

## The Luckiest Man on Earth

We all have bad days, but Dave Branson's – Brannie to his friends - was a belter. On the day in question he was twenty years of age. He had just successfully completed his A levels and had obtained an RAF scholarship. He was studying Physics at the University of East Tyneside.

All Dave wanted to do was fly. For his entire life, everything he had done was had been aimed that one ambition. Throughout school he had chosen the right subjects, joined the right clubs and studied the right things. On this particular day during his Easter break, he had just returned from a two week spell with the RAF.

His parents had divorced five years ago and Dave, who was very much his mother's son, had been placed in her custody. His brother, Bryan, had gone with his father. On his way back from RAF Benson, Dave had spent a couple of days with his brother and intended to spend a couple more. Unfortunately, Bryan and Dave had not particularly enjoyed each others company. Dave had found Bryan something of a wastrel who was living off his father's money and Bryan had found Dave something of a prig. They had parted as friends, but parted two days early.

Dave was a little late arriving home due to an accident on the bypass so he was not surprised to find his mother's car was not on the driveway.

*I bet she's gone out with that bastard Phil.*

Phil was his mother's new boyfriend. She had met him on a cruise about three months ago and was completely smitten by him. Dave didn't like him, but realised it was probably something to do with his closeness to his mother and the fact that he was now having to share her attentions. There was something more to it than that, but Dave couldn't put his finger on it. At least Phil hadn't moved into his mother's house, he had a very nice place of his own, but before his trip to the RAF Benson he had gone out for a meal with his mother and Phil and had found out they were looking at buying a new house together. This was a bridge Dave would have to cross when he came to it.

Dave let himself in and found a neat pile of post on the table by the door. He went into the kitchen and put the kettle on and then sat at the kitchen table and began to open his mail.

The first envelope was a familiar buff colour of the type used by the RAF for all its correspondence. He opened it eagerly, but was disappointed by what he found.

Inside was a short letter on official notepaper and a sealed envelope.

*Dear Mr Branson,* he read.

*The routine medical examination you undertook on April the 14<sup>th</sup> revealed symptoms of a medical complaint which may be a cause for concern. We suggest that you take the enclosed letter to your general practitioner with some degree of urgency.*

*We would be grateful if you would contact us at the above telephone number as soon as possible after this meeting has taken place.*

*Yours truly,*

*Flight Lieutenant Godfrey St John*

Brannie finished making his cup of coffee in a state of confusion. Godfrey St John had been one of the instructors on the RAF course Dave had just returned from. He had been a friendly and open sort of chap who had been more than civil over a couple of pints in the officer's mess where all the students had been based.

The formal nature of the language didn't sound like the Godfrey he knew, but most of the letters he had received from the RAF had been in a polysyllabic jargonese.

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The content of the letter was also something of a puzzle. Dave remembered the medical quite clearly. It had been quite thorough, including a trip to a clinic for x-rays and blood tests and everyone had been given a clean bill of health with one exception. One student had been diagnosed as having testicular cancer and had been rushed to hospital for emergency treatment. Brannie had been one of a small number of students who had been to visit him after emergency surgery.

This was why Brannie remembered the physical so clearly and was why he was so sure that he was healthy. If they could spot something like cancer in a day, surely they would spot anything else.

He was prevented from contemplating the mystery further by a knock on the door. He went to the door and seeing what appeared to be a man in uniform through the frosted glass, he experienced a sudden twinge of panic.

*What in heavens name is going on?* He thought.

He pulled the door open and instead of finding an RAF officer, he found a quite attractive WPC.

"Mr Branson?" she asked. "I'm WPC Johnson. We've had one of the neighbours keeping an eye out for you. It's about your mother."

"Good God. Is she alright?"

"Yes, yes. Nothing like that. She's helping us with our enquiries."

"Is she in trouble?"

"No, not really. It's a matter regarding Mr Philip Jenkins."

"That bastard. I knew there was something fishy about him. What's he done?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that, but if you'll accompany me to the station..."

"I didn't think you people talked like that."

"Like what?"

Brannie asked the WPC if she could wait while he made a quick call to his doctor's. She agreed and he made an appointment for later that day. He continued to pester Ms. Johnson about the nature of the despised Phil's crime, but after his crack about her use of language, the WPC stayed tight lipped.

When they arrived at the station they were greeted by a friendly sergeant who offered Dave a cup of tea and took him on to an interview room.

"There's no easy way to tell you this," he began. "But Mr Jenkins is a con man."

"What?"

The sergeant went on to explain what had happened.

