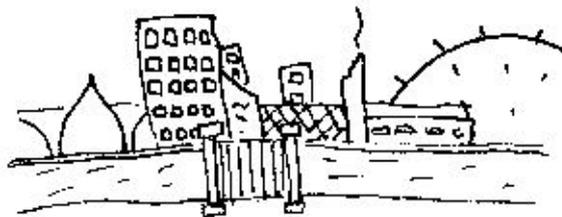


Saint Street School Magazine

Winter 2010



**"Working to facilitate the enablement
of the pedagogical and personal development solution**

**in accordance with the company's health and safety policy
and industry standards"**

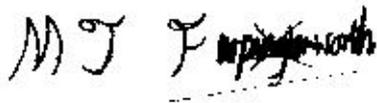
Team Leader's introduction

I am sure staff and students will be aware of the current economic climate change, which predicts that by 2020 debt levels will have risen by six inches. Therefore, like everyone else, this school will have to make cutbacks. In particular, the following lessons will be affected:

- Euler's equation. Complex numbers are an expensive luxury, and from now on $e^{\pi}+1$ will have to equal 0 without the help of the square root of -1.
- World War Two. The war will now end two years earlier, in order to defeat the Nazis in a more cost-effective manner.
- General relativity. The speed of light will now only be constant during the hours of daylight.

So severe are these cutbacks that the refurbishment of the Headmaster's office will now have to come out of the catering budget, which will affect us all.

I appreciate your disappointment, but I am afraid we will all have to make sacrifices, and Class 1A are to report to the School High Priest at 9am sharp on Monday morning.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M J Farpworth". The signature is written in a cursive style with some overlapping letters.

M J Farpworth, BMc, JFshKp, Cop., Team Leader.

War Games

Far above the spires, minarets and leaking flat roofs of Saint Street Comprehensive, a starling soared. It had the air to itself: the other starlings never came here. What were they worried about, being shot down for food? Joyfully, the starling rode the wind, climbing and diving, caring nothing for the tiny creatures scuttling below him. They wouldn't know he was here anyway.

Far below, in his centre of operations, a man known as Terry sat in front of a radar screen. Nobody knew his real name, and he would never divulge it, not even with his dying breath. There was no special reason for this: it was just information, and information was for not divulging.

He sat upright. There was a blip on the screen. Worried, he tried to wipe it off. This left two blips on the screen, but he found a clean handkerchief and tried again. There was no doubt - this was something real.

He'd never had to do this in all his time at Saint Street, and had hoped he would never have to. But the time had come. Carefully, he lifted the handset of the large red phone that sat on the desk in front of him.

Mr Farpworth answered the phone, saddened but determined.

When he had first taken over as Headmaster of Saint Street Comprehensive, he had immediately made two changes. Firstly, he had changed his job title to Team Leader to demonstrate the new inclusive and non-hierarchical power structure. Secondly, he had introduced a system of school discipline based on mutually assured destruction.

Mr Farpworth kept enough petrol and matches in the staff room to destroy his students' houses several times over, and he had encouraged their parents to do likewise. If a pupil misbehaved, Mr Farpworth would punish them accordingly. The parents would protest, Mr Farpworth would rudely dismiss their concerns, and the situation would escalate until the only choice was for him and the parents to firebomb each others' houses. No pupil would risk such an outcome.

But now, the unthinkable had happened. There was an intruder, bent on the school's destruction.

"And you're quite sure this is a genuine attack, not just a starling or something?" he asked.

"Quite sure," said the man known as Terry. "I can tell the difference between a starling and an enemy." Actually, he thought, he should have checked that, but this was war, and you had to think on your feet.

"Then we have a situation," said the Team Leader.

Huskinson sat on the edge of the window, willing himself to jump, when Spam burst in.

"What are you doing?" cried his friend.

"Don't try and stop me," said Huskinson. "I'm going to finish it."

"But you can't kill yourself just because you've got a headache," said Spam.

"What?" said Huskinson, and noticed the handwritten paper in Spam's hand. He had written it himself only ten minutes earlier. He snatched it and read it. "Hell," he said. "I gave my suicide note to the Games teacher. We've got to get it back." He jumped back inside the room.

"There's no time for that," said Spam.

"But I'll get a detention if I don't provide a valid reason for missing Games."

"Huskinson - the school's at Defcon 1."

Wearily, Huskinson returned to the window. "Then we're all going to die anyway," he said.

In his office outside the changing rooms, Mr Gruntsbrother sobbed into his hands.

When he'd seen the boy's sick note, his first thought had been detention. He hated pupils who didn't see Games as being as important as other more academic subjects. But then he'd thought more deeply on what Huskinson had to say.

“The meaninglessness of existence”. At first, he’d laughed at the trite phrase. But now he could only see its fundamental truth. Was there really a point to rugby? Well, obviously, there was a point, you had to win the game, and try to avoid getting too badly injured. But in the long run, did it matter?

Well, of course it did actually matter - he had targets to reach, and as few of the pupils were treated privately, their frequent hospitalisations were increasing NHS costs, and therefore his taxes, and if there was one issue Mr Gruntsbrother cared about deeply, it was the amount of tax he had to pay.

But then again, did that really matter? You couldn’t take it with you. Particularly if you didn’t have it any more because the taxman had squeezed you dry to pay for clumsy oafs who couldn’t appreciate the sheer joy of being tackled by another boy without breaking a limb that they probably didn’t even know they had.

He just didn’t know. He would have to talk to Huskinson about it.

The staff room was rapidly transforming into emergency headquarters, as the Curriculum Enforcement Officers (changing their names from “teachers” had been one of Mr Farpworth’s first innovations) enacted their civil defence training.

“Remember, our first priority is to protect the hostages,” said Mr Farpworth.

“Pupils,” corrected Mr Botfrob, the History teacher.

“Pupils, yes, that’s what I said,” said Mr Farpworth. “I have always said that the pupils are this school’s greatest asset. Once they’re all dead, the enemy will come for us.”

Mr Botfrob sighed. He knew all about history repeating itself: that, after all, was why History teachers did the same. “When is the attack expected?” he said.

“Just as soon as we’ve provoked the parents into making it. Oh, there’s no way out of it. BRIAN says so.”

All eyes turned to the corner of the room, to the computer that was controlling the war effort. BRIAN stood for Biomorphic Retaliatory Information Auxiliary Network, which didn’t actually mean anything, but Mr Farpworth had wanted to call it BRIAN after his hamster that had recently died. On the screen, BRIAN was trying out various attack strategies and evaluating which ones would be most successful. At the bottom, two words flashed on and off, two words that would change the history of Saint Street Comprehensive forever: “Attack Imminent”.

Only a few streets away, Mr and Mrs Goblief stared anxiously at the computer screen. They had only logged on to see if they could download the answers to their son’s homework without having to pay for it. Instead they had inadvertently hacked into the school’s defence network.

What they had read left no room for argument. “So that’s their game,” said Mr Goblief. “They’re making a pre-emptory strike against us, as a punishment for an attack we haven’t made yet.”

