

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
The Best a Man Can Get

john o'farrell **this is your life**

'Excellently done...O'Farrell gives an extra
squirm to the traditional English comedy
of embarrassment'

Sunday Times



About the Book

Jimmy Conway always wanted to be famous. As a teenager he even stashed away a series of letters advising his future self on how to handle the fame and fortune coming his way. And so when he's reunited with these rather embarrassing predictions in his mid-thirties he can't help feeling he must be a bit of a disappointment to himself.

Thus begins an extraordinary journey into the world of celebrity. Jimmy bluffs and stumbles all the way to the very top until he finds himself about to perform stand-up comedy in front of a packed theatre and a live television audience of millions. There's only one problem, he's never performed anything before – ever...

With his second novel, John O'Farrell has written a compelling, funny and acutely observed satire on our shallow celebrity-obsessed culture in the vain hope that he might get to go on telly occasionally.

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Also by John O'Farrell

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THIS IS YOUR LIFE

John O'Farrell

For Pat O'Farrell

1

SCRIPT FOR THIS IS YOUR LIFE – JIMMY CONWAY

UNAWARE OF THE SURPRISE AWAITING HIM, JIMMY APPROACHES THE ENTRANCE TO THE RESCUED OTTER SANCTUARY. ONLOOKERS APPLAUD. BUT THEN A FAMOUS TELEVISION PRESENTER (STILL EAMONN ANDREWS??) APPROACHES CLUTCHING A BIG RED BOOK.

FAMOUS Jimmy Conway?
PRESENTER:

JIMMY Yes? (JIMMY SEES TV CAMERAS AND PRESENTER'S FAMOUS
CONWAY: RED BOOK) Oh I don't believe it!

FAMOUS Yes, you thought you were here to open another
PRESENTER: otter sanctuary as part of your tireless work for
various animal charities, but you're not because,
Jimmy Conway, THIS IS YOUR LIFE!

JIMMY LOOKS STUNNED, THEN LAUGHS AND LOOKS SKYWARDS IN DISBELIEF. WE 'CUT' TO THE FAMOUS STUDIO WHICH IS IN LONDON AND IS VERY BIG.

FAMOUS You were born 'James Elliot Conway', second child
PRESENTER: of John and Valerie Conway of 27 Elms Crescent,
East Grinstead, Sussex, England, Great Britain,
Europe. Your family didn't realize that you were
destined for great things as your big brother
Nicholas is now forced to admit . . .

VOICEOVER FROM NICHOLAS (NOW GROWN UP, FAT AND BALD):

Oh, our little Jimmy was always joking and laughing. I used to tease and bully him and say he'd never achieve anything, but he's proved us all wrong. We're all very proud of him. He's certainly turned out much better than me if the truth be known.

FAMOUS
PRESENTER: After leaving a very respected university with a good degree in an intellectual yet commercially useful subject that you could always fall back on if needs be, you began a glittering career in show business. You started out as a humble stagehand which was very sensible because it's a good idea to get to know the ropes first rather than diving straight in at the deep end. Anyway, a week later the star and his understudy were travelling in a car together when they were involved in a tragic collision with a lorry load of animals destined for laboratory experiments. Fortunately the actors were not seriously injured, and none of the animals were badly hurt either, but it took firemen twelve hours to cut the two actors out from all the mangled cages while all the animals, like rabbits and things, escaped to a nearby forest, which luckily didn't have any foxes. With no one to play the biggest part in that night's performance, the director got the cast together to tell them he was forced to cancel the show, which would also by the way bankrupt the whole theatre and put everyone on the dole including poor people like cleaners etc., etc. At this point a young unknown stagehand called Jimmy Conway (you) stepped forward and bravely announced that he knew the lead part off by heart. The director takes up the story . . .

FAMOUS
DIRECTOR: Jimmy was really brilliant. He was a real revolution to us all, he was far better than the famous comic actor that we'd got but no one liked anyway. Soon afterwards, Jimmy got the star part for good, we moved to the West End theatre, he became a famous comedian and, as they say, 'the rest is in history'.

I folded the well-worn script and placed it carefully back in my breast pocket. It was over twenty years since I had painstakingly typed it out on the Silver Reed typewriter I had received for my thirteenth birthday.

I lay back on the tatty sofa and closed my eyes. I wanted to empty my head of all thoughts but somewhere an insect was buzzing loudly. At the window a wasp seemed to be struggling with the insect equivalent of Fermat's last theorem. Problem: you are confronted with a half-opened window. How do you get to the other side? Wasp answer: keep headbutting the glass over and over again. 'Aah,' says the wasp professor, 'you would think so, wouldn't you? But if you repeatedly fly into the glass of the *half-opened* window and you find for some reason that you cannot seem to go straight through the glass, then what do you do?' Hush falls over the wasp tutorial as their eager brains are taxed to the limit of wasp logic. Until one brilliant young wasp, the intellectual superstar of Wasp College, Cambridge, tentatively puts up his front leg, the answer slowly coming together in his insect head.