Philip Jenkins preyed on middle-aged divorcees. He met up with them, got them to fall in love with him and then got them to agree to buy a house with him.

The con was well worked out. His real wife acted as the estate agent and his daughter acted as the house seller. Branson's mother had given them £150,000. According to the sergeant, Jenkins had cleared the best part of three million in the last five years.

"Jenkins had got a house," said Dave. "A nice house. I went there several times."

"Rented. In fact that's how we got onto him. Your mother had proved to be more resistant than some of the others and he'd only got a three month lease on the property. The owners had tried to move him out and when he refused, they'd called in the police.

"If it's any consolation, we've got the 'estate agent' and the 'house seller' and they say that they'd decided they'd got enough and had given up. The cruise was their celebration of their success. Luckily for us, Jenkins decided that your mother was his one last score. If he hadn't, we would never have caught them."

"And what about Jenkins?"

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“He’s hit the road. Your Mums over at the rented house helping our people look for clues. It would help us if you could tell us everything you know about Mr. Jenkins” Dave spent some time telling the sergeant everything that he knew, starting from the first post card he’d received from his mother on the cruise and finishing with the meal before he left for his sojourn with the RAF.

Dave suddenly remembered he had a doctor’s appointment. He knew he needed to talk to his mum but it could wait. The sergeant offered to run him over.

When Dave arrived at the surgery he was only ten minutes late, but the surgery was surprisingly deserted. The receptionist seemed overly pleased he was there.

“He’s in one of those moods,” she said conspiratorially. “He’s given everybody two aspirins and sent them home”

Dave went in and gave Doctor Doberman both the letter and the sealed envelope. The doctor spent some time reading both.

“Oh great,” he said suddenly. “This is just what I need.”

He finished reading the letter inside the envelope and shook his head.

“You’re an intelligent young man and there’s no easy way to tell you this,” he said.

“The RAF thinks you’ve got MS.”

“What?”

“They want me to book you in for a few extra tests at the hospital, but they’re pretty sure.”

“Why?...Why didn’t they say something at the time? They were able to tell one chap he’d got cancer.”

“The tests take slightly longer and besides, at this moment in time, it’s a very, very mild form.”

“At this moment in time? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s going to get worse.”

“How much worse?”

“I can’t say without further information. You could be in a wheelchair in a couple of years or you could lead a long and happy life. But, and, there’s no easy way to tell you this, it’s only fair to tell you that the Air Force thinks it will be the former.”

“How do I stand with the RAF?”

“How do you mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“Will I fly?”

“That’s for them to decide.”

The doctor tried to contact Lieutenant St John, but he was unavailable so all that remained was for appointments to be made with the hospital. The doctor also rang Dave’s home and found that his mother had still not returned

Brannie felt he needed a drink and knew that The Rose and Crown was just round the corner. He asked the doctor if he could use the phone to ring his girlfriend. The doctor agreed, but Dave found Ginnie wasn’t in.

Dave had gone out with Ginnie since their mid-teens, but what with University and the RAF he hadn’t seen as much of her as he liked. Despite the fact they were only just in their twenties, they’d settled into a mature and comfortable togetherness that Dave was really quite happy with.

Dave decided to go to The Rose and Crown anyway.

When he got there he went into the tap room and bought himself a pint. From the main bar he could hear a familiar voice and so decided to go next door to investigate.

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There he found three of his friends, Mick, Stephanie and Ginnie.

“Oh hello,” said Ginnie, looking surprised to see him. “I wasn’t expecting you back.”

“No, I was getting in Bryan’s way and I decided to come home. I’m not particularly pleased I did.”

“Why?”

“Long story.”

“I must say, I’m surprised to see you here,” said Steph. “I think your taking it very well.”

“Thank you.”

Dave looked a little perplexed about how Steph could know what had gone off, but assumed that in a small town like this, everybody would know that Phil had done a runner by now.

“So what brings you here so early?” he asked.

“We’re going to the pictures, so we’ve called in for a pint,” said Mick.

For some reason Dave couldn’t work out there was a

“So what exactly has happened to you today?”

Dave took time out to explain what had happened.

“So you haven’t opened any their post this morning?” asked Mick.

“No. Why?”

Ginnie looked shocked.

“Is that the time?” Mick said suddenly. “The film is about to start. We’d better be going. Coming Ginnie?”

“No, I think I need to talk to Dave.”

“It’s OK,” said Dave. “If you’d planned to do it, you go ahead and do it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. I need to find my Mum.”

“OK, but we’ll talk tomorrow.”

Mick and Steph were already by the door.