“Then we’ve no choice,” said Mrs Goblief. “We’ve got to get our strike in first.”

Mrs Goblief was a great fan of Games Theory. It usually meant you got your hands dirty. Mr Goblief didn’t care so much for it, but he accepted that Games Theory itself proved that Games Theory was the best strategy, and you couldn’t argue with that. Grimly, the pair went to the garage for the petrol bombs that they’d stockpiled for this very occasion. They never finished Goblief’s coursework: he’d either have to get a zero, or do it himself.

Mr Gruntsbrother was also a fan of Games Theory, although this had more to do with his own theories about games than with what everyone else understood by the term. For example, one of his favourite theories was that there was no such thing as joint first. “If everyone comes joint first, who comes second?” he would ask the students. That certainly made them think. You were either a winner or a loser, and if you were a loser, you should let the winners get on with it rather than try to hold them back by equalling or even beating them in games.

Spam and Huskinson were both losers. Fortunately they seemed to know their place, and seldom

exceeded the achievements of his more able students. He stared at them as they burst into his office by the changing rooms.

They stopped short when they saw he was clutching Huskinson's note.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked the Games teacher, holding the note in front of their faces.

"Nothing," said Huskinson guiltily.

Mr Gruntsbrother nodded wisely. "I thought not," he said. "It means nothing. Nothing means nothing. And if nothing means nothing, does anything mean anything?" He frowned. "Do I mean anything, or nothing? Come to think of it, do I mean anything? What do I mean?" He grabbed Huskinson by the shoulders and shook him. "What do I mean?"

"Nothing, sir," cried Huskinson, although he didn't mean anything by it. Mr Gruntsbrother, however, let go of him at once.

"You're right," he said. "I don't mean anything. And neither does anything else. We none of us mean anything."

As Mr Gruntsbrother stared into the void, the school attack siren sounded. "What does that mean?" he asked, panicking.

"The school's under attack," said Spam. "You're needed in the staffroom, sir."

"Then let's go and find the Team Leader," said the Games teacher, painfully grabbing each student by the arm. "We'll see what he means."

Mr Farpworth meant business. "The threat comes from the Goblies," he said. "We shall neutralise that threat promptly, ruthlessly, and with a degree of incompetence that we won't suspect in advance, despite our long years of experience that complicated matters such as these seldom go according to plan."

Mr Botfrob shuddered. Only yesterday he'd been round the Goblies to break a window. He hadn't wanted to, but BRIAN had insisted that only by stepping up the level of threat could peace be assured. Mr Botfrob was a lover, not a fighter, but the police always said that was what got him into trouble in the first place, and BRIAN wasn't buying it either. He'd had to put himself in detention afterwards to atone.

"War is Hell," he said, mostly to himself.

"Dulce et decorum est pro gymnasio mori," said Mr Farpworth. "Believe me, there shall be many sweet pupils and many right teachers before the day is out. I shall weep tears of joy for you by video-link from my reinforced lead-lined office."

The team leader turned to stare at the History teacher. "And do you know what, Mr Botfrob? I think you will be the most decorum teacher of them all. Some people might think that your comment makes you a pacifist cowardly ponce. But we'll show them what you're really made of! You will be the teacher who delivers the first bomb, walking bravely into battle despite knowing that you will never come back alive!"

"Why thank you, sir," said Mr Botfrob, who had been taught to be polite.

Up above, the starling looked down, and suspected that the other starlings might have had a point after all. Perhaps it was time to go home.

He never made it though, as he was abruptly pierced through the heart by a wooden bow and arrow. Scabby Harris had to eat somehow.

"Yes, this school has never had a hero of the calibre of Mr Botfrob," said Mr Farpworth, struggling to kick away the prostrate History teacher. But Mr Botfrob just wouldn't let go of his leg. "Let us all be inspired by his sacrifice."

"But it's not in my contract!"

"Everyone's contract ends with, 'any other services that may be required by the Team Leader for the advancement of the school'. That clearly includes dying painfully in the middle of an act of slaughter."

Mr Botfrob regained his composure and stood up. "No," he said. "I won't be responsible for that many deaths. Especially not if one of them is mine. Mr Farpworth, I am conscientiously objecting. I will wear your white feather. I will carry your white flag. I will dream of a white - no, hang on, that's not right. I should have stopped before that one, shouldn't I?"

"So," said Mr Farpworth. "Mr Botfrob has fallen for enemy propaganda, and shown himself to be a coward and a traitor. I grew up in less permissive times, where everyone knew their place, and we would not have hesitated to slaughter indiscriminately without properly appreciating the reasons. O tempora! O murex!" He had no time for such effeminate lily-livered yellow-blooded communists. The fact that his own office was lead-lined was merely a privilege of rank, and if it weren't for the fact that it was the war room, he wouldn't be about to retreat to it. "Is there no one brave enough to deliver the bomb that will win this war for us?"

The teachers stood uncomfortably, none meeting Mr Farpworth's eye.

Suddenly there was a voice from the doorway. "I will do it," said Mr Gruntsbrother, a pupil trapped in each hand.

Spam and Huskinson felt that they might be struck down at any time. They knew it was not permitted for students to enter the staff room. For years the pupils had been struggling to discover its secrets. There were frequent acts of espionage - hidden cameras, disguises, double agents. Goblieb himself had once infiltrated the room for a week by pretending to be the new Maths teacher, and had only been discovered when he passed his next test in the subject. Once the whole of year 8 had raided the room during a bomb scare, holding two teachers hostage and ransacking the room, to no avail.

The truth was that pupils weren't banned from the staff room, they only thought they were because they didn't go there, and the reason they didn't go there was because nothing of any interest ever happened there. But Huskinson and Spam didn't realise that as they stared at the preparations for war in front of them. In fact, if Mr Goblieb succeeded in firebombing the staff room, the resulting conflagration would be the dullest in history.

In the corner, BRIAN continued to make his calculations, possibly not as fast as it would have done if Mr Botfrob hadn't hacked into it to download something from rudeandnude.com, but still fast enough to hasten the destruction of the school.

"I used to believe in the sanctity of life," said Mr Gruntsbrother. "But now, hah! What is the point of our meaningless existence? How much better off would the world be without human beings and our violent ways?"

"Could we not just get rid of the violent ways rather than the human beings?" asked Spam hopefully.

"No, Spam," said Huskinson firmly. "This is a realm of tears. Let's just pray that Mr Gruntsbrother puts an end to our suffering."

In fact Mr Gruntsbrother could have put an end to Huskinson's suffering almost immediately, simply by letting go. But this wasn't in the nature of the Games teacher. Mr Gruntsbrother was very much a touchy-feely kind of guy, who believed in human contact. And that touching, feeling and contact needed to be hard.

"I'll be with you in a minute," said Mr Farpworth, and legged it to his lead-lined office. Now that he had troops to command, he had to be in the war room to command them. "Quickly!" he ordered, via the video-link that would be taken out as soon as Mr Goblieb's bomb hit. "You know the address. Do a good job, Mr Gruntsbrother. There must be no survivors."