'If . . . one . . . cannot fly straight *through* the glass' - he cogitates as the lecture room falls silent, the other wasps sensing that they are in the presence of wasp genius - 'and we have established that the window is *half open* . . .' he continues, his brow furrowed in total concentration, 'then surely the logical thing to do . . . would be . . . to fly repeatedly at the glass, buzzing a lot?'

The other pupils glance eagerly across at the professor to see if this pupil has hit upon the solution, but their tutor smiles knowingly and shakes his head. 'No,' he says. 'The answer is that there is no solution to this conundrum. It is an impossible problem, like predicting prime numbers or putting a definitive value on pi. It is a philosophical trick question that cannot be answered.'

I stood up and rolled up a newspaper to strike the stupid wasp dead, but then thought better of it and used my improvised swatter to guide him gently over the top of the window and away into the outside world. A year earlier I don't think I would have spared him but now I felt in a position to act with generosity and benevolence.

I lay back on the sofa once more and closed my eyes. How nice it would be if I could just go to sleep now, if I could forget where I was and what I had to go and do. Then, as if somebody was aware of my escapist fantasy, there was a loud distorted crackle, and from the old speaker hanging off the wall came the startling message: 'Jimmy Conway, this is your five-minute call! Jimmy Conway to the stage please.'

In 300 seconds' time I was supposed to be walking out onto the stage of one of London's most famous theatres in front of two thousand specially invited guests. Here, I was to stand on my own under the glare of the lights and perform a brand new stand-up comedy routine, a performance which was, incidentally, being transmitted live on BBC1 to millions of homes across the country, who even now were glued to the spectacle of an all-night charity gala featuring dozens of their favourite stars.

The prospect made me wonder what it would be like to be a librarian. That must be a nice job, I thought. Surrounded by books all day; warm and quiet, occasionally stamping the return date on a Catherine Cookson novel, smiling at the old lady and handing the book back to her. 'Due back on the twenty-fourth, Edna.' Yes, I could live with that. There must be some stresses and personal pressures I suppose, having to stay late when there was 5 pence missing from the fines box or whatever, but I bet you don't often have to go out and perform a stand-up comedy routine live in front of millions of people.

I pulled myself upright and looked in the long mirror. I was wearing an immaculate light grey suit, my shoes were polished, my face was clean-shaven and I'd now removed

the tiny bits of torn-off toilet paper that had been placed on all the cuts. There was a small speck of fluff on my jacket and I carefully picked it off. 'Time to go and knock 'em dead, Jimmy,' I said to myself, slightly unconvincingly. 'Jimmy Conway to the stage please!' replied the tannoy, slightly more insistently. There must be some other preparation required, I thought; some other avoidance task I could invent just to keep me in this private cocoon for another few seconds. I know, I should gargle. It's very good for your voice, gargling; everyone knows that actors gargle before they go on stage. I picked up a plastic cup on the side of the washbasin and turned on the tap. At which point a high-pressure jet of cold water shot out of the tap with such powerful fire-hose force that it ricocheted off the bottom of the sink and out all over me.

'Shit!' I said. I looked down to see that my groin was completely soaked: a large soggy dark grey patch spread outwards and downwards from the epicentre of my flies. 'Shit! Shit! Shit!' I repeated. I grabbed a towel and tried to dab my trousers dry.

Comedy is all about making your audience feel comfortable, about reassuring them that they are in safe hands; they need to believe that you are relaxed, not the slightest bit nervous or on edge. I knew my routine off by heart, I had a flashy suit; the only slight imperfection that might make an audience feel I was not completely comfortable about being up on stage was the fact that I'd obviously wet my pants. When you're looking for signs of nervousness in a comic, I'd say that a big damp patch around his groin was probably a bit of a giveaway.

I threw the towel to one side and ran out of my dressing room. Maybe there was an electric hand-dryer I could use in the gents' toilets. The stairs down from the dressing room were austere uncarpeted concrete and the bricks on the walls had long ago been painted with nicotine-yellow gloss paint. In theatreland every effort is made to present a

glittering spectacle before the paying audience, while the parts of the building they don't see are inversely utilitarian and tatty. When I reached the floor below, I burst into the gents' to see a large electric hand-blower on the wall in front of me.

