

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Good Times

Justin Lee Collins

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## About the Book

He street jams in spandex and wrestles in lycra. He's been a magician, a ventriloquist and a clown. He's hugged some of the biggest stars in the world, and pretty much anyone else who's crossed his path. He mucks about, wears silly costumes and manhandles his friend Alan Carr on national TV on a weekly basis. And people have literally paid him to do all this. Good times!

But life wasn't always so kind to young Justin. He discovered he couldn't kiss very well at school camp in Plymouth. "An attractive sixth-form girl let me snog her. I was about 12. She pulled away, and said 'Aaah, you can't do it.' Then she then picked me up and carried me back to my room." The years stacking shelves at Bristol's Marks and Spencer weren't exactly a high point. Being told to 'walk faster' by his boss and being given a final warning: "it dawned on me they thought that putting out knickers and crisps was beyond me!" Bad times.

But mere retail couldn't keep him down! This hilarious coming-of-age story follows his journey from collecting *Star Wars* toys as a small boy to schmoozing Carrie Fisher in her Hollywood home, and becoming one of the most loved and instantly recognised faces on British TV. For each new twist his life has taken, he hasn't changed a bit. He's as bouncy, funny, shambolic, huggable and of course Bristolian as he's ever been. This is the story of how it all happened. By accident.

But this book is not just a routine celebrity autobiography/memoir - that would be boring. Especially for Justin himself, whose attention span is that of a small child at the best of times. Instead, this is JLC utilising his remarkable photographic memory to ponder the unfeasibly peculiar and funny moments that have defined his life, and desperately trying to make sense of it all. Rock on!

## About the Author

A proud Bristolian, Justin began his performing career as a stand-up. But he hated it, and thanked the lord when he was able to become a full time TV presenter instead. He was spotted fronting Flipside TV, a cult late night show on digital, which lead to his big break with BBC3 hosting the spin-off show to the first series of *Strictly Come Dancing*. Since then he has become the co-host of *Sunday Night Project* with his proper friend Alan Carr and fronted myriad personal documentaries for Channel 4 and Sky 1. He is currently presenting his own chat show, also called *Good Times* on FIVE.

# Good Times

Justin Lee Collins



# INTRODUCTION

## EWOK SOAP

I SAT THERE in the Cannon Cinema, Frogmore Street in Bristol with my gran. The lights went down. And I burst into tears. I was petrified, quite frankly.

It was 1977. I was only three years old, admittedly, and no one told me it would suddenly get pitch black in the room. I was an easily scared child. But I soon recovered, and when C3PO and R2D2 walked across the sandy desert on Tatooine in bleached-out sunlight, the incredible brightness of that image calmed me down instantly. I completely forgot I was frightened of being in a dark room with a load of strangers.

Star Wars was the first film I ever saw in the cinema and to be honest the only thing about it I really remember is that shot of R2D2 and C3PO making their way across the sandy landscape.

I've seen it since then, of course, and I'm pretty sure I enjoyed the rest of the film too though not much about the intricacies of the battle between the Empire and the rebels sank into my three-and-a-half-year-old brain. But that day was all about that one stunningly bright image. It was burned into my retinas.

Thirty years later I was sitting in the bright, sunlit garden of Princess Leia herself. I was about to interview Carrie Fisher at her home in the Hollywood Hills. It was a classic LA mansion, previously owned by Bette Davis, among others. Before the interview, Carrie showed me round the house.

Star Wars merchandise and memorabilia were everywhere, including a statue depicting Princess Leia with her breasts exposed. George Lucas sent it to her, she told me.

It was a pinch-me-am-I-dreaming moment. Ever since I saw Star Wars as a little boy, I'd been obsessed with it. I collected the toys, I competed with my friend Andrew Jackson to collect stuff, every birthday and Christmas I asked for more Star Wars-related items, I re-enacted scenes from the film on my own at home. I loved it.

And there I was, as a grown man, making a television programme about the film saga that had meant so much to me throughout my life, hearing from the woman who played the stunningly sexy Princess Leia herself about how she had to tape down her breasts underneath her white toga-style costume because they wobbled around too much and George Lucas the director wouldn't let her have any underwear on. He told her straight: 'There's no underwear in Space.'

Not only that, she revealed that she had flirted with Harrison Ford throughout the shoot, and, she hinted, maybe more than flirted with him.

Carrie was still beautiful, she was totally honest, funny and she gave me a big hug. And a bar of Ewok soap. I'd never seen that merchandise before. And I've acquired a lot of Star Wars merchandise in my life, as you've probably gathered. I've still got the Ewok soap in its box at home. It would be worth loads on eBay.

