

The Paper Bag Baby

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About the Book

Edward is determined to make a million by the time he's twenty. So when he stumbles across an intriguing package in the park, he knows he's onto something. He ropes in two schoolmates to help him with his plan, a plan that could result in a fortune - or serious trouble for them all!

THE PAPER BAG BABY

Ruth Thomas

RHCP DIGITAL

To Caroline, with thanks
for the idea

An amazing find

Edward walked alone, through the park. He walked through the park, not because that was the quickest way home, but because it was forbidden. 'Unless there are at least four of you!' Mrs Rudge warned them, in Assembly. 'And then stay close together. You all know why.'

It was because of the Strangers, of course. Strangers liked hanging about in parks, it was their favourite sort of place. They lurked in parks, waiting to catch unwary children, and take them away, and do unexplained bad things to them. Edward, however, had nothing but scorn for people who were afraid of Strangers.

Strangers were cunning, and crafty, of course, but not as cunning and crafty as Edward Lawson! Just let some Stranger try it on, just let him try!

'Oh look!' Edward would say, pointing at the sky. 'There's a UFO!' And while the Stranger was looking, Edward would be shinning up a tree, quick as lightning, up to the very top, where the Stranger would be too big and heavy to follow. 'Ha, ha!' he would crow at the Stranger. 'Tricked you that time! Dum-dum! Egg-face! Slime-bag!' He would sit safely in his tree, calling down all the rude names he could think of, until, shamed by the insults, the Stranger slunk away in defeat.

Anyway, today there were no Strangers around. Indeed, at this moment, there was no one around at all in this part of the park. Over by the swings there would be mothers with toddlers; here there were only birds, hopping over the hot summer grass, and a grey squirrel or two, darting shyly amongst the branches.

Wait a minute, though, wait a minute, Edward thought – what was that? Way ahead, down by that seat, where the trees to the left of the path were tall and close together, *that* was someone! Someone coming towards him. Someone who suddenly changed course and dived into the shadow of the trees.

Why?

Edward's heart began to beat faster. His steps slowed, and then stopped. Perhaps that *was* a Stranger. Hiding behind a thick trunk, all ready to pounce on him as he passed! Now that it seemed likely he might really be attacked, here in this lonely place, he felt his knees to be, annoyingly, quite weak.

He wouldn't run, though, he wouldn't do that. He'd never respect himself again if he ran, would he? No, he'd do his plan the way he'd worked it out.

A tree. He needed a tree.

Well, there were plenty of trees; there was no shortage of trees in this park. The question was – how was a person supposed to climb one? Now he came to notice it, he realised that if he stood on tiptoe, if he jumped, even, there was no way he could reach even the lowest branch.

Edward turned and, bony legs flying, pounded back the way he had just come. Out of breath, he glanced fearfully over his shoulder. Nothing. Nothing on the path behind him, but far to his right, someone had come out of the trees and was stumbling across the grass and away from him. Up a slope, and over the brow of the little hill, the hunched up figure of Edward's Stranger. Only it didn't look much like a Stranger now, it looked like a girl in trousers, a girl in a big hurry . . .

Relief and shame tumbled over each other, a jumble of feelings in Edward's thumping chest. With the back of one hand, he wiped at the sweat which was snaking down the bridge of his nose, and making for his jaw in two tickly channels. He hadn't been afraid really, he told himself, not

really. He would have climbed that tree if it had been possible, he *would*.

Well, all right, he made a mistake; that was nothing, was it? Anyone could make a mistake about a tree. He would have to make a different plan, that's all. *Then*, let a real stranger come along; just let one come along then!

Edward walked on, feeling in his trouser pocket as he went. In his trouser pocket were today's takings, something reassuring, something to help him feel good about himself.

Three pounds twenty. Only one pound twenty profit, of course, but not bad for five minutes' work! Easy money and a brilliant idea that no one else had thought of. You were allowed to bring apples and crisps for playtime, but plenty of people forgot, and didn't have the chance to buy anything on the way to school because they were being brought by car. Edward, on the other hand, living near and being old enough to come by himself, had ample chance to visit the corner shop which called itself a supermarket. There you could buy multi-packet bags of crisps, and bags of apples - small ones. Then you could open the bags, and sell the items, separately. You could do it behind the toilets, where the teacher on playground duty couldn't see. If the teacher saw, she would certainly be spoilsport enough to stop it; adults were like that. But so far he hadn't got caught, and the number of Edward's customers was growing in the most satisfactory way.