'Thank you, God!' I said to the ceiling and I pressed the big metal button. Nothing happened. I stabbed at it again several times but it was completely dead. There was a switch on the wall that I flicked on and off but it made no difference. I heard an electrical crackle which for a split second I hoped was some sign of life but then a voice bellowed through the speaker. 'Jimmy Conway to the stage now PLEASE. You are on in two minutes. Jimmy Conway to the stage immediately!'

There was no escape. I ran out into the corridor, now in a state of uncontrolled panic. Maybe they had hand-dryers in the big star dressing rooms down here on the first floor. I hammered on the door of Dressing Room One but there was no reply so I pushed open the door and there lying on the table before me I spotted the Holy Grail - an electric hairdryer. Salvation was at hand. It was already plugged in so I switched it to the maximum setting and directed it at the big wet patch between my legs. The dark grey of wet cloth quickly dried to light grey, but I could still feel the dampness in the lining of my pockets underneath, and since there was not a second to spare, I undid the buttons of the trousers and attempted to dry my crotch from the inside, wiggling the hair dryer, jumping slightly as the hot air scalded my skin. It was at this moment that the door to Dressing Room One opened.

I'd always wanted to meet Dame Judi Dench. I'd say she was one of my all-time favourite actors and I'd always hoped that one day our paths might cross.

'Hello,' said Judi Dench looking at me, apparently only slightly surprised to see a man in her dressing room with her hairdryer on full blast down inside his trousers.

‘Um, hello,’ I replied. ‘Sorry, is this your dressing room?’

‘Yes.’

‘Look, I’m really sorry, but I splashed water all over myself and I’m on stage in two minutes and I was desperate.’

‘Two minutes? Was that you the SM was just calling on the tannoy?’

‘That’s me, yes, Jimmy Conway,’ I said, offering the wrong hand to shake because the other one was still fiddling around in front of my pants.

‘Judi Dench.’

‘Yes, I know. I thought you were brilliant in *Iris* by the way. And *Mrs Brown* for that matter.’

‘Thank you.’

‘What’s Billy Connolly like?’ I said, hoping that casual theatrical chit-chat might distract slightly from what I was doing with Dame Judi’s personal hairdryer.

‘Billy’s lovely. Hadn’t you better get a move on?’

‘Well, yes, it’s just I didn’t want to go on stage with a big damp patch on my trousers . . .’

She laughed. I made Judi Dench laugh.

‘Jimmy Conway? You’re the comic that everyone is talking about, aren’t you?’

‘Oh. Well, not everyone – um – just some people,’ I stuttered, trying to sound modest but secretly delighted that the reigning queen of British theatre had heard of me.

‘I’ve not seen your act, I’m afraid, but I’ve heard you’re very good.’

‘Well, fewer people have seen me than you’d think . . .’ I said.

‘Until tonight, that is.’

‘Oh my God, they said two minutes about two minutes ago, didn’t they?’

‘Don’t worry. I’m sure the stage manager’s allowing a few minutes spare, especially with this going out on the telly as well.’

‘Do you think so?’ I said.

‘Look, why don’t I go and tell him you’re just coming while you sort yourself out in here?’

‘Oh, thank you so much, I really can’t thank you enough. Tell him I’m in your dressing room, and I’ll be there as soon as I’ve done my trousers up.’

‘Well, I might not put it quite like that,’ said Judi Dench with a smile, and then she was gone.

What a nice lady, I thought. She really was very nice indeed.

Judi (as I felt I could now rightfully call her) had been quite right, of course. The panicky cry of ‘Jimmy Conway, you are on stage in two minutes!’ had meant more like ten minutes, although the stage manager still mimed a mock heart attack when he saw me and called back the runner he had sent out to search the local pubs.

The trouser crisis had at least allowed me briefly to forget the next stage of the evening, but having got myself into a state of extreme anxiety about one problem, I was denied the opportunity to use that wave of adrenalin to surf right out onto the stage. I had to build myself up all over again. Through a crack in the curtain at the side of the stage I could see the audience staring as one straight ahead of them. In a few minutes all those telescopic sights would be aimed at me. They seemed in quite a jolly mood until the dear compère started talking about the dreadful suffering their ticket money would go a tiny way towards alleviating. Did he not realize that a comedian was about to take the stage? What better way to warm up an audience than to talk about disabled children living in poverty in Britain’s inner-cities? ‘Honestly!’ I said to the stage manager. ‘Why doesn’t he flash up some pictures of neglected kids to make them feel really miserable and guilty?’

‘They are flashing up pictures of neglected kids,’ he replied. ‘You just can’t see the monitors from back here.’

‘Oh. Spiffing.’

