

MILES JUDD

'Crisply funny... Judd is a genteel treat' *Guardian*

FIBBER IN THE HEAT



Following England in India – A Blogger's Tale

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About the Book

Fanatical about cricket since he was a boy, Miles Jupp would do anything to see his heroes play. But perhaps deciding to bluff his way into the press corps during England's Test series in India wasn't his best idea.

By claiming to be the cricket correspondent for BBC Scotland and getting a job with the (Welsh) *Western Mail*, Miles lands the press pass that will surely be the ticket to his dreams. Soon, he finds himself in cricket heaven - drinking with David Gower and Beefy, sharing bar room banter with Nasser Hussain and swapping diarrhoea stories with the *Test Match Special* team. Amazing!

But struggling in the heat under the burden of his own fibs, reality soon catches up with Miles as - like a cricket-obsessed Boot from Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* - he bumbles from one disaster to the next. A joyous, charming, yet cautionary tale, *Fibber in the Heat* is for anyone who's ever dreamt about doing nothing but watching cricket all day long.

About the Author

Miles Jupp was born in London in 1979, and is an actor, writer and comedian. In 2003 he was nominated for the Perrier Best Newcomer Award at the Edinburgh Festival. He has been a frequent guest on Radio 4's *The News Quiz*, and BBC TV's *Have I Got News For You* and *Mock The Week*. He plays Nigel in the sitcom *Rev*, and John Duggan in *The Thick Of It*. He has also appeared (to be fair sometimes extremely briefly) in a number of feature films such as *Harry Potter And The Order Of The Phoenix*, *Made In Dagenham* and *Johnny English: Reborn*. He's done all sorts of stuff, really. Even proper theatre; *A Day In The Death Of Joe Egg* at the Glasgow Citizens, *The Way Of The World* at Northampton Royal. He's made several documentaries about literature for Radio 4. None of this seems to matter though. He could have spent six months manning the international space system, or been kidnapped by guerilla fighters, or pioneered a new method of losing weight using sound alone; any description of him would still be likely to focus on the fact that he used to play Archie The Inventor in the childrens' programme *Balamory*.

FIBBER IN THE HEAT

Following England in India — A Blogger's Tale

MILES JUPP



*For my father, who rang me up one day and told me to
write a book.*

Chapter One

I LOVE CRICKET. But I can still remember a time, very clearly, when I didn't. I was ambivalent about cricket. It was just another sport, like all the other sports that I also felt ambivalent about. I must have first played it when I was about six or seven at school. I had a copy of the tabletop game Test Match, which featured Ian Botham and David Gower on its box. I played the real game, albeit badly, for my school under-10s team. I even, for a time, went to afternoon nets in the indoor school at Lord's.

All the time, however, I was just going along with it. It was part of the timetable, like football or athletics. It was just one of those many things that you did at that age, simply because you had to.

But one day all of that changed. One fateful morning during the summer holidays in 1991, bored, back from boarding school and looking for something to do, I pushed open the study door of my father; a former church minister, he now had a mysterious academic career writing about death. 'Come in,' he called without registering that I hadn't actually knocked. His study was a long, narrow room with steep, crammed bookcases on each side. The shelves were piled high with the academic tomes that provided the bibliography and footnotes to his work. A number of tall, grey filing cabinets were arranged haphazardly about the place, giving the room a feeling not unlike a carelessly thrown together sculpture garden. Each one had been

placed exactly where they stood by a delivery man. 'Just put it down where you like,' my father had told the first delivery man, 'I haven't decided quite where to put it yet.' He would then give the cabinet not another moment's thought until a day came when he realised that it was full and so ordered a second one to be delivered, whereupon the pattern repeated itself.

I dodged my way in and out of the metallic standing stones and made my way to the far end of the room where my father's desk was placed, under a huge window through which bright sun was streaming down onto the many piles of notepads, newspaper cuttings and files that covered most of the desk. Only a small proportion of the desk seemed to have been set aside for working on, but in the summer months that position was usually coveted by a large tabby cat who liked to sprawl and bask, eyes shut, for as much of the day as possible. 'I've just stopped working to have a cup of something for elevenses,' said my father, who then immediately began to reorganise a pile of files on the floor by the desk.

I sighed. I wasn't really sure what the work was that my father claimed to have just stopped doing. All I knew for sure was that it involved lots of paper and lots of books, and that when we went on family holidays we seemed to spend a lot of time visiting cemeteries. I knew what my mother did for a living - she worked in London in order, she said, to finance whatever it was that Daddy did. But the truth was that I wasn't remotely curious about what my father did all day in his study; I wasn't very curious about anything. This made it all the more surprising to my father when I suddenly posed him a question.