He intended to be a millionaire by the time he was twenty. Only nine years to achieve this goal, but at least he had made a start. Edward smiled to himself, contemplating his happy future. He hummed a little tune. The world was a delightful place, full of sparkling promise.

He was passing the park seat when an odd little sound made him stop again. A mewing sound, like a kitten or something. There was a kitten stuck somewhere, perhaps. Edward looked around for it.

The sound came again.

Under the seat. The sound was coming from under the seat.

But under the seat was only a large, stiff, brown paper carrier bag; someone's rubbish, Edward supposed, that they couldn't be bothered to put in the bin.

Only this bag was moving!

Oh, the kitten must be *inside* the bag. What a funny thing! Edward bent, reached under the seat, and was just about to pick it up when the bag rustled and moved again. Edward drew back his hand. Wait a minute, Edward Lawson, wait a minute. Suppose it's something dangerous inside the bag! A rat, perhaps, or a snake . . . ! No, not a rat, something bigger than a rat . . . a baby crocodile, perhaps, with rows and rows of needle-sharp teeth, and jaws that go *snap*, as they bite your hand off!

Best leave the bag where it is.

On the other hand, how am I going to respect myself if I do any such a wimpish thing?

Edward took a deep breath, picked up the bag, and looked to see what was inside.

There was some hair, not very much, wet and plastered to an otherwise bald little dome. There was a small crumpled face, with screwed up eyes and a mouth that cried weakly. No doubt about it, this was a real live baby!

Astonished, Edward sat on the seat with the bag and the baby on his knees. The baby cried again, and Edward peered more deeply into the bag. The tiny body was wrapped in a clean pink towel, which bulged and shifted here and there. Edward thought the baby was very ugly; perhaps that was why its owner didn't want it. He held it gingerly, not too close.

What was he supposed to do with it? Clearly the baby had been thrown away - what do you do with babies that get thrown away?

It was always happening, of course, you heard about it on the television all the time. People leave babies in dustbins,

and in telephone boxes, and someone finds them and takes them to the hospital. 'You're a nuisance though,' he told this baby. 'I don't want to be bothered going to the hospital with you, I want to get home and play with my computer.'

I could take it home and give it to Grandma, of course. Grandma could take it to the hospital, I wouldn't have to waste any more of my time. Or I might meet a policeman on the way. The policeman would be pleased with me for finding the baby, wouldn't he? He might even give me a reward.

Hang about, though, hang about, don't be in too much hurry, Edward Lawson, there might be a better idea. Ha, ha, there is a better idea! That policeman might be too mean to give me a reward. There's a certain way to make some money here - what about the people who *buy* babies! They do buy them, they do, I saw that on the television as well. They go all the way to other countries, and spend out thousands of pounds, just to buy a baby.

And the thing is, *I've* got one they could buy!

I wouldn't ask them for thousands of pounds, I could let them have it cheap. They could give me five hundred, or six hundred, or . . . anyway, not thousands . . . Well, perhaps *one* thousand . . . It would still be a bargain because they wouldn't have to pay for the aeroplane to go to that other country . . .

Excitement mounting, Edward peeped into the bag again. It's not *really* all that ugly, he thought, not really . . . I expect some people would think it was quite pretty . . . Well, all right, I could let them have it a bit cheap considering how ugly it is, that would be fair, wouldn't it?

The future was not just sparkling now, it was a great golden blaze, shimmering and wonderful, and just within his reach. Not in nine years' time, not in five years, or four, but *now*.

There were people coming along the path towards him now, he saw them out of the corner of his eye. Not

Strangers, just a few slowcoaches of parents, choosing this way to escort their children home. Quickly, Edward stuffed the baby in the bag back under the seat, and took his homework out of his school bag, so he could pretend to be doing it until they had passed. Giddy with exhilaration, he forced his mind to deal with the practicalities of his new future.

There are a few problems, he acknowledged. Like - I'd have to keep the baby somewhere. Till I find someone who wants to buy it, I'd have to keep it somewhere. That is one problem.

. . . And feed it, and all that sort of thing. That is another problem, because I don't really know how to do it.

And keep the whole thing a secret, because they won't let me if they find out. The adults won't let me, they'll say the baby has to go to the hospital, I know them. And it's not fair because it's my baby, I found it!

