

Oh, heck!
Now they want me
to do a drawing
for the cover!

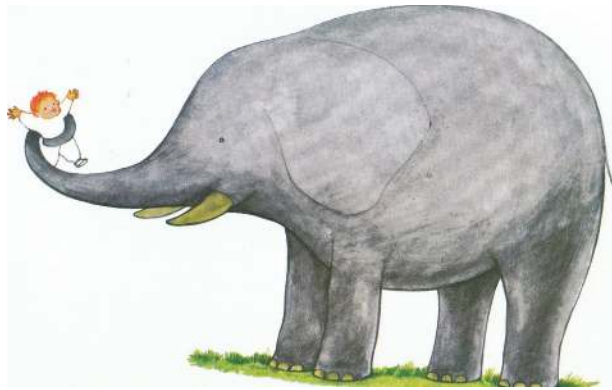


RAYMOND BRIGGS

Notes from the Sofa



unbound



Notes from the Sofa

Raymond Briggs

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Dear Reader,

The book you are holding came about in a rather different way to most others. It was funded directly by readers through a new website: [Unbound](#).

Unbound is the creation of three writers. We started the company because we believed there had to be a better deal for both writers and readers. On the Unbound website, authors share the ideas for the books they want to write directly with readers. If enough of you support the book by pledging for it in advance, we produce a beautifully bound special subscribers' edition and distribute a regular edition and e-book wherever books are sold, in shops and online.

This new way of publishing is actually a very old idea (Samuel Johnson funded his dictionary this way). We're just using the internet to build each writer a network of patrons. Here, at the back of this book, you'll find the names of all the people who made it happen.

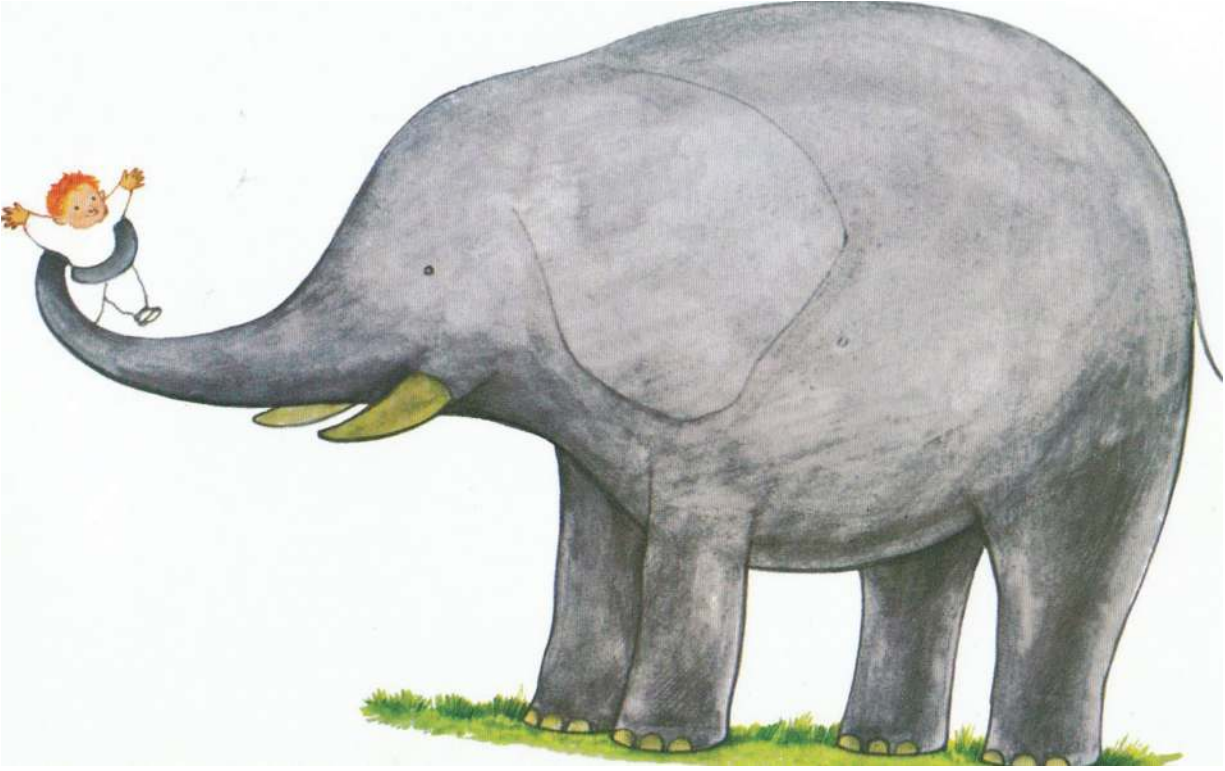
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Thank you for your support,

dan *Justin* *John*

Dan, Justin and John
Founders, Unbound



Raymond Briggs is an award-winning author, whose bestselling books include *The Snowman*, *Father Christmas* and *Ethel & Ernest*. For the last few years Raymond has also been writing a regular column for *The Oldie*, “Notes from the Sofa”.

