he the *only* person in Looniversal Learning who could keep it up?

‘Stop.’

‘I have.’

‘Have what?’

There she goes again! In any other circumstances, Colin would have been happy to hang around making idle chit-chat – nothing gave him greater satisfaction than wasting somebody *else’s* time – but this wasn’t “any other circumstances”. “*This wasn’t*” or “*these weren’t*”? Tricky one. Colin could see arguments for both sides here; he could always see arguments for both sides. And just whose side was Nicola on, anyway? He was still trying to work her out.

As Colin saw it, the world could be divided into three groups: 1) people who are on your side, 2) people who are not on your side and 3) people who you’ve still to meet and have therefore not yet joined the second group. The third group was probably the biggest group; the first group was easily the smallest. Indeed, could one person be said to form a “group” as such?

‘Stopped.’

‘Are you alright, Colin?’

Why did everybody keep asking him that question?

‘Never been worse. How about you?’

Why did he keep asking everybody that question?

‘Fine, thanks.’

A pregnant silence followed . . . though neither of them knew when the baby was due.

‘Lovely day, isn’t it?’ said Colin. He wasn’t going to win any prizes for this conversation. He wasn’t going to win any prizes, full-stop. For all Colin knew, there could be a blizzard outside. You could hardly have a blizzard *inside*, could you? He never listened to the weather forecast; it was just too damned depressing. Still, the great thing about being English was your listener never knew whether you were being ironic or not, so Nicola could interpret his *Lovely day, isn’t it?* whichever way she pleased.

‘I take it you’re being ironic, Colin?’

Was he? He hadn’t really thought about it. He would have to play his joker . . .

‘In what sense?’

‘In an ironic sense, I guess.’

It was at about this point in the conversation that Colin concluded that he could safely put Nicola in the second group.

‘Well, I like this weather, Nicola. Don’t you?’ *Whatever “this weather” is.*

‘It’s fine if you enjoy the freezing cold and thunderstorms, I suppose,’ said Nicola ironically. ‘Colin, you haven’t even looked out of the window today, have you?’

‘Too busy preparing classes,’ replied Colin half-truthfully: he had been busy, but he hadn’t been preparing his classes.

‘You could have fooled me.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Come on, Colin, admit it! You’ve never prepared a class properly in your life, have you?’

Ouch! That was below the belt! Yes, Nicola was definitely in the second group. This was a perfect cue for Colin to present and defend Colin Raphead’s Learning By Discovery Approach of which he was a leading proponent – indeed, its only proponent – and which, reduced to its essence, could be summarised in just two words: “wing it”. Unfortunately, this was neither the time nor the place for a full-blown exposure; the only thing on Colin’s mind was how to wing it to Wizzerland.

‘Look, Nicola, it’s been nice chatting to you.’

‘“Nice”? Honestly, Colin, if you call this chat “nice”, that says a lot for your usual standard of conversation.’

And it was at *precisely* this point in the conversation that Colin realised his “three kinds of people” model required urgent revision. He needed a fourth category for “people who are out to make your life a misery”, a kind of radical offshoot from the second group; though whether he’d call it Group 2b) or Group 4), he couldn’t say at present.

‘Now listen here, young lady, there is nothing wrong whatsoever with the standard of my conversation,’ said Colin, thoroughly affronted. He had always *prided* himself on the quality of his intercourse. ‘And if you don’t like it, you can piss off . . . Which reminds me: where did Jack say the nearest loo was?’

‘You’re asking *me*? How do *I* know what Jack told you?’

‘I was talking to myself. I find it’s the only way these days I can be sure of getting a decent standard of conversation.’ *Take that!*

‘So you don’t want to know?’

‘I didn’t say that.’ *Shit! I take that back!*

‘Then ask me nicely.’

‘Where’s the nearest loo, Nicola?’ asked Colin, more icily than nicely.

‘Is that the nicest you can do, Colin?’

‘Nicola, could you *please* tell me where the nearest loo is?’

‘Certainly. Here it is.’ Nicola pointed to the door directly behind her.

‘Thank you so much,’ said Colin, pushing his way past Nicola. *Wizzerland, here we come!*

It was one of the strangest toilets Colin had ever seen. For starters, there were no urinals, just two separate cubicles. The “please-sit-while-you-pee” vigilantes were evidently gaining ground on the “I’ll-slash-where-and-how-I-goddamn-like” diehards, most of whom were blokes, it seemed. Colin would normally have been in the second group but, ever the pragmatist, he was quite happy to be a diesoftie on this occasion.

And then there were the knobs. Colin had never seen knobs like these ones before. What ever had happened to the old “vacant-engaged” warnings? How Colin wished his students’ foreheads came equipped with similar indicators; it would save everybody a lot of grief. You might want to add, “don’t even ask”, “out to screw you” or “try me”.

One of the cubicles was taken – “piss off” – but the door to the other one was ajar – not literally a jar, obviously, but the old jokes were the best. It came complete with an invitation to “piss away”. Colin stepped inside, closing the door behind him, only to discover that the bolt had bolted. *Never mind, I’ll come back in seven months’ time*

when they've replaced it. What class of pervert got a thrill out of raiding public lavatories in search of loose screws and nuts? A "Class P pervert", at a guess. But Colin had no time to worry about all that just now: he was about to accomplish his mission . . .

In hindsight, Colin's suspicions should have been aroused immediately on lifting the toilet seat. Instead of being greeted with the usual "crap" – for want of a better word – Colin found himself staring at a sparkling clean bowl. It was a joy to behold; fit for a goldfish. And if it was good enough for Freddie the Fish, it was good enough for Colin the Cod. This particular cubicle had even been thoughtfully provided with an individual bin; you could never have enough bins. Yes, Colin was most impressed. All you needed now was a magazine rack and sweets tray to make it to the very top of Colin's "Smashing Slashers" list; it had already jumped straight in at number four or five.

