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Opening extract from

Pants Are Everything

Written by

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Working for a Second Chance

Friday

Tasks completed: None.
Things I have learned: Nothing.

My name is Michael Swarbrick and I have two weeks to save my school career. This is because:

1. I was arrested for dancing naked in front of a stolen donkey.
2. I boasted about number 1 on the front pages of a local newspaper.
3. I hacked into a computer network and displayed my buttocks to the entire school.
4. I set fire to myself.
5. Because of 4, I caused an incident of mass streaking.
6. Because of 5, I became an Internet sensation.
7. Because of 1–6, I became a word.
8. I had my first ever snog with the most incredible girl

in the universe. This *should* have been a good thing. However, since she was not actually *awake* at the time, this is considered a very, *very* Bad Thing.

9. I imprisoned an elderly foreign lady and forced her to become a nudist.
10. I destroyed a car in order to send rude messages to someone else's girlfriend. NB: **I did not actually do this.**

My school does not like to expel people. When people in Year 10 or above get in Big Trouble, they are sent on an extended work experience called "Working for a Second Chance".

For the next two weeks I will be working all day, then spending my evenings reflecting on why I am not in lessons and writing about what I have learned. If I work hard and prove I am a decent human, I *may* be allowed back to school.

If not, then I will definitely be kicked out.

Now, many people would look at the above list and say, "You are clearly a bad person. I hope you get run over by a bicycle or bitten by feral children. You deserve it."

The problem is I did not *do* these things. Well. OK. So I *did* do all of them, apart from number 10. But mostly they were not my fault. And the ones that were my fault I did for the right reasons.

Sort of.

There are plenty of people who would love to be expelled

from school. They would have a whale of a time sitting at home all day in their underpants, watching TV and eating crisps. Not me. I *like* school. I *like* learning things. When I am older, I want to work in a nice clean office with a chair that spins round and my own supplies of rubber bands, fountain pens and boiled sweets.

If I do not finish school, I will probably end up doing something I do not enjoy, like hand-washing donated underpants at a second-hand shop.

Therefore, I *must* do well during this placement. I am certain. . . OK, I am *pretty sure*. . . Well, all right, I *think* I am a decent human being. I just need everyone else to realize it. And at the moment, the evidence is stacked against me.

Since the car incident, I have been suspended from school. This morning Mum and I had to go in for a meeting with Mr Whittle (the head teacher) about my work placement. This is the first time I have been in a room with a member of my family since Friday. Indeed, I spent a good portion of the weekend in my room, on my laptop, investigating whether it is possible to divorce them.

For the record, it is not.

Mr Whittle talked about "giving something back to the community" and becoming "more rounded".[1] He said that if

1 I presume he meant in the sense of finding out about lots of different things, rather than in terms of my shape, which is already fairly round.

I work hard for two weeks, I will be allowed back in time for the school disco.

Even though I absolutely do not want to go to the school disco, I nodded my head and smiled and tried my hardest to look nice. Mr Whittle took a long look at me and asked if I needed the toilet.

In the meeting, I was given a choice: either the school could find me a placement or I could organize one myself.

I wanted to work at the local library so Mr Whittle allowed me to call them. I was actually quite excited about this – a peaceful fortnight alphabetizing things and making sure the books were perfectly straight sounded like just the ticket. Plus, I would certainly be giving something back to the community. I spoke in my nicest, friendliest voice and explained who I was.

Before I could say anything else, the librarian cut me off and told me I would not be welcome there because they had read all about me in the newspaper. Then she hung up.

Mr Whittle said he was not surprised. He said he would not let me loose anywhere with bookshelves in case I hid behind them in the nude and leapt out at old ladies.

I felt that this was a bit unfair. I *never* took off my clothes in front of that old lady. If anything it was the other way round. This is the problem with people thinking you are a notorious nudist, though. Everyone always expects the worst from you.

Anyway, Mr Whittle said it would be better if the school found me a placement. I will find out what it is on Monday.

By coincidence, my slightly obese best-and-only-friend Paul Beary is being punished in the exact same way. Last week he raided the vending machine storeroom for supplies, then bunked off and attempted to hitch-hike to France. Unfortunately, the only lift he got was from a policeman who drove him straight back to school again.

Paul claims that it took an entire SWAT team to capture him and he was shot by a police sniper. He even showed me the bullet wound.[2]

Paul always tells lies. E.g,

a. His sister's husband owns a rhinoceros farm in Kenya (at which Paul has spent many happy hours *milking* the rhinos).
b. He has a cousin called Silas who got bitten by a radioactive elk in Latvia and now eats grass, has antlers and glows in the dark. And
c. His Uncle Dwayne (who invented the caravan) has "three butt cheeks".

Paul wanted to do his placement in McDonald's so yesterday he went in and told the person on the counter that he won Junior MasterChef last year and wanted to "sprinkle stardust on to their Big Macs".

2 His belly button.

However, while he was waiting for the manager he "got a little peckish". The manager caught him drinking barbecue sauce directly from the dispenser. Unsurprisingly, he did not get the job and is now banned from every McDonald's in town. He had to organize a placement at his Uncle Dwayne's caravan factory instead.

Working for a Second Chance

Monday

Tasks completed: I "chose" a placement.
What I have learned: That I will not be turning my life around any time soon.

My cretin of a brother says that if you do good things, then good things will happen to you in return. But, if you do bad things. . .

You can probably guess the rest. Ordinarily my brother talks rubbish.[3] However, in this case, I think he may have a point. As previously mentioned, I have been involved in bad things. And now, even though none of them were my fault, I am paying the price.