But I'll never sell it and probably never open it.

Carrie Fisher was fabulous. I loved everything about her. It was the best interview I've ever conducted.

The thing is, although I still can't quite believe I ended up doing a job that entailed meeting so many of the key figures in my favourite film and turning it into a TV show which I got to present, I have to say it's only one of a number of mind-

blowing experiences I've had which relate directly to the things I loved when I was growing up.

I'm not boasting. I'm as stunned as anyone by the ridiculous route my life has taken and by the absurd number of my lifelong dreams that have somehow ended up coming true. I guess that's what this book is about, if it's about anything other than a bunch of silly stories from my increasingly absurd existence.

Now that I come to think about it, I'm stunned and amazed that any of these dreams have come true, because until fairly recently every time I thought I was about to fulfil my ambitions, it all went horribly, sickeningly, but in retrospect quite entertainingly wrong.

That's what this book is about too - the long, long, extremely bumpy and badly signposted road to becoming a reasonably successful professional TV presenter, which is, for as long as I can remember, what I always wanted to do. It's the story of how I've had so many good times I can barely believe it, because along the way there were so many bad times.

I'm not going to moan about the bad times, don't you worry. I'm just telling you about them because they happened and because I can laugh about them now. Hopefully we can all laugh about them together and learn something about ourselves along the way. Or at least learn something about me and my daft life.

Good times . . .

# CHAPTER 1

## MUCUS AND PEE

WELCOME TO MY book. This is the first chapter, about my childhood and that.

My name is Justin Lee Collins. You can call me JLC. Or Justin. Or just Just. I don't mind. Really, call me anything you want.

The first thing you should know about me is that I'm an only child. I think that's very significant. (Every now and then in this book I'll signpost something that I think is highly significant by saying that it's significant. That's an advance warning. I hope I don't repeat myself too often. Apologies if I do.)

I think it's important to know I'm an only child because it meant I had to amuse myself from as early on as I could remember.

My dad, on the other hand, was one of fourteen children. Yes, they were Catholic. But my dad isn't really very religious. I think he's lapsed.

My mum also has two sisters and a brother. She's a bit more religious but not born again or anything. She goes to church regularly, but bear in mind her local church in Bristol is the nicest place. It's very laid-back and relaxed. They don't try to force anything on you. They don't really preach as such. I love it there.

Anyway I was born in Southmead Hospital, Bristol in 1974, the year of Goodbye Yellow Brick Road by Elton John, Living

For The City by Stevie Wonder and The Night Chicago Died by Paper Lace.

Our first house was in Teresa Avenue, Bishopston. A couple of people claim that house was haunted. But we never experienced any hauntings. We weren't haunted - can I just say that here and now? Despite what you may have heard, we were not haunted.

We lived there from 1974 until 1981. Then about two months before my seventh birthday we moved to Kingswood. That was also the year Charles and Di got married. I won't give the full address in Kingswood because my mum and dad still live there.

My dad was a self-employed electrical engineer and he was often away from home working in Saudi Arabia, laying marble flooring. He's also a plumber. In fact, my dad can pretty much do anything. He's a proper handyman. He can do heating, plumbing, electrics, lay marble floors and many other things. The exact opposite to me. I cannot bang a nail into a wall. I'm useless.

I think he laid marble flooring on and off in Saudi Arabia for about three years. He wasn't around in my formative years an awful lot because of those working trips to Saudi when he'd be away for around three months at a time.

Later on, when I was older, he'd be away from home again when he worked at Kodak shops in the London area from Monday to Friday, fixing them up.

As for my mum, she has always worked and has had loads of different jobs. When I was very small she worked in a bookies, behind the counter. Then when I was in junior school she was a dinner lady. Not in my school but another one in the area. She also worked in a hairdresser's, a post office and a charity shop at weekends.

I was a long time coming. My mum was twenty-four when she married my dad. And I took about seven years to come along. My mum was thirty-one, and my mum didn't carry very well with me, as they say. I wasn't a very pleasant baby

to carry. Even in the womb I was a trouble-maker. So that might be why they never had another baby and I'm an only child. Which, as I mentioned before, is very significant.

My earliest memory is from when we lived in the Bishopston house and I remember being sat in my highchair and looking from the open-plan dining room into the kitchen where my mum was with her mum, my gran. I have nothing to say about that memory except that it's the first snapshot image I can think of from when I was very little. I must have been about a year old.

I do have lots of memories of that house. It was a large, three-bedroom terrace house. But my dad split one of the bedrooms in two so it became a four-bedroom house. I had a playroom. I had a rocking horse. Not a fancy wooden one. It was made of tin.

