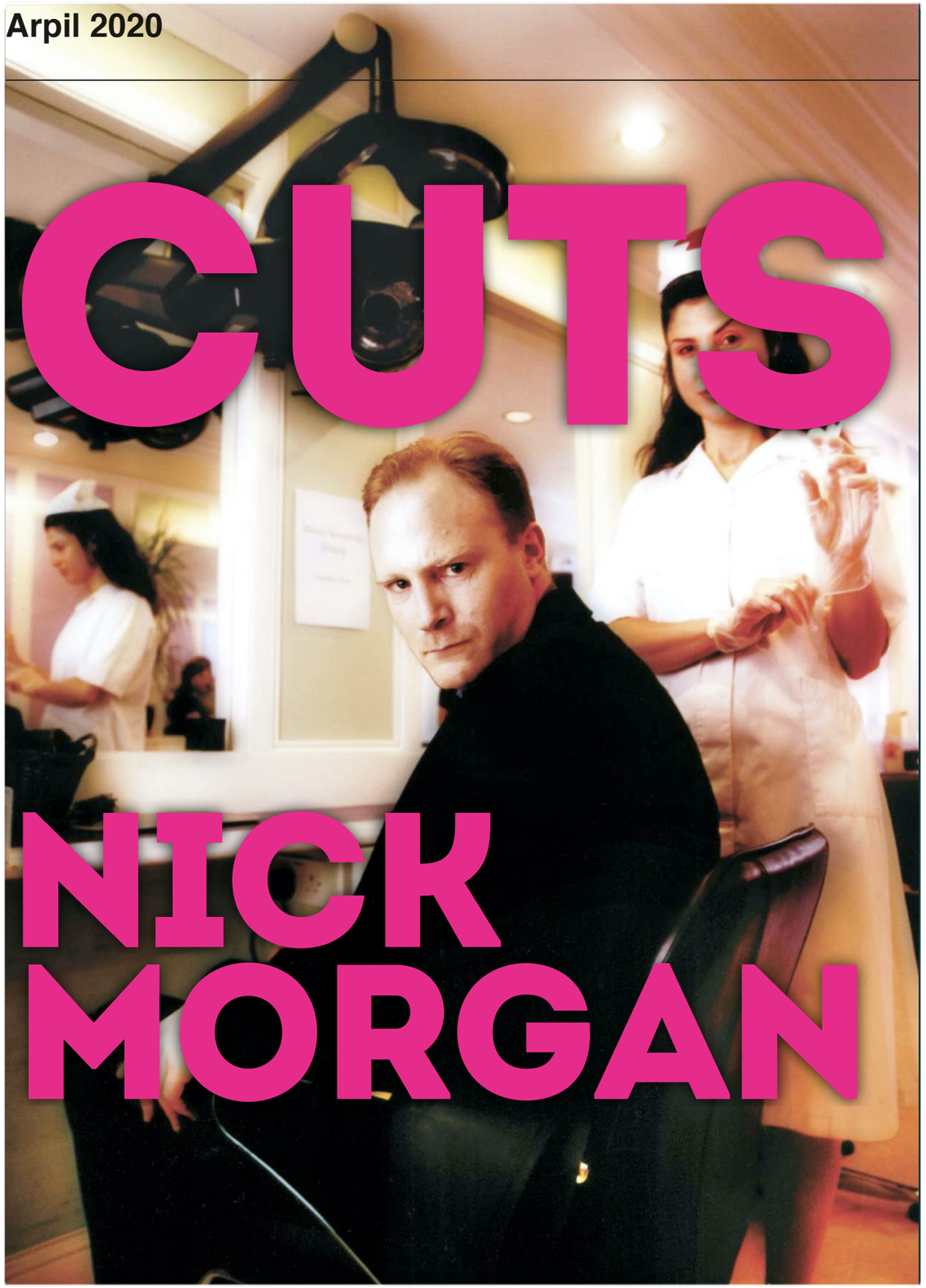
Arpil 2020



CUTS

NICK MORGAN

Health (I've won awards you know)

Special Health Feature

THE TEXT MESSAGE THAT SAVED A LIFE

When a bullet passes though flesh it maintains the majority of its kinetic energy, but when it hits bone the energy is displaced —the bone explodes and fragments become secondary missiles shooting up into the soft tissue. **This is what happened to 16-year-old Jean.**

BY NICK MORGAN

Jean in hospital—his wound had gone gangrenous; (top) surgeon David Nott (right) with the message he received from Professor Meirion Thomas (left)

MARK THOMAS (TOP); SARAH ELLIOTT PHOTOGRAPHY

ONE MINUTE JEAN WAS WALKING WITH HIS YOUNGER brother through a forest in Nyanzale, in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo; then came the sounds of guns and screams. Caught in the crossfire, Jean* felt a heavy blast, then blackness. When he next opened his eyes he was on the forest floor and his brother was wailing. Jean felt pain in his left arm. He looked down and the arm was gone. His brother was fleeing in shock, but unhurt. Jean got to his feet in a daze and walked towards the armed men. They did nothing to help him.

Three weeks after the shooting, Jean found his way to the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital in nearby Rutshuru. Newly arrived surgeon David Nott assessed him. Even before the bandages were removed Nott noticed the sickly-sweet smell of gangrene alongside putrefying flesh. Jean was in septic shock. Removing the dirty dressing Nott inspected the five-inch stump. Blood had not reached what was left of the arm muscles for at least a week—the boy's bone was sticking out and rotting.

Nobody expected Jean to live more than three days.

A WEEK EARLIER DAVID NOTT, 52, HAD BEEN DOING HIS rounds at the NHS's Charing Cross Hospital in London. The day before that he'd been working in his private consulting rooms just off Sloane Square. Now he looked around: paint was peeling

NOBODY EXPECTED THE BOY TO LIVE—HE'D BE ANOTHER CASUALTY OF THIS WAR

off the tropical walls, the beds were old cast iron with slivers of plastic for mattresses, dishevelled rugs covered the patients. This was not just another country—it was another world.

He knew the only way Jean was going to survive until the end of the week was with radical surgery: the infected areas would have to be removed, including the collarbone and shoulder blade. But this procedure, called a forequarter amputation, was so extreme and dangerous that even in the UK it had only been carried out by a handful of surgeons.

That night Nott could not sleep, tormented by the decision before him. It would be simplest just to let the boy die. Nobody expected him to live—he would be one of the thousands of casualties of this war. There were solid practical reasons for not attempting the surgery. It would stretch hospital resources: what if ten gunshot wounds came in mid-operation? Jean would probably need a lot of blood and there was only a pint available. And he was so sick that there was an 80 per cent likelihood he would die on the operating table. Could he justify using resources this way? And even if the operation were a success, how long would Jean survive in Congo with just one arm? What would he do to earn money? How would he survive?

The team that carried out the operation: David Nott with anaesthetic nurse Paul Kanulambi Walelu (left) and surgeon Jaques Claude Wani Adeba (right)

COURTESY OF MSF

Nott reached for his mobile. Reception was too unreliable for a conversation, but windows opened up at random times, making texting possible. In his address book he found the name Professor Meirion Thomas. A colleague and a consultant surgeon at the Royal Marsden Hospital in London, he was one of the few surgeons in the UK with experience of this operation.

Nott sent a message: "Hi Meirion, I have a boy here who will die if he doesn't have a forequarter amputation, can you take me through it by text, voice comms very poor, text better."

Three hours later his phone beeped as a reply came back: "How to do a forequarter amputation..." Nott scrolled down to see a list of ten actions, ending "... and get deep to serratus anterior. Your hand sweeps behind scapula. Divide all muscles attached to scapula. Stop muscle bleeding with cont suture. Easy! Good luck."

Nott felt a surge of bravado—if he stuck to these steps he would be able to complete the operation. "I'm going to do this," he whispered to himself.

JUST 48 HOURS AFTER SEEING JEAN, NOTT AND HIS surgical team were gowned and masked. The operating theatre was elementary but had good equipment and lighting. However, sterility wasn't brilliant and the anaesthetist was less experienced than Nott would have liked—a nurse rather than a doctor.

The big worry was where to make the incisions—these would

* Name has been changed

have a direct bearing on the skin needed to close the wound after the operation. There was no margin for error. Nott reminded himself again that there was just a pint of blood available.

He took a deep breath, then started to follow the texted instructions. The scapula (shoulder blade) was removed and the collarbone divided with a special saw. After that came the task of ligating (tying off) the major artery and major vein, which were sealed with a heavy stitch. Next, the chest muscles

NOTT FELT A SURGE OF BRAVADO WHEN HE RECEIVED THE TEXT, 'I CAN DO THIS'

were divided going round the shoulder blade; again the blood vessels were tied off quickly to prevent blood loss. The infected stump and shoulder were cut away and Nott found himself looking at Jean's chest wall. He lifted the skin flaps and stitched them closed—they fitted.

The operation had gone like a dream, in just three hours.

Jean was put on a course of intravenous antibiotics and was watched over by Nott. Against the odds he regained consciousness and slowly grew stronger. Crucially, he remained free from infection.

DAVID NOTT HAD BEEN VOLUNTEERING A MONTH EACH year with MSF for over a decade. It was moments like this that made him realise why he did it. But he didn't have time to reflect for long—the conflict brought streams of casualties from all sides as well as those caught in the crossfire.

After a local fight 75 civilians and soldiers arrived at the emergency room in a critical condition. Surgeons operated for 22 hours non-stop. The next week Nott arrived at the hospital gates to find that a lorry had arrived full of casualties. Blood-soaked men were being lifted off the vehicle. The hospital filled with people, some writhing and screaming in pain, others struggling to breathe. The most urgent—chest wounds due to bullets—were treated first, then the patients who were bleeding to death were placed in order of severity. Nott and a team of surgeons worked through the night and all the patients survived.

The month passed quickly. Nott lost touch with Jean and was going home to his girlfriend and his old life. He hitched a ride on the ambulance carrying five patients to a hospital in Goma. When the trip started the road was full of displaced people on foot, which was normal. Then it suddenly became empty.

Four armed men jumped the ambulance, shouting in a mixture of Swahili and Congolese French. They were bandits—they wanted money and mobile phones, anything of value. The muzzle of an AK-47 was pushed into Nott's neck and he felt the spittle on his face and smelled whisky. Poverty, alcohol, guns and a lack of witnesses—a very bad combination. *This is it*, he thought. But a wounded soldier in the back of the ambulance appeared to know the gunmen. There were two minutes of intense shouting and arm-waving. Then the bandits disappeared as quickly as they had arrived.

Ironically, a patient had just saved Nott's life. But unlike his patients, Nott was able to leave that world. Back in London he often thought of those he'd operated on in the Congo, wondering how they had fared. One day, by chance, on the MSF website he saw a picture of Jean, along with a brief article about his recent life. "He said his father had been killed and his mother had left the family to live with another man," Nott explains. "Jean had the responsibility to take care of the family—something he now had to do with one arm."

DESPITE HIS ESCAPE FROM THE BANDITS, DAVID NOTT IS going back to the Congo with MSF later this year. "Working for MSF is always challenging: you're often in parts of the world where the health structure has collapsed. There is no doubt there are risks for volunteers. But often the team is the only medical hope for millions of people. I think if I have the skills to help, then it is one of the best things I can do with my life."

STRAIGHT TO THE POINT

Advertisement seen in an Edinburgh supermarket:
"Room to let in flat with student. Female. Quite German."

Submitted by **David Wallace, Edinburgh**

Undercover for Reader's Digest, I made a chilling discovery about the people who are supposed to look after our eyes

THE GREAT EYE TEST SCANDAL

BY NICK MORGAN

I'M GOING BLIND. Very slowly, my iris is breaking up and particles of pigment are starting to clog drainage channels behind my cornea. Because of this, a build-up of fluid is pressing on the optic nerve at the back of my eye. It's this pressure that is causing damage. This is glaucoma.

As I entered a high street optometrist in north London two weeks ago I didn't know this. The optometrist was mid-forties with dark hair. After I'd read lists of shrinking letters she said, "Now

PUNCHSTOCK/RADIUS; PUNCHSTOCK/BRAND X

we'll look at your eye health." She put what looked like a 1970s ray gun to my eye. "This is to measure the pressure; you'll feel a puff of air." Then she shone a light into each eye. Finally she said, "I don't want to panic you, but I'm going to refer you to your doctor."

I was there as part of an assessment of the consistency and fairness of British optometry. Since Brits spend £105 million on eye tests each year, the *Reader's Digest* assignment seemed reasonable: visit ten optometrists, ask for an eye test and whether you need new glasses and see what they say.

Three hours later I was in a branch of a high street chemist having the backs of my eyes photographed with a retinal camera. I thought, If there is something wrong with my optic nerve it should be obvious, because this will actually take a picture of it. But, to my amazement, the optometrist said briskly, "Your eye pressure is a little high, but within normal limits; you need to be tested again in 12 months. Have you had a look at our frames?"

THE SAME EYES, the same city and the same day, yet very different results. Of all ten optometrists I visited—well-known high street names, independents and a supermarket—only seven were to pick up that something was seriously wrong with my eyes and either refer me to my GP or ask me to come back for more tests. Three said no more than, "See you in a year."

But glaucoma is serious. Says the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) campaign manager Barbara McLaughlan, "More than 30,000 people in the UK have lost their sight to this treatable condition." According to Professor David Edgar of the Department of Optometry and Visual Science, City University, and co-editor of *Glaucoma Identification and Co-Management*, "There are possibly a quarter of a million people suffering from glaucoma in this country and as many more remain undiagnosed."

TO GET A definitive assessment of my eye health I went to see Dr Deacon Harle, lecturer at the Institute of Optometry and one of the most highly qualified optometrists in the UK. After examining my eye with a microscope he says, "There is pigment on your cornea; it's very subtle, but with other signs as well I can say you have pigment dispersion syndrome. I'm going to refer you." He means I must see an ophthalmologist, a doctor specialising in eye treatment and surgery.

Dr Harle adds, "Until your eye health is dealt with, I don't think it's appropriate to be spending money on new glasses."

So why, on top of almost a third of my tests failing to sound alarm bells, have all but one of the optometrists I visited gone on to suggest I buy new glasses? I now have no less than nine prescriptions for new specs—and what's more, no two of them are alike.

The wide range of prescriptions is nothing to worry about, according to Dr Susan Blakeney, consultant at the College of Optometrists. "Prescriptions will depend upon a variety of factors, including what you use your specs for. Prescribing is often more of an art than a science."

Although all ten optometrists identified that my left eye needed a less powerful prescription than before while my right eye needed a stronger lens, eight failed to spot the astigmatism that Dr Harle identified in my right eye.

And what about the optometrists who overlooked my glaucoma? Dr Blakeney explains that diagnosis is about skill and professional judgement, not just ticking boxes. In short, the health of my eyes might have flagged up some warning signs but the results weren't beyond the definition of what is clinically "normal".

Why did three in ten optometrists fail to notice there was something seriously wrong?

But I'm not normal. I've started to go blind and 30 per cent of the optometrists failed to notice that there was something seriously wrong. There must be another reason for this.

And there is. It all comes down to money. Optometrists in England are facing a crisis.

Says David Craig of the Association of Optometrists, "English practices receive £18.85 from the Department of Health for performing an NHS sight test—yet the cost to the optometrist is just over double that figure. The system is unsustainable."

It means that after you have an NHS test (free annually to over-60s, under-16s and those who meet one of a number of other health or income criteria), you've cost the practice about £20. Even private tests, for which optometrists charge on average £19.20, don't usually pay for themselves. If opticians want to stay in business they need to recoup cash through selling products. This can create a blurring of priorities between the medical and the commercial.

Pressure selling is getting more widespread. After noting my high eye pressure, a supermarket optometrist asked, "Would you like to feel what it's like to have a contact lens in your eye?" This technique, where you're sold a product while in the examination room, is called "selling in the chair".

One optometrist who asked not to be named told me that he had worked in a practice with a "conversion chart", recording the number of eye exams that became spectacle sales. He says, "If I didn't get a high conversion rate I was made to feel very uncomfortable."

Dr Harle has a similar story. "When I was newly qualified I worked in a chain where the patients chose glasses before the eye test. If I found the prescription hadn't changed or that glasses weren't necessary, the manager would come in and ask why he'd lost the sale."

Optometrists want the NHS to pay a realistic fee, but market forces have hamstrung the industry. David Craig says, "Each year we ask for more money per test from the NHS and they point to all the optometrists who are offering free and cut-price tests as loss leaders and say, 'Why should we pay you more?'

"But subsidising eye tests through spectacle sales isn't good practice."

Government regulations about what eye checks should be carried out in an NHS test state merely that the surface and vicinity of the eye should be checked, followed by an intra-ocular examination and "such additional examinations as appear...to be clinically necessary". As a result, optometrists in England have three options: do the minimum that is "clinically necessary"; charge for "extras" requiring useful but expensive equipment such as retinal cameras; or carry out the extra tests on a "goodwill" basis in the expectation of making product sales.

A further complication is our ageing population. Over-60s account for 43 per cent of NHS tests. They are at greater risk of eye health problems and so are more likely to need longer tests. But they're much less likely to need new glasses. In the current system that makes them an economic liability.

Then there's the arrival of cut-price frames and the birth of Internet glasses. It's your legal right to walk out of the opticians holding your prescription—which you can take to a company such as glassesdirect.co.uk who will make glasses for as little as £15. Supermarkets too have slashed prices; Tesco is selling fully made up glasses for £20.

All of which might well be reflected in the eye test itself. Says Dr Harle, "You pay your money and you make your choice, but as things stand the eye care you get from one optometrist to the next can be dramatically different."

I can vouch for that. The cost of the tests I underwent varied from one practice to another, as did the amount of time they spent and the equipment and techniques used. Three tests were free and the most expensive was £55. It included the use of a state-of-the-art Optomap retinal scanner that records the majority of the retina in one image. Yet there was no obvious link between cost, equipment used and detection.

I'd asked each optometrist what it would cost to have new lenses made for my existing frames. The charge varied from £70 to £160 (the optician said, "We have to send them away," as if that explained everything). Two practices said they wouldn't replace my lenses, only sell me new glasses.

Many in the optical profession believe we should follow the Scottish example*. Last year the Scottish Executive Health Department abolished the NHS sight test and replaced it with a comprehensive eye examination. Everybody is now entitled to a free test and the optometrist gets paid £36. If more tests are necessary they can claim a further £21. Practices have also been given a grant of £8,000 for equipment.

*In Northern Ireland NHS eye tests are administered in much the same way as in England; in Wales the system is slightly different.

WHAT YOUR EYE TEST SHOULD INCLUDE

The test should last at least 20 minutes (30 if you're older), include questions about family history and these three kinds of test:

1 VISION TESTS

Visual acuity. You look at the familiar letter chart at a distance to check what you can see with each eye and at paragraphs of differently sized text close up. Tests vision and measures your prescription.

Retinoscopy. You look at a red and a green target while the optometrist shines a light in your eyes to see how it reflects on the back of them. Checks for short- or long-sightedness and astigmatism.

Subjective refraction. You wear frames into which the optometrist inserts different lenses and asks which make it clearest for you to read a letter chart.