'Daddy,' I said, 'what's happening in the cricket at the moment?'

To this day I have no idea where the question came from. I lingered over the words 'the' and 'cricket', as if I was repeating a phrase that I had heard somebody else

use, and wanted to make sure that I was pronouncing the phrase correctly. Of course, I had talked occasionally about cricket in the past. But never before would I have dreamt of referring to it as 'the cricket', as if it was a region of Africa that people had suddenly started mentioning because there was a civil war there.

My father was both delighted and stunned. It was probably the first question that he had heard me utter all holiday, other than endlessly saying, 'What can I do to stop me being so bored?'

'Well,' he said, breaking off from attempting to decipher some handwritten notes he had once made on an index card, 'at the moment England are playing a Test series against the West Indies. There is one game of the series remaining, which starts in a week's time, and if England win it they will draw the series.'

And that was that. In a single moment of intimate paternal connection, I became obsessed. There was something so beautifully clear about this equation. So much of what my father usually tried to explain to me was well beyond my comprehension, but here I had been furnished with an answer the essence of which I could grasp immediately. My interest in cricket went from almost nothing to an obsession in an instant, lurching into action in the same way that a sleepy dog might when it hears a key turning slowly in a lock. My father passed me a copy of that day's *Times* still warm from another cat, this time a large, ginger one, who had been sleeping on it. I sat down on the floor of my father's study and read all of the cricket reports and articles in it. I then went to the pile of back issues that teetered on a creaking chair in the kitchen and wormed my way through all of them, ignoring the headlines on the front pages that must have been concerned with unrest in the Gulf, and instead turned to one of the back pages where I could read about 'bowlers in good rhythm' or batsmen 'struggling to convert their county form into Test

runs'. Cricket, I soon realised, had its own language, and it was one with which I instantly fell in love. Outside of articles on cricket, one could never conceive of people being described as 'wristy', or happen upon a sentence that read: 'Although proving adept at playing inside out, he was less sure sweeping against the turning ball and eventually perished as he top edged to a leg gully that had been moved finer.' The fact that at first I didn't understand a single word of it did nothing to dampen my new-found fervour.

As well as its language, I also found great pleasure in analysing the statistics that were carefully laid out in each day's edition. I realised that if I attacked the last week's papers in order, and spread them all out on the kitchen table, I could follow the course of each county game day by day. Each game was a self-contained story. I would read the preview that was printed on the morning of a game's start, and then monitor the scorecards and reports that appeared in the next four days' editions, thus feeling that I myself was involved in each game's ebb and flow. In some games one side would dominate throughout. In other games the initiative would be seized and re-seized in unexpected, brilliant moments and thus the balance of power would swing back and forth wildly, like a lunatic on the end of a rope. I spent entire days just doing this.

I tried to share some of my new knowledge with my older brother Edmund, who liked to spend all his waking hours reading novels and listening to music. Several times I bounded up the stairs to his room at the top of the house armed with some bits of newspaper that I thought contained interesting tales, but he could never really demonstrate any interest in what I was telling him. He would merely wait until I had finished my prepared speech and then say, 'Call me Ed.' He had, in fairness, just commenced the messy business of being a teenager, and so who knows what sort of thing was going on inside that body

or head of his. Instead I would report my observations to my father, who would say things like, 'Yes, cricket can be like chess sometimes.' I thought that cricket seemed nothing whatsoever like chess. Whenever had a chess player been praised for being 'strong off his legs'? Alongside such insane utterances, my father was also able to impart more practical advice. This included showing me how to use the Teletext service on the television, so that I could check for cricket news and scores throughout each day.

It was through this medium that I eventually learnt that England's squad for the last Test of our series against the West Indies had been announced. I recognised many of the names from the county scores that I had been reading in *The Times*. G. Gooch and H. Morris played for Essex and Glamorgan, I knew, and M. Atherton played for Lancashire. A man called A. Stewart had been recalled, whom I knew to be a Surrey player. Another player had also been recalled, with a name far more recognisable than all the other names put together: I.T. Botham.

*

In the event, I was unable to watch any of the match's coverage on television. My father, as had long been agreed, had taken my brother and me away on a holiday to Ireland. My mother, though too busy to commit to any substantial time away herself, felt that the three of us would benefit from a camping trip. People that knew us thought that camping seemed a strange thing to attempt by a family that hadn't ever really managed to master simple domestic life. We were, after all, a family that sometimes sat down together for supper when my mother had returned exhausted from London, only to discover that none of us had actually thought to prepare anything to eat. Thus we would sit around the dinner table discussing our respective

days and eating nothing but cheese and tinned fish. We were all very excited about the idea of camping though, and had gone and rented an enormous tent, as well as a portable cooking stove and gas canisters.