“Come on, Gin. We’ll be late,” shouted Mick and Ginnie grabbed her coat and left.

*There was something weird about all that,* thought Dave, but he had other things to think about so he just finished his pint and went and got another.

He realised he needed to talk to his Mum, so he used the public phone in the pub and rang home. There was no reply.

There was something about sitting and drinking on his own that made him think of his father, and somewhere in the middle of his third pint it began to become important to him to meet up with his dad.

He rang his father’s work and found that his dad was about to leave work for a favourite restaurant. Dave invited himself along. His Dad lived two stops down the local train line and he could be there in half an hour.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” said his father rising from his seat.

“I really need to talk to you.”

“Me? And not you Mother?”

“You.”

Dave sat and his father poured him a large glass of wine from the bottle on the table.

“I’ve got Multiple Sclerosis,” he said.

The story of the day just poured out of him. His father said nothing, but grinned at the point when Dave recounted the events in the pub. When Dave finished, his father restocked the wine glasses.

“How can I help?” he asked.

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“I don’t know, but I need you and mum needs you.”

His father sat back and took a long sip of his drink.

“No she doesn’t.”

“What?”

“You’re mother doesn’t need me. Even if I was willing to help her – and I’m not – she wouldn’t accept it.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Fair? Why did your mother and me split up?”

“Unreasonable grounds.”

“Yeah,” he smiled. “‘Unreasonable grounds’. Do you know what that means?”

For the first time since the divorce Dave thought about it. Really thought about it.

“I thought...you know...something sexual.”

His father burst out laughing.

“Exactly the opposite. Your mother got bored with me. That’s it, pure and simple.

She’d got you and she was bored with me.

“To be honest, it was a relief when she asked for a divorce.

“Do you know how she did that?”

“She sent me a letter asking me to move out.

“There was no arguing and no-one else involved, just a polite exchange of correspondence.”

Dave was struck dumb by the what he saw as the awesome simplicity of it all.

“Listen, the MS thing?” said his dad. “That’s a bit of a bummer and I’ll do everything I can to help. But I cannot, will not, help your mother.”

Brannie finished his drink.

“Don’t bother with the train back, I’ll pay for a taxi.

“Before you go, there’s two bits of advice.

“Firstly, don’t do anything stupid. When things get a bit rough, you can be a bit prone to grand theatrical gestures, you take after your mother that way. She could often make rash decisions under pressure and live to regret the consequences.

“And secondly, when you get back...”

“Yes?”

“Check your post.”

Dave had another couple of drinks before the taxi arrived and was feeling a little on the sloshed side when he finally arrived home. The taxi driver was quite chatty and apologised for having to take him on the country roads and not down the bypass.

“There was an accident on the bypass this morning, somebody dropped dead at the wheel according to the wireless. I reckon there’s more to it than that. The police have still got one side of the dual carriageway closed.”

Dave wasn’t in the mood for talking, but just kept nodding and saying “Uh-uh”. It came as no surprise to him that there should be another small hitch in his day horriblis.

The taxi was pre-paid, so on his return home, Dave just ran into the house. He was disturbed to find a note had been pushed through the door telling him to ring the police on a specific number. The officer answering seemed to know all about his case and said they would send a car straight round.

Dave went and got the bottle whiskey his mother kept for visitors and after taking a big unpleasant swig he remembered what his father had said about the Grand Theatrical Gesture, he went and put the kettle on.

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It was then that he remembered his father's second piece of advice and went looking for his post.  
He first scanned the envelopes and noticed that one of them was from Ginnie.

*Dear Dave*

*You're an intelligent young man and there's no easy way to tell you, but I can't go out with you any more.*

*I'm sorry that this comes to you in a letter, but this is really the heart of the problem.*

*If I'd been able to talk to you about it, I would have told you ages ago.*

*I've been going out with Mick for the last eight months*

*You were away so often and were so distant when you were there that it was easier to pretend than to tell you (God knows what I'd have done if you'd wanted sex).*

*But now we're thinking of getting engaged and I can't keep it from you any longer.*

*I hope we can remain friends, but that's up to you. The fact of the matter is that I don't love you anymore and I'm marrying Mick.*

*Love,*

*Ginnie.*

The word love had been crossed out and then re-written.

Dave re-read the letter then put it on the work surface.

He seemed curiously untouched. Maybe it was the nature of the day he'd had, maybe it was because they had settled into a non-demonstrative tedium or maybe there was a refusal to accept the contents of the letter and a belief that they'd get back together.

Whatever it was, Ginnie leaving him didn't seem to hurt.