Reading addition. Similar to above, but checks whether you need different lenses for close-up work.

2 HEALTH TESTS

Ophthalmoscopy. The optometrist shines a light in your eye as you look in various directions. Or he might use a microscope. Detects problems such as glaucoma, high blood pressure or diabetes.

Tonometry. Optometrist puffs air into your eye to measure pressure. Or he might drop in a yellow dye and shine a blue light on it.

Field of vision. You look at a screen straight ahead and indicate when you see dim lights flash in your peripheral vision.

3 EYE MOVEMENT TESTS

All check whether your eye muscles work normally:

Cover test. You look at targets with one eye covered.

Motility. You follow a moving target with your eyes and report any double vision, pain or difficulty.

Near point of convergence. A target is moved closer to your eye until you go cross-eyed or see double.

Which? magazine, September 2007

Hal Rollason, former chairman of Optometry Scotland, says, "The Scottish eye exam may appear to cost the NHS more in the short term, but fewer people will face losing their sight. This in the longer term will mean savings: if we prevent only 30 people a year going blind, it will have paid for itself."

The RNIB was influential in creating the new Scottish eye care system. Says Barbara McLaughlan, "Regular eye tests are vital so that conditions such as glaucoma can be picked up and treated early. Everyone should get a test at least every two years, annually in the case of under-16s and over-60s."

What can you do to ensure your eyes are being properly monitored? Our experts all advise sticking to the same optometrist if possible, as he or she holds a medical history of your eyes, which is important for diagnosis. But if you don't feel your test was thorough (see box above), seek another opinion.

As for me, I'll be going to hospital for further tests and the probability is that I'll be prescribed eye drops, which will control the internal pressure of my eyes and stop me going blind.

Have you been dissatisfied when getting your eyes tested? Write to the address on page 10 or email YouSaidIt@readersdigest.co.uk.

Sarah Pearson pictured at home in London

LOSING WEIGHT AT ANY COST

BY NICK MORGAN

Sarah Pearson was 22 stone. She'd been overweight since she was 18. Now, at 38, she felt continually fatigued and her knees ached. As a nurse, she knew what the future held: arthritis, high blood pressure and a real risk of a heart attack. She was sure the world judged her a failure for being that size—her misery made it all the harder to avoid the comfort of eating. Ten stone over her recommended weight, she knew that as time went by she'd get even fatter.

Then, in February 2005, in the back of her local paper, Sarah saw a small advertisement promising easy weight loss. Keyhole surgery could be used to place an inflatable "gastric band" round the top of the stomach. This would stop feelings of hunger and limit the

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JONATHAN BANKS

amount that could be eaten. Sarah was thrilled—and determined. She arranged a loan later that week for the £7,500 the surgery cost and went for a consultation in Harley Street.

She was warned that she wouldn't be able to eat solids for a month and only soft food for a further month—tough food such as meat might cause the band to move. She was also warned that she might initially feel sick, as the band would be near some nausea receptors. None of this put her off. Six months later, Sarah drove from her flat in Walthamstow, north-east London, where she lived alone, to a private hospital in Birmingham for the surgery.

WHAT IS A GASTRIC BAND?

Sometimes referred to more fully as a laparoscopic adjustable gastric band, it acts like a belt round the top portion of your stomach, creating a small pouch. According to the British Obesity Surgery Patient Association (BOSPA), you will feel full after eating only a small quantity of food. This feeling of fullness will remain—a person working well with their band will feel satisfied eating three quite small meals a day.

The next morning Sarah felt groggy and a little nauseous, but that was all. The operation had left four small cuts round her stomach. She felt a small bump at the centre of her ribcage: this was the injection port for the gastric band, where fluid could be added or removed to inflate or deflate the device.

There were other side effects. The poor diet made her constipated and she had sporadic shooting pain between her shoulder blades as wind got trapped underneath the band. She was happy to live with these symptoms because, in the first month, she lost a stone. And as promised, she didn't feel hungry.

After the first month, the weight loss became more gradual. There were some teething troubles: she was able to eat more than she should because the band went slack. More saline solution had to be injected, at a cost of £250.

But Sarah was generally pleased with the results; after two years she had lost seven and a half stone. It was easier to find clothes that fitted and she felt more confident.

However, things began to go wrong. She started to vomit at the end of each day. Then the nausea got worse and she threw up more often, forcing her to carry a vomit pot in her handbag. She only went out when she had to and increasingly took sick leave from work. Her friends and colleagues had no idea how ill she was; ironically, because of the lost weight, she looked really well.

Her GP said it was probably to do with the band and prescribed anti-nausea drugs, to no effect. Sarah went back three times but, though the GPs at her surgery were sympathetic, they had no experience of gastric bands.

When Sarah called the private hospital and described her symptoms, they said she'd need a procedure called an oesophagogastroduodenoscopy (OGD), where a tube containing a small camera was fed down her throat. But they themselves didn't offer OGDs.

Sarah's GP agreed to an NHS referral, but there was a wait of 65 working days. For six weeks Sarah had been unable to eat anything but a little soup each day and she'd become very weak. She was too scared to wait—after talking it through with her family, she made a private appointment with a gastroenterologist, costing another £250.

"It's bad news," the specialist said after the OGD. "The band has eroded your stomach wall. As it has worked its way through, the stomach has sealed itself behind. The band is now floating inside your stomach. It's known for bands to cause stomach erosion, but I've never seen anything as extreme as this." Sarah couldn't believe what she was hearing. There was no telling how much damage had been done.

The band needed to be removed and—unlike the procedure to install it—this would be a big operation.

Two weeks later Sarah woke up in her local NHS hospital. She had an epidural for the pain and a large nasal gastric tube to drain the stomach fluids out. There was a big V-shaped cut across her abdomen with 25 staples holding the incision together.

The gastric band had been removed

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

BOSPA points out that being obese makes any surgery more risky. Anaesthetics are more difficult and obesity-related diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure can add further complications. Statistically, the death rate with gastric band insertion is about one in 2,000. The most common cause of death is the development of a blood clot in the lungs. Sometimes patients develop infections at the time of the surgery, which can delay recovery.

Sarah's experience is not that uncommon—about one in ten gastric-band patients will need a further operation at some time. This may be due to:

Slippage Months or even years after the surgery, there is always the risk that the stomach will move up through the band and the upper pouch will become enlarged. The band will have to be refitted in the correct position.

Erosion Particularly if it is tightly inflated, the band can work its way into or through the wall of the stomach. Apart from anything else, it will stop working. In this case, it would have to be removed and replaced if possible.

Leakage The band can be damaged when the inflation is being adjusted. Again, all or part of it would have to be replaced.

Infection of the reservoir/port or tubing If this persists the device may have to be repositioned; if the infection is so severe that it's resistant to antibiotics, the band may have to be removed.

successfully but her stomach had been shredded. With so much stitching to try to hold the stomach wall together, she was in hospital for a week.

A fortnight after leaving, Sarah, convalescing at her parents' house, was eating a meal. When she'd finished she put her knife and fork down—and was immediately sick. It was blood.

Her mother drove her to casualty where she had a further OGD, but they couldn't see the source of the bleeding. Admitted for observation, she passed out. A second OGD showed a great deal of blood, but not where it was coming from. That night Sarah's blood pressure suddenly dropped and her pulse disappeared. Staff resuscitated her and rushed her into emergency surgery.

Her stomach was so badly damaged the surgeons still couldn't see where she was bleeding, so they oversewed everything that had already been done.

After the operation Sarah gradually rallied, but it was almost three months before she could return to work.

A year on, Sarah says that she doesn't regret having the band fitted. But she's angry at the lack of aftercare from the private hospital. "I should have done it through the NHS. If I'd been seen faster by a specialist there would have been less damage and I wouldn't have needed such extensive surgery."

Sadly, with the band now gone, Sarah is gaining weight again.

For more information, see BOSPA's website at bospa.org. Comment on this article at rdlife.co.uk or email readersletters@readersdigest.co.uk.

Nick Morgan was a recent winner at the Medical Journalism Awards 2008.

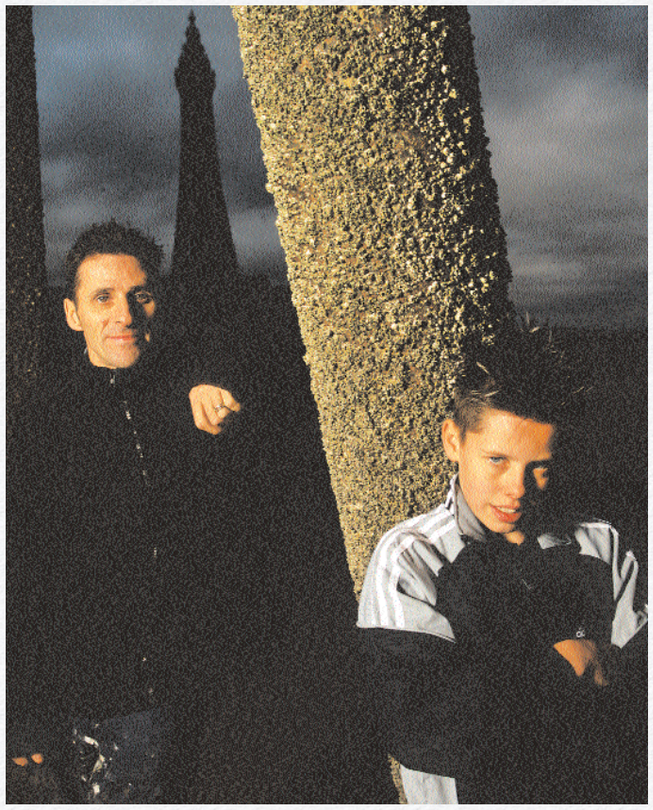
Drama Drama Drama Drama

2

I’ve done a great deal of drama in real life pieces. Normal people who have done exceptional things - this is one of my favorite assignments.

Braving the Waves

BY NICK MORGAN



When his best friend drowned, Paul Leyden pledged never to go into the sea again. He never dreamed what fate had in store

ON A BREEZY afternoon last August, Paul Leyden, a 41-year-old self-employed gas fitter, finished work and went to meet his wife who worked close to Blackpool's North Pier. As he walked along the sea wall some tourists caught his eye. The tide was right in and they were pointing into the sea. The wind caught a cry: "Has anybody got a mobile? There's somebody in the water!"

Paul ran towards them. When he looked into the water he saw a little boy being thrown around. The waves crashed over him then lifted him up, battering him against the sea wall before he was sucked down and out by the undercurrent.

Suddenly Paul realised to his horror that it was from this exact spot two years before that his best friend Mark Smithhurst had plunged into the sea and saved two lives, only to be swept away himself, his body washed up at the base of the pier.

Ever since, Paul had made a secret vow: he'd never go into the sea again. But the father of two couldn't believe so many were standing around doing nothing to save the child. *Maybe I'm meant to be here*, Paul thought as he grabbed a lifebuoy and threw it into the sea. But the rope it was attached to pulled tight then jerked back. It was six yards too short to reach the boy.

Paul had no choice but to break his vow. Although a weaker swimmer than Mark had been, he stripped to his boxer shorts. More than anybody, he knew how treacherous the waves were here. He'd had nightmares about Mark out in the water. Taking the lifebuoy rope, he climbed up on to the top of the 45-foot-high wall and started to abseil out over its jutting overhang. The rope burned into his hands as he went down.

Now in the water Paul stepped on to the wall's 45-degree base which was covered in moss and as slippery as ice. Plunging through the angry waves he saw the boy close up. No more than 11, he was bleeding everywhere. The skin on his arms and face looked as though he'd been through a cheese grater.

> 'I couldn't believe so many people **were doing nothing to save a child'**

Paul held the rope in his left hand and threw the ring out. The boy managed to wrap an arm round it, but he wasn't strong enough to hold on. The next wave caught hold of his body and pulled him under.

Paul waited for him to surface. The seconds stretched out. *Am I too late?* Then he saw the boy again, this time being lifted directly towards him. Paul's elation turned to horror as the wave picked up the boy and threw him once more against the wall. Now the wave hit Paul—making his feet slip on the mossy surface—and knocked him down.

Under the waves he thought again of Mark being here all alone and dying in the water. *It's no coincidence that I have the chance to save this boy.*

Paul hauled himself up. Seconds later, another large wave came in carrying the boy. This time Paul clenched his teeth and lunged at him. To his amazement he felt a small wrist fall into the palm of his hand. He grabbed it hard. He wasn't letting him go this time.

Up on the wall some fishermen threw a rope to Paul. As they dragged him and the boy to safety, Paul grabbed a metal ring in the concrete and pulled the lad up. Out of the water, Paul looked into the boy's face. He was chalk-white and drained of energy, but he was still breathing. He could only have been minutes from death, Paul realised as the ambulance took 11-year-old David Everton—who had been sitting on the sea-wall steps when a huge wave swept him away—to the town's Victoria Hospital where he made a full recovery. His mum Melaine, 32, said: "When I heard what happened I just cried and cried. I cannot thank Paul enough. Without him my son would not be here."

Last October Paul was given the Lancashire Red Rose Courage Award in recognition of his bravery.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY CRAIG STENNETT

WANTED: YOUR HEROES!

Do you know someone who inspires you? If so, please write to us. We pay £100 for published contributions. Your nominee could feature on our back cover. Send details to the address on page 7.

In Deep and Drowning

BY NICK MORGAN

Paul Swift and Leanne Duce used their first-aid training to prevent a murder

ON A BRIGHT, cold April day last year, 16-year-olds Paul Swift and Leanne Duce were walking along the Leeds–Liverpool canal towpath in Blackburn, Lancashire. They had just crossed a bridge below a lock in the heart of the town's magnificent old cotton mills, when Leanne stopped dead. "Did you hear that?" Paul shook his head. "It's like a moaning."

Paul squinted into the sunlight. He made out a glint of light in the middle of the canal just under the bridge. Moving closer to the bank, he saw the face of an Asian woman bobbing on the surface of the water, the sun reflecting off her glasses.

A St John Ambulance first-aid cadet, Paul assessed the danger calmly. He knew Leanne, a fellow first-aider, was not a strong swimmer, so he kicked off his trainers, tore off his coat and eased himself down into the canal. The dark water was so cold he started to shiver straight away. He felt his heart pounding in his chest.

As he swam, Paul fixed his eyes on the woman's head. She was gasping for air and trying to shout something. He assumed it was a cry for help, but up close he was shocked to hear her pleading: "Go away. Leave us!" Paul didn't know what to do. Then he saw part of a child's red jacket in the water. A moment later, a girl's head, her hair floating in the murk. She couldn't have been more than six, and the woman was forcing her down.

With all his strength Paul grabbed the child's arm and yanked her free.

The woman was forcing the girl underwater

Swimming her to the bank he knew from her limp body that he had to get her out fast.

Suddenly, Paul realised that the lock gates were opening upstream and the current threatened to flush them away from the bank. He pushed as hard as he could with his legs and they made it to the canal edge just before the full flood was unleashed.

Leanne helped pull the girl out. Paul quickly checked her over using his first-aid training. The child's airway was clear, her breathing shallow, she had a faint pulse and her face was blue. Leanne called for an ambulance on her mobile while Paul put the girl into the recovery position.

Paul was shivering with cold and shock. He knew the woman didn't want to be saved, but he had to help. He glanced back to the canal. To his horror, she had vanished. *The currents have dragged her down*, he told himself.

He jumped back in. Amazingly, the woman shot up out of the water close by. He grasped her shoulder. Although she was semi-conscious, she didn't struggle, but she was too heavy to lift out alone. Fortunately a passer-by walking his dog rushed over and together they got her on to the bank.

The woman was alive and breathing regularly, but when Paul saw the little girl's face he was alarmed. It was still blue and her pulse was flickering. Quickly, he retrieved his coat and put it over her to try to keep her warm. Just a minute later there were flashing lights and sirens as an ambulance arrived.

At Blackburn Infirmary, Leanne and Paul, now treated for cuts and bruises, went to see the girl. Although covered in breathing apparatus, she smiled at the boy who'd saved her life.

When police told them that they had stopped a murder and suicide, Paul was shocked that a mother could do that to a daughter.

Paul and Leanne were given St John Ambulance Young First-Aider of the Year awards, and Paul also won the highest St John award for lifesaving.

In March, 36-year-old Rukhsana Hashmi, who suffers from a severe depressive illness, was given a two-year community rehabilitation order. The girl is now being looked after by both parents, with social services' help.

WANTED: YOUR HEROES!

Do you know someone who inspires you? If so, please write to us. We pay £100 for published contributions. Your nominee could feature on our back cover. Send details to the address on page 9.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY CRAIG STENNETT

THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH

BY NICK MORGAN
PHOTOGRAPHED BY CRAIG STENNETT

YOU'RE A PILOT. A MAN IS HANGING FROM THE OUTSIDE OF YOUR AIRCRAFT. YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN GO AND RESCUE HIM. ***SO WHO'S GOING TO FLY THE PLANE?***

July 17, 2008, was a bad day to jump. Summer, yes, but cold with low cloud cover. When pilot Garth Greyling arrived at the British Forces' parachute centre at Bad Lippspringe airport in central Germany, he wasn't surprised to be told that all flights were grounded until further notice.

Garth would be flying a mix of competitors for the Army Parachute Championships. The juniors would be on static lines and have to land on a designated target, while the more experienced parachutists would link arms in a series of formations. The most experienced was the jumpmaster Major Jeremy Denning—known as Jerry. He'd be first into the twin-engine Islander and last out, not leaving until he knew everybody was safe.

Jumping out of a plane with a bit of fabric on your back is intrinsically dangerous, so everything is done to make it safer. Static lines are long straps connected to the aircraft—when the jumper leaves the plane, the line pulls tight and opens the parachute automatically. More advanced jumpers have a ripcord they pull to open the chute themselves. But as a safety measure all jumpers have an Automatic Activation Device (AAD). If the main parachute doesn't open, this detects fast descent and triggers a small charge that breaks the ripcord, releasing a reserve parachute.

But with this low cloud nobody was flying anywhere. It was a case of waiting in the pilot's office and catching up on paperwork. Garth, 34, sat back in his chair and sipped black coffee. His life had changed so much over the past year. Just ten months ago he'd been a Royal Engineer in the army, but a lifelong love of flying made him leave and train as a pilot. Six months on, he'd got his commercial licence and now he was a civilian contractor.

Lunch was pie, beans and sweetcorn in the airport canteen. Then at 5pm Garth got the green light from the drop-zone ground controller: "We've got a gap in the clouds at 8,000 feet. It's now if you want to jump."

Garth climbed into the cockpit of his Islander, put on his headset and flicked a switch to fire the turbine engine into life. "Juliet Sierra Alpha Tango, radio check." The response came back, "Read you, strength five."

He taxied to the flight line and the jumpers climbed in through the back hatch. The rear of the Islander is naked aluminium fuselage, without even the luxury of a bench to sit on. Garth remembered his teacher telling him, "Weight is the aircraft's enemy." Now, with a full load, the plane responded more sluggishly.

Garth pulled back on the yoke and felt friction disappear from his wheels. No matter how many times he took off, he'd never lose the thrill of being in the air.