But being excited about the idea of something and actually having any aptitude for it are very different things. In the end, of the 18 nights that we spent away from home, a mere six were spent sleeping in the tent that been hired for this purpose. We had a terribly depressing experience in a place called Spiddle that was so wet and gloomy that my brother and I decided that camping was not for us. Privately, I suspect my father had realised very early on in the holiday that we simply were not up to its demands. All that I really liked about this way of life, it turned out, was starting fires - an activity that was forbidden at most campsites. On one disastrous evening I was stung on the ankle by a wasp, and in a state of confused shock all that I was capable of doing was jumping up and down whilst shouting 'my head, my head', which meant that the source of my panic took far longer for my father to uncover than it should have done.

Ed, meanwhile, had a habit of letting his mind wander at crucial points during our frequently fraught attempts to put up the tent. Just as my father was saying something along the lines of, 'Now we all need to pull at the same time,' he would realise that Ed had let go of his end, and was instead practising chords on an imaginary guitar. 'The rest of us are trying to put a tent up, Ed. What are you doing?' my father would ask through gritted teeth. Ed, once shaken from his reverie, would always calmly reply, 'I am awaiting further instruction.'

My father began to find this ritual rather tiresome, although he could never admit to this. And so he told us that he didn't like camping for an altogether different reason. He told us that he was appalled by how much it had changed since he was a boy scout, and was horrified by

how prissy it had become. If you were going to stay in something called a campsite that actually had electricity, gas hobs and working lavatories then you might as well be staying in a bed and breakfast. And so we did.

Much of our time away was spent travelling to what the guidebooks described as 'places of interest'. We kissed the Stone Of Eloquence at Blarney Castle in Cork and climbed the stairs of Thoor Ballylee, where the poet Yeats had lived. In Dublin we visited the house in Upper Dorset Street where Sean O'Casey had been born, and late one afternoon we clambered over the rocks of Sandycove to see the Martello Tower where Oliver St John Gogarty was said to have fired a shot at James Joyce. My father and Ed were both utterly entranced by it all.

I, however, was less entranced. None of these things, I am ashamed to say, meant a great deal to the 11-year-old Jupp. Being away from home didn't represent a wonderful opportunity to see new things and places. It simply meant that I was unable to watch the cricket on the television or check county scores on Teletext. I mentioned this to my father in the car, though, and for my troubles I was rewarded with a wonderful discovery: BBC Radio 4's *Test Match Special*. This represented some sort of heaven to me: a radio show in which jolly men with jolly-sounding names and even jollier voices told listeners exactly what was happening in the cricket and filled in the gaps with chatter of more general interest, such as their best recent experiences involving cakes, or a discussion about whether or not hedgehogs should be given milk. At one point during this game, and I had no idea what had caused it, two of the men on this show collapsed into hysteria and for a minute and a half no sound emanated from the car's radio but that of their barely muffled shrieking and the occasional fragment of a croaked sentence. Ed and I, sitting in the back of the car, found ourselves giggling too, whilst in the driver's seat my father let out a series of snorts and

laughed so hard that he had to punch the horn four times in order to get a grip on himself.

Sadly, the luxury of *Test Match Special* was taken away from me as suddenly as it had been delivered when one afternoon my father, perhaps whilst explaining French verbs to Ed, became a victim of the power of association and found himself driving on the wrong side of the road. No one was hurt, but the family car had to be towed away and was replaced with a hire car that – horror of horrors – had no radio. Cricket news would now have to be sourced via the telephone.

And so it was that one day, whilst staying in a town called Clifton, the three of us rang home, and my mother's friend Karen, who was visiting for the afternoon, told me that England had won. Botham had hit the winning runs and immediately became my hero. I was elated. From that moment on my moods began to run more or less in tandem with the fortunes of the England cricket team. My adolescence, for instance, was perfectly in sync with England's horrendous spell throughout the nineties.

*

As I grew older, my obsession deepened. At school, I would absent-mindedly play batting strokes as I walked along the corridors. For my twelfth birthday I asked for a tiny radio so that I could surreptitiously check the score during lessons. I once chose to be late for a maths lesson so that I could watch David Gower make his 1992 comeback on the television in the common room, and then skipped the rest of it to witness him become England's highest run scorer of all time. I was given an absolute rocketing and a detention by a man called Mr Wridgeway, but I didn't regret it for one moment.