But what did hurt him was that everybody *knew*.

He thought back to his conversation in the pub earlier and ran through in his head what Steph had said to him. Being brave had nothing to do with facing multiple sclerosis, but turning up in the pub. In fact, she might even have known the content of the letter and was surprised that he wanted to remain friends.

His father clearly knew, because he had told him to check his post.

He wondered if his mother knew.

There was a knock on the door.

*For God's sake, what now?* He thought.

It was two police officers.

Dave let them in just as the kettle began to whistle.

"Is that the kettle?" asked the WPC she entered the door. "I could do with a cuppa.

Can you sort it out Kev?"

Dave showed the constable where the mugs and coffee were and equipped with a cup of coffee each, they went into the lounge and sat down.

"First the good news. We've caught Mr Philip Jenkins.

"How? Where?"

"He had a heart attack driving up the bypass. Car went off the road and killed him outright. You wouldn't believe the amount of bother that's caused."

"Oh, I might."

*Just*

"You're an intelligent young man," began the WPC, "And there's no easy way to tell you. Your mother's had a heart attack."

"What?"

There was a too long a pause, ended by the WPC.

"I'll take you straight there."

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Despite the late hour, when the police car arrived at the hospital, they were prevented from pulling up in front of reception by a lorry that appeared to be delivering mattresses. The policeman driving leapt out of the car.

“What are you doing? This is supposed to be emergency vehicles only.”

“We got caught up in that accident on the M6, we’re six hours late,” said the lorry driver. “They’re supposed to go round the back, but we can’t find anybody with a key. They’ve told us to leave them in reception.

“Well get this thing unloaded and moved before an ambulance comes.”

*I can’t believe it, Dave thought in his vaguely inebriate state. What else is going to happen? Please let her be alright. I need to talk to her.*

He ran into reception, but had to wait for the police to catch up. They were directed to the appropriate ward and Dave was allowed to see his mum. She was in intensive care with a variety of cables and tubes attached to her.

A doctor took him off to one side.

“I can see you’re an intelligent young man,” he began.

“Let me guess,” said Dave. “There’s no easy way to tell me?”

“I’m sorry if that sounds callous, but no, there isn’t.”

The doctor waited for Dave to make a comeback, but Dave suddenly found himself struck dumb.

“Your mother is in a coma, we don’t know when – or if – she’ll come out it.”

Suddenly, Dave could take no more.

A combination alcohol, his disposition and the events of the day just proved too much.

He ran off.

Dave ran out of the ward and towards the lift. When no lift arrived, he shot down the stairs. Reaching the bottom of the stairwell, he found there was no way out, other than a service lift full of mattresses. He pulled the door shut and pressed UP, but was unable to work out how to stop the upward travel. Eventually, the lift stopped and deposited Dave in a small room with just the lift and a door. Dave opened the door and found himself in the worst possible place.

On the roof.

The fresh air hit him badly and he felt suddenly weak. He walked up to the edge of the flat roof and looked over.

*Would it hurt if I jumped?* he thought.

Later he would say that he got onto the roof and started to think about things, but that wasn’t true. In reality, from the point he had opened the letter from the RAF, things had been running through his mind.

But he run through the day in his mind.

- He’d got a letter from the RAF
- He’d been late getting home because of problems on the bypass
- His mum was out.
- He’d found out that his mum’s new boyfriend (who he hated) was a con man and had run off with all her money.
- He’d found out he had a disease that would lead to a slow and debilitating death.
- He’d realised that he would never fly.
- He’d gone for a drink with his girlfriend who he later found out was his ex-girlfriend. He’d failed to meet up with his mum.

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- He'd found out that his girlfriend had been going out with someone else.
- He'd realised that everybody – his friends, his Dad and maybe even his mum – knew that his girlfriend had dumped him.
- He'd found out by letter – by letter for God's sake.
- He'd found out that all the times he'd been late and missed his mum had been the responsibility of The Bastard Phil (he still wasn't sure how he felt about that death).
- He'd found out his mother had suffered a heart attack.
- He'd not been able to get into the hospital.
- He'd got to his mother and found out that she was in a coma that she might not get out of.
- He'd still not had a chance to talk to his mum.
- He suddenly realised that he was an intelligent young man, and there was no easy way to tell himself.
- He hadn't got a lot to look forward to.

He was drunk, in fresh air and standing on a roof.  
Dave jumped.

And landed on the pile of mattresses he had seen being delivered earlier.  
A male nurse came running out of reception.  
“Bloody Hell, mate,” he cried. “You must be the luckiest man alive.”