The Islander, driven by two propellers, handled like a dream. The cockpit was old-fashioned stick and rudders. This was real flying—nothing fancy like an autopilot on board. When Garth had been training his instructor had said, "This aeroplane is so well made you could adjust the trim then sit back holding the yoke with just your little finger." (The trim is the default position of the controls when you're not pushing them one way or the other; the yoke controls altitude.)

At 3,000 feet jumpmaster Jerry opened the Islander's door, filling the craft with rushing air. One by one the static-line jumpers took position at the hatch: they knelt down with one foot dangling outside the aircraft, one hand on the door frame, the other on the floor. Garth saw each of them for a split second in his rear-view mirror, then—in a heartbeat—they were gone.

He circled and climbed to 5,000 feet where the more experienced parachutists jumped in freefall. Every time one left Garth made small control adjustments to compensate for the weight change. The last two were a more experienced beginner on a static line and Jerry himself. Garth looked in the rear-view mirror and saw the static-line jumper kneel by the hatch. He blinked and the man had gone.

Garth made more adjustments to keep the Islander level. In the mirror he saw Jerry pulling in the static line. Thirty seconds later Jerry gave Garth a smile and a thumbs up. Then he too had gone. Clockwork.

Garth pulled the lever to close the hatch. It stuck. He looked over his shoulder and saw that a static line was still trailing out of the plane. He cursed Jerry for not stowing it properly. The line, which has a small bag at the end of it, would create drag and might cause the Islander to behave erratically—the drinks would be on Jerry later.

Garth radioed the control tower: "This is Juliet Sierra Alpha Tango. I have a static line outside the aircraft and can't close the hatch door." The radio came back, "Take an easy descent."

The Islander felt sluggish and Garth would have been happy to be back on the runway. As he approached the treeline the radio crackled, "Do you have anybody left in your aircraft?"

Garth replied, "Negative."

Control said, "I've counted the canopies and there's one less than in your log." There was silence. They must have missed one. >

Garth at the airfield

"I'VE COUNTED THE CANOPIES AND THERE'S ONE LESS THAN IN YOUR LOG." THERE WAS SILENCE

A few minutes later the landing flaps were set and the aircraft was approaching the runway. The radio suddenly crackled the emergency command: "Go around, go around!"

Garth's heart jumped. He applied full power, retracted the landing flaps and pulled back on the yoke. As he climbed, the pieces fell into place. One canopy fewer, unusual drag, a stray static line—Jerry must have become tangled up in it. Seconds later the radio confirmed his fears: "...still attached, I repeat he's still attached. Climb to 7,500 feet."

Suddenly Garth thought of the AAD on Jerry's reserve parachute. If the plane had descended any faster the device might have activated, the parachute would have opened and almost certainly ripped Jerry apart. Then the canopy would have damaged the aircraft's structure or possibly got stuck around the tail. They would have both died.

The Islander levelled off at 7,500 feet and Garth waited for instructions. The first was the most insane: he'd come in to land and meet another vehicle travelling at speed. They'd match pace and Jerry would be grabbed and cut free. It was like something from a film and there was a lot that could go wrong.

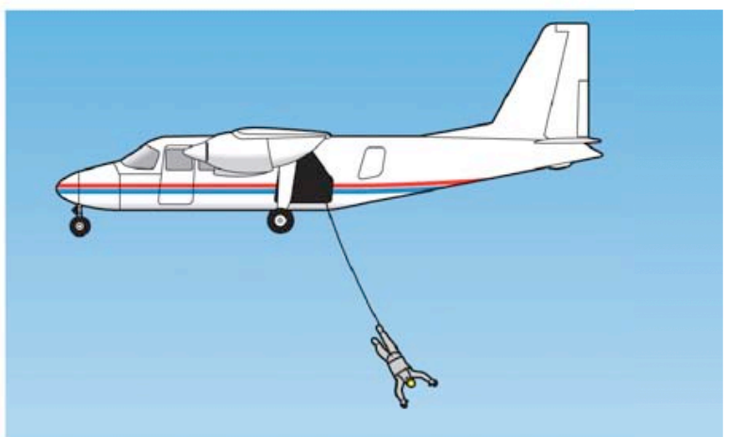
The second idea was to descend gently and land on grass. It would be rough for Jerry but he might—in theory—survive. But that plan could go horribly wrong too. When Jerry landed, his leg could be torn from his body or he could be pulled into the propellers.

I'll do whatever I can for you, Jerry, thought Garth, *but I'm pleased I'm not in your shoes right now. It doesn't look good.*

Then control said, "Garth, if you set your trim well enough do you think you can leave the controls to cut him free?" Garth remembered what his instructor had said about the Islander. "Yes, yes, I can try."

He glanced behind him. On the far side of the jump door, attached to the wall of the fuselage, was an emergency knife held in a sheath. He told himself, *Walk to the back, release the knife, cut the line, free Jerry, his parachute will open, we'll all go home.* It sounded simple.

Garth set the controls so the Islander would fly level. He looked at the knife—three seconds, that's all it would take to get it. He checked his airspeed and altitude indicator then radioed, "I'm going to get the knife."



ACUTEGRAPHICS.CO.UK

"If the plane descended too quickly, the parachute could open and rip Jerry apart"

Three steps and he was past the hatch and reaching for the knife. He tugged at the handle but it wouldn't come. He remembered there was a safety catch that had to be pressed to release the blade. But he couldn't make it release.

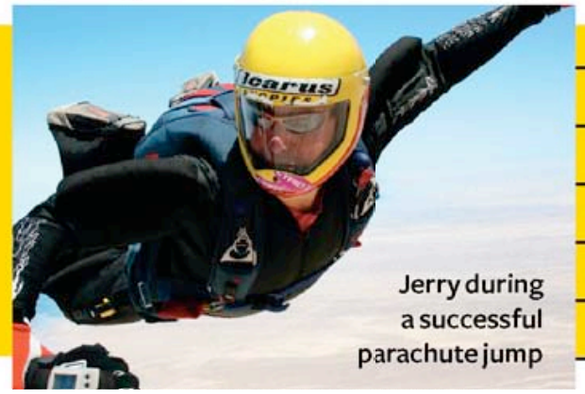
Now the increased weight at the back of the Islander was causing the nose to pitch up to a 45-degree bank. As that happened speed dropped—Jerry was seconds from being caught in the propellers. Garth rushed back to the controls, thrusting the yoke forwards.

As the plane pitched forward and down, Jerry experienced "negative g", a moment of weightlessness, no longer being dragged. Garth caught a glimpse of him in the mirror. The static line and bag had wrapped round his ankle, held in place by the pressure. The wind had blown his shirt and fleece up so his bare torso was exposed. His skin was blue. At this temperature and altitude he wasn't going to survive for long.

Garth radioed in, "I can't get the knife; I can't keep the aircraft level." Now the first two plans—the ridiculously dangerous ones—had to be reconsidered.

Then Garth had an idea. The problem was the pitch of the Islander: all he had to do was push the nose into a dive before setting the trim. Then, when he walked into the back, the plane would level out. He'd have more time to get the knife.

On the first attempt he put the nose too far down. They lost height too quickly even with his weight at the back. He tried again, setting the pitch a little higher. He got to the knife but could still not pull it free in time. He altered the nose and tried again, and again and again.



COURTESY OF JEREMY DENNING

Jerry during a successful parachute jump

GARTH CAUGHT A GLIMPSE OF JERRY IN THE MIRROR. HE WASN'T GOING TO SURVIVE FOR MUCH LONGER

After six attempts Garth was on the point of giving up. Then he suddenly realised his body wasn't the only variable. There was Jerry's body outside, trailing on three yards of line. He was causing the bank angle to destabilise.

Garth now adjusted the controls to compensate for both his moving weight and for Jerry's drag. This time he got to the sheath and at last worked the knife free. He rushed back to the controls: "I've got it."

The plane had now strayed too far from the drop zone. Garth took the yoke >

in both hands and set the Islander for a course back home. He was sure that Jerry was unconscious—he'd be relying on his AAD to open the emergency parachute. If the AAD was damaged or wrongly set, cutting the line would be a death sentence.

Over the drop zone Garth radioed, "I'm ready to cut."

The voice came back: "Cut."

Garth set the trim one more and moved to the back of the Islander. Static lines are made of similar material to car safety belts: how easy would it be to slice through? He hesitated—the stress on the line was huge: not just the weight of an adult, but also the pressure of the Islander's speed dragging the body through the air. Garth pushed the blade into the side of the line. In a split second the fabric exploded and the line attached to Jerry's body shot out of the hatch.

Back at the controls Garth waited. Then came the words, "We see a safe parachute. Come in to land."

The next time Garth saw Jerry was in hospital, with his leg up in a cast. There were burns around his ankle but the doctors assured Garth there should be no permanent damage.

Three days after the flight Jerry was conscious. Through a haze of painkillers he got a scrap of paper and a pen and wrote, "Garth, thank you for saving my life."

» The Royal Humane Society are awarding Garth Greyling a medal for bravery later this month.

SnapSchott

The Changing High Street
by **Ben Schott**

Since 1997, Britain has lost 7,500 post offices, 3,460 pubs and 1,310 public lavatories, but gained 1,270 betting shops and 276 lapdancing clubs – according to 2010 data from the Valuation Office Agency. Listed below are the types of high street business that have experienced the greatest rises and falls:

Increase	%	*Decrease*	%
Lapdancing clubs	+1,150	Sport & social clubs	−55
Drive-through restaurants	+53	Petrol stations	−52
Large supermarkets	+49	Livestock markets	−39
Betting shops	+39	Post offices	−39
Casinos	+27	Hospitals and clinics	−32
Nightclubs	+26	Bingo halls	−29
Hypermarkets (>27,000 sq. ft)	+25	Public toilets	−23
Charity shops	+20	Swimming pools	−21
Wine bars	+16	Schools	−10

Ben Schott is author of *Schott's Almanac* · www.benschott.com

Money: save, spend, get more

We love it, we want it and we want to read about it: how to get it, save it, spend it, learn how to live without it and then get it again!

HOW MONEY WORKS **Nick Morgan** lowered his credit card interest rate—just by asking

It's time to be a **card sharp**

At 19.9 per cent, the APR on my Barclays credit card seems steep. Is it negotiable?

I call Customer Services and say I'd like a lower rate. I've been a customer for 20 years and I'm looking to pay off my £5,000 debt over the next year. After a stunned silence the woman, who sounds as if she's in a call centre in India, says. "I'll need to talk to my supervisor." There's a pause; then, "No, you cannot have a lower rate."

I wait a day and call back with a new approach. "I'm having difficulty making payments." I'm shocked to hear my own words, but it's true: for the past six months I've been using an overdraft to make the minimum payments. I've clearly tripped an alarm. I'm quickly given the number of Financial Difficulties.

Financial Difficulties are in the UK, so I feel I'm closer to home. But the message is stern: "We can reduce your APR to zero per cent, but we must freeze your card." I protest, but they point out, "You say you're having difficulty paying us back, so it would be silly to let you carry on spending."

Richard Sorsky from the UK Insolvency Helpline says, "Customer services are the foot soldiers: they often work from scripts and have no power to negotiate. The debt resolution and management team, on the other hand, can bend over backwards to

help—but they won't unless you're a good customer who might leave, or they think you're in serious debt trouble."

So I roll up my sleeves and say, "I could become a 'card tart', taking my debt to a zero per cent card until that rate runs out, then moving to another one." To my astonishment I'm informed by Barclaycard that Virgin is offering a good deal just now.

Sorsky explains: "It seems strange that credit card companies will recommend their competitors, but the industry has groups of allied companies. However, you've said something important: that you're going to leave. If you're a good customer—someone who at least makes the regular minimum payments—then they won't want to lose you."

Back on the phone to Barclaycard I say, "Look, you have the Simplicity card at 6.8 per cent APR that you're offering to new customers: why can't I have that rate?" But I'm not a new customer, they say.

"It's good to do your homework about what's on offer," Sorsky advises, "but a basic rule is that companies charge a high APR to high-risk customers. The Simplicity will only be offered to those on a high income with a good credit history."

I appear to have hit a dead end, so I try a simple line: "What do I need to say to you right now to lower my APR?" It sounds like a cheesy sales line but I sense a smile at the other end of the phone. "I'll put you through to Customer Loyalty."

"This is the crucial stage," says Sorsky. "The question in the mind of the company is always, *Are they really going to leave?* I know one organisation whose cancellation line has a policy to keep customers on hold indefinitely for the first two calls; most give up, but those who call a third time are answered, as the company knows they're serious."

There are no such dirty tricks where I am. Customer Loyalty is charming: she calls me back so I don't have to pay for the call. She looks at my history and tells me, "You are just the sort of customer we want to keep." The APR for my existing debt is lowered to 6.9 per cent, with new purchases at 9.9 per cent. And I'm not unique. "We help thousands of people lower rates every year," says Sorsky. "In some cases companies even reduce the debt."

The UK Insolvency Helpline offers free, independent and impartial advice (0800 074 6918, insolvencyhelpline.co.uk).

SIMON WINNALL/GETTY IMAGES

SCAMWATCH»

Get off my Wi-Fi!

You've seen signs in cafes boasting "free Wi-Fi!" But could you be offering the same service? "Wi-Fi piggybacking" is the illicit use of someone else's wireless internet connection. A strong signal can be picked up through several brick walls, and a 2008 survey found one in nine people admitted to having done it.

So what? Well, you don't know what they're downloading or uploading—it could be obscene or illegal. And many of us have broadband deals with a maximum monthly download allowance: if the piggybacker pushes you over this, you'll be landed with a bill for the excess, so...

- Ensure your router has "WPA2" level of security.
- Use a password: longer ones are harder to crack. Your router may come with a preset password in the manual, which you can change.
- Every wireless device has a unique "MAC address" code. If you can find all your codes, you can set up your router to allow access only to your devices.
- Set your router so that its "SSID" is not broadcast—its identity won't even appear to other users.

13 Ways to get a better phone deal

I love gadgets and I love free stuff, so when my mobile phone contract was nearing its end I knew I'd be eligible for a new handset.

"Of course," said my provider. "Which one are you looking at?" I wanted the latest Sony Ericsson with an 8.1 megapixel camera, BBC iPlayer, GPS and Google Maps. "No problem. That's £359.95."

But we don't get what we deserve in life, we get what we negotiate. Five minutes later I got the phone for £6. Here's how:

1 Wait until your contract is almost over. Providers will only upgrade when they want you to renew. Put the date in your diary.

2 Do your homework. There's no point asking for a phone that your network doesn't have. If you want an iPhone you'll have to go to O2, which limits your bargaining power. If you don't need loads of features you could ask for an older model and a tariff discount instead. Some networks offer "SIM only" deals with no handset at all, but you pay less for airtime.

3 See what competitors are offering. "Your bargaining power is directly related to the quality of your alternatives," explains Steve Jones, MD at Focal Point Negotiation. Compare deals at omio.com.

4 Call your provider direct. They will probably be in a better position to offer a new phone than a high-street shop, which will almost certainly take a cut.

5 Speak to someone in authority. Customer services rarely have the power to offer great deals. Ask to be put through to "disconnections", "retentions" or "customer saves".

6 Get their name. "Using someone's name is a powerful tool," says Jones. They'll probably give you their first name at the start of the conversation—jot it down and use it while negotiating. This is a trick sales people use all the time.

7 Stand up. Just being on your feet while talking will make you a better negotiator; your breathing becomes deeper, your brain gets more oxygen and your voice becomes more assertive.

8 Be reasonable. Point out that you're a good customer of long-standing and pay bills on time (assuming this is true). "Be assertive but not aggressive," Jones says. Try: "I don't want to leave your network, but if I can't have the deal I want I'll consider it." But if you make threats be prepared to follow them through. ▶

9 Talk airtime. The phone isn't really free: your provider claws back the cost through the monthly tariff. If you're on a low tariff you may have to move up to get a top phone.

10 Ask for your PAC. You need the Porting Authorisation Code (PAC) to transfer your mobile number to another network. It costs nothing to request and it'll arrive by post or text. Having it doesn't start the transfer, but it tells your provider you're serious about leaving.

11 Hang up. Try calling back the next day. You might get a better deal with a different adviser.

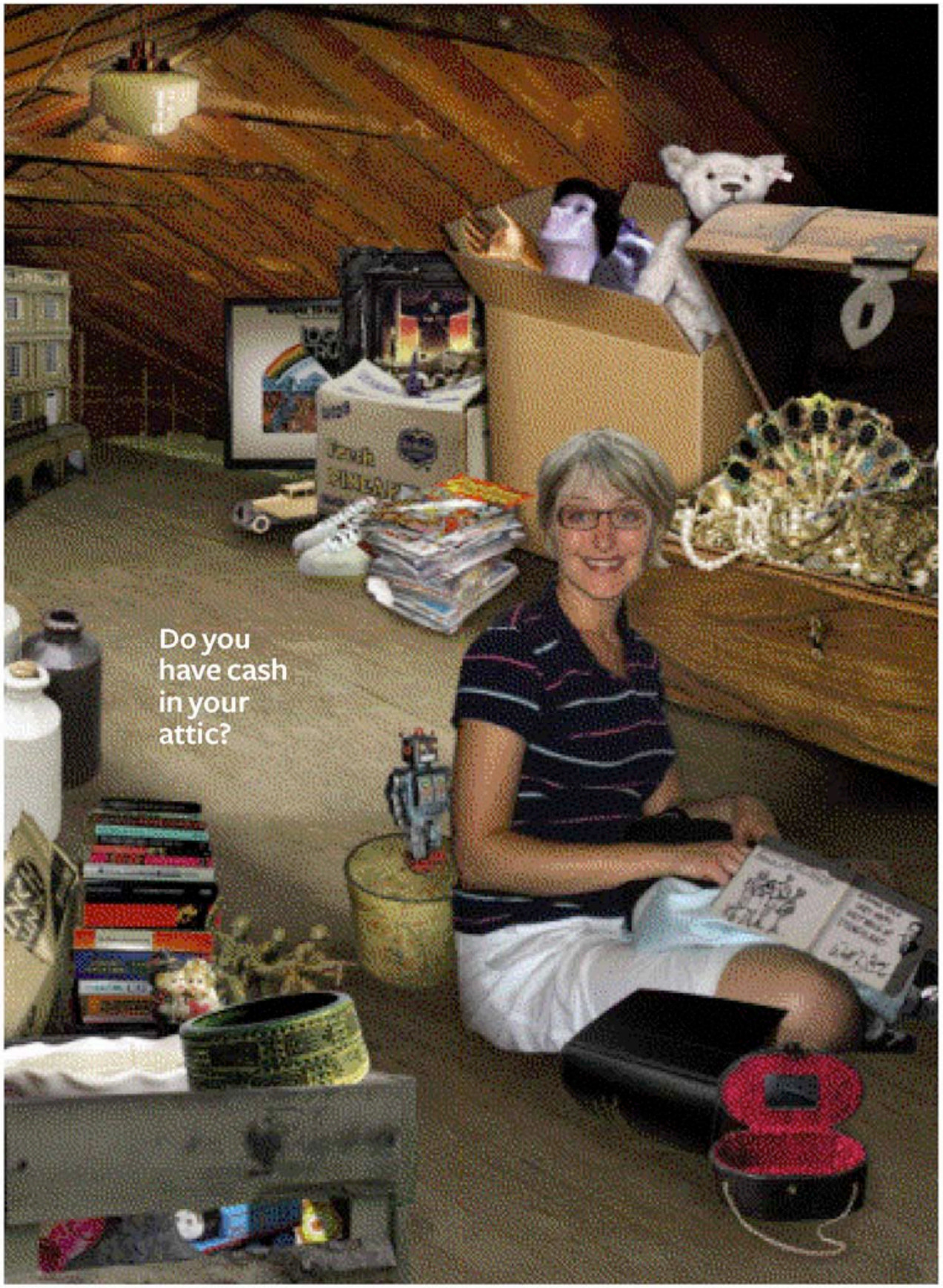
12 Can I help you with anything else? This question is an open door: use it to ask for a lower tariff or an extra service; they can only say no. Jones adds, "Another tactic is to answer a question with a question—'What can you offer me?'—then shut up."