3 Like the time when I was four and he told me that if I licked my finger and put it into the plug socket, I would grow a beard.

Today was my second meeting at school. Mum and I went to Mr Whittle's office. I do not like Mr Whittle's office. It smells of coffee and body odour. A bit like Mr Whittle himself, I suppose. There is a poster on the wall of a crocodile attacking a family of terrified wildebeest. The slogan underneath reads: "Only the Strong Survive". This says a lot about Mr Whittle.

Anyway, when I sat down, Mr Whittle told me he had some good news. He had managed to find me a choice of two last-minute placements. They were:

1) Working for my old counsellor, Chas.
2) Manually removing the guts from dead chickens at a factory called Golden Nuggets.

This was a tough decision to make. Indeed, the only reason I did not opt for Golden Nuggets is because I am allergic to latex gloves. As a result I would have been forced to handle raw chicken intestines with my bare hands for eight hours a day.

I do not wish to sound ungrateful, but working with Chas will be only marginally less unpleasant than this.

Allow me to explain: before the Bad Things happened, Chas used to counsel me for some other problems I was having. E.g, my mother was an insane nudist who disgraced herself in front of the entire city, and I was scared of naked people and donkeys.

In fact it is Chas's fault that I was arrested in the first place, which led to all of the other terrible things. Frankly, he is the worst counsellor of all time and he completely ruined my life. This may well stop us from building up a happy working relationship.

As Mr Whittle phoned Chas to arrange a meeting tomorrow, I worried that my school career was being flushed away like an unwanted terrapin.

Following Mr Whittle's phone call I came home. The only other person in the house is my brother, who is laughing and joking next door with his girlfriend. I do not wish to listen to this so I have stuffed cotton wool into my ears.

One of my tasks during this work placement will be to reflect on why I am doing it in the first place. If I explain about my arrest, you may understand why I do not wish to work with Chas.

My Arrest

About two weeks ago, Chas gave me some advice. As a result, Lucy King and I went to Blackpool to solve our problems.

Lucy King is the world's most wonderful person. Sadly, she now hates me. A few months ago, she was number two in *Swimming Times* magazine's "Ten Stars

of the Future". It said she is a "hot tip for glory at next summer's European Championships".

I cut this article out and put it into the scrapbook I have assembled for her. This is not a weird thing to do. Lucy *was* my best friend. Best friends are proud of their best friends. They collect pictures and articles of them from newspapers and magazines, along with other important artefacts.[4]

Lucy's dad made her train so hard at swimming that she no longer enjoyed it. She became so desperate that she actually went out with my brother. Luckily she realized how ridiculous this was, and after catching him with another girl, smacked him one in the face. He ran away to Australia straight afterwards.

Unfortunately, he has since returned.

Anyway, to rid me of my fear of donkeys, we hired one on Blackpool beach. After a pleasant trot, we tied it up to one of the piers and hopped into the water so Lucy could see that swimming can be fun.

The perfect plan, right?

Er . . . not *exactly*.

Lucy suggested I should take off my shorts to challenge my phobia of nudity. Despite my shyness, I

4 I.e, broken goggle straps, discarded energy bar wrappers, a sticking plaster that dropped off her foot just prior to the Regional Championships butterfly final last year, etc.

did it. By the way, Lucy did not even look or anything. She is not that kind of girl.

For about three seconds, it worked. I felt free and at ease.

Then the problems began.

Things Go Wrong

So, basically, what *should* have happened was:

1. We have a lovely time with the donkey and go for a swim. I remove my shorts and throw them over my head in a joyous celebration of freedom.
2. We return the donkey and happily go home, cured of any problems and issues.

What *actually* happened was:

1. As above.
2. We lose track of time and keep the donkey for longer than we paid for; over an hour longer, as it transpired.
3. Unknown to us, the donkey owner calls the police, and a riot van rushes to the scene. Apparently donkey theft is a serious crime in Blackpool.

4. I learn about 3 when I turn back towards the shore and find an angry-looking policeman is standing at the water's edge staring back at me.
5. I quickly tell Lucy to escape so she does not get into trouble.
6. Lucy whizzes away beneath the murky waves like a beautiful porpoise and emerges on the other side of the pier.

Unfortunately, this was not the end of the story.

The End of the Story (Which Actually Is Not Even the Beginning of the Story)

The policeman calmly asked me to come out of the water. I did not want to. I could no longer see my shorts and the sea was protecting my modesty like a giant pair of liquid underpants.

"OK, mister," said the policeman. "Let's not get silly. Hands above your head and on to the beach now."

Very slowly and very reluctantly, I emerged from the waves. Hands in the air. Grey water cascading down my skin. *Everything* on show. It was like a cheap advert for

really bad shower gel. Clearly disturbed, the policeman threw the book at me.

When I say "threw the book at me", I do not mean that he arrested me and locked me up in a cell (that happened later). I mean it literally; he reached into his pocket and threw his notebook into the water.

"Urgh. Cover yourself," he ordered. Humiliated, I used the notebook to hide – you know – the *important areas*, and slowly waded on to the shore.

"Whose are these?" he said, lifting up Lucy's clothes.

I did not wish to get Lucy into trouble. "Mine."

The policeman frowned. "What? Even the miniskirt?"

"Yes. I . . . wore it underneath my trousers."

This was a new low.

"Well. A boy who steals donkeys, then flashes at them." He paused to whistle. "When he isn't dressed like a woman. Right. Down the station – we'll see what your parents have to say about this. And you can leave your girly clothes here. I'm not having any of that nonsense in my v—"

He did not get the chance to finish. There was a *CRACK* from above us and something fell from the sky, crashing into the policeman and knocking him to the ground.