Granted, the graffiti was something of an eyesore. Not only that, it was neither original nor inspiring: "Miss Tedley was here" *Ha ha ha!* . . . "So was Amanda" *Yeah, sure!* . . . "Raphead's a craphead" *Thank you, Jack!* . . . One graffito in particular caught Colin's attention, if only because he had read recently on Wikipedia that the singular of "graffiti" was "graffito", and he was now itching to see if he could use the word correctly: "A penny for your thoughts?" *Is that a challenge? You're on!* . . . No, the penny still hadn't dropped, either literally or figuratively. But it was about to.

Colin grabbed his pen with his right hand and his penis with his left. Or was it the other way round? No, it wasn't – he could hardly grab his hand with his penis, could he? Colin scribbled away and he dribbled away. Lost in his thoughts and in his noughts – Colin was a piss-artist in every sense of the word –, he dribbled scribbily and scribbled dribbily. Scribbling, dribbling . . . Dribbling, scribbling . . . He could have gone on like this for ages. He did. Life didn't get much better than this.

'Oh, hello, Miss Tedley.' *Miss Tedley!* 'I didn't hear you come in.'

'Hello, dear. I opened the door quietly. Didn't want to disturb you.'

'Lovely day, isn't it?' Colin was neither thinking straight nor tinkling straight.

'Well, they say we're in for a few showers. I think you'd better put that away, dear.'

'I hadn't finished,' said Colin, reluctantly putting his pen away.

'I meant your other pen, dear.'

'Oh, yes, sorry. I won't be a dick. Hey, hang on, Miss Tedley!' said Colin. 'What are you doing in here, anyway? Shouldn't you be in the ladies?'

The other cubicle door opened noisily. *Inconsiderate bastard.*

'This *is* the ladies'! And you, young man, have a lot of explaining to do.'

Slapper!

'Look, Miss Slapper, it's a silly little thing.'

'Yes, I can see that. Now come on! This way!'

Grabbing Colin forcefully by the dick, Miss Snapper cockmarched her startled victim out of the loo and down the corridor back to HQ. Colin greeted friends along the way – 'Bitch!' . . . 'Bastard!' . . . 'Et tu, Simon?' . . . – while protesting his innocence in vain – 'Get your hand off my dick, Slapper!'

Miss Snapper's patience had finally snapped; the question now being: Had Colin's snapped too?

9»»

Glorious

She's _____, _____ out
Making __ glorious

Colin stood there in all his glory; knackered, next-to-naked. He'd had better days. At least, he thought he had, though none sprang to mind right now.

Slapper had called an emergency Board meeting; the Board of Governors, to be precise. Not that it mattered one hoot which Board it was or what it was called. "Board of Governors", "Board of Directors", "Board of Bollocks" . . . As far as Colin could see, every Board in Looniversal Learning consisted of exactly the same members – with his own member making the occasional guest appearance. Colin did a quick head count . . . Yes, they were all there, *Slapper's Seven*:

- Slapper (director of operations)
- Simon (so-called director of studies)
- Amanda (teachers' representative)
- Kevin (child prodigy & secretary)
- Jack (students' representative)
- Miss Tedley (honorary member)
- Nicola (curious cow)

Chairman Slapper began the proceedings . . .

'Colin Raphead, you are guilty of the following crimes . . . ' She pressed the "Enter" key on her laptop. Everybody's eyes turned to the brand-new full HD 1920 by 1080 interactive wideboard . . . Nothing. She pressed "Enter" again . . .

'What's wrong with this bloody computer?!'

As always, nobody had the foggiest, but that had never stopped anybody from trying:

'Press the "Shift" button.'

'Did you log in as an "administrator"?''

'Try pressing "F five".'

'Did you put the projector output lead in the right socket?'

'Have you tried "Alt" plus "F ten"?''

'Are you sure you're connected to the network?'

'How about "Control" and "F seven"?''

'Turn the sodding thing off, then turn it on again, you stupid cow.'

This seemed to do the trick.

'Thank you, Colin . . . Now where were we?'

'You were going to tell me what crimes I have committed.'

'Ah yes. OK, here goes. Fingers crossed . . . Yes, that's more like it,' said Slapper, almost smiling.

In all honesty, it was a rather poor presentation, consisting as it did of just one slide, which, in turn, was nothing more than a long list of alleged offences. Colin suspected that Slapper hadn't yet worked out how to insert new slides – it would certainly explain the Size 5 font – but, to be fair, those blood red bullet points did look pretty good. They

certainly had the desired visual effect, and Slapper herself was visibly delighted with the results. She resumed the case for the prosecution . . .

‘Colin Raphead, you are clearly guilty of the following crimes . . .’