13 Go elsewhere. It may just be time to jump ship; you can pick up introductory deals by hopping providers. Take your PAC to the new firm and they'll do all the work.

Nick Morgan

ILLUSTRATED BY SATOSHI KAMBAYASHI

STEVE LISS/GETTY IMAGES



Disposable income

Turn cast-offs into cash with these speedy selling tips

BY NICK MORGAN

Think of all that unloved stuff on your shelves and rammed into the backs of your drawers: the old mobile phone, designer jeans that always felt a bit tight, the mother-in-law's porcelain shepherdess and a pair of old broken earrings—who on earth would pay cash for those? But with a little ingenuity you could find you're sitting on a gold mine...or at least a chunk of holiday cash.

GETTING STARTED: WHAT IS IT WORTH?

That ugly vase you inherited looks just like the one that pulled in a £2,000 estimate on last night's *Antiques Roadshow*. But is it real Ming or just a minger? What's the best way to find out what it's worth and turn it into the maximum amount of quick cash?

Ten years ago, you'd be heading out to the reference section of your local library—now, so much is online you can search from the comfort of your home. Miller's have produced antiques guidebooks for over three decades; today the publishers have a new website (millersantiquesguide.com) with an easy-to-use (and frankly addictive) database featuring over 33,500 items.

Judith Miller, author of more than 100 books and doyenne of the *Antiques Roadshow*, says, "The value of many high-end antiques is going up, so it's a good time to sell unwanted valuables."

If you can't find your item online,

ILLUSTRATED BY ALI PELLATT

[[2R]]

take some good clear photos and show them to antique-shop owners—or to an antiques show. Miller says, "Most dealers will be happy to talk about your piece and may even venture a value."

If you find the idea of traipsing round shops off-putting, it's back to the web. You can use an online appraisal site such as valuemystuff-now.com, which for £3.99 will give you background information on the item and a valuation. The site is run by Patrick van der Vorst, former director at Sotheby's, and if he can't identify your trinket he'll ask a former colleague from a top auction house to help.

Once you have identified what your item is, you will need to find out what it's worth—guidebooks offer estimates based on past sales, but markets fluctuate and you really want to know what the market was like in the last week. Robert Pugh, eBay entrepreneur and author of *The eBay Business Handbook*, has a great tip for finding out what items are really worth. "Go to ebay.co.uk and search using keywords for the item you're interested in selling—let's say it's a 'man's Cartier watch'. After the search has finished, look on the left-hand side of the page and click 'completed listings'. Now you can see a list of all the Cartier watch auctions that have ended in the last two weeks—the prices in green are the ones that have sold."

Now you know what it's worth, how do you go about getting the cash?

HOW TO SELL IT YOURSELF

On eBay

"Selling online also offers you a great deal of control," says Miller, "and can cost the least in terms of fees, but you'll need to devote more time to the process, which can be complicated."

Few of us know how to use eBay well. "Knowledge can be the difference between making a profit and your item being lost in the system," says Pugh.

HOT

Superheroes rule the world of comic books. Superman's 1938 debut comic went for £200,000 at auction.

It's a fake! It's a reissue! It only looks collectible! And its value plummets accordingly—just £1.

NOT

Some tips for a successful auction from the expert:

- Take clear photos with a digital camera. Have a clean background, use natural lighting rather than flash (which can distort colours) and rotate the pictures so they look as they should—don't ask the potential buyers to tilt their heads 90 degrees just to have a clear look at what you're selling!
- Make your title count: there are 55 characters in your title, so choose words the buyer will search for. The watch would be, "SANTOS DE CARTIER 18k Gold ST.STEEL AUTOMATIC WATCH," rather than, "Wow great look at this fantastic Carter watch!!"
- Get your spelling right. There is just an "i" between "Carter" and "Cartier" but it's an "i" that could end up costing you £1,000! Remember you can amend a listing any time before a bid and you can end an auction early if you feel you've made a terrible mistake.
- Anything with a designer name is going to generate scepticism; give as much evidence as possible, show (and include) the original box, the history of the item and a receipt if you still have it.
- Sell individually, not in lots. If you have 100 DVDs you're going to get more for them if you sell individually.
- Be patient. Most auctions pick up speed in the last 15 minutes of bidding. If you are selling a high-value item it might be wise to place a reserve on it; if it's a small-value item, reserves will be costly and put buyers off.
- Protect yourself from chargebacks. This is a process normally started when the buyer claims they haven't received

HOT

Antique Steiff bears in good condition can easily go for £5,000. If it's both extremely rare and in good condition, add another zero to that figure.

Beanie Babies. The mid-90s craze has long gone—many of these toys go for less than £1 on eBay.

NOT

Other DIY marketplaces

ebid.co.uk A rival to eBay, the perks of selling here are no listing fees and the final value fees are no more than three per cent. Of course, a smaller site means you are reaching fewer buyers.

gumtree.com Lets you sell online at a fixed price through classified ads in your local area. A basic ad is free and the site is easy to use.

amazon.co.uk Allows you to sell your items at a fixed price for 60 days—a much longer period than eBay—and there is no listing fee. Sellers pay 86p per item sold, plus 17.25 per cent of the sales price.

mobilephonebuyer.net A way of selling your old mobile handset for hard cash. The website provides a quote for your model (iPhones can go for up to £190) and then you send it to a Freepost address. Payment is made directly into your bank account.

yourbooty.co.uk Want to sell face to face? There's no better way than a car boot sale. Yourbooty claims to be the UK's largest car boot sales directory; sellers have to pay around £9 for their spot.

the item or it's not as described. You should send all valuable items fully insured with a number that can be tracked—simple recorded delivery is not considered robust enough in many chargeback cases.

At a pawnshop

If you're uncertain about parting with that old watch or gold necklace but want some quick cash, consider pawnbrokers. With the recession biting and banks getting more picky about who they give credit to, pawnbrokers are thriving. According to the National Pawnbrokers Association, there are just over 1,000 pawnbrokers in the UK—and this number is growing at a rate of around ten per cent a year.

Here's the deal: the pawnbroker lends you cash and holds your item as security—you will normally be able to borrow half the value of the item. You may collect your item by paying off the loan with interest at any time within a set period, normally seven months. "More than 80 per cent of customers come back to claim the items," says Nathan Finch, co-owner of Pickwick Pawnbrokers. "We make our money on the interest charged. It's not about acquiring goods on the cheap; it's about providing a short-term loan service."

Pawnshops typically charge eight per cent per month. Pickwick Pawnbrokers deals in jewellery, watches, gold and silver: "Some pawnbrokers will lend on TVs and computer games," Finch says, "but they cost a lot to store and can lose their value."

To a gold buyer

If you are selling precious metal, consider a gold buyer. "Gold and silver are safe bets in a weak economy," says Jenny Keefe at MoneySavingExpert.com. "That's why we're now seeing so many ads on our TVs offering to exchange our broken and 'unwanted' trinkets for cash."

Companies usually send out prepaid, pre-insured envelopes for you to fill with your gold, silver and platinum—some will even accept dental work! Your metal is valued and you get sent a cheque. But many of these companies are not willing to disclose how much you will be paid per gram of gold, so when the cheque arrives it could be lower than you had expected.

In all cases Keefe advises a quick trip to a local pawnbrokers first to get a free valuation. "Then you have an idea what your item is worth before you apply for a postal offer," she says. "The postal companies should offer to return your item without charge if you are unhappy with your payment."

Keefe warns that the value of the gold and silver you sell will depend on the purity and weight of the metal. "If you have a gold watch it may have a low gold content, in which case the intrinsic value of the watch may be higher than the actual gold."

HOT

Jukeboxes are proving to be a rock-solid investment as nostalgia for the 1940s and 1950s grows. A 1946 Wurlitzer can fetch up to £8,500.

iPods have dominated the music market for the last ten years, but they don't keep their value; an early 20GB iPod goes for around £20 on eBay.

NOT

LET OTHERS DO IT FOR YOU

With an auction house

If you want to pass on the leg-work of selling but still want the excitement of people bidding for your goodies, consider an auction house. An auctioneer

Do you have any of these?

ALBUMS

The guide: *Rare Record Price Guide* by Andy McDuff is an industry bible.
What's hot: Near-mint acetate promotional recordings from well-known artists, says Nick Courtney of Sweet Memories Vinyl Records in Portsmouth.
What's not: Classical, 78s or easy listening. "Nobody buys James Last on vinyl," Courtney says.
The grail: The Beatles' *Please Please Me* was issued in 1963 while Parlophone was changing its label. Most were printed with a yellow logo and lettering, but the first 1,000 used gold print and can fetch £8,000.

BOOKS

The guide: There's nothing definitive, says Mary-Rose Brookes of Richard Booth's Bookshop in Hay-on-Wye: "The field is too vast: you wouldn't be able to lift a book about it!" She suggests searching amazon.co.uk and abebooks.co.uk, but warns, "Just because someone is asking £800 for a book doesn't mean it'll sell for that."
What's hot: First edition Ian Fleming James Bond (with the dust cover): a first edition *Dr No* in good condition will fetch £2,000. Also, "Victorian fashion and natural history books with hand-coloured plates, and Victorian leather-bound books," Brookes adds.
What's not: "People think a book is valuable because it's old or signed," says Brookes, "but it depends on the signature and the book."

COMIC BOOKS

The guide: Nothing definitive, but start with *The Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide* by Robert Overstreet.
What's hot: Any first appearances of characters from the 1930s to the 1960s, says Stephen Sharpe of Dave's Comics in Brighton.
What's not: Most comics from the past 20 years. "Today print runs are huge and collectors bag and board their comics, so there's no real scarcity," says Sharpe.

TOYS

The guide: There's a book for every type—such as John Ramsay's *British Diecast Model Toys Price* >

has a vested interest in getting the most money for your item, since he makes a commission (expect to pay between ten and 20 per cent) based on the final sale price.

Auctioneers don't need to have any professional qualifications (and many don't) but if you want some extra security look for The Society of Fine Art Auctioneers and Valuers (SOFAA) membership or similar qualification. "Some auctioneers are more flamboyant than others but ultimately it's the piece that fetches the price," says auctioneer Robert Inman from Raymond P. Inman Auctioneers in Hove. Find your local auction house at ukauctioneers.com.

With a dealer

If you're more cautious, you may be happier with a dealer. You will normally be paid for your item immediately, so you will know exactly what you're getting without charges or hassle. Find a reputable dealer close to you (the British Antique Dealers' Association —bada.org—is a good place to start) then take in some clear photos. "Many items look similar but details can make all the difference," says Louise Phillips of Elaine Phillips Antiques in Harrogate, "We specialise in oak furniture, and while two items may look similar in a photo it's the fine details, the colour and the patination of the wood that make the difference in value. If we like what we see in the photo we will come and have a look without obligation."

Antiques Roadshow's Judith Miller says, "Be aware that dealers have to cover their business costs and they have to make a living—they'll 'mark up' the item to give them a margin to pay for these costs." So you won't get paid the market-selling price.

Miller continues, "In order to ensure that you are getting the best deal, it's wise to show your object to a number of dealers to gain different opinions."

Let us know your selling tips—email readersletters@readersdigest.co.uk.

> *Guide* or *Ramsay's British Model Trains Catalogue* by Pat Hammond—says Leigh Gotch of auction house Bonhams.
> **What's hot:** Toys often have a 30-year cycle: people in their 30s and 40s are collecting the toys of their childhood, says Gotch. "Prices are rising for 1970s model diesel trains and plastic soldiers, cowboys and Indians—£30 for some nice pieces or up to £200 for a rare stagecoach."
> **What's not:** Condition is all: the price could double with the original box or halve if slightly damaged.

COSTUME JEWELLERY

The guide: *Costume Jewellery* (*DK Collector's Guides*) by Judith Miller.
What's hot: "Items that were worth nothing ten years ago are now highly collectable," says Judith Miller. Early pieces are best: original Trifari crown-shaped pins from the 1940s can fetch £100–£200.
What's not: Low-end modern pieces and reissues of classic designs, "The Trifari pins were reissued in the 1980s: these are lighter and less desirable," Miller says. Watch out for fakes too.

[[1L]]

They graduated owing £41,000 between them

Peter Boddy (top), Becki Matthews and James King

Is University Really Worth the Money?

The soaring costs of getting a degree are saddling graduates with debts that put their lives on hold for years

BY NICK MORGAN

Peter Boddy had it all worked out. Graduating from King's College London with a first in biology last year, he was confident his degree would be a leg up into a career. "I studied science because I thought it would lead to a job I would enjoy," he says. But the real world had other ideas.

Peter left college not only with a good degree but also a heap of debt. He owed £15,000 in a student loan and soon found himself living on an overdraft that quickly added £1,800 to his debts. When he failed to get posts he thought he was qualified for, Peter felt panicked by money pressures.

Today he's making cappuccinos in Starbucks. "I'm grateful for the job. At least there's some money coming in. But this is not what I planned."

Aged 28, he earns just £720 per month before tax. "Out of

that £300 goes in rent and over £30 on transport, then there's bills and council tax. There's not much left to live on." Starbucks gives its staff a 50 per cent discount on sandwiches, but Peter makes his own to save cash.

When he does get a job worth more than £10,000 a year he'll have to start paying back his student loan at nine per cent of his gross income above that figure (from April, £15,000). Unless he lands something very well paid, he'll be on a tight budget well into his mid-thirties.

In six years the average graduate debt will be £33,700

That's precisely the deal being made by increasing numbers of graduates who have mortgaged their futures to meet tuition costs and maintain themselves at college. Like Peter Boddy, they are facing hefty student loans, bank loans and credit card debt. "Debt will be with them for years, hitting them with payments when they should be thinking about getting a mortgage or saving for a pension," says Helen Symons, National Union of Students vice-president with responsibility for welfare.

THE COST of getting a degree has changed dramatically in the last 15 years. "In 1990 students lost the right to claim housing benefit or unemployment benefit during summer holidays, then the maintenance grant was progressively reduced and student loans increased. In 1998 tuition fees were introduced at £1,000 per year. As a result 90 per cent of students are now in debt," says Symons. Most students borrow money through the government's Student Loan scheme, 34 per cent also have debt with banks and 15 per cent an outstanding credit card balance. Ten per cent borrow from parents.

And it's about to get much worse. Next year the cap on tuition fees in England is to be raised to £3,000. Many universities feel even that is too low. Educational think-tank The Oxford Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies wants to see top universities charging in excess of £10,000 a year.

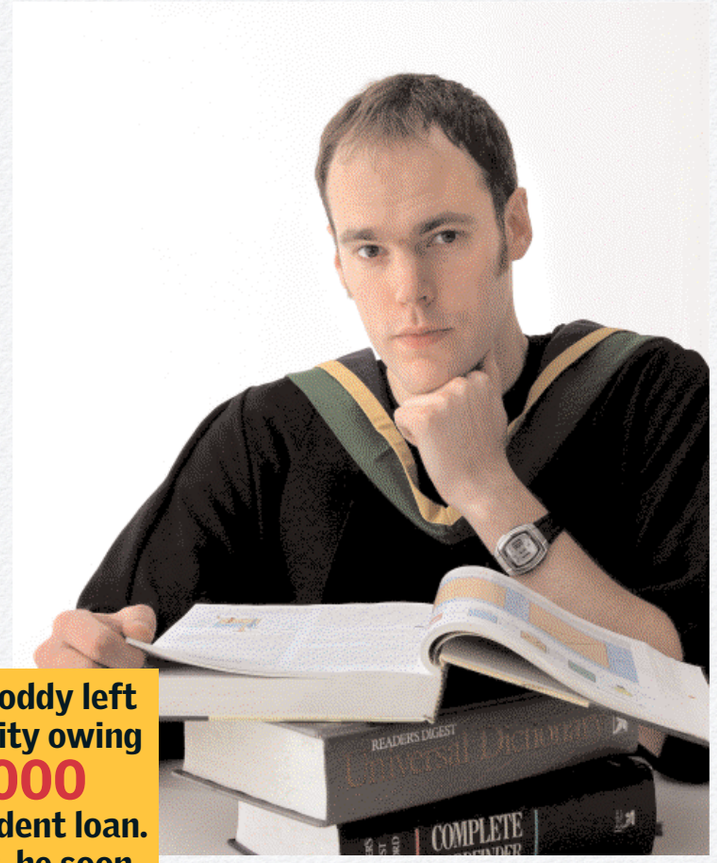
In the next six years Barclays Bank expects the average graduate debt, currently £11,000, to triple. So if you have a child taking GCSEs later this year, by the time they leave university they may well have debts of a phenomenal £33,700.

While families on incomes of £15,000 or less will be cushioned by promised student grants, middle-income homes will be hard hit. Nearly a quarter of families surveyed recently by Prudential now expect to have to put off retirement in order to fund their children through university.

Says Ainslie Waller from York, who has three teenagers aged 15 to 17, "We started saving with children's bonds when they were babies. The savings could have been for a car or a deposit

on a flat, but we now know it will all have to go on fees and we won't be able to help with their living costs. We'll have to consider buying laptops and books second-hand."

David White, chief executive at The Children's Mutual, which specialises in savings plans for university, estimates that the cost of a university education in 18 years' time translates into a savings plan of about £130 per month for a baby born this year.