The Oldie is a humorous monthly magazine launched in 1992 by Richard Ingrams, who for 22 years was the magazine’s editor following 23 years in the same post at *Private Eye*.

For Liz

&

Parkinson's UK

Introduction

by Dan Kieran, CEO of Unbound

“I HEARD YOU on the radio –apparently Unbound are giving publishers a good kick up the arse. Sounds marvellous, how can I help?”

So began my first conversation with the legendary Raymond Briggs in our old office in Soho some years ago. He had come to visit us, along with the then editor of The Oldie Richard Ingrams and the writer and publisher of The Oldie James Pembroke, to talk about the possibility of doing a book. The long and lubricated lunch has become something of a rarity in publishing these days, but we went out and had one of those, and the result is now in your hands.

I could drone on about what a privilege it has been to work with one of the most loved and talented children’s illustrators and writers who has ever lived. How Raymond is both genial and yet wonderfully fierce at the same time on certain subjects, or how he is that very rare species of childhood hero you meet who turns out to be a generous and extraordinarily humble, genuine and utterly brilliant man. But I won’t do any of those things because he would tell me to shut up and stop boring you all with my sentimental bollocks.

What I will say is that this is the first new book from Raymond in a decade. It is unique because, as he says himself, this is a book of thoughts, ideas and memories that he has written entirely for himself, rather than for an

audience of children, for the first time in his entire career. It is funny, melancholic, wise and honest, and all of us at Unbound are thrilled to have played a small part in bringing it to you. You'll love it. He's a genius.

Foreword

by Raymond Briggs

PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS asking: However did you come to be writing for The Oldie?

Well, what a question. I honestly can't remember; like everything else in Old Age it is lost in the mists of time. These mists shroud anything from more than six weeks ago, let alone six years. No doubt soon it will be six days, then we'll be in serious trouble. Now don't get gloomy, Briggs. This is meant to be a light-hearted introduction to a book that is supposed to be humorous.

All I remember is that copies of The Oldie started arriving in the post. I enjoyed looking at them but didn't say thank you as I didn't know who had sent them. Then I heard from the illustrious NAIM ATTALLAH, asking me to come and have lunch with him. I knew his name, of course, but was not sure what he did, other than it was to do with immensely expensive shops in Bond Street - jewels, silver and gold stuff, nothing much... I was asked to go this address in Frith Street in the heart of wicked Soho - such a contrast to the innocence of dear old Wimbledon Park. The whole building was painted black outside and I was shown into a very dark room, also painted black. Naim Attallah and I were the only people in the room and I formed the impression that it was his own house. He had a small gadget on the table like a glasses case (obviously containing an APP, even in those days). Whenever he put his hand on it, a waiter would silently appear and bring in

the next course or more wine. Naim said, I think, that he owned The Oldie and casually mentioned that it was only losing thirty or forty thousand pounds a month. Huh! Peanuts, I thought, but I didn't say it. I think I've been to the same place since then and realise now that it is a sort of club, still dark and painted black inside and out.

Naim then went on to suggest that I write for The Oldie! Blimey! What on earth would I write about? I had done odd bits for respectable papers like the Observer, the Guardian and the Times Ed. Supp., but they were mostly book reviews, fairly routine stuff. This was much more intimidating.

Still, it was a great honour to be asked to write for a national magazine when you are over seventy years old and a decade or so past retirement age. Furthermore, to be given the freedom to write about anything you like and get paid* for it!

Ye Gods! My cup runneth over. It went all down my trousers yet again.

A new lease of life for an elderly olide! So, ta Attallah! Thank you.

Raymond Briggs

*albeit tuppence ha'penny

HOWEVER, I SOON felt less intimidated because of encouragement by the legendary Richard Ingrams. He sent many hand-written notes such as this one in response to a RANT. No! "Going great guns!"

Trousers - watch out!