I watched from the sides for a few more minutes, feeling numb and totally alone. At one point I got out my script and glanced over the opening paragraphs, but it was ridiculous; I knew it so well I was in danger of forgetting the meaning of the words.

‘Haven’t you learnt it yet?’ teased the stage manager in a whisper loud enough to be pointless.

‘Of course I have,’ I said, a little too defensively. ‘I couldn’t be better prepared.’ A boast that was rather undermined by my mobile phone suddenly ringing loudly in my breast pocket. I decided on balance not to take the call. I always think it’s a bit rude to talk into mobiles when other people can overhear you, like when you’re on a train, in a café or walking out to perform in front of two thousand people at the London Palladium. ‘Hiya, I’m on a stage!’ It would be hard for the audience to pretend not to be listening.

‘Sorry!’ I whispered as I turned the phone off. The compère was introducing me and I tightened my tie and checked that my hair wasn’t all sticking up.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, it’s the moment you have all been waiting for . . .’ roared the compère. ‘You’ve heard so much about him, but now, making his BBC debut, put your hands together for a very, very funny man, the one and only . . . JIMMY CONWAY!’

The applause was louder than I had expected, and there was some whistling and a lone cheer. My senses were highly tuned, seeing, hearing, smelling everything; absorbing it all at once. The compère gave an exaggerated gesture to welcome me on stage and I stepped out from that shady sanctuary into the exposed bright open space of the vast arena, like a nervous rabbit thinking about crossing the motorway. The compère skipped offstage patting me matily on the back as if we knew each other well. For a moment I thought I must seem rude for not remembering ever having met him before.

The microphone stand lay ahead like a solitary blade of grass on a World War One battlefield, I walked towards it. What the fuck am I doing here? I thought to myself. The applause of two thousand people was dying down as they waited for my first words. I thought about all those millions of people watching me on their televisions at home, including just about everybody I knew. And as the applause finally gave way to an electrified tightrope of silence, I wondered if I should perhaps have shared my little secret with someone else by now.

That I'd never performed any stand-up comedy ever before.

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27 Elms Crescent,
East Grinstead,
West Sussex,
England

Dear James,

Please find enclosed the script for your appearance on This Is Your Life. Of course it may not be exactly like this when it happens – it's just a rough plan.

I have decided to write it all down and put it in a safe place for you to find when you are a grown-up just in case you have forgotten to become successful and rich and famous. Because most adults seem to just let it slip their mind. Then they suddenly remember and laugh and say, oh yes, that's right, when I was young I wanted to be a pop star or a football player or whatever, but now they're all working in the bank or something and, well, how can you forget to do something like that? Obviously I know they can't all be famous – I'm not stupid; I am nearly fourteen, which is virtually an adult anyway. For example, yesterday when Nicholas was dealing at cards I waited until he'd put down all seven before I picked them up to look at them. But by the time I am 100% grown-up with a car and proper facial hair and everything, I do not intend to settle for anything other than being a rich and famous comedian, actor and entertainer, so I have taken the trouble to plan it all in advance.

It's like everyone else in my class gets their homework and starts writing an essay straight away without doing a plan first, and surprise, surprise, they get a C+. But I do a plan beforehand on a separate piece of paper like Mr Stock says and I always get an A or A- (except one D- which doesn't count because I wasn't there when we did 'Lord of the Flies'). And then everyone leaves school and they don't do a plan of what they are going to do any more than they ever planned their essays and so it's no wonder they have lives that are only C+. So I am now going to write a plan of everything I am going to do on a separate piece of paper, and that is why in my life I think I am going to get an A or A- unless something really

terrible that's not my fault happens, like I get bitten by a dog in France and catch rabies.

I should say that I only want to be really successful so that I can help those who through no fault of their own are less fortunate than myself. It's not for my sake that I want to be a celebrity or anything. I only want to be really famous for doing good for others, not for shooting John Lennon or something like that. And if I was really rich I'd be able to give some of my money away to charities and stop people pouring lots of oil into the sea near where there are lots of gannets. Instead they should be made to give that oil away to people in the third world who probably don't have any oil of their own.

The important thing, Jimmy, James (people call you James now like you always wanted them to), is how you use your good fortune, although it won't just be good fortune, you will have worked very hard for it as well. I mean, OK, so you're fabulously rich and everything but at least you earned every single penny through your own efforts. Just because you are really important now does not mean you have to be all pompous and stuffy. On the contrary, it means you can be the kind of adult who still wears jeans, for example. And when a group of sixth-formers come to hear you give a lecture about all your work for animal charities, you could turn the chair the wrong way round and sit on it back to front when you are talking to them.