I've always had a lot of ear, nose and throat problems. I always had bad catarrh and coughs and a bunged-up nose. Often I would wake up and I couldn't open my eyes because my very long eyelashes would be matted together with sleepy dust. My mum would have to clean my eyes with a warm flannel so I could open them.

I produced a lot of mucus. An awful lot of mucus. I would be bunged up all the time. I still produce quite a lot of mucus to this day and am often bunged up now.

Back then, the doctor prescribed me some medicine and it made me very drowsy. I went into the back garden one day and locked the door behind me because I thought it would be funny to lock my mum in so she couldn't come out into the garden. But because I was on this medication I fell asleep on the lawn.

I was sprawled out, totally unconscious. So my mum was stuck there banging on the door looking at me fast asleep in the garden. Eventually I woke up because I heard her yelling at me and banging on the door.

I remember another time we'd been out and my mum had left that back door open. She'd cooked a chicken and then left it on the worktop. When we got back, the chicken had gone and there were muddy paw prints on the worktop and all across the kitchen floor. A cat had nicked the chicken and eaten it. That story has no great significance apart from the fact that it mildly amused me at the time.

More importantly, I was circumcised at the age of four. For ages I had no idea why I was circumcised. I went through a period in my early teens of wondering if I was Jewish because I was circumcised. I had heard that Jewish men were circumcised and I was circumcised so I thought maybe I was secretly Jewish. I thought that because my parents are quite dark-skinned that they were perhaps secretly Jewish and just didn't tell me. Another theory, albeit short-lived, was that I was adopted. I considered all kinds of possibilities. Of course I'm not Jewish. And I'm not adopted. I just don't have a foreskin. And this is why.

When I was a little boy my foreskin wouldn't retract properly so when I went to pee it was a bit cumbersome and slightly painful. So the doctor said I needed to get my foreskin taken off. It was a medical condition.

I can vividly picture being in Southmead Hospital, the same hospital where I'd been born, waiting for this operation. My mum brought me my Uncle Bulgaria from the Wombles - he was my favourite cuddly toy. I also had an emu and a frog.

I was a Ribena freak at that age. I loved it. While I was in the hospital waiting for my foreskin to be removed, I was always pulling the cord to ask the nurse to bring me some Ribena. But you're only supposed to have about three Ribenas at that age, perhaps at any age, because they're so full of sugar.

My gran told me that when I was in hospital to have my foreskin removed, a day or two after the op, she took me for

a walk through the ward and we bumped into the doctor who said, 'Hello, Justin, how's your willy?'

And I answered, 'It's okay, Doctor. How's yours?'

So I've got a circumcised penis. It wasn't really much of an issue at the time, because I had no idea that not having a foreskin was in any way unusual. I didn't know any better.

But I first noticed my willy was different to other boys' willies when I was in secondary school. It was all due to being forced to shower with the other boys. I don't think these days it happens so much. I think they have individual showers. At least I hope for their sakes they do.

But when I was at school we all had to shower communally, just at the precise point in our lives when we're most embarrassed by our bodies. We were all feeling self-conscious and unsure and we're all looking to see who's fat and who's got a big willy or a small willy and who's got pubes, like the horrible little boys we were. And if you didn't have any pubes, for example, you were going to get ridiculed. It was awful. We were forced into that situation of having to look at each other's penises, circumcised or not, by adults. It was just wrong. It was fuel for the bullies. It was a nightmare. I hated it.

But that was when I first noticed my willy was different. It looked very different, because, let's face it, when circumcised willies are flaccid they do look very different from uncircumcised ones.

While I'm on the subject of medical conditions, let me jump ahead to the next time I was in hospital overnight.

I was twelve and I broke my wrist in two places. Everyone said how brave I was. And I *was* brave, considering the agony I was in. And I didn't cry at all - not in front of my mum or anyone. My dad was working in London and rushed back to see me that night in hospital.

It happened on a Wednesday night, which was the night I used to do karate. The classes took place on Stapleton Road

in Bristol at a community centre called the Mill. It was quite a rough place. In fact, it was the place where David Blunkett chose to go a few years back when he was trying to publicise his latest crackdown on crime, surrounded by security staff, of course.

Anyway, I started doing karate from the age of eleven, mainly because my dad wanted me to. I was into it initially.

Before that my dad took me to judo when I was six. I went to one class in Hanham folk centre. I was there with my little white suit and my little white belt and I was forced into sparring with a ten-year-old blonde girl who was very pretty and had a basin haircut. She was much taller than me and just as I was thinking that I quite liked this judo thing and that it might be for me, she threw me over her shoulder and I hit my head on the mat and it hurt and I thought, 'Actually, I don't think I do like this judo after all. I'm not going to do this any more.' So that was my last judo lesson.