Looks like I'll have to find someone to help me. Who? Well, a girl of course! Girls know about babies. I must hurry up and find a girl, before they all get home.

Eagerly, Edward dragged the bag with the baby in it out from under the seat once more. The baby seemed to have gone to sleep. His school bag over one shoulder, and the paper bag dangling from one hand, Edward hurried to the park gate - and hesitated. Of course he would have to give this girl some of the money, and that was a pity . . . Never mind, he wouldn't have to give her much. She could be, like, his servant or something. After all it was his baby, he found it.

He looked carefully up and down the road. There was one girl from his class, and one from the other Year Six class, but they were both with their mums, or other people's mums, and with younger brothers and sisters tagging along. He wanted one by herself.

There! What about that one! Alice Cousins, what about her? A most uninteresting person - so quiet in class you

might miss her altogether. But she must be sensible. She must be sensible, because you couldn't help noticing how Miss Churchwood was always picking her for doing important jobs. And whatever she was asked to do she always did it. And, *and . . . she had a new baby brother*, didn't she . . . or a sister, or something! So she'd be sure to know all about babies.

Pity she had to be with her friend, that scatty Miranda person. Perhaps Miranda could be got rid of.

Edward ran, calling Alice's name.

The short, lumpy girl with the heavy red face stopped and looked back. 'What is it?' She spoke in a small shy voice, her eyes not quite meeting his. There was no expression on her face – there hardly ever was.

'Come back here a minute, I want to ask you something.'

She came, obediently, and the other girl came too.

'Not you!' Edward told her. 'Alice.'

'Not *me*?' Miranda's smooth blonde hair swung, a cascade of gold as she tipped her head sideways. She favoured Edward with a teasing smile; the green eyes with their long lashes sparkled. Silly cow, Edward thought scornfully, she thinks I fancy her! All the boys did fancy Miranda a bit, he knew, all except for him. Edward fancied no one because he was never going to get married, ever. Catch him sharing his millions, no way!

'I want to talk to Alice, all right?' he said. 'It's private, and it's a secret.'

Miranda linked arms with the other girl. 'Alice is my friend,' she insisted. 'We don't have secrets from each other, do we, Alice? We tell each other everything, don't we?'

Alice agreed. She would, of course. She was an agreeing sort of person.

Edward sighed. 'OK, you as well then, but you have to swear not to tell anybody. Both of you.'

'Yeah, yeah, we both swear, don't we, Alice? Hurry up, then, what's the secret?'

Edward held the bag open. 'Look!'

Miranda screamed. 'Oh, the angel! Oh, the sweet little thing!'

'Shut up!' Edward hissed. 'We don't want people to notice!'

'Why? Whose baby is it?'

'Mine, of course, I found it. Somebody threw it away, and I found it, under a seat in the park.'

'It's newborn,' said Alice. 'You should take it to the hospital, or the police station.'

'It would be more fun to keep it though, wouldn't it?' Edward pointed out. 'But the thing is, I can't actually look after a baby all by myself.'

'Well, we'll help you!' Miranda enthused. 'We'll help you, won't we, Alice?' She began jumping up and down with excitement. 'Oh the angel! Oh, the lovely little thing!'

If she says that one more time, Edward thought, I shall probably hit her. And I can't mention about selling the baby now she's gone all sappy about it. With an effort, he controlled his annoyance. 'The thing is,' he said, 'we have to think of somewhere to keep it.'

'It will need bottles, and nappies,' said Alice slowly. 'And it will have to be bathed, and somewhere warm to sleep because they mustn't catch cold . . . It ought to go to the hospital really.'

'Oh, not the *hospital*,' said Miranda. 'Not the hospital, Alice! It's all right, Edward, we're not taking the darling, darling thing to the hospital . . . Can I hold it a minute?'

'No . . . I mean, only if you help. If you think of somewhere we can keep it.'

' . . . What about my bedroom?'

'Get real!'

'Well - / don't know, do I? Edward, *please* let me hold the darling, darling baby!' Miranda put her head on one side

and gave him her most charming smile. 'Please, pretty please, with sugar on top!'

'Only if—'

'I know,' said Miranda, suddenly. 'What about your playhouse, Alice?'

Alice just looked wooden; you couldn't tell from her face what she was thinking or feeling. 'It wouldn't do,' she said, in her small shy voice. 'I'm sorry.'