But I've been going on too long again (just like my homework!!) and so I will stop now and write again in a few days' time. ~~When I've finished all these letters I'll put them in a shoebox in the attic, so if you've forgotten where you put this letter twenty years ago and you can't find it, that's where it will be.~~

Mine sincerely,
Jimmy

A year before I was to make my showbiz debut at the London Palladium, I was indeed performing for a living, albeit to a different sort of crowd. Many entertainers boast of playing difficult audiences. I'd never played the Glasgow Empire on a wet Tuesday in February, I'd never done an open spot at the Tunnel Club in Woolwich, but no performer could have had a tougher grounding than standing up and talking for an hour in front of the beginners' class of brain-dead teenagers at the Sussex Language Centre. To say they were slow to respond would suggest any response whatsoever. Teaching English as a foreign language to this particular group was like explaining quantum physics to a bowl full of goldfish, except at least goldfishes close their mouths occasionally.

The beginners' class at the Sussex Language Centre was where they sent people if they were unsure whether or not they'd come out of a coma. The students would sit at their desks, slumped forward and staring blankly at me, as I cheerily spouted an endless stream of meaningless syllables at them. 'Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah? Blah! Blah blah, blah blah blah, blah blah blah! Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah.' I did actually say that to them once just to see if it might provoke any sort of reaction, which I soon realized was wildly optimistic of me. Of course, it is possible to begin to teach English to students who only know the words 'OK', 'taxi' and 'Beatles'. You can teach any language to anyone who wants to learn, but this, I think, was the problem. These adolescents had been exiled to this dismal suburb-on-sea against their will, leaving behind their friends in Turkey or Algeria or Brazil. Denied the opportunity to smoulder at their parents, they sulked at the nearest available adult, who happened to be me.

'Ball!' I said brightly, holding up a ball. '*Ball!* Now you try.' And I pointed to a young Russian sitting at the front. After

about five seconds he blinked, which was progress of a sort; it was the most reaction I'd had all week. 'Ball!' I prompted him again, because after all it was a lot of lines to learn all at once. He looked at me. Not even a blink this time; we were going backwards now. There had been quite an exciting breakthrough earlier in the week when one of them had coughed. I had wanted to telephone his parents to share this exciting development. 'Wonderful news! Nadim lives! Young Nadim actually coughed!' and they would weep with joy at the first sign of life since their son was stunned into a silent stupor by finding himself imprisoned in a language school in some dreary English coastal town.

I had moved to the south coast at the age of twenty-one and got myself a temporary job at the local language school, where I was now their longest-serving teacher. I had only come to Seaford to be with my Truelove-for-Evermore but six months after we'd self-consciously set up home together and got proper jobs we had split up; the white-hot comet of our love had burnt up on entry into the atmosphere of the real world. We parted amicably; I got her Hermann Hesse novels and she got the interesting life away from Sussex.

Seaford is not the glamour capital of Western Europe. There are plenty of swinging songs about New York and LA, but I'm struggling to think of a single line that ol' blue eyes ever sang about the bleak weather-beaten collection of bungalows that I'd made my home. 'Seaford, Seaford, that's my kinda windswept English coastal resort.' Nope. 'I wanna wake up in a town that fell into a coma in 1957.' It wasn't ringing any bells. On the plus side, the town did have a wool shop, so if knitting was your passion then I suppose it might possibly have justified a brief diversion off the A259. I'd lived in Seaford for thirteen years now, which was quite a short amount of time compared to how long it takes most of the local inhabitants to find the right change when they get on the bus. The wind blowing off the sea is so strong on this

part of the coast that the indigenous population grows up at an angle. Like those bent-over trees you see on clifftops, some of the old people have spent so long staggering along the seafront leaning inland at an angle of 75 degrees that their bones are permanently set in that position. It must be impossible organizing the over-60s music and movement classes. Every time they turned around they'd bump heads.

I didn't plan to be around here for quite as long as that. I managed to make my job tolerable by not turning up to it every other week - I had a loose arrangement with the school's owner to work alternate weeks or mornings only. This was when I would turn my attention to what I privately considered my real job: my comedy screenplay. The film idea was such a good one that I was sure someone would be desperate to make it. Ever since the concept had first popped into my head I'd had a positive spring in my step, sensing that my life was on the cusp of a great change. The thought of that brilliant opening scene up on the screen at the Odeon Leicester Square filled me with excitement. I had considered giving up teaching altogether so that I could concentrate on the screenplay full-time, but I had no idea how long it took to write a movie so I thought I'd better keep some money coming in until I sold the script. But the boredom of my everyday routine, the relentless aggravation of never having any money - none of the things that habitually got me down had bothered me much since I'd had this brilliant idea. It was my ticket to another life. I was tempted to tell everyone I met, but it was so precious that I had to keep it locked up inside in case someone stole it from me.