A few years later I got into Bruce Lee and, especially, Chuck Norris. Luckily, there was a video shop that stocked all the Norris films: Breaker! Breaker!, Good Guys Wear Black, The Octagon, A Force Of One, Lone Wolf McQuade, and obviously Missing In Action - the trilogy. So when my dad wanted me to start doing karate, I liked the idea because of the Chuck Norris connection.

So I started karate lessons every Wednesday night at the Mill and for about the first year I quite enjoyed it. Then when I ended up enjoying it less, I really only carried on doing it to keep my dad happy. Eventually I made the decision to stop going and I told my mum and she backed me up, but when we told my dad he went ballistic. I think like many dads he thought I was in danger of becoming a mummy's boy and of being mollycoddled. So I carried on going in spite of the fact that I didn't really like it.

Anyway, this Wednesday night, I'd come home from school and had my tea - six corned beef sandwiches. That was my tea that night.

After I'd had my tea, Jason McAuley came knocking on my door to see if I wanted to come out and play.

I said I would go out for a bit of a play and my mum pointedly reminded me that I had karate later. But I thought it would be fine to have a bit of a play with my friends before karate. I should have just let my tea go down and wait for karate. But I didn't.

So we went to play in the school grounds, which we often did because the gates were always left open. There was this bay where they kept all the bins and there was a big wooden box in the corner. Inside the box was some kind of generator, and you could stand on top of this box and above you would be two green iron girders and what you could attempt to do was stand on the box and jump up onto the girder and swing.

You could do that if you wanted to. It was pointless but we did it.

That night Jason did it first and then I tried to do it. But I didn't really commit to the jump properly. My fingertips just brushed the edge of the iron beam, then I immediately slipped off and fell to the ground in a seated position and I fell forward onto my hands. All the weight fell on my wrists.

I sat there and thought, 'Ooh, this feels quite painful.'

Jason said, 'Oh shit! Mate, are you all right?'

I told him yes, but then I looked at my hand and my jaw dropped to the floor. My right wrist was literally about 180 degrees from where it should be and it was hugely swollen. It was hideously disfigured.

I immediately ran across the road to my house to show my mum. I walked in the back door and through the kitchen and I could see my mum sitting there in the living room with her dinner on a tray on her lap. By this point I was quite calm but I knew that if I showed my mum my hand in that state she would totally freak out. So I stood there in the living room and I hid my hand behind my back because I didn't

want her to freak out, but I also knew I had to tell her what had happened. It was a quandary.

So I said, 'Mum, I've done something . . .'

She said, 'Oh my god - what have you done?' She knew something was up.

I said, 'Well, I've done something but whatever it is I don't want you to be upset.'

I knew when I showed her my arm that it looked so freaky and horrible and beyond repair that she would freak out.

As I pulled my arm from behind my back, I said, 'I think I've broken my wrist.'

As soon as she saw it, she did of course freak out.

But the first thing she did, as soon as she saw this hideous sight of my disfigured hand, was to grab me, take me to the kitchen and run my wrist under cold water. I suppose she thought it could numb the pain and take the swelling down.

But it didn't help much.

Then my mum decided to run me over to my Uncle Dave's, because my dad was away in London working, and she wanted someone to be with us. Maybe she felt she should have a man around for this distressing incident.

We went in the car to my Uncle Dave's and he actually told me he thought it didn't look too bad - like I'd just sprained it or something. I think that was his way of trying to make me feel better. Because in fact it was an abomination.

On the way back, my mum decided for some reason that we should stop off at a chemist and see what the pharmacist thought of my clearly broken wrist. So first she ran it under cold water and then she decided we should show the pharmacist. That was her plan of action.

We stopped off at the chemist's on Lodge Causeway and by this time I had a wet tea towel wrapped round my wrist, and when I took it off to show the pharmacist, sure enough he said, 'You really need to take him to A&E immediately.'

Years later my mum broke her nose while she was getting a shovel out of her garden shed and a broom fell to the floor and my mum tripped over it and fell flat on her face. My wife Karen and I happened to be in my mum's house at the time and as soon as I saw her I could see she'd broken her nose, so I told her we had to go to casualty. But my mum said, 'No, let me go to the pharmacist first.'

I've no idea why. I've no idea what she thought the pharmacist could do about broken noses and wrists.

But sure enough, twenty years later, I did take her to the same pharmacy that she took me to all those years ago when I broke my wrist.

