

## CHAPTER ONE

# Marsupial Elvis

Somehow, Sparky and GoGo were still living with me. Susan always seemed to be in too much of a hurry to take them with her and I was seriously thinking of charging them board and rent. To be honest, I think she was just a bit fed up with them. After all, they didn't seem that exciting and had clearly overstayed their welcome at her house. I actually felt a bit sorry for them, just swimming endlessly around their little tank, past their ornamental sunken castle, until someone told me that goldfish only have a six-second memory. I felt sorry no more. What a fantastic life they must have! Every six seconds they were having a new adventure and what could be better than discovering a sunken castle?

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Here I was, feeling bored with their apparent lack of amusing antics, whilst they were having the time of their lives. I thought about putting a little deep sea diver man next to the castle, but they would probably 'OD' with excitement and, by the time Sparky had finished telling GoGo about the castle and the diver, he would have forgotten what he had started talking about; it would be unfair.

“Look GoGo, a sunken castle ... and what’s that ... Oh, my God ... a deep-sea diver! I wonder if he’s dived... No, no, hang on, I’ve lost the thread ... what was I on about again?”

I had also been joined by Hammy the hamster. Hammy was no trouble really and spent most of the day driving about in his small toy car. He was meant to be the classroom pet at Deborah’s school, but she had lent him to me in case I grew bored whilst Barney was away.

Oh, and in case I forgot to mention it, Barney was away.

Sorry, it’s a bad habit of mine that I really should overcome. I tend to flit back and forth between things like a butterfly, without properly explaining what’s what. Don’t worry, I’ll try not to do it again. No promises though.

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By way of mitigation, it had been an eventful twelve months – a watershed year.

Thanks to a marsupial Elvis, and to the begrudging appreciation of man’s best friend, I had revealed the 10 steps that anyone could master to becoming an Alpha male (or Alpha female for that matter). With the Lowest of the Low in tow, I had journeyed around some of the more bizarre named places in Britain taking in the likes of ‘No Place’, ‘Pity Me’ and ‘Wetwang’ en route. Moreover through this I had discovered the secret of my excess, and learnt that thankfully it’s never too late to re-start your life over again ...to say this is my year zero – a new Monday in my life. (Yes, yes, of course I’ll share all this with you as you travel through the book with me – just be patient).

Less significantly, but just as important, I had also found out that it’s probably a bad idea to take a laxative and a sleeping tablet on the same night.

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I run spasmodically and, by that, I don’t mean I have a bizarre

running style but that I go running two to three times a week.

It's a pleasant run, past a large park at the end of my street and then mostly through the woodland by the river's edge and, because the river is tidal, the scenery and wildlife change with the ebb and flow of the tides. At high tide, I have seen the best that nature can offer, from seals swimming upstream following the spawning salmon, through to swans swanning about on the sun sparkling water, and dutiful ducks leading their downy ducklings in line as if off on some summer's outing.

At low tide I have seen the best that ASDA can offer in the form of shopping trolleys half sunk in the slimy brown sludge along with various other flotsam and jetsom including a revolving clothes line that must have had an accident, a crate of empty Brown Ale bottles and a shoe – that must have been some hell of a night out!

There are not many sparrows about though. Apparently they are becoming scarcer. I think pheasants are the new sparrows. I'm not sure what sparrows are supposed to be now. Maybe the old pheasants? Elsewhere, be it high or low tide, herons hide amongst the reeds on the bank, fishermen sit patiently on the water's edge and I swear I've heard the hollow tapping of a woodpecker in the trees.

My running circuit takes me along the river bank (with either the high or low tide views en route), over a small pedestrian bridge, then back the other way (same view – except back to front!) and over a single road bridge back to my house. It's about two and a half miles all said but I round it up to three in a pathetic effort to look impressive. However, if anyone dares to pour scorn on my meagre exercise, I remind them that I ran the last London Marathon, dressed as a banana. (I didn't actually run the marathon at all. In fact I think it would probably kill me but, as long as the banana's identity remains a secret, I will take full advantage of his anonymity).

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By this stage in my life, I had lived on both land and sea, on both sides of the English/Welsh border and eventually on both sides of the aforementioned river. I had served in uniform in the British Army and the Royal Navy, been both a single and happily married man, felt like a small person in the big city, and the nearest I had got to being a big person in a small world was visiting the model village in Bourton-on-the-Water.

But a year ago, I had an ex-wife, lived on my own on the South side of the river, wore a suit to work and had no idea how the year would unfold.

My main source of amusement, apart from the pub, was my hobby – magic. Sadly not the running around the garden naked at night in the company of some fit vestal virgins – with my luck I'd probably step barefoot on a slug anyway. Not even the chopping a woman in half type magic. No, my magic was the close up sort that happens in your hand or in front of your eyes so you can't deny its impossibility and is designed to impress attractive single young ladies. Well, that is if you don't tell them how it's done – otherwise you run the risk of suddenly reverting in their eyes from a mysterious and (hopefully) sexy man to a vision of a slightly sad bloke who's never properly grown up, sitting in his darkened bedroom practicing with a deck of cards while 'normal' people are out enjoying themselves in some trendy wine bar that probably used to be a bank.

Significant others in my life at that stage were Bethan, my ten year old daughter, who manages to guess how all my tricks are done, and my good friend Deborah who comes complete with her seven-year-old Border Collie dog called Tess.