In the early months of 1993, I would wake at four in the morning in order to listen to *Test Match Special* on my tiny

radio, and would then feign sickness during the day so that I could regain my lost sleep. England were playing India at that time, and it was a disastrous series in which the England team's averages took as much of a battering as their intestines, which were frequently turned to soup by a combination of bad prawns and ignorance. Most of the England team were ill at one stage or another and an even greater number of them played abysmally. They lost each one of their three Test matches, and their leading wicket taker was Graeme Hick, with his part-time off-spin. Their leading batsman, David Gower, hadn't even been selected for the tour. Despite these failures, I loved listening to the games from India. To me it didn't matter how much England struggled, because the quality of our performances at the games seemed somehow incidental to the carnival of noise created by the crowds present at them. There was a constant cacophony in the background from Indian fans, and whenever the frequent wickets fell during each of England's brief innings it was a full minute before the commentators' voices could be heard over the roar of the Indian crowd. 'Here,' I thought, 'is a country where the people are as obsessed with cricket as I am.' Lying in a bunk bed in a boys' dormitory in a Berkshire preparatory school, wearing both tartan pyjamas and a woollen dressing gown just to keep warm, I genuinely imagined that I had a lot in common with those Indians whose shouts I could hear so clearly.

But cricket did not always bring joy. Later that same year I suffered my first cricketing heartbreak when Ian Botham retired from the first-class game. His last match, fittingly, was against the touring Australians. That week the Jupp family, none of us genetically inclined to great athletic endeavour, were on an extremely stressful cycling holiday in the Loire Valley. A sense of direction is essential to the long-distance cyclist, but so too is the judgement to pack only that which is truly necessary and the ability to ride a

bike confidently when being squeezed off the road by heavy goods vehicles. Day after day, our convoy of four, which sometimes stretched out over a kilometre, would find itself lost or out of water or out of patience. Tempers flared, thighs were chafed and a family vowed never to go on holiday together ever again.

I had calculated the exact time when Botham's last game would come to its conclusion, and at that precise moment I took the time to shed a tear for the end of an era. It was a rare moment of respite from an otherwise continuous barrage of screaming and grumpiness into which our ill-advised vacation had descended. Ian Botham had been my first cricket hero and I was close to bereft. But not entirely. Because before he retired from the game, I had already found another one. A demi-god in fact. And his name was Michael Atherton.

*

Michael Atherton became my favourite cricketer at some point in 1993, a tough year for English cricket during which we played a disastrous series against Australia. Throughout that summer Atherton was a lone beacon for England and by the end of the series I was obsessed with him and grateful for his scores of 19, 25, 80, 99, 11, 9, 55, 63, 72, 28, 50 and 42.

I always believed there was something trustworthy and honest about him. He was stubborn yet unassuming, and he was quiet. It didn't matter to me that he had limitations as a player. The great thing about Atherton was that he knew exactly what his limitations were, and so played within them.

He was such a hero that when I was 13 or 14 at school other boys would say things like 'Michael Atherton? He's your boyfriend.' I suppose this was classic schoolboy misnomenclature - perhaps understanding the definition of

'boyfriend' to be 'someone that you've never actually met, who has no idea of your existence, and whom you merely admire from afar'. Which, as every schoolboy of 13 or 14 knows, would actually make him a 'girlfriend'.

Late in the summer of 1993, Atherton became England captain. In 1994 he was accused -wrongly - of ball-tampering at Lord's. This was a tough moment for me - it probably hit me harder than it hit him. He was fined by his own team manager and hounded by the media. He withstood calls to resign, never even went back to his house between the Lord's game and the next Test at Headingley, and then when he came out to open the batting he got an amazing response from the crowd, and batted doggedly and brilliantly for most of the day. But then, after batting for 360 minutes, he prodded the 224th delivery he faced back to the bowler Brian McMillan who caught it and he was out. For 99 runs. 99. For the second time in his career. I switched off the television, lay on my bed and howled and howled and howled.

For much of the 1990s Michael Atherton *was* English cricket. He led from the front; he scored the most runs. Once he was out, we were usually all out, as if he was some sort of inadvertent trade unionist accidentally leading a strike. Other people did great things in that era for us, but no one, as far as I was concerned, could hold a candle to him. I worshipped him.

I encountered him once in 1995. I went with a friend to see England play West Indies at the Oval in south London. I was an enthusiastic autograph collector in those days, and someone had told me that all of the England players parked their cars in the playground of Archbishop Tenison's School, just along Oval Road. So my friend and I went along to this car park and waited for as long as we had to. In dribs and drabs, various players came back to the car park and signed autographs for us and chatted pleasantly. There was a small crowd of us, and we waited and waited until I

had the autograph of every other member of the England team, the twelfth man, both umpires, the match referee, and two national broadsheets' cricket correspondents. But still no Atherton.