Funnily enough, this time round the pharmacist told us there was nothing he could do and that my mum should go to A&E.

Anyway, my mum and my Uncle Dave did eventually take me to the hospital.

When I got there, the doctor asked me when I had last eaten. I told him I'd had my tea a few hours previously. He asked what I'd eaten for my tea and I told him - six corned beef sandwiches.

He said, 'SIX corned beef sandwiches?!'

I told him, 'Yes, Doctor, six corned beef sandwiches.'

A few hours later, I was in the hospital bed and my arm was up in a sling and I'd asked if I could have a TV and they brought me a portable TV and I was watching Taggart. For the first time ever, as far as I could remember, I was on my own, and I had a little cry.

I'm not sure if that was because it was a particularly bad episode of Taggart or because it all suddenly hit home how much pain I was in, or just because I was on my own.

## CHAPTER 2

### GOTTA LOTTA BOTTLE

AS USUAL, I was thirsty and I couldn't sleep, so I went down to the kitchen to get a satsuma and a glass of water, and as I walked through the kitchen, I just happened to peep through the crack in the living-room door. I could see my mum sitting on the sofa with the Millennium Falcon on her lap, in the middle of wrapping it.

She saw me. She knew that I'd seen her. And I'd seen it.

I said, 'I didn't see anything,' but I had.

It was Christmas Eve, and I knew right then that there was no Father Christmas. But I didn't really care. I was getting a Millennium Falcon from Star Wars.

I was nine years old.

The thing I remember most about being that age was that I loved watching films and TV programmes and almost simultaneously realising that I wanted to be in those films and TV programmes. Or that I wanted to do something akin to what the stars of those shows did. You could say I wanted to be on TV from a very young age. I know, it's a ridiculous cliché. But it's true.

After I saw Star Wars that time when I was three, I used to go to the cinema all the time, whenever I had pocket money. In the school holidays I'd go four times a week. If there was nothing new on I'd see the same film again.

My gran used to take me to the cinema during the summer holidays too. The three things we'd do were: 1. Go

to Weston-super-Mare, for the Grand Pier, which burned down recently and is sadly no longer with us. 2. Go to the movies. And 3. Go to Bristol museum, which was brilliant. They had a stuffed gorilla called Alfred which I loved.

But the cinema was my favourite (partly because the trip to the Bristol museum was knackered because it was up a steep hill). When Return Of The Jedi came out, some cinemas had special Star Wars Spectacular events in which they showed all three films back to back - Star Wars, Empire and Jedi. My gran took me and had to sit through six hours of Star Wars. What a great woman.

Apart from Star Wars, I loved films like Young At Heart with Doris Day. Channel 4 launched when I was eight and I grew up watching the old films on Channel 4 in the afternoon. I also loved the old RKO horror movies. Bela Lugosi as Dracula. Abbott and Costello. Abbott And Costello Meet The Wolf Man. Abbott And Costello Meet Dracula. Dracula Meets The Wolf Man and even Dracula And The Wolf Man Meet Frankenstein. I loved them all!

Apart from watching the TV till all hours, I would also listen to Brian Matthew late at night on Radio 2. And I loved Steve Wright on Radio 1. But Dave Barrett on GWR was my favourite. His phone-ins. Late-night radio was a big thing for me. I loved it so much that I soon knew I wanted to be on the radio and, equally, I loved Abbott and Costello so much I knew I wanted to be a comedy actor.

And the one thing I never ever ever ever had any inclination to do my entire life was stand-up comedy . . .

The first comedy person I ever remember liking is Harold Lloyd. They'd show Harold Lloyd films on BBC2. And Monkey would be on straight afterwards. I would have been about three when I first saw Harold Lloyd. I adored him. I also loved Laurel and Hardy on Saturday mornings. Bilko was huge for me. Then there was Morecambe And Wise and Tommy Cooper.

Then a little bit later I used to stay up till about eleven at night and watch Rhoda and Taxi and Laverne & Shirley. In my teens I moved on to Happy Days, Mork & Mindy and The Garry Shandling Show.

Then when I was about fifteen it was all about Vic & Bob.

But if you asked my mum what my favourite programme was as a little boy, if you called her right now and asked her that question (although I doubt very much you've got her number), she would answer without missing a beat, and she'd say, 'Come Dancing.' The original ballroom dancing show.

I'm not talking about Strictly Come Dancing - that came much later, of course. And I love that show too. But when I was a little boy, the original Come Dancing was going strong on BBC1. And that was my favourite show. I loved the glamour, how the dancers looked, the music and maybe the element of jeopardy - that they might fall or have some kind of accident as they were attempting a particularly difficult paso doble. I just loved it all, to be honest. But it was mainly the glamour and the jeopardy I loved when I was a little boy. I used to sit there and cuddle up to my mum while watching Come Dancing.