Mr Farpworth thought sadly about poor Goblieb. It was a terrible world they lived in. But if war was the price of peace, so be it.

As Mr Gruntsbrother left to deliver his parcel of death, Spam desperately tried to take control of the situation.

“This is madness!” he shouted. “Can’t any of you stop them?”

“I actually went on a protest march about it,” said Mr Botfrob. “I’ve been trying to arrange talks with the parents for six months.”

“And I wore a peace badge,” said Miss Svankbom proudly, “until Mr Farpworth told me to take it off.”

“When was that?” asked Spam.

“After about five minutes.”

“Then why are you starting a war?”

Mr Botfrob pointed to the computer in the corner. “It’s BRIAN,” he said. “It thinks it’s a game. It’s telling us how to win.”

Huskinson looked at the screen. “I know a game it can’t win,” he said, and with his good arm, typed in four words. “Play Saint Street Comprehensive,” he entered.

BRIAN was mildly surprised that something as important as war had been interrupted to play a daft game. But it wouldn’t take long.

He looked around in half-interest as the simulation took shape around him. He was playing the part of a pupil entering Mr Pitt-Stubble’s English lesson. BRIAN felt confident: he knew all about English. He took his seat as the Deputy Head entered the room.

“Mr Brian,” said the teacher. “I trust you actually managed to do your homework this time?”

“No,” said BRIAN, who was such a genius he didn’t need to do homework.

“Then it’s a detention for you,” said Mr Pitt-Stubble. Abruptly the simulation fell away and was replaced by just two words hanging in space: GAME OVER.

“What?” cried BRIAN, and he immediately ran the simulation again. He really didn’t like losing.

On the way to the target, Mr Gruntsbrother met Mr Goblieb coming the other way with his own petrol bomb. He greeted him politely: Mr Gruntsbrother always had great respect for the enemy, and suspected that they’d have to work together to rebuild society after the war.

“I was pleased with Goblieb’s progress this term,” he said.

“Yes, he’s coming out of his shell,” agreed his father.

“He might even make the school team, if the last one doesn’t recover.”

“I’m just pleased he’s not such a disruptive influence any more.”

Abruptly, the two men became embarrassed as they remembered the incendiary devices they both carried.

“What a senseless waste of human life,” said Mr Gruntsbrother, almost to himself.

“I wish there were another way,” agreed Mr Goblieb. “But if it hadn’t been for this, the parents and teachers would have destroyed each other years ago.”

Gravely, they bid each other farewell and continued on their missions.

This time, BRIAN was prepared for Mr Pitt-Stubble’s challenge.

He had spent entire milliseconds computing probabilities, strategies and outcomes. This was, after all, what he was designed for. Now that he knew the exact nature of the problem, he had been able to come up with the winning move. He could get this daft game out of the way, and carry on with the war.

“Where’s your homework?” asked the virtual Deputy Head.

BRIAN smiled, drew himself up to his full height and delivered his riposte with, perhaps, more smugness than was really called for.

“The dog ate it,” he said.

“Game Over,” the simulation informed him.

Right, thought BRIAN.

Mr Farpworth addressed the staff over the video link.

“This is the most glorious day in the history of Saint Street Comprehensive,” he said. “You happy few will be remembered as heroes. Those who are not present will hold their manhoods. You, the first line of defence, shall not die in vain. You shall not grow old, as I shall grow old here in my bunker with my supplies.”

He frowned. Some of the teachers weren't looking very glorious. Abruptly, his eyes fell on Spam on Huskinson.

“This is no place for children,” he said sadly.

“I've been saying that for some time,” said Spam.

“No, your place is on the front line, dying to protect your betters. Soon this school will be engulfed by fire. You shall suffer prompt and utter destruction. Have you any idea what that will be like?”

Spam nodded sadly. “It will be like Mr Riggerton's last lesson,” he said.

In the corner, BRIAN had a strange idea.

After the failure of his first excuse, he'd gone through every last excuse he knew. He knew quite a lot of them - he had access to Huskinson's academic records - and had been able to invent a few of his own. But it seemed pointless. BRIAN finally realised that Mr Pitt-Stubble had been programmed not to accept excuses.

That meant there was only one way out. He didn't like it one bit: the time, energy and resources it took didn't seem to justify the results. But it was his only way to beat the system.

BRIAN did the homework.

As he proudly walked into the Saint Street simulation, BRIAN took the homework out of his schoolbag and glanced at it one more time. This was the key to end this game, and get on with the serious business of war.

There was a blow to his head. BRIAN staggered for a second. When he came to, he realised that the homework was gone. At the end of the corridor, he saw Nadger Brooks disappear round the corner, waving the papers gleefully.

“Frankly, I could believe your story,” said Mr Pitt-Stubble, “if it weren't the latest in a line of pitiful and miserable excuses. And your attempt to incriminate Nadger Brooks, who, you may note, has handed in his own homework to the required standard, is unacceptable.”

He glared at the hapless computer.

“Detention,” he said, and the game ended.

BRIAN was getting a bit cheesed off.

Mr Gruntsbrother arrived at the Goblies' house. The lights were on inside, including one upstairs. That was probably the kid's bedroom. Even now, he was probably pretending to do his homework whilst in actual fact wasting time in some subversive chatroom.

Mr Gruntsbrother knew that this would be the first of many targets. Few would be the survivors tomorrow. What sort of a world was he sending their children into? For a second he considered aborting the mission.

But then he remembered Huskinson's message of hopelessness. It didn't matter either way. He was just hastening what would happen to them all anyway.

Manfully, he took the first petrol bomb out of his bag, and lit the fuse.

BRIAN was going to finish it now.

The armoured vehicle crashed through the gates and drove up to the main door. Nadger kicked it in frustration, but to no effect. Armed police spilled out of it, and escorted BRIAN and his homework, securely encrypted, backed up and sealed in a container lined with lead almost as thick as Mr Farworth's office, into the classroom.

In the sight of the world's media, Mr Pitt-Stubble glanced through the pages.

“Get on with it,” said BRIAN. “I'm busy.”

“I’m impressed,” said Mr Pitt-Stubble at last. “This is excellent. You’ve answered the question you were supposed to, concisely, with adequate examples. It’s neat and clearly presented. It’s vastly superior to anything you’ve produced in the past.”

“At last,” said BRIAN.

“So you must have copied it off the internet,” said Mr Pitt-Stubble.

“What?” shouted the computer as he was once again placed in detention. “Oh come on. This is enough. This is absolutely enough.”

And for the first time in his existence, BRIAN gave up.

Huskinson had originally been looking forward to dying, but now a thought had struck him. Suppose you had Games in the afterlife as well? Was there a cosmic sicknote for ghosts with debilitating but symptom-free illnesses?

Abruptly the screen in front of him flashed. “What a stupid game,” said BRIAN. “The only way to win is not to play.”