I regarded it as something of an achievement that I had reached my current age, bearing in mind that I had led such a reckless childhood by today's standards. Oh my stars, the dangers I faced when I was small – both physical and mental. It was a world devoid of pushbike helmets, children's TV on all day, friendly Russians and bottled water. (Water ...in a bottle ...that you pay for!!! Why would you need that when there was 'council pop'?) As for mobile phones, we didn't even have a full

'land' phone in the house – we had a 'party line' shared with next door, so that when they were on the phone you couldn't make a call (and just had to sit quietly on the stairs and listen into Mrs Davies conversation instead!)

I'm not quite sure why, but in those days we also answered the phone quoting our own telephone number.

"Hello Cardiff 499456". I'm not too sure why we did this as surely the caller knew the number they had just rung. I'm pretty sure we didn't open the door saying our address too – but I'm not ruling anything out. These were odd times!

There was no such thing as safety caps on medicine bottles in those days either ...but if Health and Safety regulations were lax then, they seem to have gone much too far the other way now.

My sister rang me last week to tell me the news that the Doctor had prescribed her some suppositories. She explained to me that the instructions had read '*insert in rectum*' closely followed by '*keep out of the reach of children*'. A short biology lesson to assist in rectum location covered the first part of the instructions. There was a short pause on the phone while she re-read the second part of the instruction. I assume she was doing this because the next thing I heard was an alarmed voice imploring "What sort of person do they think I am?"

I calmly informed her it was just standard procedure to print it on all tablet bottles and nothing personal was meant by it. I explained to her that it's like when it says on the box that four out of five people suffer from diarrhoea, it doesn't mean that there is one crazy person who actually *enjoys* it – it's just the way they write things on medicines nowadays. She seemed happier at this explanation but I told her that if she was still concerned about keeping things out of the reach of children, just to wear a pair of high heels for a few days to be on the safe side.

Sorry, where was I? Oh yes I remember now – growing up. So instead of high tech gadgetry when I was growing up, we had ads for X-ray specs, the Beano and Dandy, scary supervisors (parkies) in the park whose aim was to seemingly stop you

having fun, and dogs wandering the streets leaving little white turds that would silently explode into a cloud of dust if you kicked them. This was a time when twenty five pence was decent pocket money and the only thing ‘race issues’ meant was who ran the fastest. Hell, we even drank squash out of communal beakers with our friends – and sometimes we didn’t even know what side they had used first.

Then, as now, we had the dreaded BCG injection, but I’m sure due to some sort of time zone difference or some such thing, it hurt more in my day than it does now. I can still remember the clarion call ‘My BCG, my BCG!’ if anyone ventured within the 10 yard exclusion zone surrounding my left arm.

We were also the last generation to grow up not using computers in school and shock, horror – as scary as it may sound to children today, I didn’t have a Playstation or Gameboy because they hadn’t been invented, so I had to use my imagination (my Luddite tendencies followed me into adult life to the extent that, when someone first told me they had a Palm Pilot, I thought it was some type of bizarre instruction manual for a five-finger shuffle).

Instead, we played football up at Cyncoed Park, went swimming down the Empire pool, and played ‘Escape from Colditz’ whenever we could. Oh, and we cycled a lot. I had a dynamo on the bike that powered the lights when it got dark, which was good, except when I stopped at a junction, the wheels ceased powering the dynamo, the lights went out and I was plunged into darkness, which was bad. What a rubbish invention. A palm pilot sounds a lot more fun.

I was also frankly shocked when I discovered, years later, that you didn’t actually look cool at all riding a Chopper bike whilst wearing your jumper tucked into your trousers. My God, this was a dark time when some people even felt the need to tuck their shirts into their underpants too!

I was never trendy enough to do the tucking or own a Chopper, but even so I was devastated to find out years later

that even my ideas of cool were un-cool. Unthinkable as it may be, sometimes we even ran around with sharp things, and despite threats from my Mum and all my friends' Mums, I don't recall anyone's eye ever being poked out (last recorded incident of eye being poked out whilst playing with sharp thing – some guy called Harold in 1066). All these Mums were additionally programmed to chorus "You won't feel the benefit" if we dared enter the house without taking our coats off first. We were also affected by a bizarre medical phenomenon back in those days that meant if you accidentally swallowed your bubble gum, apparently it wrapped itself around your heart.

Yes, life may have been hard for us thirty-somethings when we were children, but the one thing we did have that children nowadays don't seem to possess, was a decent taste in music. After embarrassing my daughter sufficiently by dancing like the wallies on 'Top of the Pops', I retreat into the kitchen and listen to the music I like. One of my favourites is an Australian called Nick Barker.

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When I first heard the song 'Thylacine', I thought it was about some dreaded hereditary disease, a new strain of penicillin or distant cousin of the BCG, but when Nick Barker sang, "You're famous; the marsupial Elvis," I knew I was way off. It turns out that a Thylacine was also known as the Tasmanian Tiger, which was a bizarre mix of different animals. Starting from the front, which is as good a place as any to start – it had the head of a large dog, followed by the front part of a wolf and the back half of a tiger, finishing off with a rigid tail. On the undercarriage, it had 'wolfy' front legs, the back legs of a hyena and, to complete this exotic mix, a pouch like a kangaroo. I say, 'was' because they were hunted into extinction in their native Australia, with the last one, named Ben, being kept in captivity until he finally succumbed to old age and, in 1938, joined the ranks of the Dodo.