Peter Boddy left university owing £15,000 in a student loan. Jobless, he soon added a £1,800 overdraft

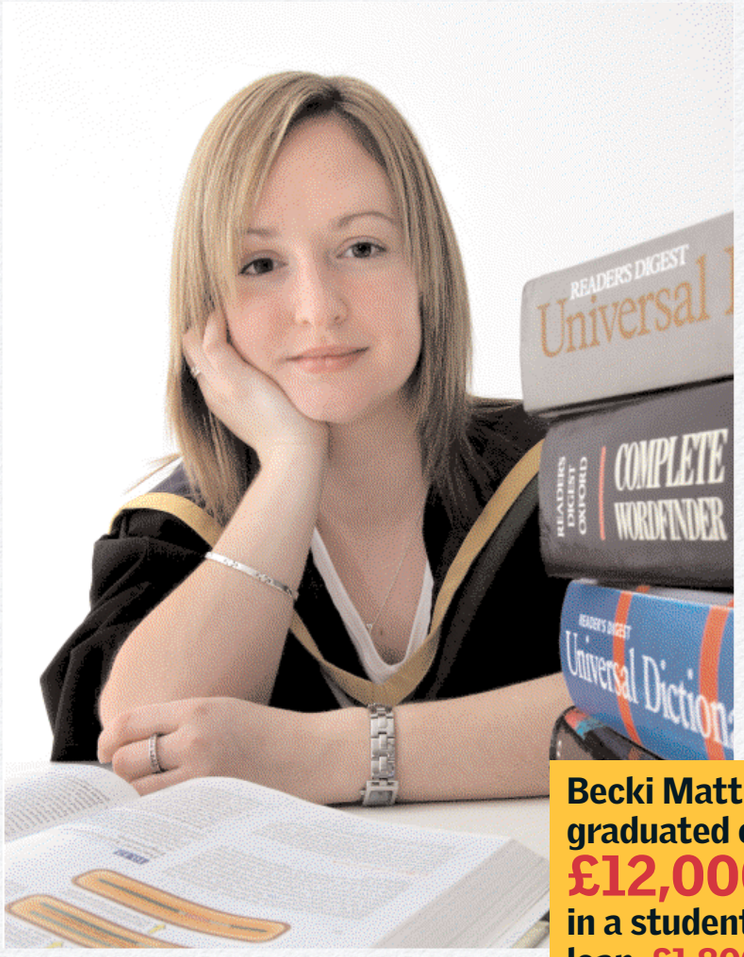
A DEGREE should be the key you need to open the door to your dream job, but many graduates such as Sally Smith* are now finding that door slammed in their faces because of debt. Sally graduated in communication and law from Leeds in 2003. Her dream was a job in media law. "That's what I love, and that's why I went to university in the first place," she says. But her debts amounted to £20,000. "The student loan was £9,000, then there was £10,000 on credit cards and about £1,000 on store cards."

So Sally went to work as an IT recruiter in London, a job that pays enough to service her debts, but which she dislikes: "I do a lot of cold calling and I hate that." Although she earns £35,000 a year, "It'll take at least three years to pay off my debts and the danger is I'll get used to the big money and never get my dream job."

There's evidence too that employers no longer reckon degrees are all they are cracked up to be. In a recent poll by the Association of Graduate Recruiters, more than half of firms questioned say that there are now too many graduates entering the market. Sixty per cent say expansion of higher education provision is having an adverse effect on the quality of graduates (a view endorsed by leading academics in a poll last November). In reply to the statement "universities are developing graduates with the right skills for employment in the 21st century", not one company agreed strongly.

Georgina Connolly graduated from

*Name changed to protect privacy.



Becki Matthews graduated owing £12,000 in a student loan, £1,800 in credit card debt

Cardiff University two years ago with a degree in psychology and £23,000 of debt.

"When I came out of university I was really confident about getting a job," she says. "I applied for posts I thought I'd be qualified for but was rejected, often because I didn't have any experience within that area."

Her degree was actually a disadvantage for certain jobs: "They thought I was overqualified and were afraid I'd move on too soon." Georgina was forced to do bar work and later took a job as a PA. "If I could go back I'd choose a course more carefully, so that it was something that would actually get me a job."

For lots of students, the worst isn't even the weight of those direct student loans. It's what they rack up on the plastic cards in their wallets. In the academic year 2003/04, 15 per cent of undergraduates had an average outstanding credit card balance of £1,156.

That's no surprise, given the aggressive marketing by banks and credit card companies. When Georgina Connolly went to Cardiff she was astounded by the amount of credit card advertising in the student union. "During freshers' week there was a Barclaycard stand offering a free inflatable chair when you signed up," she says. "By the end of my first year I was up to my limit of £1,000 on the card. I spent the summer working in a shop to pay it off, but then they raised my limit to £2,600, which I was soon up to."

Card issuers pay universities for the privilege of advertising on campus. Despite the loss of revenue, some universities now ban or restrict such advertising. Undeterred, some banks now issue cards automatically. When Becki Matthews was accepted to study sociology at Huddersfield University three years ago, she was sent a credit card in the post without even asking.

"It was a £500 limit to start," she says. "But they put it up during my first year." By the time Becki, now 21, reached her third year her limit was £1,300. Seeing that she was constantly right up to her maximum, the credit card company increased her borrowing level. Because Becki regularly made the minimum payments she was considered a good risk. But she also took out a student loan of £12,000. Earning £12,500 a year and already paying out towards the mortgage for the flat she is buying with her boyfriend, Becki says, "I can't even think about paying the loan back at the moment."

If the debt has gone too far the wisest people to call might be the Insolvency Helpline, funded by banks and credit card companies. "Calls about student debt have gone up nearly 50 per cent in the last year and we are expecting that increase to escalate," says Ian Richards, the helpline's senior adviser. "At the moment we have 12 student advisers and we're training a further 18." They assess the client's ability to pay then contact all creditors and offer them a fixed amount over a set period. "In effect you agree to pay smaller amounts over a longer period and they promise not to take further action against you."

There is another alternative that allows graduates to wipe their debts clear in a stroke: bankruptcy. The Student Loans Company says more than 3,500 graduates in England and Wales declared themselves bankrupt between August 2003 and August 2004, writing off between them as much as £16 million of debt. The figures so alarmed the Department for Education and Skills that last September it closed the loophole that allowed graduates to write off

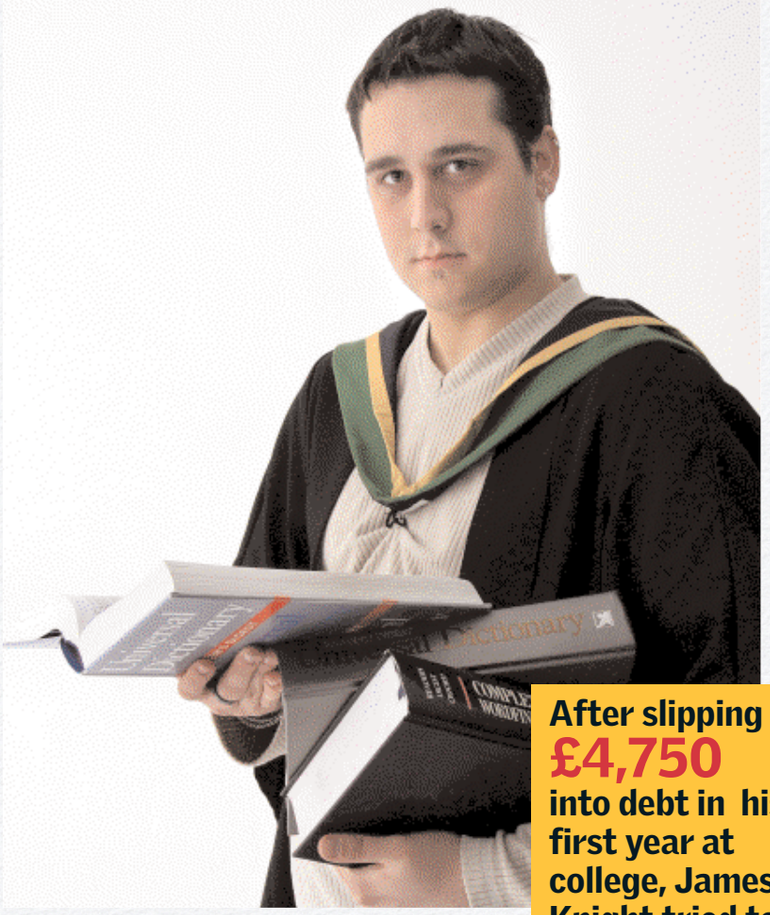
No Degree? Apply Here

Going to university may be your best ticket to a high-paying career, but these solid jobs don't require an undergraduate degree

Profession	Median Annual Earnings
Commercial pilot	£52,480
Air traffic controller	38,626
Train Driver	33,029
Police officer	31,100
Commercial surveyor	30,667
Telecom engineer	24,875
Plumber	24,804
Electrician	24,390
Aircraft mechanic	23,935
Lift engineer	22,615
Dental hygienist	19,961
Bricklayer	19,486
Farmer	18,085
Flight attendant	17,584
Journalist	17,000
Funeral director	16,707
Estate agent	15,000*
Court reporter	14,371

* Plus Commission

SOURCES: OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS; CHARTERED INSTITUTION OF BUILDING SERVICES ENGINEERS; ESTATE AGENCY PROFESSIONALS; NEWSPAPER SOCIETY



After slipping £4,750 into debt in his first year at college, James Knight tried to commit suicide

their student loans this way.

But, says Ian Richards, "Since the loophole closed we're finding that graduates are transferring their debts to banks, making the first three or four payments, and then going bankrupt. It's a simple process, but there are some extreme consequences."

According to Donna McKenzie Skene, senior lecturer in law at the University of Aberdeen, who specialises in personal bankruptcy, these consequences include being unable to enter certain professions, such as the law, armed forces, police and health care. "You will also find it very hard to get credit, a mortgage will almost certainly be out of the question and if you have any assets, like a car or house, they will be taken to pay off your debts." And even though you can be discharged from bankruptcy after 12 months, Frances Walker of the Consumer Credit Counselling Service warns, "It will still stay on your records for six years, and for the whole of that time you will find it hard to get credit."

In a few cases the pressure of debt can threaten to overwhelm students. James Knight attempted suicide in his first year of a psychology degree at Cardiff University. "My grades were slipping because I was holding down three part-time jobs and still I had slipped £4,750 into debt." James was lucky. He received treatment for depression and is now paying off his debt with a job as president of the Welsh National Union of Students.

Suicides are relatively rare, but despair is common—and it sometimes leads students to rethink whether university was worth it. In fact there are quite a few jobs that don't require a degree, yet pay fairly well (see box, page 55). Graduates are said to earn on average 50 per cent more than non-graduates in their working lives, so foregoing a university education has not been seen as a wise choice. But with graduate numbers increasing, it remains to be seen whether that continues to hold true.

Suhail Daar, 28, who graduated from the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside five years ago, is glad he borrowed to get through his business degree, and he still hopes to land a job in international marketing. But he left university owing £11,000 then added a further £2,000 with a graduate loan. After a string of clerical and marketing jobs in London, he still has the same level of debt.

Like so many other students Suhail took out his loans on a kind of blind faith that he could deal with the consequences later. "I thought I'd get a good job soon after university, but there are so many graduates out there it's not enough just to have a degree. Meanwhile, I can't begin to think of buying a house." "Later" has now arrived and Suhail is finding out the true cost of his university degree.

High-Flyers Without a Degree

Philip Green, retailing, including Topshop, Dorothy Perkins, Bhs (worth £4.6 billion)

Sir Richard Branson, transport, leisure, mobile phones (£2.2billion)

Sir Alan Sugar, electronics and property (£703 million)

Felix Dennis, media and magazine publishing (£585 million)

Charles Dunstone, Carphone Warehouse (£500 million)

Brian Souter and Ann Gloag, Stagecoach road and rail transport (£342 million)

Penny Streeter, recruitment (£50 million)

Karen Millen, fashion (£40 million)

SOURCE: PHILIP BERESFORD, COMPILER OF "THE SUNDAY TIMES RICH LIST 2004"

Insolvency Helpline: 0800 074 6918, www.insolvencyhelpline.co.uk.

Consumer Credit Counselling, Service: 0800 138 1111.

Do you think young people should think twice before taking the plunge into university? Might some be better off just getting a job? Write to the address on page 8 or e-mail YouSaidIt@readersdigest.co.uk.

Education

4

A key slot to write for, all the major papers carry a education pages.

The two teenagers were locked in a spiral of racist violence. What happened next astonished them both

From Gang Rivals to Best Mates

BY NICK MORGAN

ON HIS THIRD DAY at secondary school in Peterborough, Ricki Ulliot was warned by his older brother Wane that a gang of Asians were "kicking off". At 12, one of the oldest in his year, Ricki was unimpressed. "Pakis don't scare me."

Later that day he was talking to a friend outside the dinner hall. Ricki heard his name called and looked up. A tall Asian boy from the upper years was glaring at him. "You're Ulliot junior, aren't you?" Before Ricki could reply he was falling to the floor screaming, reaching for the backs of his legs—when he brought his hands back, the palms were smeared in blood.

Wane had a reputation for fighting Asians and Ricki was

Shaahid Latif (left) and Ricki Ulliot hated each other for years

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANDY SEWELL

inevitably both a soft target and a way to settle old scores. A plank with five nails hammered through it was handed in to teachers. They were told it had been found in a nearby wood. The nails matched the deep wounds in Ricki's calves. No witnesses came forward and the culprits were never caught.

From that point, Ricki would freely call himself a racist. He started to swear at Asians and call them abusive names. He relished the aggravation: with little effort he earned respect and friends.

But his reputation began to get him into serious trouble. He was playing football when a small white boy came up and said, "A gang of Asians has been picking on me. Can you talk to them and make them stop?"

This was the first of many times Ricki was asked to intervene—all too often these talks turned into fights. As he got older the violence became more adult—and Ricki knew that some of the older Asian boys carried knives and hammers.

SHAAHID LATIF, like Ricki, had been picked on at school, not only because he was Asian but because he was overweight. When he was 12 his dad sent him to the local gym to train. Shaahid worked hard, sweating on the bench, pushing weights until his arms ached. Then he'd put on boxing gloves and attack the punchbag. By the time he was 14, he was fit, lean and fast.

A local nightclub called Liquid held "nappy nights" when the bar served non-alcoholic drinks and the atmosphere was normally positive. Just after 10pm on one of these nights, Shaahid saw Ricki for the first time. He knew the white boy's reputation as a bully and racist. There was instant animosity.

As music boomed, dirty looks were exchanged. Shaahid walked up to Ricki and said, "What's the problem?" There was no reply. "Do you want to fight?" Still no reply. Shaahid smiled and began to turn away. From the corner of his eye he saw Ricki's right fist pull back. Shaahid ducked and the punch missed. Suddenly fists were flying between Ricki's and Shaahid's rival groups.

They were dragged apart by bouncers and held in separate rooms until police arrived. Ricki claimed Shaahid's gang were the aggressors and they were charged with affray. After a six-month court case, the charges against Shaahid were eventually thrown out; but Ricki had made himself an enemy.

In fact, Ricki found that being a "name" put him at risk, particularly after he found his name and photo on a hit list on an Asian hate website. Ricki's mother cried every day when he left for school.

Shortly after he turned 16, Ricki was visiting a friend at Jack Hunt School. It was 3pm and the grounds were busy. Someone shouted Ricki's name—there was panic in the voice. His friends were pointing at a black car that had just pulled up. A group of Asians in jeans and hoodies jumped out and walked towards him. Then a hatchback pulled up and more Asians stepped out. Turning to escape, Ricki found a third group.

Some of the Asians pulled hammers from their jackets; others swung leather belts with large metal buckles. Ricki buried his head in his arms as blows fell furiously. When the attack stopped, Ricki's face was swollen, his lip split and his nose gushing blood. Even his eyes were bleeding. "They didn't want to kill me," Ricki thought grimly, "just to do some damage."

Ricki gave the names of nine Asians to the police; one was Shaahid, who, Ricki knew, attended Jack Hunt School. Shaahid was able to prove he had been in the school library at the time. But he was furious: once again he was in trouble with the police because of Ricki.

Shaahid was shocked to be paired with Ricki, the boy who'd caused so much trouble

But Shaahid's spiral into violence didn't need any help. Since the fight at Liquid, his fists had got him into lots of trouble. He'd been suspended three times for fights with white boys.

Academically he had been doing well and was hoping to get at least three GCSE A grades. But his parents worried that the suspensions would threaten his results. Often, when he came home from school, his father would ask him, "Why are you throwing away your future?" Shaahid would brush off these queries, saying, "Nothing's going to happen."

But a few months before his exams, Shaahid was walking with his girlfriend in school along an alley with a wall to one side and a thick hedge to the other. He looked up to see a group of Asians walking towards him. Turning, he saw a gang of white youths coming up behind. He knew what to expect. His girlfriend ran for the bushes, pleading with him to come, but Shaahid shook his head. He hadn't been looking for trouble, but it had found him.

After this fight Shaahid was permanently expelled. He was enraged; a fight he hadn't started was going to cost him his qualifications.

As he went with two friends to clear out his locker, he saw a white teen who had been in the fight. "He hasn't even been suspended," Shaahid thought. The three Asians charged. The white boy was punched unconscious.

SHAAHID COULDN'T believe it when the judge gave him a four-month custodial sentence at a young offenders' institution. He looked up to meet the eyes of his parents, his mother crying, his father ashamed.

Although Shaahid was only inside for two months, he saw the same faces discharged one week and returning the next. Some were friends. They were bright—but couldn't break the pattern.

"Why didn't I listen to my father?" Shaahid asked himself. When he was

The best of friends. "If we can make peace," says Ricki, "there's hope for everyone"

released he promised his family things would change.

In the summer of 2001, Bradford, Burnley and Oldham were seeing their worst race violence for decades and in Peterborough tension was stoked by the murder of 17-year-old Ross Parker with a foot-long hunting knife.

Despite all their work to promote the celebration of ethnic diversity, Peterborough City Council's Youth Service looked on in horror as the city polarised. Area manager Javed Ahmed sat at his desk and sighed—if only these teens, who divided so bloodily along lines of race, realised how much they actually had in common. He knew they all faced the same problems with friendships and family, unemployment and training. They supported the same football teams and listened to the same music. He started to outline a new project that would celebrate not diversity but unity.

A year later, Javed's project was given a green light—and a tight budget. He knew he'd have to pick teens who had the status to influence others.

LAST YEAR, Shaahid Latif received a phone call inviting him to attend a two-day Unity Youth Crew residential course. Immediately he thought this could be the opportunity he needed to change his life. He accepted.

But on the first day of the course, Shaahid was in for a shock when he saw the other six participants—one of them was Ricki Ulliot. Here was the racist who had got him into so much trouble. He clenched his fists. "No," he thought, breathing deeply, "I've come this far. I can control it."

Ricki had taken longer to persuade. He knew Shaahid would be there—but he also knew his current road would lead to prison, hospital or a morgue.

Ricki and Shaahid were paired and told to build a paper tower using only paper, sticky tape and paper clips. Both felt the urge to build a big structure, but as Ricki held two bits of paper he saw there was only one roll of tape. "Could you..." he choked "...pass me the tape?" Shaahid glared. Then he smiled: the only way to build a really big tower was to work together. As he handed the tape over, Ricki managed a soft "Thanks".

Next they were asked to sit back to back. Shaahid had an abstract picture of circles, squares and triangles. Ricki had a blank sheet of paper and a pen. Shaahid had to describe the picture to Ricki and he had to draw it. At first Ricki thought it was pointless. Then he saw how he was forced to listen to what Shaahid was saying; there were no interruptions and they had to trust each other to get a result. Five minutes later, the two pictures were almost identical.