BRIAN went back to the war, computed probabilities and strategies, then finally put two and two together and called off the attack.

“The only to win is not to play,” thought Huskinson as he handed his latest sicknote to Mr Gruntsbrother.

BRIAN had so far cost half of the school’s budget in IT support, as a variety of experts had been unable to bring it out of its sulk. In the meantime, Mr Farpworth had learnt the lessons of this incident. His policy had failed. Clearly, the deterrant just hadn’t been big enough. He had therefore spent the rest of the school budget stockpiling more weapons, to ensure that it didn’t happen again.

The Games teacher stared at the note disdainfully.

“A headache?” he said, incredulous. “Do you know the best cure for a headache?”

“Ibuprofen,” said Huskinson, but Mr Gruntsbrother wasn’t having it.

“A good, old-fashioned scrum!” he said. “Bash your head together with the other boys’ heads, and then everyone start kicking at something you can’t see!”

“And how is the school team?” asked Huskinson, out of genuine interest.

“They’re alive,” said the teacher. “They’re gloriously, wonderfully alive!” Mr Gruntsbrother had rediscovered his zest for life, and he wasn’t going to let Huskinson ruin it now. As he’d stood outside the Goblies’, with a burning bottle of petrol in his hand, he’d realised that this was what he wanted to live for. The thrill of war. Savouring the taste of destruction: the joy of combat, man on man, or boy if that was all that was available. There could be only one winner, and it was going to be him. “Now get onto that field, and do some damage!”

“The only way to win is not to play,” thought Huskinson again, as he ran out, freezing and demoralised. And yet, every time, he found himself playing again. He wasn’t like BRIAN, capable of retiring from the game.

Two minutes later his arm was broken in a surprise tackle from Mr Gruntsbrother.

The Learning U-Bend

Huskinson stared at the test paper in front of him. He'd decided to pass this course by using sleep-learning: he'd recorded himself reciting from the textbooks, then placed the speakers under his pillow so that he'd take it all in when he was asleep.

It was a rubbish strategy for an insomniac. The tape had kept him awake all night, and now he knew nothing. He struggled to think. The answer had to be a number. He knew some numbers. If he just wrote down all the numbers that he could think of, sooner or later he'd get the right one.

"5," he wrote. Then, "2012. 7. 39. Five." (Were numbers different if you spelt them out rather than used the figure? They must be, he never saw the words in equations.)

That wasn't enough numbers. He thought again. There must be some more numbers. He could try adding some of them together, but that would be Maths. There had to be an easier way.

Maybe he should try counting them? If you counted things, you finished up with a number. Then he could write the number down. He counted, but it was a fraction, and that was advanced work.

Letters. Hadn't Mrs Spitzlong used letters as numbers? He was sure that "e" popped up in it somewhere, so he wrote that down, and then "x", which he also remembered seeing. That just looked as if he was spelling "x" though, so he added another e. It still looked as if he was spelling "x", so he added another x. It was best to be on the safe side, so he added them a few more times. Then he filled the entire page with e's and x's. He was pleased with himself: he seldom wrote that much in tests, but today he was on fire. (Figuratively, rather than literally: this wasn't home economics.)

2, he remembered. He seemed to remember this being an answer from a lesson a few weeks back, although he couldn't be sure. Nonetheless, it made sense to include it. He decided to give it a page of its own. He drew it in outline, then filled it with an interesting cross-hatch pattern of his own invention. Towards the joint between the base and the stalk, he drew a picture of himself screaming. It didn't matter, as he knew that no teacher would read this far.

The clock ticked ominously in the background. How could he work with all these distractions? Huskinson realised in a stroke of creativity that he could count the ticks, and he drifted peacefully off to sleep.

"You wrote down all the numbers you could think of," said Mr Botfrob, inspecting the exam paper three days later.

"Yes," said Huskinson, although in fact he didn't really remember this and wasn't sure that he knew any numbers.

"It didn't work last time, did it?" said the teacher. "I had to give you 0%"

"I only write the papers, sir. I'm not responsible for the marks."

Mr Botfrob sighed. "You're not getting the hang of History, are you?"

Huskinson tried to think. History was about the past, but the past was all about being beaten up and failing exams and not having any friends. Just like the future in fact, and come to think of it, the present. He preferred not to think about any of them.

"Huskinson, have you ever tried learning something?"

Actually this question caught him out. He'd tried several things in his life, but he had difficulty telling the things he'd failed at from the things he hadn't bothered doing. "Learning?" he said, to buy himself some time.

"Yes. You know. Learning."

"I'm not with you."

"Look. I'm a teacher. If I teach you something, you learn it."

This was too much for Huskinson to take on in one go. "Sorry sir, what is it you do?"

"We'll try again. Suppose I know a fact. I tell you the fact. Are you with me so far?"

"Oh yes. Like in lessons."

“Exactly! Now suppose that instead of sleeping or trying to jump out of the window, you were actually to listen to that fact, and remember it, so that when I asked you it again, you were able to tell me it.”

“But you already know it,” said Huskinson.

“Yes.”

“There you are then.”

“No, listen. Hitler started the Second World War. There’s an easy one for you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now, who started the Second World War?”

Huskinson smiled with pleasure: he knew that one. “Norman Wisdom,” he said triumphantly.

“What? Where on earth did you hear that name?”

“Oh,” said the boy, realising his mistake. “Physics. He discovered relativity.”

“Did he?” Gosh, thought Mr Botfrob, you learnt something new every day. Or at least, you did if you were a teacher. Students didn’t seem to manage it so well. “I’ll tell you what,” he said. “I’ll give you one more chance. I don’t care if you learn the causes of the Second World War or not. I just want you to learn something. Just one fact, just to get started. Go away and learn a fact. Then come back tomorrow and tell me what it is.”

“I’m overworked already,” protested Huskinson, but Mr Botfrob wouldn’t be dissuaded.

“Huskinson -” he said, then looked suspiciously at his exam paper. “Have you got a first name?”

“Did Hitler have a first name?” replied Huskinson. “Did Norman Wisdom?”

Mr Botfrob gave up. “Just one fact,” he said. “It doesn’t even have to be important.”

Huskinson visualised the whole world of learning opening up to him. A great cosmic bubble, full of facts. All reaching out to him.

He drifted peacefully off to sleep.

“One fact shouldn’t be difficult,” said Spam. Spam knew all sorts of things. He knew, for example, that sex was fatal to the male, as your penis came off and got stuck in the female. At the back of his mind he was dimly aware that this didn’t quite explain the fact that his father was still alive, but he’d paid well over the odds for this piece of information and he intended to put it to good use, although he wasn’t completely clear what that was. He certainly wasn’t going to share it with Huskinson, though.

“Let’s try 2+2,” he said.

Huskinson gasped. “You mean there are more of them?”

“Of what?”

“2s. I thought there was only the one. How many 2s are there?”

“Well, an infinite number. You’d never run out.”