As I finished my last class of the week I was excitedly looking forward to the prospect of a whole clear week getting to grips with the next scene. These were the times I lived for. I had to admit there wasn't much job satisfaction spending weeks teaching a class English only to drop them off at the ferry terminal and have them turn and shout a

final fond 'hello'. I dumped a few books in the office and gave a goodbye wave to Nancy, a fellow teacher and friend, who seemed to be involved in a serious phone call.

'How can you be so bloody stupid!' she shouted into the phone.

Either she was talking to her daughter or the speaking clock had forgotten to bring its watch that morning. Like me, Nancy worked irregular hours at the Sussex Language Centre, fitting in alternate weeks between her fourteen-year-old's court appearances. How fate had conspired to give such a kind-hearted, generous spirit as Nancy a daughter like Tamsin was one of the great mysteries of life. She did once bring her mother some flowers but even that ended up in an argument. Tamsin said that whoever tied them to the lamp post obviously didn't want them any more.

Nancy slammed down the phone and put her head in her hands.

'Shit! Shit! Shit!'

'Everything all right?' I said, disguising nosiness as concern.

'Guess who's been suspended from school again?'

'What's it for this time?'

'Setting off the fire alarm.'

'Setting off the fire alarm? Why on Earth would she do a thing like that?'

'She says there was a fire.'

'Honestly! Is that the best excuse she can come up with?'

'The fire brigade put it out and everything, but she's still suspended for two weeks.'

'This fire? It wouldn't have been started by Tamsin by any chance, would it?'

'Well, obviously the head has jumped straight to that conclusion. But they're picking on her again. Just because she was seen near the rubbish dump with matches and a box of firelighters. Oh God, why does she do these things?'

The phone rang again and I stood there trying to do a bit of supportive hovering while Nancy and her daughter argued back and forth.

‘Let me have a word with her,’ I said.

‘Hi, Tamsin. It’s Jimmy here . . . Er, look, while you’re suspended, do you think you could walk the dog for me? I’ll pay you and everything.’

Tamsin was delighted at this prospect. In the background her mother was hissing: ‘Don’t pay her! She’s supposed to be being punished!’

I continued chatting as Nancy listened to me with growing incredulity.

‘So, was it a big fire? Right. What sort of firelighters did you use? Oh yeah, Zip, they’re good, aren’t they? That was very forward-thinking of you, firelighters and matches and everything. Oh, was it? Well, say hello to him for me. Yup, see you soon.’

‘What was all that, “Oh yeah, Zip, they’re good, aren’t they”?’ exclaimed Nancy. ‘Why didn’t you suggest she used petrol next time?’

‘I thought you were supposed to show an interest in a kid’s hobby?’

‘Not when it’s arson.’

‘Well, it turns out that Kelvin brought in the firelighters and everything – he obviously put her up to it, and it was only a load of old leaves and stuff. She doesn’t deserve to be suspended.’

‘Oh God. What am I going to do with her?’ Nancy sighed a world-weary sigh. ‘I’m working all next week but I can’t leave her in the house on her own all day. She’s only fourteen and anyway I can’t afford the bills from the Home Shopping Channel.’

‘Take next week off,’ I heard myself say. ‘I’ll cover for your lessons here.’

‘But you were desperate not to work next week.’

She's right, I thought. What am I saying? Take this chance to back out while you can . . . 'Er, that's OK,' I said. 'I'll try and grab some time around the edges.'

'Oh God, Jimmy, you are such a star,' and she gave me a peck on the cheek and suddenly a precious five days on my script had evaporated.

Many moons ago I'd actually had a brief relationship with Nancy, but her having had a child by a former boyfriend made it all a little complicated. One can only put up with so many childish tantrums and eventually she got fed up with them and we split up. I think I probably hadn't felt ready to become a stepfather, especially before the real dad had finally disappeared from the scene completely. But when she'd said, 'I don't want to lose you as a friend,' for once it had been true. I still thought she was attractive with her big blue eyes and her infectious laugh, but we were living proof that it was possible to be just good friends with an ex; over the years we had disproved the theory that former partners only ever remained friends in the vague expectation of eventually getting back together.