Then eventually a smaller boy shouted, 'There's Atherton', and we all looked back along the road towards the ground. There he was, laden down with cricket equipment, slowly making his way towards the car park, all the while besieged by a group of fans and autograph hunters who had followed him from the ground. Patiently, we waited and by the time he got to us he maybe had a group of just six people around him. He stopped, and again signed autographs diligently and graciously. Just at that moment a couple of cocky, confident, probably slightly drunk, teenage girls came walking in the other direction. When they clocked that Atherton was signing things, they stopped and one of them said, 'Who are you?'

And he said, in his delightful Lancastrian lilt, 'Why? Who are you?'

And one of the girls said, 'It doesn't matter who we are. You're the one signing autographs, you must be someone.'

And Michael Atherton said to them, 'No. I'm not anyone. I'm just a cricketer.'

The captain of the England cricket team, who had just scored a match-saving 95 against the West Indies: 'I'm just a cricketer.'

He rocketed yet further in my estimation.

When I grew up and became the captain of the England cricket team, then I would definitely behave as modestly as that.

Chapter Two

I NEVER DID become the England cricket captain. I never even became good at cricket. The 11-year-old who was mad about the game seemed to be no better a player than the 10-year-old who didn't care a damn for it. As an under-10 player I could usually be guaranteed a passenger berth somewhere in the team. By the time I was in the under-11 age group I was being asked to operate the scoreboard. It was not a big school, however, and so as a 12-year-old I was given a slot in the second XI as a reward for nothing other than enthusiasm. As one of the few players in the team with any interest in the game, I was asked to open the batting. On one occasion I batted for an hour and four minutes and made just one run.

I did have one amazing day, though, when having made single-figure scores in every other match, I suddenly came good in our last fixture of the season. Chasing, as I remember, a total of 77, I went out to face the first ball and, out of nowhere, found form. I had never before been in 'the zone' - as professional batsmen might term it - in my life. Nor have I ever been in it since. But that day people kept bowling at me, and I kept on hitting it, and the ball kept screaming across the outfield. I brought up my half-century with a four driven through mid-on. If you took into account the number of seconds that I raised my bat to the crowd (about 20) compared to the number of people that crowd contained (about seven) then, proportionally speaking, it

was probably one of the biggest celebrations any cricket ground has ever witnessed.

I played a bit at my public school, always enthusiastically but never successfully. I represented the school in various B teams and eventually captained the school Third XI. Played one. Drew one. So I was not in a position, when I left school, to embark on a dazzling career as an international sportsman.

Instead, possibly predictably, I went on to Edinburgh University to read Theology. Whilst there, possibly less predictably, I had started performing stand-up comedy. At the end of the Edinburgh Festival in 2001, I won a long-running newcomer competition called *So You Think You're Funny?* The final was held on 25 August, the same date that Michael Atherton played his final innings for England. In my victory speech, I dedicated my prize to him.

Getting more professional, I found myself an agent, and started travelling to London to do gigs at weekends. And then suddenly I was asked to be in a BBC Scotland comedy programme called *The Live Floor Show*. It was a completely nerve-racking experience. I was a 22-year-old undergraduate who had been doing stand-up less than two years and I was completely, and hopelessly, out of my depth.

At some point during this exhilarating and terrifying period I went to an audition. A few weeks later I was offered the part of 'Archie The Inventor' on a new children's show called *Balamory*. It wasn't quite what I had imagined myself doing with my life, but I was going to get 22 weeks of filming work on it. Besides, it would be on a digital channel, and therefore not many people would even see me prattling about in a pink kilt and jumper.

And so I did it. We had two weeks of filming on the Isle of Mull doing various bits of dancing about, and then we went back to Glasgow and filmed the rest of it. When it started being shown on the CBeebies channel a handful of

people watched it. For a while it looked like *Balamory* might die a slow death as so many things do. But then Alan Yentob, or whoever was in charge of these things, decided that this wonderful piece of work deserved to be put out on a terrestrial channel and that, I think, is when it started going bonkers. There were articles in the newspapers, and in the *Radio Times*. There were impressions of the show on *Dead Ringers*. People would shout 'Archie' at me in the street or in pubs. It was suddenly a big, slightly out of control, deal.

In 2003 I went back to university for two terms and then did a solo stand-up show at the Edinburgh Festival. I muddled through to the end of the year with some writing work and a presenting job for E4, to which I was not at all well suited. 2004 was spent almost entirely filming more episodes of *Balamory*. And then, over Christmas, we did an arena tour.

As 2004 turned into 2005, I didn't know which way to turn. Already another arena tour was planned for the end of the year, but until then I had no idea what I would do with myself. I couldn't really be bothered doing any stand-up gigs on the comedy circuit, and I wasn't offered any other acting work, so I just sat about a bit. I wrote one long essay, which was enough for me to finally finish my degree. But I completely lacked any ambition. The *Balamory* juggernaut had somehow killed all that in me.