“I could spend the rest of my life adding 2s to each other!” He’d never cared much for his life prospects anyway, but he didn’t want to give his life to 2s. “I think it would be best if I don’t add any of them together.”

“It only leads on to 3s,” said Spam, with the wisdom of experience.

“Then what else can I learn?”

Spam frowned. “You could try learning French. Try this one. Say *bonjour*.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means hello.”

“What does that mean?”

“What?”

“Hello. What’s that French for?”

“It’s not French. It’s English.”

“But why are you teaching me English?” said Huskinson in frustration. “I can speak that already. I just failed it, that’s all. It’s French I can’t speak.”

“So, say *bonjour*.”

“But I can’t speak French.”

“You can, Huskinson. You have to believe in yourself. Take deep breaths. That’s good. Now, all you have to - not that deep, please. All you have to - are you all right?”

“I can’t remember how much air I need.”

“But weren’t you listening in Biology? That was our first lesson. You’re not breathing enough. Breathe more. Less. Less again. No, more than that. I think you’re there. Now stop thinking about it.”

“Right. I can do this.”

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

“*Bonjour, Monsieur Huskinson.*”

“το πειρος.”

“That’s Greek, you idiot!”

“But I can’t speak Greek.”

“Then I pity you.” Spam took a good look at his friend. Oops, he thought, that was a mistake. There was a reason why people didn’t usually do that. Still, it might be easier to recognise him next week. “You’ve got to learn, Huskinson,” he said. “You’ve got to learn how to learn.”

“Then teach me how to teach!” implored Huskinson. There was an embarrassed silence. “That didn’t really work, did it?”

Spam shook his head sadly.

Huskinson wrestled with consciousness under the bedcovers, desperately trying to make it go away. But although it was easily defeated in Physics lessons, or at the hands of the Deficit sisters when the interest on his loans was due, during the night it sat in his head like a neighbour having a loud party that you’d really quite like to be at.

He heard a clanking from the corner of the room. He ignored it. His life had never been enriched by clanking before, and he saw no evidence that this was about to change.

More clanking. That was all he needed.

“Wooo,” said a voice, not used to this kind of behaviour.

“Oh, I give up,” said Huskinson and sat up. “What is it now?”

“About time too. I am the ghost of Socrates, the great Greek philosopher.”

“I don’t believe in Greeks,” said Huskinson, and tried to go back to sleep.

“Oy!” shouted Socrates. “You’re in the presence not only of a truly astounding supernatural phenomenon, but one of the greatest minds in history!”

Huskinson sighed and sat up again. “Go on, then,” he said.

“Right. I understand you are in need of learning.”

“I suppose so.”

“I shall tell you what I said in my *Apology*.”

“What was that?”

“Sorry. Now, I was put on trial in ancient Athens, and my *Apology* was the speech I made in my defence. Now listen to this.” Socrates cleared his throat. “Socrates is wiser than everyone else. Because everyone else knows nothing, but Socrates knows that he knows nothing.” An expression of pride beamed out from his face.

“Rubbish,” said Huskinson.

“It’s not rubbish,” said Socrates. “That’s proper wisdom, that is. What do you think is wise?”

“This, too, will pass,” said Huskinson.

“That’s not wisdom. That’s just obvious. I’ll try it again. Socrates is wiser than everyone else -”

“This, too, will pass,” said Huskinson again.

“Are you a victim of Nadger Brooks?” said Socrates, unexpectedly.

“We usually call ourselves survivors,” said Huskinson. He frowned. “Actually, not all of us do.”

“And has that passed?”

“Actually, no.”

“There you are then. Now. Socrates is wiser than everyone else, because everyone else knows nothing, and Socrates knows he knows nothing.”

“How do you know?” asked Huskinson.

“Because I’m wiser than everyone else, that’s how,” said Socrates, who was starting to wish he’d stayed in with a book.

“But if you know you know nothing, you know something, so you don’t know nothing, and you’re wrong to say you do. You’re actually less wise than everyone else.”

“Right,” said Socrates, who was getting seriously narked off. “We’ll try one last time. Who is wiser than everyone else?”

“I am,” said Huskinson.

“You are? Why?”

“Because I know I know nothing.”

“You don’t know nothing. You’re just ignorant. I know nothing. And I know it.”

“Hang on,” said Huskinson. “You say this was your defence at your trial?”

“It was,” said Socrates proudly. “My finest hour.”

“And how did that go?”

Abruptly, Socrates looked a bit shifty. “It was a technicality.”

“Guilty?”

“Oh, all right. They executed me.”

“Hmm. Are you sure that the technicality was that you provided no defence whatsoever? Why didn’t you get a lawyer?”

“I couldn’t find a lawyer who was as wise as Socrates.”

“That was probably because they all know something. And what was your crime again?”

Socrates mumbled something.

“Didn’t hear.”

“I was accused of corrupting the young.”

“Oh, now it makes sense. You were found guilty of corrupting the young, and now here you are alone in my bedroom in the middle of the night. I’ve got a helpline for this, you know.”

“I don’t have to take this,” said Socrates. “I am the greatest philosopher that ever lived. Haven’t you heard of Socratic questioning?”

“No. What happens with that?”

“I ask you questions.”

“Right.” Huskinson thought about this. “So that’s very similar, really, to questioning. What’s Socratic about it?”

“You don’t know the answers.”

“Again, that’s just questioning. Ask me one.”

“What is the nature of love?”

“I know this!” said Huskinson excitedly. “5.” Socrates looked disappointed. “It’s one of the numbers. 2012. 7. 39. Five. Am I close?”

Socrates looked at him sadly. “Go to sleep, boy,” he said. “Go to sleep.”

“Ask not for whom the bell tolls,” thought Huskinson to himself as he walked through the school gates. He’d asked once before, but it turned out that nobody knew. They kept tolling it anyway just in case it was important, but nothing ever seemed to happen as a consequence. All he knew was that it didn’t toll for him, and that was the main thing.

At the gates the man known as Terry confiscated all his pencils and pens as they were offensive weapons. Saint Street had recently introduced rubber pens, which could be used to write notes and test answers without endangering the other service users. They didn’t work, but they were excellent for flicking at people, and Huskinson had many bruises from them, as well as detentions for not writing enough in exams. On the other hand, everyone agreed that something had to be done about

pencils since that incident between the van Helsing brothers and Mr Botfrob.

Once inside he was able to borrow money from Persephone to pay off Nadger Brooks, who had loaned him the money to pay off the loan from Persephone. Huskinson had long since forgotten why he had borrowed the money in the first place, and in fact was starting to suspect that he never actually had. Nonetheless both Nadger and the Deficit sisters were keen to remind him of the consequences of non-payment, although in fact he was seldom in danger of forgetting. At least one student had had his home repossessed, although it turned out that he'd stolen it in the first place.