'It *would* do! Why wouldn't it? Your playhouse - right down the bottom of the garden, it's perfect!'

'It wouldn't do,' Alice said again.

'Yes, it would! Why wouldn't it? Nobody ever goes there, only us.'

'They do sometimes. When they want to fetch me for something.'

'Well, they don't have to see what's inside! You're just being difficult, isn't she, Edward?'

Alice turned her head. 'We ought to take the baby to the hospital, though.'

'Oh, fiddle the hospital! I'm tired of hearing about the boring old hospital, aren't you, Edward? Come on, Alice! Please, Alice! Please pretty please with sugar on top! You're nodding, I saw her nodding, didn't you, Edward? You can't get out of it now. She can't get out of it now, can she? So let's just go, and I can hold the dear, darling, sweet, lovely little baby; I can't wait!'

Lies and more lies

Alice's head spun, floating oddly somewhere above her body. This wasn't real, it couldn't be real, and yet it was! And what was going to happen now?

Clearly, what she had said yes to was a very wrong and silly thing to do, and Mum and Dad would not be pleased with her if they found out. And how could they *not* find out if this wrong and silly thing went on for any length of time? And then they would be really shocked and angry, wouldn't they? Mum hardly ever got angry, but Dad did sometimes, and he would surely be angry about this! Her parents would punish her, she supposed, but that was not the worst thing. The worst thing was how unpleased they were going to be.

On the other hand, if she had said no, then *Miranda* would not be pleased. And Miranda was her best friend in all the world. Alice loved Miranda, was desperately proud of being best friends with her; she couldn't bear it if that ever came to an end.

It was so hard to please everyone, all the time; but when you weren't pretty, or clever, that was the only way to make sure of being liked, and wanted, wasn't it? And besides, pleasing people gave you a happy feeling, inside.

Number 25 Almond Avenue. And oh dear, there was Mum on the lawn, stretched out in a sun-lounger, a baby's pram beside her. Mum opened her eyes lazily as the children tried to tiptoe past her. 'Hullo, you lot - where are you off to?'

Alice felt herself turn cold with guilt and fear, in spite of the hot sun. 'Just down to the playhouse.' Proud of her pretty mother as Alice was, she fervently wished her elsewhere at that moment.

Alice's mother smiled a sleepy smile. 'Lovely day, isn't it?' She had a high-pitched, fluting sort of voice. 'Hullo, Miranda. And . . . er . . . whatever your name is.' She smoothed the flowing blue and purple Indian dress over her slender legs, and smiled another sleepy smile.

'We're going to the playhouse,' Alice said again. She forced herself not to look at Edward's carrier bag. If she didn't look, then perhaps Mum wouldn't look.

'Just run down to the shop for me first, there's a good girl. You don't mind, do you?'

Alice swallowed the lump of dismay which had risen in her throat and was threatening to choke her. 'What about my friends?'

Alice's mother smiled again. 'Come on now, you can all go, can't you? It's only that I'm out of eggs. Won't take you more than ten minutes! Leave your school bags here.'

What's wrong with *her* going, Edward thought furiously. She looks like she's been lying there all afternoon - why does Alice have to do it? He felt a slight movement in the carrier bag which dangled against his legs. He held the bag behind his back, where he felt it moving some more.

'What have you got there?' said Alice's mother to Edward. She turned her head, mildly curious. 'Looks like something alive.'

'It's a kitten,' said Edward. 'I found it in the park.'

'Oh, let me see.' She eased herself up slowly, and leaned forward.

'Better not,' said Miranda. 'It's a really horrid kitten. It scratches. And it bit Edward, didn't it, Edward?'

'Yes, it did. That's why I put it in the bag. So it can't bite any more.'

'Ugh! How not very nice! You should have a tetanus jab for that.'

'Oh, it's OK.'

'Well, I don't agree. Better safe than sorry.'

'I mean,' said Edward desperately, 'it's OK because I had a jab already. Last week, when another cat bit me.'

'Ho, hum . . . Well please take this one away. Ugh! And don't bring it back!' Alice's mother turned her back on Edward and his kitten, to smile fondly into the pram.

'All right, I won't. I mean, I won't bring it back. I'll take it away now.' Edward hurried back to the road, glad to have escaped but with no idea what he was going to do with the baby now.

Miranda ran after him. 'Look, we don't have to give up,' she said. 'We can still sneak the baby into Alice's playhouse, after we did the shopping. Can't we, Alice?'