In an attempt to get things going again I decided to do not one but two daily shows at that August's Edinburgh Festival. But by the time the festival came around, I had no wish to be involved in it. All I wanted to do was to sit in my flat and watch cricket on the television. Not just any cricket, though. This was the gripping Ashes series of 2005, and in August alone there were three Test matches, of which we won two and drew the other. This was one of the most amazing series ever played on English soil. I found it impossible to concentrate on either of my shows. My

girlfriend Rachel, after she had recovered from the shock of watching my emotional response to the Edgbaston Test, decided that I had to pull myself together. 'You'll just have to get yourself a job that enables you to watch even more cricket,' she told me. 'Oh hang on, you're an actor. There isn't one.'

And yet in many ways it is here that this story begins. When the beastly month-long festival was finally over, England were leading the Australians 2-1, with one game still to play. That fifth and final Test got under way at the Oval on 8 September. England, who had fielded an unchanged team throughout the series, had had to make a change in their team owing to an injury to the Welsh fast bowler Simon Jones. Paul Collingwood came into the team as his replacement, and having won the toss, England chose to bat. At that exact moment I was a little over five miles away, as the crow flies, in the London rehearsal rooms of the National Youth Theatre. This was where the cast of *Balamory* were rehearsing the latest live show, and we were spending that particular day learning the choreography for the various musical numbers. Just as Glenn McGrath was running in to bowl the first ball of the game to Marcus Trescothick, I was struggling to keep up with a rather tricky salsa sequence that for reasons I could never quite establish involved the use of pom-poms.

At the first available opportunity I snuck out onto the fire escape to try and check England's progress on my mobile phone. As it happened, there was no need for the phone, as on the fire escape I found Rich, an Australian crew member who had a portable radio clamped to his ear. I had spent much of the last week telling Rich that Australia were going to be given a hammering, and on each occasion, much to my annoyance, Rich had always smiled and then calmly agreed with me.

'What's happening, Rich?'

‘England are going well, mate. For the moment at least. Love your dancing, by the way.’

Rich was being far too calm for an Australian that genuinely thought that they might be about to lose the Ashes. And as England slumped from 82 without loss to 115-3 by lunch, Rich still kept calmly claiming that we would definitely win. I found his attitude extremely irritating.

Not nearly as irritating, however, as the rest of the cast found my behaviour. They were all well aware that I was not giving the rehearsals the concentration that they required. Whereas the others were all terrified that the remaining three days were not going to be enough time to get the show bashed into order, for me the rehearsals really couldn't be over soon enough. Much to everyone's annoyance, I ducked out of the room to check the score at every opportunity.

By the evening the atmosphere was fraught. The production was encountering rather a lot of difficulties, and in an effort to combat this trend, everybody was doing their utmost to pull the show into some sort of shape. I had spent the day, however, concentrating on England's fortunes, which had brightened considerably since lunch. They had made it to 300 thanks to a century from Andrew Strauss and 70 from Andrew Flintoff. I learnt this news from a text message, and was in a cheery mood as the director Martin and his choreographer wife Beth presented the cast with a series of long and detailed notes. The others all wore long, drawn faces carved with agony and worry. The director finished what he had to say and then explained in grave detail how he was personally going to brutalise anyone who caused him any further stress today and then asked if anybody else had anything to add.

‘Australia have just taken the new ball!’ I announced cheerily, looking up from my mobile.

This news was greeted with silence by the rest of the group, and so I attempted to explain this announcement. I had got as far as saying, 'In Test matches, the bowling side can ask for a new ball after eighty overs...' before sensing that no one wanted to hear the rest.

'If you don't shut up about cricket,' said Martin. 'I'm going to go out and buy a cricket bat just so I've got something to stuff up your stupid, lazy arse.'

'Right,' I said. 'Sorry. We're 315-7, by the way.'

We added four more runs by the close of play, and as it was my birthday I went out for dinner with friends from university, and then we returned to a flat near Victoria and drank whisky until the last of us had passed out. I awoke in an armchair at nine in the morning still fully clothed, and with no possibility of nipping back to the cast's Bloomsbury hotel before getting to my rehearsal. I arrived a quarter of an hour late to find the rest of the cast splayed out on the floor doing a series of extreme stretches under the supervision of the choreographer. I found a spot near the back next to Juliet Cadzow, who played Edie McCredie, the bus driver, and lay down next to her.

'Yesterday's clothes, darling?' she asked with a laugh.

'I can't speak,' I replied. 'I can't do anything.'