RANT

YESTERDAY I heard someone on the wireless happen to mention, casually! in passing! that our beloved red London buses were owned by the **FRENCH!** I was so stunned by this that I thought I must have misunderstood, so I asked my assistant to look it up on her electric gadget.

It turns out to be much worse: it's not just the Frogs, there are **FIVE** foreign buggers owning *our* London buses! Has this country gone mad? Can't we Brits own our own buses for godsake? There is:

Abellio – Dutch Railways

Arriva – Deutsch Bahn (Kraut)

'London' Sovereign – Veolia Transdev (Frog)

'London' United – RATP (Frog again)

Metroline – Singapore!

Also, umpteen foreign outfits own Gatwick airport. The Frogs already own our electricity and now they even own Newhaven harbour. Local residents have been forbidden to sit on their own beach!

How far will this go? Will we wake up one day to find Big Ben is owned by the Chinese? Or a Russian oligarch owns Buckingham Palace? What price St Paul's, Westminster Abbey and the Tower of London? Are they all up for grabs?

Why did we fight the War? Something about freedom from foreign domination, wasn't it? Today if Hitler wanted to invade our country, he wouldn't need to waste money and lives on Stormtroopers, tanks and Blitzkrieg. He could just buy up the whole lot without firing a shot.

Good luck to him. Who needs it? It's not ours anyway.

PS: Then today, it came on the news that the BBC had *sold* the *Radio Times!* Mind you, it was 88 years old, so like people of that age, it's as good as dead anyway. Next it will be Broadcasting House itself, already a relic, but still of some historical interest. Most of the staff have already been shunted up to SALFORD! Poor devils.

PPS: It has just been announced that 95 per cent of the Royal Mail is to be sold off! How Royal will it be *then?* This country is not going to the dogs. It's gone.

PPPS: Yet more! The RAC is to be sold. I give up.

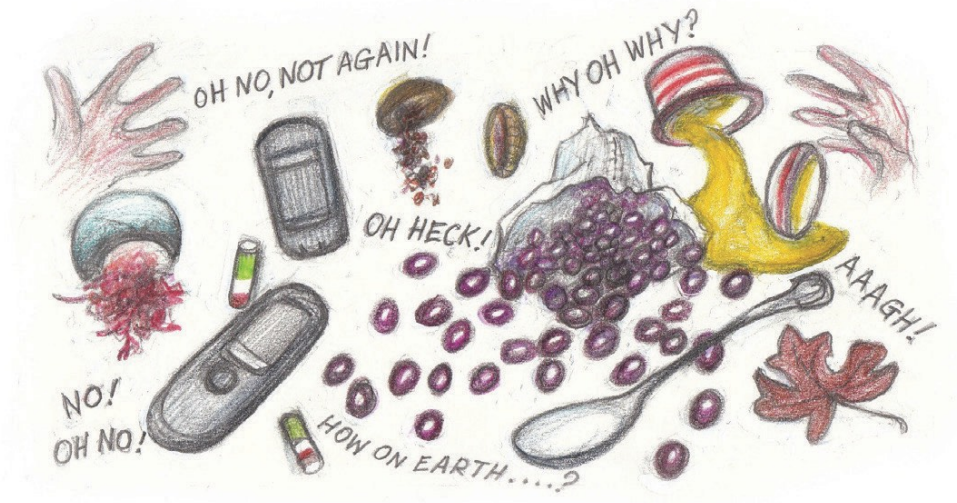
RAYMOND BRIGGS

November 2011 – THE OLDIE 51

The  **Oldie** 22/9/11

Dear Raymond
Thanks for yr. excellent
RANT about the bloody
foreigners taking over. You're
sooo sweet just!
Ollie

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The cussedness of inanimate objects

THE CUSSEDNESS OF the Inanimate Object (TCOIO) is the bane of Old Age. While genteelly dining, you reach out for your glass of wine, not for the first time, and your sleeve catches a dessert spoon and sends it clattering to the floor. Whereupon, of course, it bounces along and secretes itself under the electric heater. Without moving the table, two chairs and the heater, it is impossible to get it out. Why did it do it?

Why do these things happen all the time? For me, FOTF – Falling on the Floor – is the big one. Lately, I've been making a daily list of FOTFs – eleven yesterday. The Force of Gravity is an important factor in all ages of life, but in Old Age it becomes dominant.

It even dominates Waitrose's tiny, all-butter mince pies. Today, I took one out of its foil cup, raised it to my eager lips – and, of course, it snapped itself in two in mid-air, fell on my trousers, bounced off and messed itself on the floor.