Alice was trailing behind, the wooden expression on the heavy red face, only her dragging footsteps showing how unhappy she really was.

'Can't we?' Miranda insisted.

'How long could we keep it for, though?' Alice struggled to say. 'Even if we can get it in? I mean - it's not very sensible, is it? I mean . . . I'm sorry . . .'

'Oh, why does everything have to be *sensible*? Come on, Alice, it's fun!'

Well, he'd wanted someone sensible to help him, Edward reflected. Not that sensible, though. What was the matter with this Alice, she wasn't *trying* to help! Anyway, he wasn't giving up now, he most certainly wasn't. 'We have to find a way to sneak past Alice's mum,' he said.

Let them *not* think of anything, Alice prayed. Let them not think of a way round the problem, and we won't have to go on with this silly wrong thing, and it won't be because of me, it will be because of just bad luck!

'I know!' said Miranda. 'The baby can be my doll! We can throw the bag away, and the baby can be my doll that I just fetched from my house, how about that?'

Nice one, Miranda! Edward gave Miranda a condescending look of approval, but Alice began to think how lovely it

would be to start this day all over again - only this time have just safe, easy, ordinary things in it.

The shop was cool, and smelled of safe, ordinary things. Alice breathed the comforting, reassuring smells, and tried not to think about Edward and Miranda, left outside with the baby, where the heat was making sticky pools of black tar, on the pavement.

'Now you *have* to let me hold it,' said Miranda eagerly. 'You have to let me hold it now, Edward, so we can pretend it's my doll.'

She lifted it out of the bag, covering its head and face with her hand. The baby began to cry. There were people in the road; surely someone must notice, and think something peculiar was going on. 'Do something!' said Edward, urgently.

'Like what?'

'Stop it crying, of course.'

'Well, I don't know how to do that, do I? You can't expect me to know everything!'

Frantic with anxiety, Edward felt his temper erupt, spilling unreasonably all over Miranda. 'So what's the use of you? You silly, stupid, useless cow! What's the use of you?'

Miranda stared at him in astonishment. She was not accustomed to having boys speak to her like that. Haughtily she thrust the baby at Edward. 'All right, you wonderful useful know-it-all person, *you* do it!'

He took the baby, because there seemed no choice, and by some miracle it did stop crying. He pulled the towel over its head and held it awkwardly in his arms. One passer-by did turn to look. 'He likes playing with dolls,' Miranda gleefully informed the passer-by. 'Funny, isn't it? He's always been like that!'

Edward hated her. At that moment he thought he had probably never hated anyone so much in his whole life.

Alice came out of the shop. 'Do have a look at Edward! Playing with his doll!' Miranda doubled up, exploding with

malicious laughter.

'If you don't stop saying that,' Edward threatened her, 'you're going to get a fat lip, all right?'

He looked all set to give her one, all set to forget the baby altogether; in her alarmed imagination Alice saw the baby crashing to the ground, disregarded, even trampled on! She threw her shopping down, and took the baby from Edward's unresisting arms. Shaking inwardly with fright, Alice held the tiny bundle close, cradling its head against her shoulder.

And that was when the feeling came.

It was a feeling so strong, so unexpected, that it left her standing in bewilderment, unable to grasp the meaning of it - until she found herself thinking the words: I want this baby to be mine! Oh, I *want* it, I want it to be *mine*!

Edward sulked, kicking his heel against the wall behind him. 'Come on,' Miranda coaxed him. 'Cheer up, I didn't mean it!'

Edward went on kicking his heel against the wall.

'I was only teasing,' said Miranda. 'Come on, we'll let Alice carry the doll, I mean the baby, shall we?' She picked up the shopping and Edward went on kicking at the wall.

'All right,' said Miranda, 'you just stay there if you want to, Edward. Alice and I can look after the baby by ourselves, you don't have to be in it!'

With a great effort, Edward swallowed his pride and his anger. If he let the baby out of his sight at this point, he could lose his claim to it. He stopped kicking the wall. 'Yes I do have to be in it. It's my baby, I found it!'

'Well come on, then,' said Miranda. 'We're wasting all the afternoon.'

Back once more, round the side of Alice's house, where Alice's mother once more lay in the sun, now idly and contentedly rocking the pram with one foot. 'One of the eggs got broken,' said Alice, with some apprehension.

'Ho, hum, just leave them in the kitchen,' said her mother.