- failing to hand in your reports on time
- fostering violent behaviour in the classroom
- insulting Jack at every opportunity
- correcting people in a persistently petty and pedantic manner
- disrupting Amanda’s classes just to get her attention
- being outrageously rude to your radio listener(s)
- upsetting Simon every time you open your mouth
- failing to distinguish between a “director” and a “warden”
- making repeated references to your “dick” when talking to colleagues
- walking down the corridor as if auditioning for Monty Python
- talking about the weather whenever you run out of conversation
- echoing what the other person said when you can’t think of anything to say
- engaging in substandard oral discourse on a regular basis
- exposing yourself to any poor soul who crosses your path
- defacing walls unnecessarily
- producing poor, plodding and predictable graffiti
- splashing the toilet seat
- forgetting to flush the loo
- not bothering to wash your hands after slash-flashing your victims
- repeatedly calling your director a “slapper”
- getting on your director’s nerves in general

Yes, all in all, it was a fair summary of Colin’s day so far; of Colin’s *life* so far. *Any Day In The Life of Colin Raphead* . . . by Dolores “Dolly” Slapper, official biographer to Colin “Craphead” Raphead. Sure, there were a couple of things in that list that Colin could take issue with. For a start, it was hardly *his* fault if Slapper had a crap name, was it? Also, the veiled and vicious reference to his sex life was uncalled for, he felt. And lastly, to call his writing “poor, plodding and predictable” was just ridiculous, for there was nothing *remotely* “predictable” about what he was going to write, say or do next. This seemed like a good moment to satisfy his curiosity once and for all to see if it was physically possible to tie a knot in his dick. Just for a dare.

‘Well, Colin, how do you plead?’ asked Slapper. ‘Or perhaps I should say, “How do you *peed*?”.’

There were a few titters to be heard coming from the gallery, though what was so amusing about an 18th century oil painting was anybody’s guess. As for Colin, he was thoroughly absorbed in his latest challenge: *If I had another hand . . . Perhaps somebody could—*

‘Stop playing with yourself and look at me when I’m barking at you!’

Colin looked up quickly and his head started spinning; first clockwise, then anti-clockwise, clockwise, anti-clockwise . . . until finally coming to rest at a point near the top of his neck. In his haste, Colin had forgotten that he was still wearing his new glasses; they really were *that* comfortable.

‘Well, Colin?’

‘Just a little whizzy, er, dizzy, Miss Slapper. I’ll be fine, thanks.’

‘I mean, How do you plead?’

‘Does it make any difference?’

‘None whatsoever.’

‘Well, in that case, I plead guilty.’

‘Have you nothing to say in your defence?’

‘In my defence? What is there to say?’

‘Well, not a lot.’

‘I thought you said you liked Freddie Mercury?’

‘Freddie who?’

‘Freddie *Mercury*, Miss Slapper . . . *Bohemian Rhapsody*? . . . Queen? . . . *I Was Born To Love You*?’

‘Bollocks you were! No, never heard of him, I’m afraid. Is he any good?’

Slapper’s confession drew gasps of disbelief from her audience, followed by a quickfire round of Chinese Whispers:

‘Slapper’s never heard of Freddie Mercury! Pass it on! . . .’

‘Slapper thinks she’s the Queen. Pass it on! . . .’

‘Craphead’s got a crush on Slapper. Pass it on! . . .’

‘Which way? Clockwise or anti-clockwise? . . .’

‘Does it matter? . . .’

‘Does anything matter? . . .’

‘Nothing really matters to me . . .’

‘Listen to Freddie Mercury, Miss Slapper. He’ll save your skin one day.’

It was a Pyrrhic victory for Colin; assuming “Pyrrhic” meant what he *thought* it meant, that is. If it didn’t, it wasn’t.

‘That’s enough of all this nonsense. This is your last chance, Colin. Do you wish to add anything before I pass sentence?’

‘Not *add*.’

‘Are you trying to be funny?’

‘Heaven forbid, Miss Slapper. No, I was just wondering if we could *remove* one of my crimes from that list?’

‘And what difference would that make?’

‘Well, that way we’d have a nice list of my twenty greatest misdemeanours. I can’t stand odd-numbered lists.’

‘You’re odd, Colin.’

‘Thank you, Miss Slapper.’

‘Mind you, I suppose you have a point. Twenty-one is a pretty crap number for a list, isn’t it?’

‘That’s what happens when you use bullets instead of numbers. Beginner’s mistake, I’m afraid, Miss Slapper.’

‘Don’t you like my bullets, Colin?’

‘Oh, don’t get me wrong, Miss Slapper. I *love* your bullets. Shall I let you in on a little secret?’

‘Please do.’

The suspense was unbearable. Somebody started playing with pins, but Colin ignored the noisy inconsiderate bastard . . .

‘First select your text, then click on the numbering icon to check how many items you’ve got. If you find that you’ve got an odd numbered-list, simply add or delete an item and, with a bit of luck, you’ll now have an even-numbered list . . .’

Colin was beginning to sound like Amanda. He glanced across at her, but she appeared to have other things on her mind. It was time to deliver the final blow . . .

‘Finally, select your text again, but this time click on the bullet icon instead of the numbering icon. And Bob’s your uncle!’

‘Hey, that’s a neat trick, Colin. You know, I think you’re far better with machines than with people.’

‘The great thing about machines is you can switch them off when you want to. Some people just go on and on and on and—’

‘Belt up, Colin. OK, then, let’s see if your tip works . . .’

‘It works fine,’ said Colin, grasping his tip instinctively.

‘So which item would you like to remove?’

‘Number sixteen, please, Dolly.’

‘Which one’s that?’

‘The one about my graffiti being “poor, plodding and predictable”.’

‘I think perhaps you’d better choose another one.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Well, quite frankly, Colin, that graffiti you wrote—’

‘*Graffito*.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I only had time to write one.’

‘You’re beginning to get on my nerves again.’

‘Sorry, Miss Slapper. You were saying that the graffito I wrote . . .’

‘Well, whatever you want to call it, Colin, it was the biggest load of crap I’ve ever read.’

‘You should read Jack’s essays, Miss Slapper.’

‘Why have you got it in for Jack, Colin?’

‘He started it. He called me a “craphead”.’

‘That’s because your head is full of crap. Anyway, let’s have a look at your masterpiece . . .’