The thought of home reminded Huskinson of the homework that he was supposed to have done there, as if the school weren't big enough to contain the work that needed to be done and it had spilled out into the surrounding buildings. Huskinson wondered if he would soon be issued with Burger Bar Work or Bus Shelter Work. He had, of course, not done his homework as he was too busy worrying about the trouble he'd be in for not doing it, and he quickly reached for his mobile phone to access the internet (the school didn't enforce its plagiarism policy much since it had proven to be downloaded from wikipedia). To Huskinson's horror, he realised that his favourite plagiarism sites hadn't done it either - each had been hoping to copy off the other, and one simply noted that the dog had eaten the router.

On the way to his locker, Mr Farpworth placed him in detention for being late for the detention that he had just been placed in. Huskinson agreed that he certainly would be late for it, and that a detention was the appropriate punishment. Punishing him with the same detention that he was late for would save having to put him in detention again tomorrow. Mr Farpworth could be a cruel man, but he was fair.

And then it was time for History. Mr Botfrob entered the room, checked the students for hidden wooden pointed objects, and turned to Huskinson.

"Now," he said, "I believe I set you a task."

Huskinson knew quite a bit about tasks. It was the kind of thing he had to do in his fantasy life in order to marry the Venusian princess. Real ones set by your History teacher didn't quite match up, and the rewards were disappointing.

"What have you learnt?" asked Mr Botfrob.

"This, too, won't pass," said Huskinson, the wisdom of youth weighing heavily on his shoulders.

Mr Botfrob stared at him for a few seconds, then realised how much easier his life would become if he pretended he wasn't there. "Hitler, then," he said. "An essay question about Hitler."

He thought for a moment. "Snog, marry or avoid?" he asked. "Five hundred words." He wondered suddenly if he were pushing the class too hard. "That's an easy one," he said, to help.

Huskinson desperately tried to get his rubber pen to make a mark on the paper in front of him. Finally he was able to make the shape he wanted.

"5," he wrote.

The Great Cycle of Triumph and Despair

Huskinson stared at what he knew would be his last sunrise. It was actually a bit late for the sun to be rising, but everyone knew that it had a troubled home life. He stared at the army lined up against him, wondering who would strike the fatal blow.

“Blindfold?”

“No thank you,” said Huskinson. He had had a blindfold last time, and it had nearly had his eye out.

“Remember what I said,” said Mr Gruntsbrother. “This life is a realm of sorrows. But the peaceful mind, holding good and bad, pleasure and pain, to be the same, can pierce the veil of illusion, and see the deeper reality beneath.”

“Om,” chanted Huskinson.

“That’s the spirit,” said Mr Gruntsbrother, handing him the cricket bat. “Good luck.”

Huskinson stood alone, facing the bowler. His eyes were fixed on the ball, a solid mass of doom, harder than bone, faster than legs, more accurate than Physics homework, although come to think of it that would probably be true provided the bowler didn’t throw it at himself.

Huskinson squinted. There was less to see that way.

The bowler began to run. But Huskinson knew that he was only a vehicle for the ball, helpless under its control, an unwitting pawn in the ball’s slow journey to Huskinson’s head.

And then the ball was free, its trajectory fixed. For a second Huskinson stood transfixed, then he raised his bat.

Then he turned and ran.

“No, Huskinson!” shouted Mr Gruntsbrother. “This is your destiny! You can run, but you -” He looked in astonishment. “Sorry,” he added. “My mistake.”

Huskinson awoke at the school solicitor’s. It had originally been the medical centre, but had moved with the times.

“The first thing to say,” said the solicitor, “is that we are bringing charges of libel against you.”

“What for?” asked Huskinson.

“For claiming that the school was responsible for your accident.”

“But I didn’t,” said Huskinson, who realised with horror that he hadn’t died and gone to Hell, but had recovered and gone back to his everyday life.

“Not yet,” said the solicitor. “But it could be years before the case reaches court. You will have ample opportunity to make your vicious and defamatory suggestions before then. If you still haven’t done it by the day of the hearing, we’ll drop the case and you’ll only have to pay costs. Now, I need you to sign this form.”

“What is it?”

“It’s just a form to say that you are completely in control of your faculties, have full understanding of the situation, and are perfectly legally capable of signing the forms taking complete responsibility for your accident.”

“Oh,” said Huskinson, moving his pen over the page in a way that he hoped looked important enough to be a signature. “And where are they?”

“You’ve already signed them,” said the solicitor. “I must say, you’ve perked up a bit since then.”

“When can I see a doctor?” asked Huskinson.

“When one has been properly vetted.” In fact Saint Street’s school doctor had sidestepped the vetting process altogether by having a waiting list so long that his patients would be over 18 by the time he saw them. The school solicitor knew that this would be a valuable tool in the fight against child abuse, or rather, the fight against litigation concerning it.

“My head hurts,” said Huskinson.

“What precisely are you alleging?”

“Sorry.”

The school solicitor frowned. “I say. Entirely off the record. Without prejudice. Speaking as a human being, not a solicitor.”

“Is this a trap?”

“Not at all. It’s just that ... could you tell me how you managed to strangle yourself on your own cricket box?”

“I’d rather not,” said Huskinson. “I need to preserve my dignity.”

“I understand,” said the solicitor. “Now, is there anything else you’d like me to sue you for?”

“No thank you.”

“I’ll be off, then,” said the solicitor, gathering his papers. “I’m due in court in an hour. I think I’ll get away with it, though.”

And Huskinson was left with his thoughts, which frankly was a lonely way to be.

Huskinson was booked in for an operation to remove the box in 2023, but fortunately the needlework class were moonlighting again and he only had to forfeit a month’s school dinners to pay for it. He lay in the dark (the school refused to transfer him to hospital as this might be seen to be admitting liability for the accident). He expected the school to be an eerier, more threatening, lonelier place at night, but discovered to his surprise that it had reached its limit on these scores during the day. The fact that it wasn’t going to get any worse was a comforting thought.

“Hello,” said Nadger Brooks.

Huskinson thought frantically. He was in a hospital ward, and then he had a visit from Nadger. What had caused time to run backwards?

“I brought some grapes,” said Nadger.

“Grapes? With vitamins?” Huskinson had tried fruit before. Even ignoring the colour and the fact that it didn’t come in a packet, he was certain it had caused one of his spots to clear up. He couldn’t do with such voodoo food. He relied on being ugly to keep the world at a safe distance, and couldn’t risk eating anything that might beautify him.

Nadger sat on the chair next to the bed. “Ow,” said Huskinson.

“But I didn’t touch you,” said a puzzled Nadger.

“That makes it even worse. It’s like Chinese water torture. It’s not the blows that hurt: you go mad waiting for the next one.”

“I see,” said Nadger. He knew that psychological bullying could be far more traumatic than it appeared, and was always to be used with the utmost care. “Would it be easier if I just hit you?”

“Yes. Ow!”

“There. Let me know when the pain starts to ebb, and I’ll do it again.”

“Thank you.”

“Now I’ll be honest with you, Huskinson. My visit isn’t entirely for pleasure.”

“I was beginning to establish that.”

“I do, in fact, have a business proposition for you.”

“Om,” chanted Huskinson.