Grapes are the be-all and end-all of TCOIO. But they can scarcely be described as inanimate. They have a powerful internal lust for mischief. Even the holy Waitrose recognises this and presents its grapes sealed in a plastic bag with a ZIP! On top of that, we are exhorted to put this sealed bag of the bouncy little devils into another bag for reasons of Health & Safety. Free-roaming grapes underfoot can cause a human being to FOTF and possibly break a bone or two. What have grapes got against us? Waitrose's insurance takes no chances, so they cover themselves with dire warnings about the Clear & Present Danger of Grapes. Then, yesterday, I was putting a small pot of Müller Light Banana & Custard into the fridge, when it got its top off and slopped itself all over slices of Sweet & Nutty Jarlsberg cheese. Müller? German? Possibly a dangerous fifth column infiltrating... But also maybe an inspirational new dish – Banana and Nutty Cheese Custard, a rare Norwegian delicacy.

Recently, the forces of TCOIO launched a triple attack on me in a single evening. I had just picked up a cup of cooked chillies, and as I turned to put it down again, the back of my hand hit the hot frying pan on the stove. The pan must have surreptitiously vibrated its way off its ring and onto

the very edge. I gave a yelp and dropped the cup. Red chilli sauce and china fragments all over the floor.

Minutes later, I was out in the passage and, as I bent over to pick up a dead leaf, our new cordless phone thrust its way out of my shirt pocket and made a suicidal dive to the floor where it fell to bits. Two batteries rolled away and, of course, one of them cunningly rolled itself under the door into the junk room. Moving with lightning speed, I grabbed the door open just in time to see the battery hurrying along to hide itself under the old spare fridge.

Half an hour later, I went to get a cooked meal out of the eye-level kitchen fridge. As I opened the door, a long horizontal dish threw itself out and crashed onto the floor at my feet. Razor-edged fragments all over the floor again. I had carefully placed the dish on a clear, open shelf at about chest level, at least three inches in. How had it juddered forwards and jammed itself bang up against the door?

TCOIO? The Courage of Injured Operatives. WWU - Workers of the World Unite!

We shall NEVAR SURRENDAR!



GRRR-OMIT!

RECENTLY, I WAS astounded to receive a request, together with a head-swelling compliment, from one of my greatest heroes.

The hero was the Right Honourable Lord, Sir Nicholas Park CEB* of 62 West Wallaby street, known to the populace as Nick Park, the supreme creator of the immortal Wallace & Gromit.

One of the many sad things about old age is that your heroes, if they are still living, are younger than you, often by decades. This is particularly true of Nick Park, who is, of

course, still in his teens, so it was even more flattering when his note to me said: "Raymond - always an inspiration -" Ye gods! *Me* an inspiration to *HIM!!* My cup runneth over. It went all down my trousers.

The request was a simple one: would I agree to be sent a three-dimensional fibreglass model of Gromit and to colour it in any way I like? Golly! I thought. Yes! What a fun job. And it was all in aid of five hospitals in Bristol. Little did I know what fate awaited me.

The monster Gromit thing arrived, escorted by three laughing ladies. Five feet high, four feet wide across the ears and five feet long from nose to tail, weighing over half a ton. The three ladies, me and my assistant, gradually managed to drag it out of the van then struggled to get the edges of two of its giant paws onto a little trolley. Somehow, we staggered down the garden path to the house, only to find it wouldn't go through the door. So we trundled it round to the bigger front door, but it wouldn't go in there either. We eventually decided to try and get it into the garden shed. It did go through the door - just, provided those infernal ears were perfectly aligned and tilted at exactly the right angle. This left about 12 inches on either side of it for little me to do the work.