All eyes turned to Colin’s groin, then back to the screen . . .

*There once was a young loafer called Jack
Who spent most of his life in the sack
The tart that he fancied
Had gone rather rancid
So he ended up having a whack*

‘Not exactly Shakespeare, is it, Colin?’

‘At least my poetry rhymes properly, Miss Slapper. And there was nothing predictable about that ending, either; unless you know Jack, that is,’ said Colin, feeling rather pleased with himself.

‘Well, let’s see what the Board thinks . . . Simon?’

‘Hm?’

‘What do you reckon?’

‘I’d say it’s a bit on the small side,’ said Simon.

‘The *poem*, Simon.’

‘Ah, sorry, yes of course. Well, much as it grieves me to say this, it’s not bad at all by Colin’s usual low standards. Plus, I think it’s a topic we can all relate to. Can’t we, Jack?’

‘Drop dead, Simon,’ said Jack.

‘Temper, Jack,’ said Simon.

‘Go whack, Jack,’ said Colin.

‘Up yours, Craphead,’ said Jack.

‘You owe me, Raphead,’ said Simon.

‘Piss off, Simon,’ said Colin.

Or something like that. It was a perfect hate triangle. Or something like that.

‘Amanda?’

‘Sorry, what was that? I was inches, er, miles away.’

‘What do you make of it, Amanda?’

‘I’ve seen worse.’

‘Never mind, Amanda, I can see you’re busy . . . How about you, Kevin?’

‘Yes, I can see she’s busy too.’

‘The *poem*, Kevin.’

‘Oh, I’m sure Edward Lear would have approved.’

‘Edward *who*?’ asked Slapper, Simon, Amanda, Jack, Nicola and Colin in unison. Miss Tedley either wasn’t interested or she already knew who Edward Lear was. We will never know whether the reason was the former or the latter.

‘Edward *Lear*, the inventor of the limerick. Well, if you can trust Wikipedia, that is.’

‘Vicky *who*?’ asked Colin

‘Wikipedia,’ said Slapper, Simon, Amanda, Jack, Nicola and Kevin in unison.

‘What about you, Jack? What do you make of Colin’s pathetic little effort?’

‘I think it speaks for itself. Don’t *you*?’

‘Indeed . . . Nicola?’

‘Jack’s is much better,’ said Nicola, still trying to digest the “rancid tart”.

‘Well, it looks as if you have the casting vote, Miss Tedley.’

‘Do I, dear? How exciting! Well, in that case, I vote we take a short break. Shall I put the kettle on?’

‘But what about Colin’s poem?’

‘Oh, very witty. Yes, I think he’ll go far. So long as he can remember to keep his trousers on, of course.’

This wasn’t the answer Slapper had been looking for, but she respected the court’s decision.

‘Four-three. It’s your lucky day, Colin. We’ll delete that line.’

‘That’s great, Miss Slapper, thank you very much. Could you forward me a copy later?’

‘I can hardly forward you a copy *earlier*, can I, Colin?’

Hey! That was my joke!

‘Right then, we’ll take a short break. Two sugars, please, Miss Tedley. Oh, and Jack? . . . Give Colin his trousers back, will you?’

‘All rise. It’s OK, Simon, let her be.’

Miss Tedley snoozed peacefully in the corner as Slapper delivered her verdict . . .

‘Colin Raphead, this court finds you guilty on all twenty-one charges.’

‘Twenty.’

‘Whatever.’

‘I have therefore decided to give you twenty-one hours—’

‘*Twenty* hours.’

‘Sorry, *twenty* hours to get your bleeding act together once and for all, or else you will be out on your arse. Court dismissed . . . Are you alright, Colin? . . . Colin?’

The unthinkable had happened: Colin had gone quiet.

10▶▶

Don't Give Up

Got _____ here
I _____ more

Dear Miss Slapper

I am writing to let you know that I have decided to . . .

To *what?*

People deal with depression in different ways . . .

Some people start eating; some people stop eating; other people go on eating.

Some take to drink; some take to drugs; others take to d- words.

Some people start gambling; some people start ambling; other people start rambling.

Some send texts; some shop in Next; others surf the Net.

Some people can't forsake their bed; some people can't face their bed; other people can't find their bed.

Some accept there's a problem; some deny there's a problem; others don't know there's a problem.

Some people behave as if nothing were wrong; some people behave as if everything were wrong; other people try to tie a knot in their dick.

Some go crazy; some go cranky; others go quiet.

Some people fight; some people bite; other people write.

Some write wonderfully; some write woodenly; others write whateverly.

Colin was in the last group. He was always in the last group.

Writing was Colin's catharsis. Whatever "catharsis" meant. And whatever "whateverly" meant, for that matter.

Well, whatever, writing whateverly, wheneverly, whereverly was a wonderful way to wish one's woes away with words without wasting one's whatnots by whacking walls or wailing to the wind.

Dear Slapper

So I get on your bleeding nerves, do I?

Yes, this was much better.

Well, let me tell you something, bitch: I ain't even started!

The smile was returning to Colin's face. Well, it could hardly return to his *chest*, could it?

The worm has turned, Dolly. Whatever that means. You seem to think that you can treat your workers as if we were . . . well, as if we were worms – for want of a better worm. So the big bad bog-eyed bogey-faced bird had better be careful from now on. And don't say I didn't worm you.

OK, here are my conditions in no particular order. Read them carefully, then sign at the bottom to show that you have understood them. (Please sign anyway even if you don't understand them). You should return this sheet to my desk within the next 20 minutes. Here goes . . .