I have no idea what our rehearsals achieved that day, but England managed to make 373 before they were all out. Australia had reached 112 for no wicket in reply by teatime when rain washed out the rest of the day's play. Our rehearsals ended at lunchtime the next day when Martin headed up to the National Indoor Arena in Birmingham to supervise the finishing touches that were being made to the set. Everybody else headed back to their homes for two days' rest before we reconvened in Birmingham. I took the tube back to the hotel in Bloomsbury and spent the afternoon sitting in the Irish pub next door, watching the action on a big screen. Eventually England took a wicket, but by that stage Australia's

opening pair had put on 185. Australia then looked like batting on and on. Numerous appeals were turned down, but England only had one more success in the day and at six o'clock I returned to my hotel room with Australia having finished the day on 277-2. There were two days remaining in the game. It was incredible stuff.

*

That evening I met my friends Dougie and Nigel for some drinks in Camden. As I stood waiting for them at the entrance of the tube station, repeatedly turning down offers from men who were trying to sell me drugs, I assessed my options. After the frustrating time that I had had in Edinburgh, I was so thrilled to have actually made it to a city where one of the Ashes games was being played. I didn't want to hear about any more of it via text message or the radio or the television though. I wanted to watch it live. The only hope I had, I realised, would be to buy a ticket from a tout outside the ground. And that, I decided, would be astronomically expensive and not even worth considering.

But, of course, when I was standing outside Camden tube station having those thoughts, I was stone cold sober. Six hours later, things had changed somewhat. Clambering out of a taxi in Russell Square, I was determined that the next morning I would buy a ticket from a tout and so headed straight to a cash machine to withdraw as much as I could.

And so it was that I woke up with a sore head and four hundred pounds in cash sitting on the bedside table. I showered, shovelled down one of the hotel's obscene breakfasts, and then dashed to a tube station. It was only nine in the morning when I arrived at the Oval - an hour and a half before play was due to start - but already the place was heaving with cricket fans. Above the noise, I

could just make out my mobile phone ringing. It was Rachel, demanding to know why she had not received any call the previous night.

'Where were you? Were you rehearsing until late?'

'No, we finished at lunchtime.'

'Lunchtime? And you couldn't find time to call?'

'I was too engrossed in the cricket, Rachel. And then I met up with some friends who really frown upon the use of mobile phones in social situations.'

'Who was that?'

'Dougie and Nigel. You don't know them, they're quite staunch on the issue. I can't really talk at the moment, Rachel.'

'Where are you?'

'I'm at the Oval about to try and buy a ticket.'

'I hope you're not going to try and buy one from a tout. That really would be a stupid waste of money.'

'Of course I wouldn't.'

'Then what's your plan?'

'I don't really have one, Rachel. I'm just hoping that something will arise...organically.'

'Give me a ring when you've stopped talking nonsense.'

'Will do. Love you.'

Touts immediately started proffering tickets, but I found myself carried past them by the crowd surging towards the gates. A sixth sense guided me to turn right at the busy turnstiles and then I walked until I came across a queue that included only 20 people or so. I asked the chap at the head of it what it was for.

'Returns. If you join this queue, you'll probably get a ticket in an hour.'

I was staggered, and so instantly joined the back of the queue. It hadn't even occurred to me that such a thing existed. I asked the man in front of me how likely it would be that we would all get in.

‘Very,’ said the man, with a strong Sunderland accent. ‘I’ve got in like this every day so far. Today won’t be any different.’

‘Why are there so few people queuing here?’

‘Nobody seems to know about it. Or it doesn’t occur to them.’

But an hour and a half later we were all still standing in the queue. It was the start of play and a hush had fallen around the ground. In this moment of quiet I considered the situation of the game. If I did get into the ground, it would be to watch Australia batting and it was definitely them who held the upper hand. With two days of cricket still to go it was entirely conceivable that they could go on to win the Test and thus retain the Ashes. It was a truly horrible thought. For ten whole minutes the queue fell silent. Some of them listening to their radios through earpieces; others, like me, were trying to listen to the noise of the crowd for any hint of what was going on. There were 23,000 people inside the ground and each of them was just as quiet. But then, suddenly, there was a great roar from within.

‘Martyn’s gone,’ said a voice. ‘Caught Collingwood, bowled Flintoff.’

There was a huge cheer from the queue.

Then a steward poked his head out of the little entrance at the head of our queue.

‘Okay, everyone, that’s some more tickets just released.’

There followed an even bigger cheer from the queue, and we filed into the booth to buy them. Fifty-six pounds bought me a ticket.