In any case, I wasn't on my own any more. Now I lived with the beautiful Betty. Betty was young and happy and loved me with all her heart. If she hadn't been a Border collie she might have been the answer to all my problems. She was, however, a constant companion for me – wherever I was in the house, she wanted to be there too. I drew the line at allowing her into the toilet with me, so while I sat on the lavatory she lay on the floor outside with her nose pressed against the crack at the bottom of the door, snuffling and inhaling deeply for any clue as to what I might be doing in there. For the first couple of years I'd also had a rule that Betty was not allowed into my bedroom at night. My reasoning had been that no woman I brought home would feel particularly inclined to throw aside her inhibitions and embark upon a wild night of naked sexual passion while a Border collie sat there watching, wagging her tail and

barking at sudden movements. At some point I must have realized that the absence of a voyeuristic panting sheepdog in my boudoir was not making much difference either way, and so now Betty was permitted to sleep in the same room as me.

The next morning, I climbed out of bed at around half past nine and went downstairs to make myself a cup of tea. Not a particularly exciting or surpassing sequence of events for a Saturday, but my dog was never one to appear indifferent to anything going on around her. I imagined Betty's approximate thought process for what followed *la grande levée*:

'Oh wow - he is getting out of bed! I don't believe it, how exciting, he is putting on his dressing gown and he is going downstairs; ladies and gentlemen, he is going downstairs!!! Quick! Quick! Follow him down, hurry, I'm not missing this, excuse me, excuse me - I've got to get down before him to be there first. Whoops, nearly tripped him up on the stairs there, oooh he didn't like that, but it was worth being shouted at, I wouldn't have missed this for all the world, and now what's he going to do? Oh incredible, he is flicking on the kettle! Can you believe this? This is extraordinary - spin around in excited circles - he just flicked it on, without so much as a by-your-leave! Clear my diary, cancel licking my bottom and chewing my basket, because right now I have simply got to sit here and watch what happens next. Oh God, I'm shaking with excitement . . . Here we go, here we go, he's going to the cupboard and, yes, yes, he's opening the cupboard door and, this is amazing, he is getting a tea bag from the tea bag box and, oh wow, he is putting the tea bag in the mug, ladies and gentlemen, HE IS PUTTING THE TEA BAG IN THE MUG!! Oh dear, I barked, I couldn't help it, he didn't like that, I'm sorry but it was pretty phenomenal you must admit, and oh God I'm sorry I barked but sometimes the excitement is all too much and oh dear, oh no - he's opening the back door and telling me to go out for a wee. Oh God, oh God, oh God, he's so right, he is so right, I do need a wee, he's so clever like that; that's why I love him so much but I couldn't bear not to be here to see what he does next, and now I'm really torn because I don't want to miss any of this but I really do need a wee, and if he wants me to go out then it must be the right thing to do, because he just knows, he really does . . .

The kettle clicked itself off and luckily Betty managed to rush back inside in time to witness the event. I proceeded to make myself a brew, only tripping over the dog three or four

times before I sat down on the sofa to drink from a Princess Diana commemorative mug, which I hid from those visitors I feared would not appreciate the irony. I noticed that my answerphone was flashing. The strange electric lady informed me that I had: 'THREE, new, *messages* . . .' and her voice went up at the end as if she was about to add something more important but she never did. The first caller was my mother. 'Happy birthday, Jimmy darling!' 'Many happy returns, son!' chipped in Dad, adding the cheery afterthought, 'Oh, and Brian Meredith's got Parkinson's.' Message two was my nephews who sang 'Happy birthday' in such perfect close harmony that it would have relegated the Von Trapp family into second place at the Salzburg folk festival. This was followed by another birthday greeting from my brother's wife, Carol, who generally did all that remembering-the-family-stuff for him, adding cheerily, 'See you later for the gathering of the clan!'

Today was my thirty-fifth birthday. Halfway through my three score years and ten, and the first birthday greeting of the day was still from my mum and dad. I treated myself to a cooked breakfast, and since it was a special occasion I dished my egg and bacon onto a plate instead of eating it out of the pan while standing up. It's surprising how table manners deteriorate when you are on your own. When the Queen has a slice of toast in bed on her own does she stuff it in all in one mouthful, chewing with her mouth open and then forcing out a satisfying baritone burp? For me, eating seemed to have become a simple bodily function: feel-need-for-food, ergo put-food-in-mouth. Now when I dined out I had to try to remember to remain sitting down and not to eat with my bare hands, wandering aimlessly across the restaurant to stare out of the window.

For my birthday last year, Mum and Dad had given me a special cookery book to communicate that they had finally come to terms with my long-term single status. Entitled *One Can Be Fun*, it was based upon the Goebbels-esque

mendacity that cooking and eating alone can be every bit as joyful as a dinner party with your oldest and dearest friends. I checked the back page of *One Can Be Fun* but they had failed to come clean and print the telephone number of the Samaritans. If it had been a little more honest, *One Can Be Fun* would have had just one solitary recipe along the following lines: 1) Take one can of baked bins. 2) Open and put into saucepan. 3) Heat on stove. 4) Eat straight from saucepan in front of telly. 5) Drink several strong cans of lager after abject failure to find whole bottle of sleeping pills for dessert.