1. *Colin will receive a full written apology from Looniversal Learning for treating him like a worm. You can change “worm” for another worm if you can think of a better metaphor. I can’t.*
2. *Colin will choose which classes he is going to teach, which meetings he wishes to attend and which reports he wants to write.*
3. *All reports that come with a ridiculous deadline will be assigned to Simon immediately. He has tons of free time for thankless and thoughtless tasks like these. Besides, the written practice will do him good.*
4. *Simon will get all the tough classes. As director of studies, he should be setting an example, not sitting by the pool.*
5. *Miss Slapper will not take Jack’s side at meetings and will give more credence to Colin’s version of events in future.*
6. *Hammocks will be installed in the staffroom. Given that we spend most of our lives here in the school, this seems like a reasonable request to me. I’ve seen some pretty cool ones on Amazon, so just let me know if you need help ordering these, OK?*
7. *Teachers’ desks in the staffroom will all be the same size. Why is Simon’s twice as big as mine?*
8. *Nicola is a cheeky cow. Yes, I know that’s more of a comment than a condition, but I just had to get it off my chest. I already feel better.*
9. *Toilets will be clearly marked “Ladies” or “Men”. No more of these silly symbols on doors, please. I mean, for heaven’s sake, how was I supposed to know that the circle/cross sign meant “women only”? Is that because “women are always cross” or what? Or was that the men’s sign? If we have to use silly pictures, let’s at least be sensible about this e.g. a stick figure with trousers for the blokes, that sort of thing. Believe it or not, I do actually wear trousers most of the time.*
10. *While we’re on the topic of signs . . . a few numbers on classroom doors, arrows in corridors, etc. wouldn’t come amiss. Have you any idea how stressful it is trying to get from Room 35672 to Room 81753 in twenty seconds?*
11. *The longest corridors should be equipped with travelators. Either that or staff should receive a shoe allowance.*
12. *Please ask Miss Tedley to stop following me around. I know she means well, but it’s a bit eerie at times. Do you think she fancies me?*
13. *The git who was playing Glorious during my ordeal back there will be sacked immediately. It wasn’t funny.*
14. *Talking of sackings . . . The bastard who created the Loser’s Guide to Looniversal Learning should also be fired or, at the very least, given a taste of their own medicine. Here’s Colin’s Challenge: “Using the Loser’s Guide as your reference, you must get from Room 46290 to Room 70318 via the Men’s toilet in less than seventeen hours. Failure to do so will result in automatic enrolment on Simon’s Inane Army Anecdotes course and compulsory attendance thereof for the rest of your life.”*
15. *Colin’s salary will be brought into line to reflect his true ability. However, should this result in a recommended reduction in his wages, let’s just forget this point, please.*

I, Dolly Slapper, have read the above conditions. While I might not agree with some of the thoughts expressed therein – or indeed even pretend to understand half of them – I am nonetheless more than happy to accept these conditions just for the sake of a bit of peace and quiet. Now let's all get back to work, shall we?

..... signed D. Slapper (Miss)

Yes, that's an odd-numbered list, but multiples of five are the exception: they always look good. Besides, who ever heard of a list of 14 items, for goodness' sake?

Well, that's about it. So just sign on the dotted line, Dolly, and don't dilly dally on the way.

Most sincerely up yours

Colin

Colin saved the file to his stick – his *memory* stick – and printed out a copy. Or at least he tried to.

P.S. 16. The replica printer in the staffroom looks very nice, but I think it's about time we replaced it with a real one. Yes, that was irony. Thank you. But that wasn't.

Never mind. He would send it by email and Slapper could print out her own copy on her beautiful colour printer. *Let the lazy bitch do some of the work for once!* Colin would love to see Slapper's face when she . . . When she *what?* When she came charging into the staffroom to tell him he was sacked? After all, she had already made it perfectly clear that he wasn't wanted. Nobody was going to miss him; well, maybe Miss Tedley would at first, but she would soon find another victim to stalk.

Yes, Colin was beginning to see clearly now. Just like Johnny Cash . . . or Nash. Or was that Johnny Mathis? Colin was always getting his Johnnies in a muddle. Well, anyway, he wasn't going to give Slapper the satisfaction of firing him.

Dear Miss Slapper

I am writing to let you know that I have decided to resign. You are right: I am a "complete and utter waste of time, space and money". I'm not sure if those were your exact words, but that was definitely the gist of it.

I should like to thank you for the opportunity to work with you and – now it seems – without you.

Yours

Harry Nilsson

PS. Kevin will explain who Harry Nilsson was.

It wasn't Colin's greatest letter, but it would have to do. Besides which, he couldn't stand around all day – or sit around, rather. He had a lesson to give. Colin clicked on "Send", checked his stick, clutched his case and cursed his class . . .

'Oh, hello, Colin.'

'Oh, hi, Miss Tedley.' *Not you again!* 'Sorry, can't stop. I'm in a bit of a rush.'

'Why's that, dear?'

'Well, you know . . .' Colin stopped. Miss Tedley had a point. *Relax, Colin. You're a free man now. Just like Andy Dufresne. Wake up and smell the coffee.* Did Andy drink coffee? Colin couldn't remember. In any case, what a stupid piece of advice. As if people didn't have more important things to do when they got up. *What are you doing*

with that pot? – Just smelling the coffee – The least you could do is put some clothes on first, you percolating pervert . . .

‘Do you want to know a secret, Miss Tedley?’

‘Let me guess, dear . . . You’re in love again?’

‘No, nothing like that.’

‘You haven’t prepared your classes?’

‘I don’t need to.’

‘That’s not what Nicola says, dear.’