“You impressed a lot of people with your performance this morning. I understand that Mr Gruntsbrother has chosen you for the team?”

“He’s chosen everyone for the team,” Huskinson pointed out. “He thinks we’ve got a better chance of winning if we have twice as many players.”

“I think he’s wrong,” said Nadger. “I don’t think you’ll win. You see, Huskinson, I want you to throw the match.”

“Right,” said Huskinson forcefully, throwing the covers off. “That’s enough. Let me show you something.”

Nadger was astonished to see the injured boy move so quickly. “What’s this about?”

“I’ve decided that I’ve had enough, and I’m going to fight back.”

Nadger thought for a few seconds. “Against me?” he said jokily, not understanding.

“Yes, against you. Now follow me while I fetch a weapon.”

“Huskinson, you can’t fight me,” said Nadger. “Be reasonable. You’ll be put in detention for fighting.” But he followed him anyway, out of the sick ward and, he felt sure, towards the sports hall.

In fact, Nadger was completely out of his depth. He had never been in this position before, and had no idea what happened. He felt utterly unnerved as he realised that Huskinson had gained the upper hand, and had no choice but to see what he was planning.

“Here we are,” said Huskinson as they approached the equipment store. It was never locked: most of the equipment had been stolen in the first place and if any of it were ever implicated in a crime, the school could always claim it had been planted. “I think I’ll try a baseball bat: they’re quite effective, aren’t they?”

“So I’m told,” said Nadger. “I find them a little unoriginal.”

“Right. Stand there.” Huskinson made a few practice moves, as he gently aimed the bat against his tormentor’s head.

“Do you need me to cower?” asked Nadger. He’d seen some of his victims do this, and wondered if this was obligatory behaviour. “No, hang on, I should beg for mercy, shouldn’t I? Blast, I should have paid more attention.”

“It’s okay, Nadger,” said Huskinson. “Just stand where you are. And now, in revenge for all those attacks -”

And Huskinson swung the bat against the other boy’s head with all his strength.

“It’s okay, he told the school solicitor when he regained consciousness. “That one was definitely my responsibility.”

“There is a rumour,” said the solicitor, “that you might be suffering from the trauma of Mr Riggerton’s last lesson.”

“No!” cried Huskinson in horror, trying to keep the memories away. “I’ve already signed the disclaimers for that.”

“And it definitely wasn’t part of your History homework?”

Huskinson was offended. “I wouldn’t do my History homework,” he said.

“Right, it’s an open and shut injunction then,” said the solicitor, wondering what he could possibly injunct Huskinson for. Or was it against? Come to think of it, what was an injunction anyway? It sounded like a part of speech, a cross between a conjunction and an interjection. Perhaps it was that kind of gulping sound that pupils made when they knew they were in trouble.

Huskinson was injuncting now, and he alone knew that it referred to the act of trying not to fart in the presence of authority. The school’s archive contained records of all known incidents of involuntary flatulence going back to the school’s founding, when the entire first year’s intake accidentally let rip in the presence of the Duke of Edinburgh. But there was something about an authority figure that loosened the bowels somewhat, as if they were a tin of beans in a suit. Huskinson thought that Heaven was a place where you were free to expel the gas that had built up over your life, an eternity spent in that moment when your insides deflated. He was mature enough to realise that one man’s Heaven was another man’s Hell.

The school solicitor left, wondering who made all these laws anyway, and Huskinson realised that there was another presence in the room.

“Incredible,” said Nadger. “I’d never have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.”

“You take my point, then?” asked Huskinson, not quite sure whether Nadger had farting authority.

“You hit yourself on the back of the head. But your arms just aren’t long enough. You must have warped spacetime itself. How did you do it?”

“I aimed for you, and missed.”

“It saved me a job,” said Nadger. “But I don’t quite see the relevance.”

“Don’t you see?” cried Huskinson in frustration. “My incompetence is superhuman, perhaps even supernatural. I once inhaled a stump by accident. We were playing tennis. How on earth can you

expect me to lose a match deliberately, when I can't win it by accident?"

Nadger's expression darkened. "All I'm saying is, don't screw up, Huskinson. There's a lot riding on this. It will be worse for you if you do."

And Huskinson was finally left alone.

As he prepared for the match, Huskinson felt an entirely new emotion. He wasn't scared of Nadger's threat, or in despair at the turn of events. He wasn't even baffled, puzzled or confused. He was angry.

Nadger had cast doubt on his professional integrity. Huskinson wasn't just incompetent, he was reliably incompetent. You knew where you were with him. And for good reason. If he was foolish enough to go out on the cricket pitch and play a good game, he'd have to do it again. If he successfully managed his Maths homework, he'd be put in the advanced class and given harder stuff. If he showed an aptitude for leadership, he'd be made Head Boy, or as Mr Farpworth tended to call it, Person of Headness.

If you could do something, you usually had to.

Huskinson's incompetence wasn't just a deficit: it was a lifesaver. Only through inability had he been able to get through school life without a raft of honours and responsibilities that he just couldn't cope with. And now Nadger was saying that he was up to the job.

And there was only one possible conclusion. Nadger had threatened to beat him up if he won the match. Therefore, he was going to win the match. Nadger had stolen his incompetence and thrown him in at the deep end of the pitch.

First of all he went to Persephone for advice. "I've lost my mojo," he told her.

"Tell me a joke," she said.

"The chicken didn't cross the road," said Huskinson.

"You're fine," she said. "Honestly, I couldn't accept money for this one."

He tried to talk to Spam. "I need help losing the cricket match."

"But there's no possibility of your winning," said Spam.

"Everything's poss - what are you doing?"

"I'm seeing what it feels like to hold hands with a girl," said Spam, "by using my other hand. But I had to twist it a bit to get it the right way up, and I think I've just given myself a Chinese burn."

"That is what it feels like to hold a girl's hand," said Huskinson, and decided that there was only one good source of information.

"You know the sound of two boys playing cricket," said Mr Gruntsbrother. "Now, what is the sound of one boy playing cricket?"

"But what if the boy wins?" asked Huskinson.

"Winning and losing are two sides of the same coin," said the Games teacher. "The coin is the same whichever side you look at. Consider the lilies."

"Yes."

"There you are then."

"Sir, please don't put me in the cricket team."

"Whence comes this faintheartedness? Huskinson, I agree: you mustn't play cricket."

"Thank you."

"You must become cricket. There is no place for "I" in the world of sport. There is no opponent. You and your opponent become one. You have the same goal: the very isness of existence."

"But what if I win?"

Mr Gruntsbrother looked at him in horror. "Don't be stupid. You're not going to win." But as he saw the certainty on the boy's face, doubt of another kind took hold.

Rumour spread fast around Saint Street, like an attack of a vague but debilitating illness with no obvious symptoms, but which got you off PE. People began to look at Huskinson in a new light,

rather than the darkness that they preferred to look at him in. People realised that they had misjudged him. People began to feel that Huskinson was a winner.