In the evening they found they were sharing a room. Shaahid seethed again. Yet despite himself he found they talked through the night. The next day there were more exercises, then they played football together. Later, Shaahid taught Ricki bhangra dancing. After 48 hours the two entrenched racists had discovered they quite liked each other. Ricki paused for a moment and asked, "Why was there so much hate between us?" Shaahid replied, "I didn't know you then. I just knew what my mates said."

Ricki and Shaahid both accepted voluntary roles in the Unity Youth Crew and last December they were awarded the Millennium Volunteers Award for their work. Next month they travel to Belfast to visit projects involved in mediation and conflict resolution.

Although Shaahid's approval has protected Ricki from Asian violence, his past is hard to escape—he has been attacked by white gangs shouting "Paki lover". But his resolve remains firm and he has started a peacemaker course.

"If Shaahid and me can make peace," he says, "there's hope for everyone."

Javed Ahmed can be contacted at javed.ahmed@peterborough.gov.uk.

What Your Child's Teacher Wishes He Could Tell You

They come in for a battering these days, but Britain's teachers have a few home truths to offer parents, as we found out in our exclusive nationwide survey

DIGITAL VISION

92% of teachers wish they could say

'When I was a child if I did badly my parents blamed me—not the teachers. Your child has to do *some* of the work!'

I GET EXASPERATED when I'm asked 'Why isn't my child doing as well as I'd like?' " says Peter Mackenzie, an English teacher in the West Highlands. "I'll say either a) he's not working or b) he's simply incapable of working. Only I'll try not to be so blunt!"

Anna Mills, who has taught English in a secondary school in Worthing for 11 years, was staggered when more than half of her best Year 11 class (15- to 16-year-olds) failed to hand in some simple homework she had set. "It wasn't always like this," she says. "When I started teaching I used to be able to say 'Read the next chapter for homework' and then we would discuss it at the next lesson.

"Now that's impossible because I can't assume they'll do it." Three in four teachers told us they resent time wasted chasing homework and consider that the parents' job.

Teachers' tips Help your child learn self-discipline. Pin up homework timetables and keep an eye on deadlines. Read your child's assignments, note what he's been asked to do and what he produces. Check his notebooks weekly to see what he's really doing in class.

READER'S DIGEST INTERVIEWED A NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF 572 TEACHERS ONLINE BETWEEN JUNE 23 AND 30, 2004

87% of teachers wish they could say

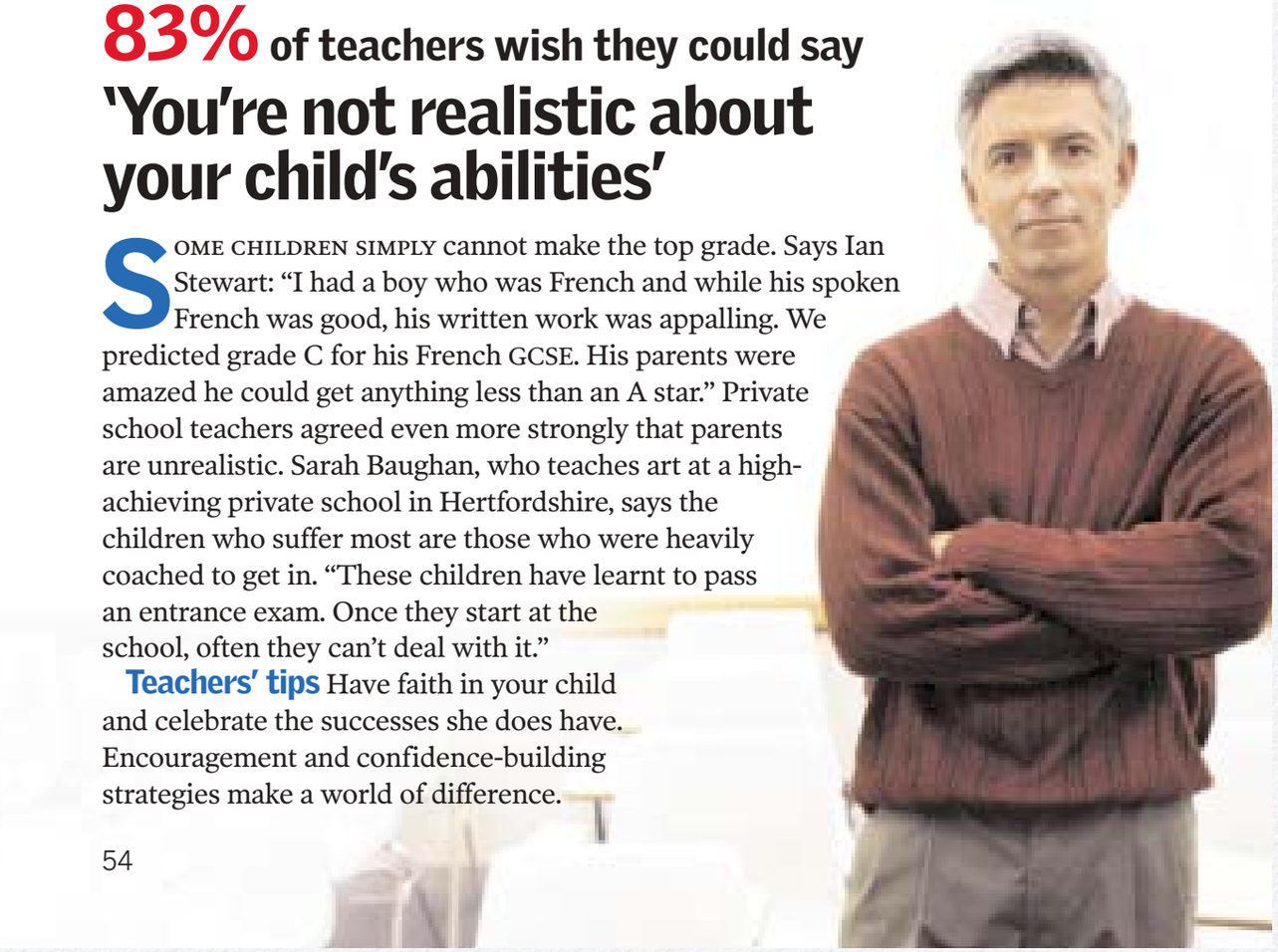
'Helping your child with homework doesn't mean letting him lift it straight off the Internet'

When Peter Mackenzie sets an essay, up to one in ten pieces he gets will be suspicious: "Too many think they can just pull some paragraphs off the Internet, slap in a few illustrations and print it out." Ian Stewart, who has taught secondary school French and Spanish in London for the last seven years, says, "Plagiarism is big. Students will write a homework passage in English then take it to a translation site. It's easy to spot as word-for-word translation is often gobbledegook."

Teachers' tips Monitor your child's Internet use. "Online encyclopaedias such as Encarta are fine for research," says Mackenzie, "but if your child is going to quote someone he must name his source."

83% of teachers wish they could say

'You're not realistic about your child's abilities'

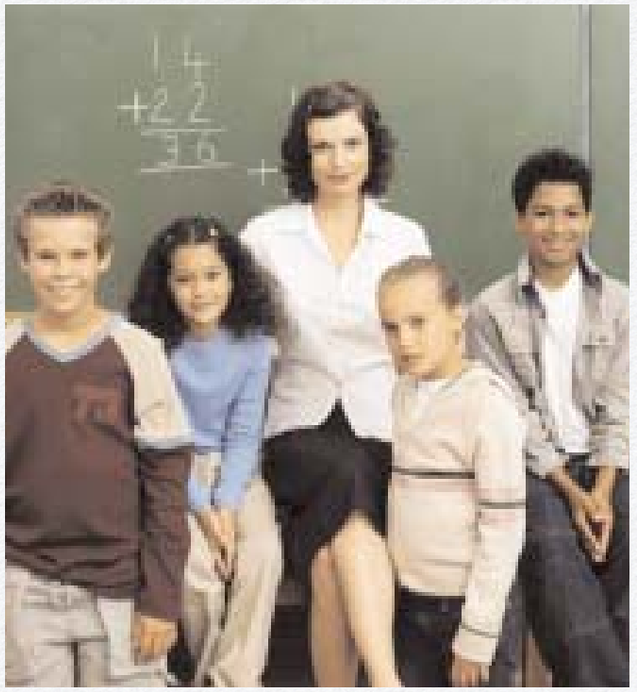


Some children simply cannot make the top grade. Says Ian Stewart: "I had a boy who was French and while his spoken French was good, his written work was appalling. We predicted grade C for his French GCSE. His parents were amazed he could get anything less than an A star." Private school teachers agreed even more strongly that parents are unrealistic. Sarah Baughan, who teaches art at a high-achieving private school in Hertfordshire, says the children who suffer most are those who were heavily coached to get in. "These children have learnt to pass an entrance exam. Once they start at the school, often they can't deal with it."

Teachers' tips Have faith in your child and celebrate the successes she does have. Encouragement and confidence-building strategies make a world of difference.

74% of teachers wish they could say

'I don't believe you talk to your child. Even 15 minutes a day would make a difference'



Almost three out of four teachers believe their students are not having the family contact they need. "A large proportion of my class don't eat with their parents, so there is no social get-together," says Malcolm Glover, a Year Four primary teacher in Cornwall. He is alarmed by the amount of time his pupils spend in front of the screen. "It's as though the children are interfering with the adults' lifestyle, so they just shove them in front of the television."

As a result children are not developing language skills. "At nine, children should be able to hold a relatively adult conversation, but kids who are growing up in front of the TV sometimes struggle to string more than two or three words together. In my class there are only six kids that I can see whose parents really care for them."

Teachers' tips If your child seems unable to listen then respond, ask yourself, do you ever really give him practice at conversation? Ask him to tell you what he learned at school then get him to explain it to you. And take that TV out of his bedroom.

STOCKBYTE

77% of teachers wish they could say

'Please get your child to wash before school'

Says Daniela Thacker, who has spent the last year teaching French and Spanish in a secondary school in Birmingham, "My kids smell so bad it's tough to teach them. It's difficult to make them understand simple standards. At the start of each lesson I have to open all the windows and spray the room with air freshener to make teaching bearable."

Teachers' tip Regular baths and clean clothes.

44% of teachers wish they could say

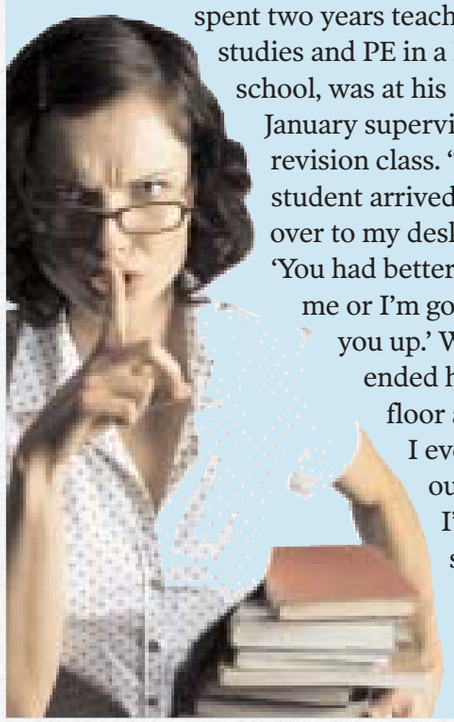
'Get real—some teachers are just not up to the job'

Or put another way by one of our respondents: "We are so short of good teachers you're lucky your child's learning anything." This is especially true in maths. The head of maths from a secondary school in Essex explains: "There's a shortage of maths teachers and pressure on schools to get results, particularly at GCSE. So the better teachers are assigned to the key Stage Four classes (14- to 16-year-olds), while the non-specialist staff are assigned to the lower classes."

Teachers' tips Go the extra mile to get your child into a class with a good teacher. "Although my son was at the top of his maths set, his school refused to move him up," says teacher and mum Sarah Baughan. "I was also concerned that his teacher couldn't control the class. So I asked my son to tape a lesson. I went to see his head cassette in hand. I wasn't popular but my son was moved up the next week."

80% of teachers wish they could say

'Your child is so disruptive I shouldn't be expected to teach him'



Twenty-five-year-old Kashif Baig, who spent two years teaching social studies and PE in a Birmingham school, was at his desk last January supervising a French revision class. "A 16-year-old student arrived late, walked over to my desk and shouted, 'You had better be nice to me or I'm going to f--k you up.' When the class ended he spat on the floor and said, 'If I ever see you outside school I'm going to stab you!' "

According to the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers, on average a teacher has to deal with some form of abuse every seven minutes of their working day. Teachers have no formal right to refuse to teach a student. More than a third (34 per cent) say they plan to leave the profession in the next five years, many citing bad pupil behaviour. Kashif Baig quit his job in May.

Teachers' tips Teach your child to resolve conflict without physical or verbal violence. If he is out of control, teachers can suggest agencies that can help. If another child is a bad influence, don't let your child play with him.

STOCKBYTE

29% of teachers wish they could say

'The real reason the school doesn't want your child to take this subject is that it would lower its league table position'

Teachers in the private sector in particular told us this, but Bob Carstairs, assistant general secretary at the Secondary Heads Association, says anecdotal evidence suggest it goes on in state schools, too.

Teachers' tip If you feel your child is unfairly prevented from studying a subject, ask the head why.

And another thing . . .

More candid remarks that individual teachers told us they wish they could make:

- Your daughter has a mobile phone and a CD player in school, so why no pen, pencil or handkerchief?
- Your child's performance in PE is so low because he is so fat.
- If you had taught your child some manners and respect, my job would be ten times easier.
- Please don't get divorced or have an affair as this has a disastrous effect on your child's emotional well-being and ability to communicate.
- Your child will miss two weeks of work while you're on holiday. Would you be happy for him to miss two weeks of my teaching if I went on holiday during term time?

70% of teachers wish they could say

'Don't complain to me that your child is overloaded with exams: I agree'

We examine our children more than any other country in Europe. Jane English, head of Year Seven at a Nottingham secondary, says, "I see students who are so pressured they lose the ability to write a sentence." Willie Bennie, a business studies teacher from Milton Keynes with 33 years' experience, says, "They get to the sixth form and decide they've had enough."

Teachers' tip Your able and conscientious child should know that in the great scheme of things, her happiness is more important than a National Curriculum level.

Teenagers AND Sex

WHAT THEY REALLY WANT TO KNOW

But don't ask—and parents don't explain. Is this why the Dutch have Europe's lowest teenage pregnancy rate—and Britain has the highest?

By Nick Morgan

Miranda Tucker is 16 with long blonde hair and blue eyes; in jeans and a T-shirt she looks like any other teenager. She is sitting in her bed-and-breakfast room in Boscombe, near Bath. Her baby Lakisha was one year old in May.

Miranda became pregnant at 14. "I'd been having sex with an older man for a month when there was an accident with the contraception. I'd no idea it could happen so easily." She decided to keep the baby, but the father soon disappeared.

She learned about sex from films and television: "I worked it out for myself. We had sex education at school when I was 11 but it was just the biology—nothing about relationships or what it was like to be a mother. I talked to my mum about sex once, but I can't remember what we said."

Lakisha cries. She has a bad rash around her mouth. All their food is cooked in a microwave and the bathroom is shared. Dirty washing is piled in carrier bags, awaiting the next benefit cheque before it can be taken to the laundrette.

"Looking after a baby is exhausting," Miranda says. "She cried for four hours one day. I left her with my sister and locked myself in the bathroom—I couldn't take it any more. I wish I could do the things a normal teenager does. Sometimes friends say they want a baby. I tell them, 'No, you really don't.'"

GETTY ONE STONE/NICK DALY

'SEX AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION SHOULD REALLY START WITHIN THE FAMILY'

Just across the sea in Alkmaar, Holland, Sabine van Knijff, 15, has been helping her mother wash up. A *Miss Saigon* CD is playing, which Sabine says she loves and her mother says is on too loud. In jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, with her hair in a ponytail, Sabine appears much like Miranda.

"I was very curious about sex at about ten," she says. "I asked questions at the dinner table. My mum talked to me about how beautiful relationships are and the emotions that go with them. The next day after school we talked about sex and how babies are made. At times I was surprised, but you have to know what's waiting for you.

"In Holland we get very good sex education, but I think it's better to hear it from your parents. In biology six months ago we started sex education and I brought the textbook home so mum and I could go through it."

When Sabine was 13 she went out with a boy aged 17. "My mum explained to me what the age difference could mean," she recalls. Sabine then decided she didn't want to have sexual intercourse until she was much older.

"I only want sex within a close relationship. And I don't want children until I've finished my education and got a job. I want to give my child a good future."

Britain still has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Western Europe, despite government initiatives to tackle the problem. But why is Holland's rate only a sixth of ours? What are they doing right that we are not?

The biggest difference seems to lie with the attitudes of parents. Studies

have consistently shown that where there is poor communication between parents and children, there is a greater risk of teenage pregnancy.

Conversely, a recent study at the Centre for Sexual Health Research at the University of Southampton discovered that teenagers whose parents talk frankly about sex and relationships are much less likely to have intercourse early. Says Dr Roger Ingham, who led the research: "In families where there is open discussion, it gives young people more control and a sense of choice."

"This is really where sex and relationship education should start—within the family," says Christine Webber, a sex and relationship expert for www.netdoctor.co.uk. "Children want to hear about these things in the safe environment of the home and it's also the best way to put the physical details in an emotional context."

If the prospect of talking to your teenager about sex fills you with dread, you're not alone. The Family Planning Association helpline receives 100,000 calls a year, many from parents needing advice.

Here, according to teens themselves, is what they want from you:

1) We hate "the talk" as much as you do. Raise issues of sex and responsibility when we are young and keep the conversation going as we get older

"I got my sex education from friends and magazines," explains Lauren, 16, who goes to school in Exeter. "Then, about a month after I turned 14, I came home from school to find a strange atmosphere in the house. My parents looked at each other, then my dad took a deep breath and said, 'How much do you know about sex?' I just thought, *God, no!* It seemed so odd suddenly to talk about it then. I escaped to my room as soon as I could."

The traditional way of tackling the facts of life is to leave them strictly alone until after puberty. But many teenagers would rather be having open conversations at a much earlier age. This also makes sense when there are so many myths flying around. Many girls, for example, falsely believe they can't get pregnant before they've started their periods.

Jade, 14, from Exeter, points out that there are ways of having "the talk". She remembers watching *Coronation Street* with her mother when one of the characters, Sarah-Louise Platt, got pregnant at 13.

"After the programme we talked about her as we did the washing up. My mum said she thought 13 was very young to be having sex and how terrible Sarah's mum must have felt. Then she asked if I knew what Sarah could have done to stop getting pregnant. It wasn't embarrassing because we were talking about somebody else."

As a guide, basic biology can be discussed when children are five or six, while details, including contraception and sex in the context of relationships and marriage, can come at ten or 11. But there is no correct time to start talking about sex. "Take your lead from the child," advises Jan Parker, co-author of *Raising Happy Children* (Hodder & Stoughton). "Avoid unrequested details, which can confuse. Be honest and positive. If faced with a difficult question say, 'I need a bit of time to think of the best way to answer that.'"

2) Let's hear from teenage parents why teen pregnancy is a bad idea

The images of babies that teenagers get through the media are mainly nappy adverts filled with smiling cherubic faces. As anybody who has had children will know, sleepless nights, dirty nappies and a splitting headache are also part of the deal.