‘I don’t care what that cow says, Miss Tedley.’

‘Nicola’s a very sweet cow once you get to know her . . .’

‘I’m leaving!’ There. He had told someone. Miss Tedley’s face was a picture.

‘But . . . But I thought you’d been let off with a warning?’

‘You don’t understand, Miss Tedley. I’ve resigned! I don’t want to work here anymore.’

‘But . . . But what will we do, Colin?’

‘Oh, I expect I’ll . . .’ *Well, congratulations, Craphead! Go on, admit it: you haven’t got a clue, have you? You and your stupid pride!* ‘I expect I’ll find something to— Hey, hold on a minute, Miss Tedley . . . What do you mean, “What will we do?”’

‘Your students, dear. You can’t just walk out on us like that. We *need* you.’

‘That’s very nice of you, Miss Tedley, but we both know that’s not true. And don’t worry: Simon will take my classes until Slapper finds somebody cheaper.’

‘Simon can’t teach for toffee, and you know it. That’s why he’s director of studies. But anyway, Colin, that’s not the point. You’re the best teacher we’ve ever had . . . Are you OK, dear?’

‘It’s just nobody’s ever said anything like that to me before . . . I nearly believed you for a minute!’ said Colin, wiping a tear from his eye. At least we *suppose* it was a tear. He wasn’t prepared for this. He wasn’t prepared for anything.

‘Well, start believing, dear. Then, there’s the competition, of course.’

‘What competition?’

‘Haven’t you seen the posters?’

Colin had been too busy trying to smell the coffee to see the posters. *Wake up, man!* Colin aimed his new glasses at the wall behind Miss Tedley. He waited patiently as first words, then sentences, and finally whole paragraphs bounced in and out of focus . . . in . . . out . . . in . . . out . . . you shake it all about . . . In the end, he decided it was quicker to take off his glasses. Not that he was in a hurry, mind you.

SPOT THE STUDENT! Look at this picture of Looniversal Learning’s Library and mark with a cross the spot where a student was recently sighted . . .

‘The other poster, dear.’

Colin swivelled his eyes sharply to the right. Just as well he had taken his glasses off. *STORYTELLING COMPETITION! Hey, you! Me? Yes, you! Do you have an exciting story to tell? No. Never mind, there’s a first time for everything. Wake up and smell the sodding coffee! Ask your teacher for further details . . .*

‘Not exactly informative, is it?’

‘I suppose they leave the rest to your imagination, dear. Well come on, we’ve got a class to go to.’

‘Well, *you* may have, Miss Tedley. I don’t work here anymore, remember.’

‘Look, we’ll carry on talking about this later, dear. You’re not going to leave us all in the shit now, are you?’

‘Language, Miss Tedley! Alright then, but just this one class. Where is room twenty-nine thousand, four hundred and twenty-eight, anyway?’

‘Follow me. Oh, I think I’d better just spend a penny,’ said Miss Tedley, pushing open a cryptically-labelled door. ‘Never understood what that arrow’s supposed to mean. Look, dear, it’s probably best if you wait for me outside. Don’t want people talking, do we?’

‘Taken to loitering outside toilets now, have we, Colin?’

‘Piss off, Simon.’

‘A bit more respect for your director of studies, please.’

‘Not for much longer.’

‘And what’s *that* supposed to mean?’

‘Slapper’s got some bad news for you, Simon.’

Colin smiled and Simon scowled.

And somewhere, not so far away, a hound dog howled.

And it wasn’t Elvis.

Four...

“I’m sure I’ve read worse books.
I just can’t remember any.”

11 ►►

How To Save A Life

He _____ you
You _____ through

‘Welcome to my ASS, everybody . . .’

Never having read more than a couple of books from start to finish in his entire life, Colin was not perhaps the most obvious choice for leading a course on Advanced Storytelling Skills. That said, how difficult could it be to come up with a good story? After all, Colin had been making up stories for as long as he could remember, so he was fairly confident he could pull this one off. All you needed was a) to be full of bollocks – no worries there – and b) to disguise, package and present said bollocks as if you alone had hit upon the Holy Grail of storytelling. Piece of cake.

‘OK, Step One: we need a Lead,’ said Colin.

‘Use mine if you like,’ said Jack, warming to the subject.

‘I think it could do with a rest, Jack. Don’t you?’

‘Well, from what I’ve seen, yours could do with—’

‘Jack! Don’t start all that again.’

‘Thank you, Nicola,’ said Colin. *Why’s she being nice to me?*

‘Just get on with it, Craphead.’

‘Well, as I was saying, the first step is to decide on our main character. We call this character our “Lead”.’ *I’m beginning to sound like Amanda again . . . Why is everybody listening to me as if I had something interesting to say? . . . How come nobody’s interrupting me? . . . What is that smell? . . .* Hundreds of questions ran through Colin’s mind simultaneously . . . but he could only remember three of them. Perhaps Miss Tedley had been telling the truth after all? Perhaps he was a better teacher than he realised? Maybe he should start using *maybe* more and *perhaps* less? Maybe.

‘And they pay you to teach this bollocks? Call yourself a teacher!’ said Jack, interrupting rudely and reeking of mocha aftershave.

Jack had a point. Which other job in the world allowed you to talk utter tosh all day and get away with it? Apart from politicians, lawyers, actors, singers, TV presenters, DJs, radio show hosts, university lecturers, directors, directors of studies . . . *Well, they won’t be paying me much longer, Jack. . . . Who’s going to pay for my bollocks now? . . .* Had he been too hasty in handing in his resignation? Perhaps. Maybe. Whichever.

‘That’s right, Jack, they pay me to teach this bollocks. Have you got a problem with that?’