*

I made my way around to Block Ten and took a seat at the very back of the stand. It was the first time I had been in a packed cricket stadium for years. My first thought as I

looked out over the scene before me was that it was strange to finally be watching some of this incredible series at the ground itself. I had watched so much of it on the television on my own or with Rachel, that every emotional moment of it up to now seemed personal to me, and only me. Sitting in a crowd of thousands I now realised that it wasn't like that at all. And for a brief moment I felt almost cheated. As if some other people had just stumbled upon my secret. Now that I had to share it with all these people, it suddenly wasn't so much fun any more.

Next ball those thoughts were immediately dismissed from my mind. Flintoff swung one into Hayden's pads, and he was given out leg before. Hayden's almost seven-hour vigil was over and watching cricket had never felt so good. The crowd rose as one, arms aloft, and I found myself yelling, 'COME ON!' as loud as I possibly could. A man who had looked incapable of getting out for two days was now trudging back to the pavilion, and past the England team who were celebrating in a huddle. The crowd that morning had seemed so apprehensive, and yet these 11 men seemed to have more belief than all of us together.

Flintoff and Hoggard were bowling superbly well in tandem, and who knows where they found the energy reserves that they were drawing on. The fortress that Australia had spent two days defending was razed to the ground in a two-hour siege by the pair. Katich was the next to go, also leg before to Flintoff, and then Gilchrist, after flourishingly briefly, was adjudged LBW to Hoggard. At lunch Australia, having started the day on 277-2, were 356-6. England still possessed a slender lead of 17, and the crowd had gone from a state of anxiety to one of elation.

They added only another 11 runs before they were all dismissed. Hoggard took three of the remaining four that fell, the last of which was a catch by Ashley Giles sprinting around the long-on boundary just in front of where I was sitting. The moment that the catch was pouched the fielder,

still at full pelt, turned to the crowd behind him, punched the air and proffered up a war cry that was lost amidst the crowd's own raucous response. But dark clouds gathered up above, and brought about an early end to the day's proceedings after a brief and nervous stint at the crease by England. We had made it to 36 for the loss of Andrew Strauss, prodding at a big spinning delivery from Warne and getting an inside edge to Katich at short leg. The crowd, anxious only that England secure a draw, were delighted by the sight of their team leaving the field, and applauded their decision to do so with uncharacteristic warmth. It is rare to see a full house celebrate the fact that there is no more cricket for them to watch that day, but the less play that was possible, the more chance England had.

All around me, other fans were rising from their seats and collecting their possessions. Newspapers were picked off the floor and folded into bags to be alongside flasks that had been emptied long ago. The detritus from their day out was left where it had fallen, or kicked under seats. There was just one day remaining of this fascinating and absorbing series, and I was determined that I was going to return to witness it.

Of course, I knew that tickets for the final day were as scarce as hen's teeth. And so the next morning I arrived at the Oval even earlier. The sight that greeted me was disheartening beyond belief: the returns queue was already 200 deep.

'Do you reckon there'll be enough tickets for everyone in the queue?' I asked a passing steward.

'No way,' he told me. 'There probably won't be any.'

Brilliantly, though, I had another plan. I still had much of the £400 in my pocket, and so set off to find a tout. It did not take long. As soon as I had headed into the throng by the turnstiles, someone grabbed my shoulder and bellowed into my ear.

'Want to buy a ticket, mate?'

I turned round to see an incredibly meaty-looking man, with a hard stare, a shaved head and a huge anorak. Had I encountered such a man in a pub, I would probably have left. Had I seen him in a tube station, I would probably have run outside and hailed a taxi. I had no idea what to say to this gruesome creature.

‘Possibly,’ I ventured.

‘Follow me,’ he said. He took me by the arm and marched me through the crowd.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked nervously.

‘Behind a van,’ he growled. ‘I don’t want the police to see us.’

Oh God.

We reached a red van parked on Oval Road, and he dragged me behind it. There an even meatier man with fat, fat hands was waiting. This had been a terrible idea.

‘This lad says he wants to buy a ticket,’ said Meaty Man 1, positioning me between himself and Meaty Man 2.

‘Oh yeah?’ said Meaty Man 2. ‘How much have you got on you?’

‘Two hundred and fifty pounds,’ I heard myself say. Quite the wheeler-dealer.

Oh no. What had I done? Maybe these men weren’t ticket touts at all, but muggers. Perhaps one of them was going to take a hammer out of his anorak and knock me out cold with it. Who knew what they’d do when they discovered that I was carrying a hundred pounds more than I had claimed. Maybe they’d drug me, and pass me around their meaty mates for sex?

I racked my brains for a way out of the situation. I couldn’t fight these men; I had no combat skills whatsoever. The only moves I had in my head were the ones for the salsa sequence that we’d just been taught for *Balamory: Live!* At best that would only ever buy me time. I didn’t even have any pom-poms on me.