Despite it being my birthday, I had now resolved to spend as much of the day as possible on my screenplay. Indeed, the night before I had read a whole chapter of *How to Write a Screenplay* and had even turned on my computer to retype the title page. 'Avoidance is the writer's greatest enemy,' said the book. I decided to re-read the entire chapter on avoidance, lest I should succumb to this insidious trap. Then it was down to work. The manual was quite specific on how a screenplay should be set out, and so by pasting everything I'd written to date into another template, I managed to make Scene One look much more professional. But then I'd type another line into the computer and the text would suddenly revert to the earlier format, so I had to try to edit the document template all over again. I printed out a page of various fonts: first Times New Roman, and then another in Bookman Old Style, until I decided that Courier New had the most pleasing old-fashioned-manual-typewriter look about it.

I printed out the whole of the first scene, punched a couple of holes in the margin and threaded little green string paper-binders through it. It looked fantastic. I read my name on the title page: modest and understated, just the right distance under the title of the film. The only thing that diminished my pride in my *magnum opus* was the slimness of the work. It was clearly only a few sheets of paper. It

didn't look anything like a completed script. I propped it lovingly on the side of my desk and set about rectifying this situation by tackling Scene Two. 'Scene Two', I typed at the top of the page. All right so far. I underlined those two words and then stared out of the window. After a few minutes I turned my keyboard upside down to shake out all the fluff and dead bits of skin that had collected in there. I glanced again at my printed script. And then I took a half-inch of plain paper from my printer, about a hundred and twenty sheets in all, and punched holes in every one before attaching the blank pages under the title page and the opening scene. There. At last it looked like a proper screenplay. I felt its weight and dimensions; I imagined it landing on the desk of a Hollywood executive. It looked perfect. All it needed now were the words.

I had intended to progress to that next stage, but by now it was a quarter past five and suddenly Betty became excited about somebody bustling around my front gate, which I knew meant my mother and father had arrived. I put the screenplay out of sight and braced myself for the onslaught as I opened the front door.

'Hello darling we had a terrible journey that's a nice jumper is it new we missed the turning for Newhaven and ended up going into the middle of Brighton is it cashmere so we came along the coast road but it's quite pretty or is it angora well they're both goats anyway we went past that famous girls' boarding school where Persephone James was sent when her father was gored to death by that bull in Pamplona. You won't remember the Jameses, dear, very sad it was in all the papers and Persephone's mother moved to London after he was killed. I expect she was upset by the sight of cows poor dear and Persephone went to board at Roedean that's what it's called which was a shame because she used to babysit for your brother before you were born.'

'Gored to death by a bull?' I said, suspiciously.

‘Well it wasn’t quite like that,’ said Dad. ‘He was struck by the bull and fell back and hit his head and died two days later.’

‘He was *Gored To Death*, darling, I’ve still got the newspaper clippings in the escritoire, there’s a big headline, “Gored To Death!”, anyway it’s much prettier than the other way.’

‘What is?’

The coast road though it adds on twenty minutes make sure you handwash that or you’ll ruin it . . .’ and while I was still trying to work out what it was we were talking about she had marched straight past me and begun tidying up.

‘Ooh you’ve lit a real log fire, I do love a real log fire, they used to have one at the Rose and Crown but they’ve replaced it with one of those lookalike gas things with the special rocks that glow when they’re hot, volcanic lava the landlord said it was, that must be a dangerous job getting them out of the volcano, he’s gone and got himself one of those Thai wives, doesn’t speak a word of English but I suppose they must have a lot of sexual intercourse, the trouble is of course they do spit so terribly don’t they?’

‘What, Thai wives?’

‘No dear, real log fires. I’ll put the fireguard up then the house won’t burn down while we’re out. I checked for your sister-in-law they do a vegetarian option and a fish dish we had some lovely fish with the new couple who’ve moved in down the road, they’re Korean but very friendly, they’re away a lot so they’ve left me a key, lovely new fitted wardrobes with lights inside, I said I’d introduce them to the new Thai wife at the Rose and Crown because that’s quite near Korea isn’t it of course your father didn’t touch the fish because it wasn’t deep fried in batter where does this go?’

Trying to talk to Mum was like playing tennis with someone who sent back seven different balls over the net at any one time. In the end you just took cover until the barrage was over. The subject of my job was briefly touched