The amazing thing about Come Dancing and ballroom dancing in general is that it has taken on an almost mystical importance in my life. Seriously. You'll see why when I tell the story of my first ever steps as a radio broadcaster. And my first ever moments as a proper live TV presenter.

I also became obsessed with darts at an early age. That was probably due to my auntie's ex-husband. He played county darts. We always watched Bullseye on a Sunday. If they ever brought that back again, I'd love to host it. My uncle was on Bullseye once, as the thrower. I watched the world championships every year at the Lakeside.

All this is by way of explaining that I had weird tastes. There's something random about it all. Darts. Ballroom

dancing. Horror movies. And then there was showjumping and Jimmy Cagney films. I haven't even mentioned those.

People say to me, how can you like that but not this? Or, how can you like him but not her? But I don't see it like that. I just do like one thing and not the other. I like my little niches.

For example, I really like football but I'm not a die-hard fan. I support Bristol City and I've supported them all my life but I also like to see Bristol Rovers do well. I can't get that passionate about football because it's the number one sport in the entire world and it's too big for me. But the darts world championship - I'm there!

I also have to admit, not that I'm in any way ashamed of it, that I stayed in a lot and watched a lot of TV. I didn't ever do that teenage thing of hanging around on street corners, and when I saw all these local kids doing that I would assume that it couldn't be very nice for them at home, because instead of staying in and watching Mork & Mindy they preferred standing on street corners, gobbing.

As well as our Come Dancing habit, Saturday nights as a kid for me meant staying in and staying up late watching TV with my mum. We'd watch Columbo, wrestling, The Rockford Files . . . all sorts. I loved it.

Where was my dad? you're probably wondering. Well, he'd go out with his mates on a Saturday, down the pub, which was fair enough when you consider he'd been working all week plumbing or sawing or grouting or whatever, including often working during the day on Saturday itself.

The Saturday routine was always the same.

My mum worked in a charity shop on Saturdays but she'd always prepare Dad's tea for him so when he got home he'd just have to heat it up. Then he'd have a shower and come back down with his hair still soaking wet. He never blow-dried it. He would lie on the floor in front of our awful wall-mounted four-bar gas fire and dry his hair with it, while Tosca was playing on TV. He loved opera. Well, he loved two

operas in particular, Tosca and La Bohème, because they were the two he had on video cassette. He'd put one of these operas on while he was drying his hair by the gas fire and I just wanted to watch The Muppet Show.

One time I was sitting there wondering if I could get away with turning the opera off when I looked over to my dad and saw steam coming off his head. Plumes of smoke!

'Dad! Your hair's on fire!' I yelled.

He darted across the room. I'd never seen my dad move so fast in his life.

But his hair wasn't on fire at all. It was just the condensation from drying his soaking-wet hair in front of the gas fire.

After he'd dried his hair and watched some opera, Dad would go out for the night with his friends Doddsy and Tony Morrison. Meanwhile, my mum and I would sit at home, get a Chinese takeaway and watch TV. Eventually I'd go to bed and stay awake and listen for when my dad came in and then, and only then, I'd be able to go to sleep.

Sometimes he'd come back just after pub closing time, armed with a prawn curry, and I'd come down and have a few prawns with him. But other times I'd be up till 3am waiting for him. I used to think, 'Where's he gone? What's he doing till 3am?'

In fact, it was only very recently that I found out. I asked him where he used to go and he just said, 'Oh, we used to go back to Tony Morrison's.'

He didn't have many hobbies or anything but for long periods Dad did have an organ in the living room, which he loved to play, especially using the wah-wah pedal. He'd have organ lessons at home while my mum took me to karate. Or the TV would go off and he would announce, 'Right, I'm going to play the organ!' I'd go upstairs. I couldn't stand the bloody thing and nor could my mum.

To make matters worse, our house had very thin walls. My dad would leave the toilet door open and we could all hear

him having a pee. So I certainly couldn't escape the wah-wah organ sound anywhere in the house.

He even tried to get me to play the organ because apparently I had the right kind of long and thin fingers for it. But I had absolutely no interest in organs whatsoever. I hated the organ. He dragged me to a class one night but afterwards I told him there was no way I was going to come back ever again. The organ was not for me.

Apart from his organ, my dad had a few other interests, though I wouldn't really call them hobbies as such. The only piece of exercise equipment he ever had was his Bullworker. He used it every now and then, although he was a pretty fit man anyway, what with his constant manual work. Well, he hardly *ever* used it actually. Did anyone ever use one of those things?