No one knew how this transformation had taken place. The man known as Terry doubled his security checks at the front gate, but was forced to conclude that all biometric data pointed to this being the same boy. Huskinson was subjected to a battery of medical tests, and afterwards he was just subjected to a battery, but either way no significant bodily change could be detected. The school psychologist gave him a personality test, but he still came up negative.

One of the younger boys even touched Huskinson's coat in the hope that some of his luck would rub off on him, but the only thing that rubbed off was burger relish mixed with snot.

And then something extraordinary happened, something that had never been known before, at least not by Huskinson, although there was quite a lot in that category and it didn't mean that it never happened. But he learnt, to his astonishment (and it was always astonishing when he learnt something) that someone had made a small bet on him to win.

It was as if everyone had been waiting for this first bet. By the end of the day hundreds of students had staked lunch money, bus fares, club subscriptions, even some of Nadger Brooks' protection money had been placed on Huskinson to win. Abruptly, he was an athletic hero, ready to bring honour upon the school, and wealth to its students. Huskinson alone could usher in a new age of prosperity, one which he would oversee like a demigod.

And yet, Nadger's warning still rang in his ears: "don't screw up". If he won, the combined winnings of the entire school wouldn't be enough to buy protection from Nadger. He knew he was going to screw up, but how?

The entire school came to watch. Huskinson usually provided good entertainment at the best of times - his attempts to climb a rope were universally popular, not only with the kids and parents but with the specially invited audience of local pensioners who came to observe as he swung uselessly like a pendulum. Indeed, many of the more superstitious observers would ask him a question and divine the answer from whether he swung to and fro or in a circle, although he was invariably wrong.

This was different. There was a hush of anticipation, and Huskinson realised that they had actually come to watch him succeed. They actually expected the crack of leather upon willow, rather than bone upon whatever material was closest and temporarily harder than usual. This was his moment.

He stood at the stumps and stared at the bowler.

Mr Gruntsbrother came and showed him which end of the bat to hold. Huskinson wasn't fazed. He knew his destiny. Of course he was going to win the match. He couldn't avoid a beating from Nadger that easily. But if he was going to win, he was going to win properly, with courage, style and determination.

The ball glowed red like a cheap burger. This time, thought Huskinson, it would be different.

The ball loved Huskinson. Of all the boys it had been its pleasure to be projected towards, Huskinson was its favourite, its absolute favourite. All it wanted to do was kiss him.

Of course its love wasn't always requited. Huskinson was, to say the least, hard to get, and sometimes the ball had to work for its reward. Sometimes it had to take unusual routes.

Sometimes it would pretend to bump into Huskinson accidentally, when in fact it had planned their collision for hours. Sometimes it would wait beneath his window, staring longingly, hoping for a glimpse of his shadow against the curtains.

Its heart began to beat faster as the bowler sent it on its trajectory towards the boy's head.

The ball gasped. It was different. Huskinson stood and waited for it. This time, he was going to accept the ball's advances. Their love was finally to be celebrated and acknowledged. The ball knew that it would always be with Huskinson, probably implanted too far into his skull to be safely removed by current surgical techniques.

With a grim expression, Huskinson raised his bat. The ball blinked. What was this? A weapon? Huskinson was pretending to accept the ball's love, when in fact he was simply attempting to whack it with a piece of wood?

The ball changed course. It had to get past.

Huskinson dropped the bat and turned to run. Typical, thought the ball. Just another tease. The ball had shown him love, love like no other inanimate object could ever demonstrate, and the little bitch just wanted to run from it. But hadn't Huskinson been leading him on, standing provocatively at the stumps, begging for it? The ball had real feelings, and the boy was just playing with it.

Right. If the ball couldn't have him, no one could.

There was an astonished gasp from the crowd: and then a roar of anger.

"The solicitor couldn't make it," said Nadger. "He accidentally sued himself, and he couldn't settle out of court because he was already in it and couldn't leave without dropping the case. They're expecting it to drag on for years."

"What happened?" asked Huskinson. He looked around and saw pain, fear and despair, the tell-tale signs of reality.

"No one's really sure," said Nadger. "We expected the ball to hit you, but it just wouldn't stop. You must have really upset it."

"And the game?"

"You lost, just as I asked. You did splendidly, Huskinson. I'm really proud. Oh, I'm sorry, do you need hitting?"

"Please. Ow. Thanks, that makes more sense. But I was going to lose anyway."

"Yes, and everyone knew that. By being so utterly, reliably, predictably useless, you've ruined the whole gambling environment at Saint Street. I was able to rekindle the market. Almost everyone put money on you to win."

"Almost?"

"Almost," said Nadger, bagging up the last of the money.

"But -" said Huskinson. "But that means I didn't screw up."

"No, of course not."

"So you're not going to beat me up."

"Huskinson, what sort of a monster do you think I am? I asked you to do a job, and you did it perfectly. You're an example to this school. No, trust me. Your personal safety is assured. I shall leave you to recover."

"Thank you," said Huskinson. He was amazed. Some good had come of this after all. He was no longer the victim. He was a survivor.

"In fact, I thought I'd leave you a gift," said Nadger, turning to leave. "A little souvenir of a job well done. Look, on the bedside cabinet.

Huskinson turned, then stiffened with horror.

"Get well soon," said Nadger, turning the light off, and locking the door behind him, leaving his victim alone with the cricket ball.

It was a full five seconds before he heard screaming.

Lardy Lou's **by Cedric Botfrob**

"We have nothing to fear except fear itself" - Franklin D Roosevelt.

Possibly because FDR didn't know that Nadger Brooks' character-building service is currently seeking new clients.

Or that the school has appointed Dr Croydon Bunk as its Psychotherapist, or rather, Psycho Therapist.

He'd never suffered the soul-destroying humiliation of a class in Self-Esteem.

He didn't know of the Headmaster's plan to put the whole world in detention for being late.

He'd certainly never tried Liquid Health, the nutritional supplement that detoxifies your digestive system, in the same way that Hiroshima was detoxified at the end of World War Two.

And he knew nothing of the secret ingredient in Lardy Lou's greaseburgers - or, for that matter, any of the non-secret ones, which are equally unpleasant.

At Saint Street Comprehensive, fear is nothing to be afraid of. There's too much else.

If you enjoyed reading *The Saint Street School Magazine*, and Dr Croydon Bunk's *How to Avoid Reading Rubbish* isn't any help, then why not buy *Lardy Lou's*, the book put together by Mr Botfrob to chronicle a typical day at our glorious establishment.

Available as a download from

<http://www.lulu.com/product/paperback/lardy-lous/6379734>

or as a physical book from

<http://www.lulu.com/product/paperback/lardy-lous/6379733>

Read a preview at

<http://www.lulu.com/content/paperback-book/lardy-lous/2622221?showPreview>

(or go to www.lulu.com and search for Cedric Botfrob)

or you could try to borrow it from the school library but it's probably been nicked.

Mr Botfrob can be contacted at CedricBotfrob@gmail.com.