Laura, from Bournemouth, had a friend who got pregnant at 13. "She went to a club and ended up leaving with an older guy. Now she has a two-and-a-half-year-old boy. I've certainly learnt a lesson from her. Maybe young mothers should give talks in schools about what it's like to have such responsibility so young."

Natasha, 14, has the example of her own mother. "She got pregnant as a teenager and thought my dad would stay, but he didn't. She's been very honest with me and always says, 'Wait for the right person.' It's made me want to lead my life differently."

Rob, 16, from Sunderland, had a shock when a school friend said, "I'm going to be a father." It made him realize that one night without contraception can change your life. "At our age it's daft to have children."

3) Show us what good, responsible relationships look like. We are as influenced by what you do as what you say

Broadcaster Libby Purves, author of *Nature's Masterpiece* (Hodder & Stoughton), says about parenting: "Every time you ruffle your partner's hair or flop exhausted into his or her arms, your children get the message that the truest use of sex is to reinforce the tenderness and belonging that is the basis of marriage and family—even if their response is 'Eurgh!'"

Children from a loving family are less likely to be irresponsible about sex as they have role models to show them what makes a good relationship. Sarah, 13, from Wigan, says, "My parents argue occasionally, but they always kiss and make up. Sometimes they say they love each other

and I've seen them snogging in the kitchen, which is a bit odd, but nice."

Claire, 15, from Leeds, adds, "Everyone's always telling us what to do—don't drink, be responsible. One night recently I heard the door open and my mum yell, 'Is that you?' at Dad. Then they had an argument. She said, 'You're drunk!' Dad said he wasn't. There was a lot of door slamming. What sort of example is that? They're meant to be the grown-ups."

4) If we ask about birth control and diseases, don't assume we're having sex

"I was 12 when I asked my mum what the Pill was and she went mental," recalls Claire. "I'd just heard somebody talk about it, that's all. But suddenly Mum was saying, 'Can I trust you?'"

Dr Ann McPherson, co-author of *Teenagers, The Agony, The Ecstasy, The Answers* (Little, Brown), has a reminder for parents: "Research has shown that by the age of 16 only 28 per cent of boys and 18 per cent of girls have had sex." But that doesn't mean the others aren't interested in what it's all about. This has certainly been the experience of Catherine Foxon, centre manager at the Brook Advisory Centre in Wigan.

"For every youngster who comes in for a specific reason, there will be four or five friends who are just curious about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) or contraception," she says. The Brook organization has found that young people who seek advice are actually much less likely to succumb to peer pressure and have sex at an early age.

In a number of schools, older pupils act as "peer educators", helping younger students discuss topics such as pregnancy and STDs. David, 16, is a peer educator in Devon. "I teach a class on sexually transmitted diseases to 13 and 14 year olds," he says. "They think they know it all because they've heard about condoms and Aids, but there are so many diseases out there—chlamydia, for example, which can make you sterile, and herpes, which can be with you for life."

5) Telling us not to have sex is not enough. Explain why, and listen to us

"Whenever I try to talk to my father about sex he just says, 'No, you're too young,'" says Michelle, aged 15. "When I asked him how old I should be, he shouted, 'Michelle, just what part of "No" don't you understand?'"

Dr McPherson knows many parents find it easy to tell their children to refuse sex, but harder to clarify why. "Of course the reasons are simple: the illegality of under-age sex, children's emotional immaturity and the danger of pregnancy and STDs. Explaining this is important, as the more teenagers understand, the better able they are to make rational decisions for themselves."

Victoria, from Uttoxeter, is 15 and glad her mother explained why she should be cautious. "I realized that at my age I'm not emotionally ready. I know girls in my year who've had sex—now boys go out with them just because they've got that reputation."

6) Often we have sex because there's not much to do. Make sure we have something to occupy us

Robert, 19, a peer educator in Wigan says: "You see gangs on the streets with nothing to do, so they all put in 50p and get a big bottle of cider. They drink that then go back to a friend's house when the parents are out and that's where the trouble starts."

Girls who feel ignored by their parents and don't do well at school find the idea of being pregnant very attractive. "It means they can succeed at something and get noticed," says Catherine Foxon.

Parents can help by encouraging evening activities. "I go to dance classes and play basketball after school," says Jenna, 14, from Exeter. "On Fridays I go to a youth club and my mum makes sure there's someone to pick me up when it finishes."

And apart from reinforcing the idea that sex should form part of a close relationship, especially marriage, perhaps the best guidance you can give your child is to instil a sense of hope or vision for the future. Says Natasha, 15, from Wigan, "When I leave school I want to travel round Europe, then maybe go to college. I couldn't do that if I had a baby."

Visit www.readersdigest.co.uk for more information.

All about me

5

There is nothing a writer likes more than writing about themselves! They are always easy to get hold of and if you need to tweak a quote they usually very understanding.

Sometimes teenagers need the support of someone outside the school and family

‘Trust Me– I’m a Mentor’

By Nick Morgan

“Are you sure this is right?” I say, as I pull on the Rollerblades. “I think the circulation below my ankles has stopped.” Struggling up, I enter a different world. My feet have a will of their own, pulling me along when I want to stay still, twisting into impossible angles.

As I flap my arms wildly, David looks on, amused and embarrassed as only a teenager can be. Then he is gliding up the path towards me; I feel the wind against my face as he passes. With a jump-twist, he turns and skates past again, backwards this time.

I hit the ground like a cartoon character. “You should keep your weight

forward," says David. I pick myself up at once. I can't give in—after all, I'm supposed to be a role model.

Two years ago a friend handed me a leaflet. It explained that Lilian Baylis Secondary School in Lambeth, south London, was looking for "mentors" to coach teenagers in their final GCSE year. *This is a great idea*, I thought. *But how could I, a 29-year-old, help somebody half my age?*

That night, however, I had a dream of a pebble hitting still water: the ripples spread far over the surface. As I awoke, I realized that even the smallest action can have far-reaching effects.

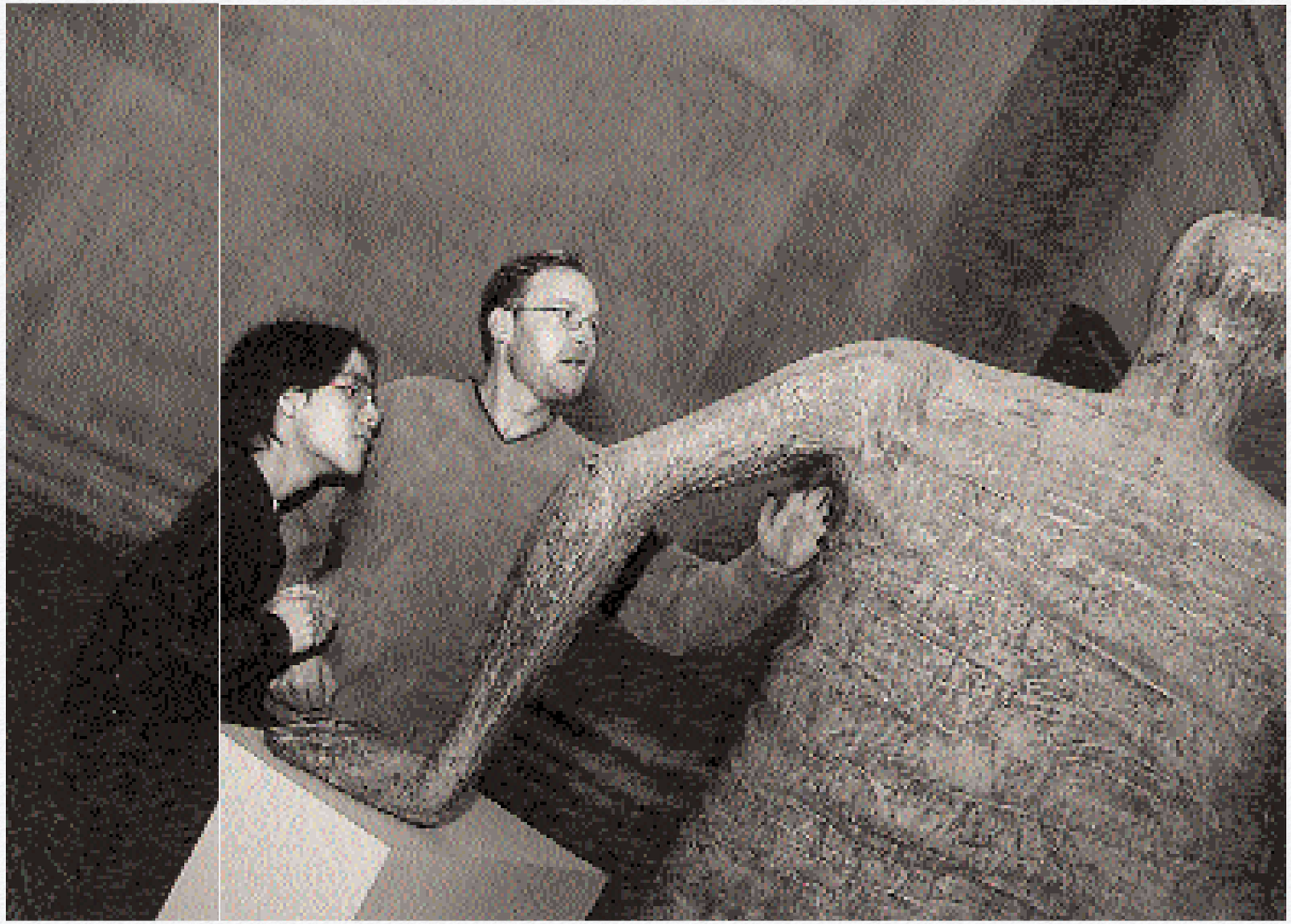
Next day I telephoned the school and arranged to see the mentoring organizer. She explained that the mentoring was intended to be partly academic, partly personal, but there was no fixed regimen. I had to give permission for my name to be passed on to the police to make sure I didn't pose a threat to children.

The idea of mentoring comes from the United States, where the "Big Brothers and Sisters" programme has been running successfully for 95 years. The roots of the movement lie in an incident in 1903, when Cincinnati businessman Irvin Westheimer found a nine-year-old boy foraging for food in a litter bin. Learning that the boy was fatherless, he decided to help—by giving him a meal, taking him to a baseball game and providing a sympathetic ear for his troubles.

Today the organization says that children mentored for more than a year are 33 per cent less likely to be violent, 46 per cent less likely to use illegal drugs and 53 per cent less likely to play truant.

No wonder the British government wants to develop its own programmes. A recent Department for Education and Employment White Paper concluded that "a mentor can be many things—a positive role model, an advisor and an experienced friend. Simply having someone from outside the school and family who takes a special interest can make an enormous difference." Some £8·5 million has been earmarked for mentoring young people at risk of offending.

The National Mentoring Network has been in existence for five years and has nearly 500 members. BT and The Body Shop both allow staff time off to take part in mentoring programmes. In addition, a British version of Big Brothers and Sisters is due to start recruiting mentors later this year.



Cultural exchange — Nick and David at the Tate Gallery in London

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANNETTE HAUG

After I had been screened I was given half a day's training and handed a ring-binder with practical notes and information about the school. Lilian Baylis, I learned, was in a deprived area of London, and had been placed on special measures for underperformance in the national league tables.

I was standing in the assembly hall, thinking how all schools seemed to smell of old school dinners and floor polish, when the head teacher appeared and introduced me to David Lau, a 14-year-old with black hair in a ponytail and the

beginnings of a teenage moustache.

I didn't know if we should shake hands, or if he would think that was square. There was a difficult silence, then David broke the ice by offering to get me a coffee. We talked about everything from the books he was studying for English to his favourite film. It seemed a good start.

I asked what he wanted to do after he finished his GCSEs. Without hesitation, he said he wanted to study either drama or music. I found myself saying, "I'll help you with anything you want, forms, advice or whatever. Just ask." I wasn't sure what I had committed myself to, but it felt right.

David is the son of Chinese and Vietnamese refugees. Both are retired and speak little English. At school David's teachers had 30 demanding children in a class, so it was rare for him to get individual attention or a chance to talk about further education or work experience. As a result, though bright, he was struggling, particularly in English and maths.

Right from the outset I wanted us to be equals. I wouldn't tell David what to do or think. When we met I'd ask where he wanted to go and what he wanted to do. But would he accept me as an equal?

One day we walked past a shop playing the song "Perfect Day" on the radio and David commented how much he liked it. "That's Lou Reed," I said. "I went to see him at the Brixton Academy when I was your age." There was a short, respectful silence. "Do you have the soundtrack from *The Full Monty*?" David asked casually. I shook my head. "I'll tape it for you," he said. "It's really good."

I found that if I gave David the space to be an adult, he filled it. Two weeks after our first meeting, he complained about one of his teachers. "The lessons are just so boring," he said. "And no matter what I do, it's never right." I said that I too could remember teachers I didn't get on with. But in five years' time this teacher would not even remember him, whereas his exam results would be with him the rest of his life. "It's up to you to get the best out of a difficult situation."

David was quiet for a few minutes. Then he said, "It's only four weeks till the end of term, anyway." I wasn't sure if I had said the right thing or if I had spoken like a bossy parent. But after a while David said, "I've fallen out with my best friend at school. He thinks he knows it all." I realized I was still the confidant. I must have done something right.

Some months after first meeting David, I asked him if he would recommend mentoring to a friend. "Yes," he said. "There have been times when I've had no one else I could talk to. It's a bit like going to a psychiatrist and being able to talk to him more easily because you don't know him so well."

As his GCSE exams came closer, our meetings become more academic. I introduced him to revision timetables and showed him how to structure his essays, how they would be marked, what was important and what was not.

To try to keep the meetings equal, and to show that we don't stop having dilemmas after our teens, I asked him for advice on things like fashion and how to ask out women without looking like a fool.

'I'll help you with anything you want.' I wasn't sure what I had just committed myself to, but it felt right

"Just tell her you really like her," said David. "Just ask her: 'Will you go out with me?'"

"I can't," I replied. "You stop asking people out like that at about 18. Instead you say, 'Do you want to go for a drink?' Then if she says no it's not a big deal." But David insisted I give his direct approach a try until eventually I promised.

It worked.

Over the year, we progressed from meeting in the school staffroom to cafés and restaurants. One afternoon I suggested we go to see the new film of *Romeo and Juliet*. This was one of David's GCSE English texts, so it seemed a good way of sneaking education in by the back door.

Sitting in a café afterwards, I said, "I really thought Juliet was going to wake up in the end. I know it's a tragedy but I thought, you know, Hollywood magic and all that. What did you think?"

David rolled his eyes at me. "I felt the play was badly cut," he began, "and by missing out some of the key scenes…" He went on to give me an essay comparing the play and the film, quoting lines and putting forward complex arguments. I was stunned. This was a grade-A student speaking, not someone who was struggling.

"I can talk about things but I can't write them down," David explained. I promised I would bring a tape recorder the next time we met. Then I would transcribe his words so he could see how good they were.

As I went home that night I wondered if the secret of mentoring was as simple as that—to give confidence.

"I think we've done rollerblading now," I say. "Let's do something else."

"How about some shopping to sort out your street cred?" David suggests. My image is a recurring theme.

"No, I feel something cultural

coming on. Can you take an art gallery?"

"Perhaps. Is it good?" I had previously dragged David to an exhibition at the Royal Academy called *Sensation*. It was full of Damien Hirst's sliced and pickled animals and the Chapman brothers' controversial mannequins. David loved it.

"Trust me, I'm a mentor."

We head for the Tate Gallery, where we look at the surrealist paintings and quiz each other about what might be going on in the artist's head. Then we move on to *Any Object in the Universe* by a young British artist called Graham Gussin. It's a white room with a photograph of a microphone projected at one end. The floor has microphones underneath and speakers amplify the sound of your footsteps as though you are in a huge cave.

David grabs a leaflet and pores over it. "I think it's about our perception of time and space," he says. "The projection is of an image in the past and the noise is something from the present that is stored and repeated like an echo."

Meanwhile I stamp the floor and bound across the room, stopping suddenly to listen to my footsteps catch up with me. "This is fabulous," I say. David gives me a quizzical look and we go down to the café.

Over a cappuccino David says, "When you were in the exhibition you looked like a big kid, stamping around." At first I take this as a backhanded compliment. Then I suggest that the idea of being a "grown-up" is really a myth. "I remember thinking I'd be grown up when I went to secondary school, then when I was in the sixth form, and then when I learned to drive. But you never really get there. I suspect most adults actually spend their time trying to remember what it was like to be young."

Our year together was almost over. David had grown, moving into my adult world of ambition, responsibility and professionalism. But I too had grown, moving into his world of Rollerblades, trendy music, electronic games and fun. It seemed like a good exchange.

BY NICK MORGAN

A tale of two halves

IN 2006, A *READER'S DIGEST* WRITER FOUND A STORY OF HOPE IN WEST LONDON. THREE YEARS ON HE EXPLAINS HOW HE'S BECOME PART OF IT

The blind corners and low lighting of the Brunel Estate in west London made it a haven for drunks and drug dealers. I was there to write a story for *Reader's Digest* about a sporting miracle: deprived local kids had formed a community football club and their coach claimed that kicking a ball around was keeping them in school and out of police custody.

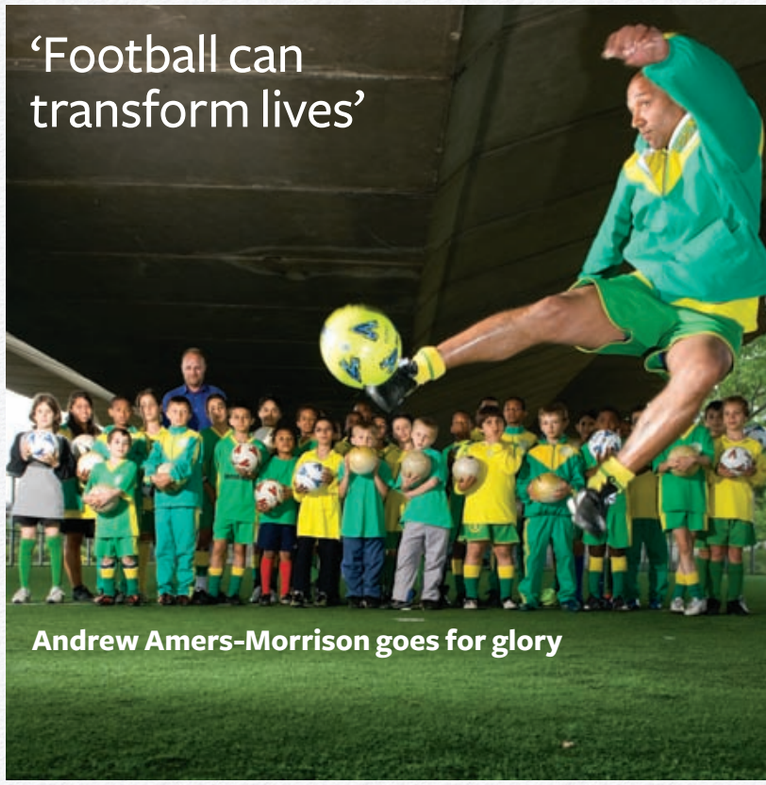
I turned a corner and found myself looking at a small Tarmac court with two lines of kids in yellow and green kits dribbling footballs round cones. Shouts filled the air—"Come on!" and "Faster!" The winners cheered while the coach barked at the losers to perform 20 press-ups. Next, the kids were split up into teams of two to pass the ball to each other.