Actually my mum and I used it. As a security device. When my dad was away on work business and my mum and I would be left on our own, my mum would wedge the Bullworker down between the door and the wall at the foot of our stairs. She would say that if anyone did try to break in and force the door open to come upstairs, the Bullworker would come straight through the door and whack them in the shins.

My dad didn't like playing the family man; he's never worn a wedding ring. I once asked my mum why he never wore a ring, and she said, 'Well, he's a jack the lad, isn't he?' She didn't mind. She knew what he was like.

Similarly, he never really liked family holidays, which most of the time meant going down to Brean Sands to stay in our caravan. In the days leading up to one of these trips he'd start complaining about his back. He often went on about his bad back, which was fair enough when you consider all the manual labour and bending down and banging things into other things he was doing. But when a holiday was approaching, mentions of the back would suddenly be more frequent. My mum and I would laugh about it, especially

when we'd suddenly see him lying down flat on his back on the floor in the living room, with one of his operas on the TV, stretching out that bad back of his.

His bad back was very real, though. He had to have a separate bed with a tough, hard mattress because of his back. So my mum and dad had two single beds in the same room, which I think was actually quite common for married couples in those days.

My mum and dad didn't show each other a lot of affection in front of me. I'd never see them kissing or cuddling or anything, but I guess that was quite usual at that time. To this day I've never seen them properly kiss each other.

But they both gave me an awful lot of love.

All the time my mum used to tell me, 'You're my life . . . I don't know what I'd do without you . . . you're my life.'

My dad was temperamental. I think that's what happens when you've experienced a tough time growing up, which he most certainly did. He was born in Southmead, a rough estate in Bristol. His dad died when he was ten after drinking himself to death. My dad has memories of the police standing outside his house while his dad stuck his head out the window telling the police to fuck off.

But even though my dad had a temper, he never took it out on me. He never laid a finger on me at all. He was never a violent man. But he didn't have to smack me or anything anyway. If he told me off, I'd stop. My hair would stand on end and I would run upstairs or into the garden. I was definitely scared of him and his temper, but at the same time I loved him dearly. He was very firm with me. But he also made sure I had everything in life that he never had as a kid. My upbringing was totally the opposite to his. He helped with anything I ever needed or wanted. I never went without.

I certainly had all the toys I could ever want.

Particularly the Star Wars toys.

But when I started getting them, and slowly built up quite a collection, I wasn't into them just to have them sitting around my room as inanimate objects. I wasn't collecting them for the sake of it. I didn't leave any of them in their boxes. I didn't care about the boxes. I loved actually playing with them. I was re-enacting Star Wars with them. I was putting myself into Star Wars. (I'm not an obsessive kind of fan at all, by the way. I loved the first three films because they were brilliant fun to watch. I hated the more recent ones. They were shit.)

I'd also imagine that I was staging a TV show, complete with me doing the continuity announcements. I had my soft Emu puppet, which we bought at Brean Sands, for example, and I'd do an Emu show, and I'd introduce it with a menu.

'Coming up tonight on Children's TV, we've got the Emu show, we've got Star Wars . . .'

I'd always do it as if I was putting on a show. If I was playing with my Star Wars toys I'd build in cliffhangers that would come at the end of my play-time as if it was a proper film. So maybe one episode would revolve around the AT-AT Walker, and the end of this five-minute bit would feature one of the main characters falling out of the side of the AT-AT and that's when I would stop, and I would say, 'Join us next week for more Star Wars.'

But I was just talking to myself as if I had an audience. There was no 'us'. I'd disappear into my own world.

My favourite character was Luke Skywalker. Luke represented me. The young boy who wants to leave home and cut his ties and achieve all he can in the wider universe.

As you know, Andrew Jackson, my best friend at Chester Park Junior School, was as much into Star Wars as I was. Every birthday and Christmas we both got Star Wars stuff. One Christmas I wanted the Rebel Transporter, which Andrew had already received for his birthday, then the next birthday I wanted the Millennium Falcon. Which I eventually got for Christmas, as I just told you. At the height of my Star

Wars toy banjoree, I had a Scoutwalker, a Speeder bike, a Tauntaun, and maybe thirty action figures.

The only one of all these toys I don't still have is the Rancor Monster. As I'm sure you know, when Luke goes to Jabba the Hut's palace to try to get Han Solo out of the cryogenic chamber and Jabba drops him down into the pit, there's a monster in the pit which he fights - and that was called the Rancor Monster.

My Rancor Monster was the pride of my collection. It was a huge toy and I loved playing with it.