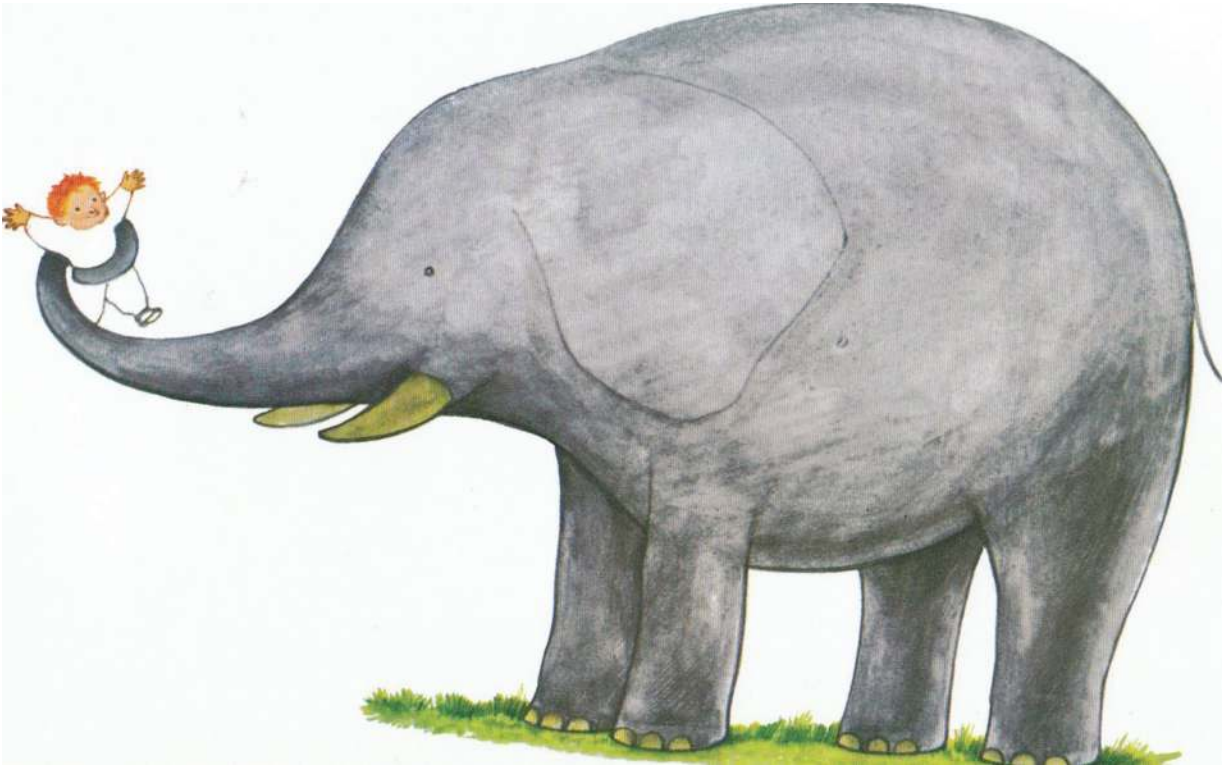
Then the real nightmare began. Naively, I dug out my 60-year-old art student's oil paints and started colouring the beast's vast body. After a couple of days of fruitless effort it dawned on me that the palette of a 1950s fine art artiste was useless and I would need a bucketful of house paint. So, I drove off to the hardware shop and bought four litres of the stuff at £8.98 a tin. If you are ever painting the belly and bottom of a fibreglass monstrosity, I can highly recommend Dulux Weathershield Quick Dry Exterior Satin.

Great covering power; beats dear old Winsor & Newton hollow.

You should try it, Park! Stop fiddling with titchy little plasticine Gromits, about four inches long; be a man and take on a five-foot monster. Try lying on your back painting Gromit's belly, paint dripping onto your face (that's another thing, I've discovered that, unlike artist's oils, house paint is *runny*). And see how many times you bang your head on those infernal ears! Also, I always wear sandals and now my feet are splattered with Dulux Exterior Green Gloss. What will my checkout ladies in Waitrose say tomorrow? Oh, Raymond! What have you done to your feet?

Yet another blow was discovering yesterday that there are not just a select few world-famous artists like me painting Gromits, but that there are now over eighty of us muggins slaving away for the greater glory of Park. This would explain the rumour that Park has already pre-sold the Gromits to a Russian oligarch for tens of millions. Before long they will be all over Red Square and dotted about the Kremlin.

*CEB: Commander of the Electricity Board. This honour was bestowed upon Park in recognition of the thousands of kilowatt hours of electricity purchased by the populace watching his funny little films.



The Elephant and the Bad Baby

YESTERDAY THREE SHINY new hardback copies of one of my earliest picture books arrived: *The Elephant and the Bad Baby* by me and Elfrida Vipont, published in 1971.

Forty-three years ago! Almost before I was born. Elfrida herself died in 1992 at 90 years of age! This was a recent edition of our book in Chinese.

It brought back memories of the day I took the finished artwork up to Hamish Hamilton, the publisher, in London.