‘How much?’

‘Sorry, Nicola?’

‘How much do they pay you for your bollocks, Colin?’

‘Mind your own business!’ said Colin, no longer sounding like Amanda. It was time to get the show back on the road . . .

‘Right then, have we all got our bollocks? Sorry, have we all got our Lead? . . . Good. OK, now have a look at this . . .’ Colin walked across to the whiteboard, picked up the board wiper and started to clean it. The whiteboard, that is; not the board wiper. It – the whiteboard – was full of the usual bollocks and graffiti, but for once it wasn’t

Colin's work. Besides, Colin always cleaned his whiteboard after his classes, unlike his colleagues. *Silent inconsiderate bastards!* Cleaning whiteboards had become part of Colin's daily workout. He couldn't understand why he didn't have biceps like Rafa Nadal after so many years of practice. Perhaps he could find a job as a window cleaner? Maybe. Unfortunately, he had left it rather late in life to become a professional tennis player, even if the thought of playing with new balls every day was very tempting. No wonder Rafa was always smiling.

At a guess, the last person to use the whiteboard had been Simon. Not so much because "somebody" had written "Holepunk woz here!" – Colin recognised Jack's writing immediately – but more because of the detailed drawings of guns, grenades and gas masks, each accompanied by short and sweet sub-headings such as "smoke", "stun", "sting" and so on. Simon seemed somewhat gung-ho about g- words and s- words in general. Silly git.

Colin began scribbling, this time without the dribbling:

C.Raphead Four-Step Story Skeleton Generator™

- Step 1: *Once upon a time* . . . Introduce Lead.
- Step 2: Something happened. What?
- Step 3: Repeat Step 2 or Go to Step 4.
- Step 4: *And they all lived* . . . End Story.

He turned round to face his audience. Why *else* would he turn round?

'Any questions?'

Colin braced himself. Whatever that meant. Just as well he did, anyway . . .

'Who was the best James Bond in your opinion?'

'I'm sorry, Miss Tedley?'

'Has to be Roger Moore if you ask me,' said Jack.

'Do you think so, dear? I was always rather fond of that Sean Connery.'

'Pierce Brosnan was probably the best-looking,' said Nicola. 'Mind you, that new guy's very sexy, too. What's his name again?'

'You're thinking of Craig Daniel,' said Jack helpfully.

'Actually, I think it's the other way round,' said Miss Tedley.

'Craig Daniel is thinking of Nicola? Why's that, then? Has he got a crush on her or something?'

'It's Daniel Craig, dear.'

'How come you know so much about James Bond, Miss Tedley?' asked Nicola.

'Oh, just a little hobby of mine, dear. Did any of you see—'

'Sorry to interrupt, Miss Tedley, but we are rather straying from the point here, I feel,' said Colin smiling politely, even if there was very little to smile about. Having persuaded Colin to give just one last class, Miss Tedley now seemed hell-bent on jeopardising his lesson. What was she playing at?

'Oh, I'm sorry, dear. But you did say, "Any questions?"'

'I thought it would be quicker than saying, "Does anyone have any questions about my Generator?"' But I was wrong, it seems.'

'A stitch in rhyme saves nine, dear.'

'"Time", Miss Tedley.'

'It's OK, I've finished.'

‘Right then, does anyone have any questions about my Generator? And no wisecracks, please,’ said Colin, staring rudely at Jack for no particular reason. He could hardly stare *politely*, could he?

‘Does your Generator work?’ asked Nicola.

‘Of course it bloody works!’ said Colin, refraining from adding, “cheeky cow!” as that would have been *very* rude. *I’ll show you, you bitch!* The moment of truth had arrived . . .

‘Well, come on then, let’s give it a whirl. I’ll give you all five minutes – don’t worry, Jack, if you can’t get past Step One – and then we’ll see what we’ve got. Just write the first thing that comes into your head, OK?’ Seeing that Miss Tedley was already drawing up her shopping list, Colin added hastily, ‘But don’t forget to use my Generator.’ Miss Tedley put away her shopping list.

There followed five minutes of pissful silence. Colin walked around the classroom, humming to the music, pretending to be reading his students’ work – “Good” . . . “OK” . . . “Crap” . . . ; answering their queries – “Can I start with Step Four?” (No) . . . “Have you got a pen?” (No) . . . “Have you got a rubber?” (None of your business) . . . “How do you spell ‘gynaecologist?’” (Just put ‘doctor’) . . . ; imagining Simon bursting into Slapper’s office . . . “What’s your game, Slapper?!” . . . ; and trying to decide on his favourite James Bond . . . Harrison Ford maybe? Perhaps . . . Who ever said men can’t do more than one thing at a time? Well, whoever said it, she was right.

‘Right, who’s going to start? Do we have a volunteer? . . . What a surprise, Miss Tedley. OK, we’re all ears.’

Miss Tedley cleared her throat, for that was what one always did in situations like these . . .

‘Once upon a time, lead is a heavy metal. Nothing much happened. And they all lived. The end.’

‘Stop that giggling at the back, it’s very rude,’ said Colin, giggling very rudely at the front. ‘OK, thank you, Miss Tedley. That was an excellent first attempt. Er, Nicola, let’s hear yours.’

‘My *what?*’ (‘Are you sure you’re ready for this?’)

‘Your *story*, of course.’ (‘Stupid cow.’)

‘You won’t like it.’ (‘Brace yourself, dickhead.’)

‘Well, we’ll see about that.’ (‘Don’t push your luck, bitch.’)