The coach, Andrew Amers-Morrison, had been a semi-professional footballer before he was brought down by a series of injuries. While convalescing, he'd kept in shape by practising tricks on the open spaces near the estate: balancing the ball on his head, then over his shoulders, catching it on the back of his foot. One March evening, a few local kids came down to watch. The next day one of them asked, "Hey, mister, can you show me how to do that?" A week later there were enough kids to make a team and, soon after that, Samba Street Soccer was formed.

On the train home I read through my notes and my mind drifted back to my time on the school football pitch. I remembered the ritual humiliation of the line-up when

Heading for glory? Nick Morgan and some of the Samba soccer players

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JONATHAN BANKS



Andrew Amers-Morrison goes for glory

the best players were chosen as captains. They'd then cherry-pick the most popular kids until there were just a few of us left. I hadn't been disadvantaged in the way these Brunel kids were, but I knew what it was like to be an outsider.

Andrew was charismatic and this would make a good story, but for me there was more here. If, two hours previously,

LOCAL HERO

Andrew's Samba Soccer Superstars

His career cut short by injury, a west London footballer is using Brazilian magic to turn reject kids into winners | BY NICK MORGAN

Nick's original article in October 2006

somebody had tried to convince me that football could transform kids' lives in one of the most deprived areas in the country, I'd have laughed. Now I had to give it serious thought.

The next day I rang Andrew and said, "I can build you a website. Would that be useful?" I bought the domain name sambastreetsoccer.com and made a home page.

I realised I'd need photographs. Andrew invited me to the game on Saturday, a home match against West Drayton Explorers, played on a pitch just outside Wormwood Scrubs prison.

But perhaps "pitch" is the wrong word: this was little more than lumpy field, peppered with used syringes and dog excrement. "Before any match, we have to go over the fields picking and cleaning for an hour," Andrew said. "We don't always get everything—it's dangerous."

I said, "You've got to have a proper pitch." Andrew laughed at my naivety. Suitable green areas in this part of town were non-existent and the nearest dedicated football ground charged more than £100 a session.

I looked at the kids kicking the ball to one another and made a silent promise: *I'll get you a safe place to play.*

I met with local MP Karen Buck, who gave us a helpful letter that read: "Despite its image of wealth Westminster, and Westbourne in particular, has exceptional levels of poverty and deprivation—recent figures indicate that 83 per cent of all children in Westbourne are living in workless households—the highest in England...Overcrowded housing is very common, levels of mental ill-health are amongst the highest in the country...I am personally wholly committed to improving access to sports in the north Westminster area and see Samba as an essential element in this strategy."

The website was slowly taking shape. Then the article I'd written was published in *Reader's Digest*. The response was amazing. There were many small donations—cheques coming from as far as Australia—and some large ones too.

Matt Dennis, a graphic designer from Swiss Cottage in north London, visited and pledged £6,000 in equipment. A company called Intellect also offered to contribute kit and equipment. They promised to support Samba in the long term—they wanted to see it grow and help as many children as possible.

> Fulham FC invited 24 Samba players to try out for the junior team—of those, 22 were retained

The Christmas party that year was phenomenal. By then Samba had more than 100 kids in five teams. After a dinner of turkey and roast potatoes I was presented with an award I still keep on my wall: "A special thank you from Samba Street Soccer".

From that point on I stopped discussing what Samba would do next and started to ask, "What will we do next?" I was part of the team.

Samba sometimes played on a concrete pitch under the A40 Westway flyover. It was a good size and the overhead motorway protected the players from the worst of the elements. But it was a rough area and the concrete surface shredded skin.

Now Westminster City Council was going to lay world-class Astroturf with rubber crumbs underneath it to absorb impact if you fell. Then the area was to be made secure with 10-foot fencing and given floodlighting.

By November 2007 the facility was up and running. Seeing the estate kids touching the Astroturf for the first time was better than seeing Beckham put one in the back of the net from a set piece.

Samba were also winning silverware in their league. The results were not lost on Fulham FC, who invited 24 Samba players to try out for the junior team. Of those, no fewer than 22 were retained, a phenomenal result.

It's not all been easy: using the Astroturf pitches costs just under £7 per hour—a heavily subsidised rate. But because Samba used two pitches for two hours a day, four days a week, a debt quickly grew. When it approached £1,000 the council kicked Samba off the pitches. Fortunately, much of the damage has been repaired, but the relationship with Westminster Council is still not a happy one.

The next stage is to get Samba charity status, which should ease the financial situation. As I write, I'm up to my armpits in paperwork and Criminal Record Bureau checks. Even so, I'm driven on because I know that every day Samba grows, more and more children get to have a slightly better life. And if I can be part of a team that's making that happen, then I'm winning.

Find out more at sambastreetsoccer.com.

■ Tell us a personal story of your own: touching, inspiring or about an exceptional event in your life. It could earn you £100. See page 12 for details.

A reluctant comic discovers first-hand that doing stand-up is...

No Joke!

BY NICK MORGAN

Our hero prepares to take the comedy world by storm

THE COMPÈRE—a stranger to my act—is saying, "So now please give a warm welcome to a very funny man, Nick Morgan." Time slows. This is my first ever performance as a stand-up comic. The sound of my name is familiar and odd at the same time. He is looking at me and pointing. I'm drawn hypnotically on stage. This is how rabbits must feel in the middle of a busy road.

Four weeks earlier I had been a carefree individual. Yes, I had signed up for some comedy classes, but I wasn't nervous—I'd been a best man and I regularly made family and friends laugh. How hard could it be? But I quickly realised that quipping with friends and standing in the spotlight were very different things.

My classmates were a mixed bunch: Sarah, a former exotic dancer who now works as an alternative funding officer for her council; Suneeda, a former IT data analyst who gave up her £70,000-a-year job to become a stand-up; Vicki, a legal secretary from Ireland; and Nicola, a sales assistant in a bedding shop.

Our teacher Jay Sodagar is a stand-up with a nine-year track record, including appearances at famous London venues such as Jongleurs,

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JONATHAN BANKS

The Comedy Store and the Comedy Café. He started with a bombshell: "Over the next four weeks you'll create a five-minute act culminating in a showcase in front of an audience."

Material was my big worry and Jay said that was our starting point. "I want you to make a list of five rants and five raves," he instructed. "The class will listen to your lists, vote and then you will talk on that topic—on stage."

My girlfriend said she was 'confused'. This was code for 'sleeping with my ex'.

—Nick

The raves came quickly: my wife, my three-year-old son Finn and his newborn brother Dan. Top of the list for rants was injustice in general, followed by the tax office and Pam, a relation who had caused some distress by announcing she was dying of cancer when in fact she was fine.

Jay asked for volunteers. I nodded and walked on stage. Needless to say nobody wanted to hear me talk about my kids. Suneeda showed some interest in my tax affairs and the rest of the group voted for Pam. "Right," said Jay. "You've got four minutes."

I raised my left hand showing my wedding ring, "When you get married, you're committing not just to a life partner but to the whole of her family too..." Then I blanked. My throat dried, I choked and stuttered like a car running out of petrol.

"Go on," came Jay's voice across the room. His words flicked a switch. I looked up at the class, opened my mouth—and the material flowed.

At first there was polite tittering, but soon there were waves of guffaws. I felt a euphoric explosion. The laughter was addictive: even as it was happening I wanted more.

"Your subconscious is a box of goodies just waiting to be opened," Jay explained. "Now, you've learned how to tap into it."

I spend the rest of the week on a high, joking with waiters and checkout girls. I've tapped into a rich vein. I've become attractive and confident.

But every laughter junkie learns that death is round the corner. My homework had been to put my material on paper. I added more details about Pam and a reference to Ben Jonson's *Volpone*. In class, as I read the revised material, there was silence. I looked up to see Nicola working on her own material and Sarah scratching her nose.

Jay explained that the holy trinity of stand-up is connection (the most important) followed by performance and finally material. "You have the material but you've made the mistake of failing to connect with your audience."

We go through my routine line by line. Jay says, "You can say 'cancer' twice but more than that and the routine dies."

Then Nicky adds, "Yeah...and who is Volpone?" Jay nods his head. "She's right: I'm afraid you're going to lose a lot of people."

There is clearly more work to be done and I leave the class with my head spinning. Back home, I tell my wife about the material I intend to use. She's quiet for a moment, then says, "If you want to go dragging skeletons out of the cupboard, pick your own side, not mine!" She has a point.

I needed some advice. I turned to Maria Kempinska, the founder of Jongleurs. "It's crucial to fit your humour to the particular listeners," she tells me. "Don't rant—be funny." But how can I anticipate what the audience will be like on the night?

'The organisms living on my eyelashes have more sex than me'

—Nicola

When the final session came, just a day before the showcase, my cohort had polished performances with tight material. Suneeda had a surreal line—"I'm very spiritual: I watch a lot of television"—which cracked me up for a reason I couldn't put my finger on. Suddenly I felt very close to these people.

When Jay asked me to read through my new material, he had a look of quiet doom on his face. I started, "Relationships are tricky. When a woman bites her lip and tells you she's confused, the relationship is already over. Unless she's holding a book of Sudoku puzzles."

As I continued the laughter grew and I was lifted by the opium of it. I glanced at Jay and he looked relieved. I now had 22 hours to cut, refine and memorise the material.

At eight the next evening the room is gradually filling up with paying customers. There's a good mix and it's a positive atmosphere.

Sarah is first. Before she's called she whispers, "I'm so nervous I've just chucked up." On stage she's word-perfect but stiff. Halfway through she goes blank and says, "My God, I've forgotten the line!" With this honesty, suddenly it's the real Sarah on stage—and the audience is with her.

Suneeda is on next, reaching the audience at once with smiles and eye contact. Then comes Vicki. Her friends have filled the front tables and she steps on stage to a hero's welcome.

Suddenly I'm on stage and my mouth is moving: "Our teacher told me to bring as many friends as possible to the show tonight. I said, 'No.' He said, 'Why?' I said, 'Because I'd like to keep them.' "

I hear laughs. I go on with a fictional story about a blind date who runs the

unofficial Jim Davidson website, then a true story about a break-up that ended up with a 3am call to the Samaritans. As the room fills with laughter, I think how strange it is that one of the lowest points in my life should be so funny today.

By the end of the set I realise I've forgotten the Sudoku joke, but decide to quit while I'm ahead. I bow and step out of the light.

The class all now want to take their five-minute acts to open mic spots in local clubs. "Stand-up is a tough industry," warns Jay. "But it's an industry where the cream rises to the top: if you're good you'll get the gigs."

As for me? When I leave the club I'm happy for it to be over. But in the shower the next day I come up with some great material for a stand-up routine about learning stand-up. Hey, watch this space.

For details of Laughing Horse courses in London and Edinburgh, see www.aboutcomedy.co.uk.

Baby Finn shortly after his birth, three months premature

FINN'S FIGHT FOR LIFE

One in every eight babies in the UK is born premature or sick. That's 80,000 babies every year. My son is one of them

BY NICK MORGAN

Nov 3, 2003

A blue line on a plastic stick changes our lives. Gill is ecstatic. I say, "Are you sure? Are you really sure?" She nods and I say, "We should frame the stick." It's propped up by the bathroom mirror.

Jan 9, 2004

At King's College Hospital in London, Gill's tummy is smeared with cold transparent goo. The ultrasound sensor shows us the echo of a tiny baby and it's dancing, disco dancing! The technician is so amazed she calls in a colleague and they look in wonder. One says, "I've never seen a baby move so much!"

PHOTOGRAPHED BY NICK MORGAN

April 5

Gill sees the midwife in our home town of Brighton. She's been feeling sick and she's worried about our trip north to visit family. The midwife gives Gill a clean bill of health and tells her not to worry: everything is normal. The drive up is good. At my mum's house in Knaresborough, Gill wakes with stomach pains at 11pm, but they ease off after an hour.

April 6 4am

The pain is worse and, frighteningly, seems to come at regular intervals, as if it might be contractions. We drive to Harrogate District Hospital. There's an examination and the doctor looks pale. He says, "I'm going to call the Cot Bureau to see who has the facilities you need." Gill bursts into tears and I hug her. She's given atosiban, a hormone designed to slow or stop the birth and an injection of a steroid that will build up our baby's lungs, should the worst happen.

I TELL FINN TO KEEP ON FIGHTING AND PROMISE TO BE THE VERY BEST FATHER

I go to the bathroom and look in the mirror. *Is 26 weeks too soon? If the baby is born now will it survive?* When I return I see the doctor on the phone leaning on the table—the blood has drained from his face and even his lips look white. I caught, "Yes, we really really need..." and I didn't have to ask my question.

Five minutes later he comes to the foot of the bed looking relieved. "You're lucky, there's a cot in York. They're holding it for you. You'll go in an ambulance immediately."

Sirens and lights cut through the commuter traffic as we're taken to the delivery suite at York District Hospital at 8am. Gill's contractions slow; the drugs appear to be working.

A midwife says that sometimes contractions start then just stop and nobody really knows why. I've learned that the big concern with premature babies is that the lungs are immature. Steroids help give them a fighting chance but the drug needs time to work. Every minute that passes increases our baby's chances.

Our room on the delivery suite is narrow and crammed with chrome equipment. I sleep on a reclining chair next to Gill's bed. Either side of us we can hear women arrive and scream and shout and swear, then there is the first cry of a baby. People doing the opposite of what we want. After one quick birth I look at Gill to see silent tears flow from the corners of her eyes.

April 7

I learn from a doctor that atosiban, the hormone that is suppressing the contractions, is notoriously hit-and-miss and also extremely expensive. I keep this information from Gill because it seems to be working for us. The contractions appear to have stopped and we are told that Gill will have to remain in bed for the duration of her pregnancy. She has an injection of pethidine and sleeps for six hours, the most continuous sleep she has had since the contractions started. It looks as though the worst is over.

April 8

The contractions are back in force. The doctors decide to withdraw the atosiban, saying that it's not working. As a wave of pain passes through her body Gill gasps, "I can't stop it any more. I can't stop this from happening." Then her waters break.

It happens quickly: a single push and a new life enters our world. This miracle that was a blue line and then a womb dancer is held by doctors who cut the umbilical cord. It's a boy. He opens his eyes and looks at me before they put him in a resuscitation cot and push a tube down his throat. A machine starts to breathe for him. A nurse asks us, "Have you decided on a name?" I look at Gill and we both say, "Finn."

April 8 7pm

I am still me, but now I am somebody else too: I'm Finn's dad. I visit his cot. He is tiny, just 2lbs 2oz—no more than a bag of sugar—and looks strangely old, with downy hair round his face and on his arms, and his skin too big for him. He should have been in the womb for another three months.

APRIL 13

April 9

Gill is on her feet but feeling blue. She's terrified that Finn will die and, I think, feels responsible for his early appearance. I reassure her but she seems far away, lost in a horror of what might be. I go to Finn and tell him to keep on fighting and I promise him that, no matter what happens, I'll be the best father I can be. He reaches out with his hand and holds my finger.

April 10

The paediatrician tells us that these first two weeks are crucial. "The steroids have been a help to the development of his lungs, but with babies as vulnerable as Finn it will be two steps forward, one step back. Just take one day at a time."

April 11

We are learning a new medical lexicon. The Special Care Baby Unit is called SCBU. The machine that is breathing for my boy is called CPAP, which stands for continuous positive airway pressure. Bradycardia (or a brady) occurs when his heart rate

drops to a terrifyingly low level—this is recorded on his chart with a little "x". Then there is the RBC, his red blood cell count. Finn is so premature he can't make his own blood cells. He'll need a transfusion, but they will wait as long as they can because there's a danger of a reaction.

April 12

Our wedding anniversary. I walk with Gill to Café Rouge in town and have steak and chips with a glass of red. It's surreal. Halfway through banana and ice-cream pancakes Gill looks at me and says, "What are we doing here?" We walk quickly back to


APRIL 18

the SCBU to find Finn sleeping soundly. I look at the chart—no bradys. A nurse says, "Have you done his cares yet?" We shake our heads. "You'll probably do them tomorrow."

April 13

I wash Finn with water and a small ball of cotton wool, then clean his mouth with a piece of foam on a stick—he loves that, sucking the water off.

April 14

Finn is very ill with some sort of bug, possibly an infection from his longline. His chart is full of clusters of "x"s. He's been given antibiotics and cultures taken to identify the bug.

April 16

The early results indicate it may be meningitis. For the first time in all of this I break down and cry.

April 17

Finn is still very ill, but seems to be recovering. It's possible the culture was contaminated or switched.

April 19

His red blood cell count is now so low that Finn is sleepy all the time. They have decided to go ahead with a blood transfusion. Fortunately Finn has no problems with his new blood. Somebody, somewhere in this country, donated the cells that now keep him going.

April 26

Finn is on 1ml of milk every hour. He takes it through a pipe in his nose direct to his stomach. To his tiny body it's a huge amount.

Kangaroo care—this is pretty amazing. I sit back in a chair and open my shirt. Finn is placed on my chest, his head against my heart. I hold his bum in my right hand and hold his head in my left. He looks up into my eyes, I feel his little hands against my chest and his legs move against my stomach. He closes his eyes and scrunches his


APRIL 28

face up and I feel a small movement in my right hand. The nurses had been trying to open his bowels for a couple of days. Looks like a father's gentle support has done the trick.

May 10

3lbs 7ozs. Finn was off the CPAP last night for a few hours and looks whacked out this morning. The registrar says, "Sorry, nothing to report. He's just plodding on now." I say, "Don't apologise, plodding is how we like it."

May 30

Our baby is out of intensive care. He's come off CPAP and the feeds have gone up to 40ml every four hours today. Just shy of 5lbs, he's unrecognisable from the baby who was born eight weeks ago.

June 1

Finn's red blood cell count is still under ten (the official top-up level) but he has gone from seven to eight, which means his body has started to produce the red cells he needs. He was weighed last night and is now 5lbs 1oz.

June 5 6am

Finn stopped breathing for 12 seconds. Big Scare. We were told the most common cause would be mucus in his nostrils. They have decided to give him a blood top-up today.

June 22

Finn is tube-free! He's now feeding from a bottle and breathing the same air as us.

June 24

Finn discharged from hospital today after more than 11 weeks. It's difficult to believe that Gill is still three weeks away from her due date. Finn is 6lbs 6oz, triple his birth weight. For the three of us, this is the end of the first chapter.

■ Bliss, the special care baby charity, has a support helpline on 0500 618 140. You can donate at bliss.org.uk.

FACT AND FICTION

I realised that at the age of seven it was inevitable for my son to begin having doubts about Father Christmas. Sure enough, one day he said, "Mum, I know something about Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy."

Taking a deep breath, I asked him, "What's that?"

He replied, "They're all nocturnal."

Submitted by **Marie Warren**