In those prehistoric days, artwork was mounted, can you believe, on cardboard! How primitive can you get? If you suggested this to a present-day art student, they would think you had gone mad. Thirty or forty sheets of cardboard

weighing approximately a quarter of a ton. Soon after this, I discovered the new-fangled holiday cases with wheels on the bottom and a telescopic handle on the top. Yoof today doesn't know it's born. They don't need wheels, telescopic handles, strength, resolve or determination; it's all done by electric. Even this bit I'm writing now has to go electric. The Oldie Powers That Be will not accept anything on paper. They don't know where it's been. Furthermore, not only is there no cardboard for students, there is no paper either. They all draw on plastic! Yuk!

That day in 1971, when I lugged the artwork up to London, was the very day when the new money came in. My wife, Jean, and I were in the coffee bar on the platform at Haywards Heath station. Together with the barman we were absorbed in the new coins. No half crowns! No shillings! A hundred pennies (so-called "pence") to the pound - not 240!

What a swindle! No tanners, no bobs, no threepenny bits!

The train came in and, still absorbed in it all and talking about it, we got on board. A couple of minutes later, I let out a shriek: Aagh! I've left the artwork in the coffee bar! Months and months of work - my entire earnings for a whole year.

Balcombe next stop - but when? When? At long last, Balcombe arrived - we leapt out and ran downstairs to the ticket office. Very sorry, but could you possibly phone Haywards Heath station for me, please? I've left a valuable portfolio in the coffee bar. The jobsworth in the ticket office stared blankly at me, shook his head and pointed wordlessly to the phone box. I dived across to it, then swerved back again. Have you got the number? Once again, he shook his head without uttering a word.

Back in the box, I seized a telephone directory, but it was fastened to a metal bar which passed right through the pages. I had to swivel it up to a horizontal position so I could open it. At last! Then - no light! Dark ticket hall, pitch-black phone box.

Couldn't see a thing. Gave up. Went back to the platform. Waited several years for a train. Got to Haywards Heath, leapt out, charged down the platform to the coffee bar, burst open the door - Have you... Here you are, mate, said the smiling barman, handing me my portfolio. I thought you'd be back before long.

I felt like kissing his hand. A latter-day saint. Thank goodness I didn't - in those days I could have been arrested.



Briggs the tea-leaf

I AM A CRIMINAL. A common thief. I have three confessions to make.

ONE: Every week I get two breaded lemon soles from Waitrose. These delicate items are packed extra carefully into the correct Waitrose cool bag.

One week, they were so carefully packed I didn't find them until I opened our fridge at home. Oh dear... don't remember these at the checkout... hastily dug out receipt... no fish on it.

What do I do? Phone them? Drive five miles back? Forget it? "That which is done cannot be undone." Not without a

lot of fiddle-arse anyway. Forget it.

TWO: Last autumn I saw an advertisement for a crate of wine. It sounded good and also amazingly cheap. I thought: "I might send for that..."

A few days later, I came home to find a large cardboard box on the step. Puzzled, I dragged it indoors and opened it. Wine! That box I was going to order... did I do it? Can't remember... must have done... the aged brain.

So easy nowadays - phone up, name, postcode, card number... all done in a couple of minutes. Of course you can forget.

A few days later, came home, *another* box on the step exactly like the first one. Address on top said Ivy Cottage, just up the lane. What a coincidence, they ordered the same wine as me! Gave them a ring, they said they would collect, which they did, though I never saw them.

A few weeks later, when my box was empty, I was dumping it by the bin. It rolled over and there on the bottom was a label: Ivy Cottage. Oh, dear. "That which is undone..."

THREE: At the Queen's birthday garden party we were all drinking champagne in the Palace and were then ushered into the garden. I was still holding a full glass, and when it was empty I looked for somewhere to put it down, but there was nowhere except the lawn itself.

Just then, we were rounded up to be presented to Her Majesty and I realised I could not shake hands with the Queen whilst holding a glass in the other hand, so I hurriedly thrust it into my jacket pocket. Later, half asleep on the train, there was something prodding into my side. I felt in my pocket and took out the glass, engraved with the Royal Coat of Arms. Oh dear.

So I have stolen from Waitrose, defrauded a wine merchant and robbed Her Majesty the Queen.

For once I don't blame the parents. I do blame the school, which was a so-called grammar school in South London called Rutlish.

A pupil there a few years before me was one George Neville Heath, who oldies will remember was a sadistic serial killer of women; hanged, of course. Then, a few years after me, came someone called John Major, a one-time Prime Minister, not hanged.

With a background like that, what hope have I?