But a while later, when I was really skint, I took a lot of stuff to a car boot sale and I put the Rancor Monster in there. I don't really know why - it was a rash decision. Maybe I did it because it wasn't a ship and I mainly enjoyed playing with the ships. So I thought I could live without the Rancor Monster. I sold it for three pounds.

But in fact my Auntie Carol bought it and told me I shouldn't have sold it. I thought, 'Brilliant - the Rancor Monster is in safe hands. It'll stay in the family, and maybe one day, when I have some money, I can buy it back from my auntie.'

Then a couple of months later my Auntie Carol sold it herself at a car boot sale. So she obviously thought the same thing: she could live without it. But I really wish I still had the Rancor Monster. I bitterly regret to this day that I haven't got it. It would be worth about forty quid now I reckon.

So I spent a lot of time playing by myself as a kid, amusing myself, keeping myself excited. But I also learned that I could entertain others.

At weekends my dad would take me with him to see his friends and I'd often do impressions in front of them. I was only five or six and my dad loved me doing them. I'd do Frank Spencer, as you had to do if you were an impressionist at the time, and I did Ruth Madoc from Hi-De-

Hi! 'Hello campers!' and all that. I also did Groucho Marx, which was a bit odd for a little boy, I suppose. I think he was featured in a TV ad at the time. I used to memorise stuff I saw on TV. Silly stuff. I had a great memory for daft stuff - jingles and ads. I would get a jumbo stick of rock and use that as a cigar and I'd do Groucho saying, 'I used to smoke a cigar until I found out this was better value.' I also did the Hunchback of Notre Dame because there was a TV ad which featured Charles Laughton as the Hunchback saying, 'The bells! The bells!' I guess it was a weird mixture of impressions for someone to do. Mike Yarwood never did the Hunchback as played by Laughton. I'd mix it up! I did Groucho Marx, Ruth Madoc, the Hunchback of Notre Dame and I'd also do bird impressions. I'd do a big gulp, which was a swallow, and I'd quickly bend down as if something was flying overhead and that was me doing a duck.

My dad and his friends lapped it up.

Throughout my childhood I was surrounded by adults and I quite enjoyed it. I think that meant that I became quite advanced in terms of interacting with grown-ups and then reading and stuff. But from an early age I was quite happy talking to and hanging out with grown-ups. Because that's what I knew.

I was ten the first time I performed to a proper audience.

It was 1984, and I went on holiday with my mum and dad to the Devon Coast Country Club in Torbay. My Auntie Liz and her husband Keith and their kids Lita and Christopher and my Uncle Dave and my Auntie Sue and their little baby Sam were also there.

To this day it was the best holiday of my life, because my family was there, my little cousins were there, and because of the competitions. (My dad took me to Disney World that same year, which I'll get to in a bit, but it wasn't as much fun as the Devon Coast Country Club.)

They held a lot of competitions at the Devon Coast Country Club. When he was young my dad had singing

lessons so he fancied himself to have quite a good singing voice. But he was known by his mates as 'One-Note Collins' because whatever he sang he only ever hit the one note, in a kind of semi-operatic, big booming style. My mum would say, 'It's the same old note every time!' as soon as he started to sing.

So he entered the talent contest and sang but he didn't win. He only placed.

My Uncle Dave entered the ape man contest in which you had to pretend to be an ape and make ape noises and beat your chest and pick up one of the Yellowcoat staff and run around with her like something out of 2001: A Space Odyssey, and he won.

That holiday was an endless series of contests.

They also held competitions for children, including a talent competition and a Bionic Man competition. (The Six Million Dollar Man was huge on TV at the time.) The competitions were sponsored by the Milk Marketing Board, whose slogan at the time was 'Gotta Lotta Bottle'. So the prizes consisted of lots of Gotta Lotta Bottle merchandise, including a Gotta Lotta Bottle T-shirt and a Gotta Lotta Bottle floatable dinghy and a Gotta Lotta Bottle mug.

I entered two competitions that week. First, I entered the Bionic Man competition in which you had to run round the outdoor swimming pool in slow-motion like the Bionic Man. I wore trunks and trainers. No shirt. I was topless. And I won that. It wasn't much of an achievement to be honest, but I was excited to win it. There was a brilliant-looking guy in charge with a big Afro and beard and glasses and he presented the prize to me and said, 'Well done, Justin, you're our winner,' and he put the microphone up to my mouth and I gave a big thumbs-up and said, triumphantly, 'Fans! Fans!'

That was my acceptance speech: 'Fans! Fans!' And a thumbs-up. I was ten, remember.