‘OK, here goes . . .’ said Nicola, clearing her throat, not because she needed to, but simply because she’d seen Miss Tedley do it . . . ‘Once upon a time, there was a stupid twat called Colin. They caught him misbehaving in the girls’ loo. Miss Snapper gave him a right bollocking. Someone recorded it all on Jack’s mobile. Somebody used Jack’s laptop to upload the videoclip to YouTube. Craphead knew nothing about all of this until now. And they all lived crappily ever after . . . Well, Colin?’

‘No, I feel awful.’

‘Did you enjoy my story?’

‘I’m speechless,’ said Colin, regaining his speech.

‘I didn’t know whether to put “stupid twat” or simply “twat” because a twat is stupid by definition, isn’t he?’ (‘Take that, dickhead.’)

‘Or she.’ (‘Up yours, bitch.’)

‘But if his name’s Colin, we know he’s a twat anyway, don’t we?’

‘Shut it, Jack.’

‘What’s the prize, anyway?’

‘I’m sorry, Miss Tedley?’

‘I said, What’s the prize?’

‘The prize for *what*, Miss Tedley?’

‘The storytelling competition, dear. You signed us up for it, remember?’

Why was everybody so obsessed with winning prizes?

‘I have no idea, Miss Tedley. Anyway, the important thing is to take part, not to—

What do you mean, “You signed us up for it”? I did no such thing.’

‘Oh yes you did,’ replied about 46 students all at once.

‘Oh no I—’ *Hang on . . . Forty-six!* Until that moment, Colin had assumed all those extra blobs were a trick of his glasses. He took them off – the glasses, not the blobs – to have a better look. Just what was going on here? It was nice to finish his teaching career on a high, but this was very suspicious.

‘. . . didn’t.’

‘Did.’

‘Didn’t.’

‘Did.’

‘Prove it.’

‘“I, Colin Raphead, being of none too sound mind, hereby confirm that Raphead’s Rappers . . .”’ Miss Tedley showed Colin the application form where she had entered their team’s name. ‘I had to choose a name, dear, but I didn’t have time to consult with anybody. I hope you like it?’

‘Well, Colin Raphead *is* my name. Rap on.’

‘“ . . . intend to participate in Looniversal Learning’s Storytelling Championship, so help me God. I accept that mistakes will be made, that heads will roll, and it will all be my fault. Signed, C Raphead. Open brackets. Team captain or something like that. Close brackets.” Here’s your signature, dear,’ said Miss Tedley, handing the letter over to Colin.

‘You forged my signature, Miss Tedley!’

‘Oh no, dear, I would never do a thing like that. What ever do you take me for? All I did was trick you into signing it, that’s all. You remember the petition, don’t you?’

‘The one about putting jacuzzis and saunas in every classroom?’

‘No, that was a real petition, dear. I mean the other one, you know, the one about putting chairs and desks in the classrooms. You were so keen to sign it, you didn’t even stop to read what it said.’

‘How could you do that to me, Miss Tedley?’

‘Very easily, dear. You’re such a trusting soul.’

‘*Arsehole* more like,’ said Jack.

‘Whatever. But I did it for your own good, Colin. You’ll thank me for this one day. And just look how many of your fans turned up today.’

‘Only because you told us all to “bring a friend *or you’ll be sorry*,” Miss Tedley.’

‘I meant it more as an invitation than a threat, Nicola. Well, anyway, it’s all terribly exciting, isn’t it?’

Nobody else seemed to think so. Eventually, Colin piped up . . .

‘Well, good luck everyone. It’s been fun.’ And he wasn’t lying.

‘Abandoning the *Titanic*, eh, Colin?’

‘I think you’ll find, *Titanicola*, sorry, Nicola, that the ship was called *Titanic*, not *The Titanic*.’ At least, that’s what Colin had read on the Yahoo forums. Personally, he

couldn't have given a toss what the bleeding boat was called. As for forums, he was all for 'em.

'Don't be such a pedantic prick, Colin.'

'I'm not being pedantic, Miss Tedley,' said Colin prickily. 'Anyway, what I was trying to say was that I handed in my notice earlier today.'

'Yes, I know, dear, but I'm sure Miss Snapper will—'

The door snapped open and in walked a noisy inconsiderate bitch.

'Talk of the Slapper. Hello, Miss Devil.'

'My office. Immediately.'

'All forty-eight of us, Miss Slapper? I'm not sure we can all fit in.'

'Just you, you fool.'

'And what about you?'

'Me as well, you idiot.'

'OK, I'll just wipe the board. It's good for my—'

'I said *now*, Colin . . . Oh, Jack, give Miss Tedley a hand getting into that jacuzzi, could you?'

'Why did you tell Simon I'd sacked him?'

'I didn't, Miss Slapper.'

'Well, he's very upset, Colin. I want you to apologise to him.'

'*Again?* Sod Simon, Miss Slapper. What about *me*?'

'What *about* you?'

'Well, aren't you even going to miss me?'

'Look, Colin, I'm getting rather tired of your sarcastic comments. You'd better get back to your Rappers, hadn't you?'

'So I've still got my job?'

'Of course you have. You know how desperate we are. Now hurry up.'

'But we've only been chatting for ten minutes.'

'Well, it feels like ten years to me, Colin.'

'Thank you, Miss Slapper.'

Back in the corridor, Colin was trying to work out where his *Boss Time Calculation* had gone wrong. *Double the minutes . . . Was it one or five? . . . She didn't say . . . She didn't say! . . . Let's try that again: Two times nothing is nothing . . . add ten . . .* That was a relief. Colin smiled. Then he pictured a distraught Simon in Slapper's office, and the smile turned to a laugh. Yes, life was fun. Sometimes.