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What You See Is What You Get

My Autobiography

Written by Alan Sugar

Published by Macmillan

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ALAN SUGAR

What You See Is What You Get

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

MACMILLAN



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This book is dedicated to my mum and dad,
Johnnie and Rita, and Harold Regal

And to some of those who served me so well at Amstrad
but are no longer with us:
Dickie Mould, Michael Davis, Bill Weidenauer,
Simon Angel, Jim Rice and Eric Shaw

And to two men who helped me flourish in business
but, sadly, are also no longer with us:
Nick Lightowler and Shigemasa Otake

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1

The Lucky Mistake

Tar Blocks, Ginger Beer and Other Childhood Enterprises

1947–60

There are three reasons why you might never have got the opportunity to read this book. The first is that maybe I wasn't planned to be in this world, the second is that once I did arrive I was abandoned, and the third is that my mum – accidentally – nearly killed me! Being twelve years younger than my closest sibling twins, I often joke that I think (well, I'm sure) I was a 'mistake' – maybe the result of a good night out during the post-war euphoria.

In the late forties, it was normal for babies to be left outside shops in their prams while the mothers went inside. That in itself gives you a picture of what times were like back then – parents were not worried about weirdoes abducting babies. One day, my mum (who hadn't had a baby to think about for twelve years) went to Woolworths and parked me outside in my pram. She did her shopping, walked out and took the 106 bus from Stoke Newington back to Clapton. Only when she was halfway home did it dawn on her: 'I've left Alan outside Woolworths!'

Like all kids, I picked up various bugs and sniffles and occasionally had to be off school. My mum would tuck me up in her bed and nip down to the shops to buy me some comics – the *Beano* and the *Dandy.* I'd finish reading them in half an hour and be bored stiff. On one particular day, when I was about ten, I got up, went into the kitchen and sat at the table, watching her cooking.

My mother had no sense of smell at all – an extraordinary phenomenon. I guess in those days medical science wasn't sufficiently advanced to know the reason or come up with a cure. Anyway, as I sat in the kitchen, I started drifting off. I folded my arms on the table and laid my head down, unable to keep awake. I was lucky that around midday my sister Daphne came home from work for lunch. Mum had left one of the gas rings on, and because she couldn't smell, she had no idea that the whole kitchen had filled with gas. It was so bad,

Daphne swears she could even smell the gas from outside the front door. You can imagine her horror when she saw me, head down on the table. She rushed to pick me up and took me out on to the balcony for some fresh air.

I sometimes wonder just how much gas was in the air that day. Mum was cooking on the other gas ring, which was lit, so I reckon it wouldn't have taken too long for the whole room to blow up. So there you have it. I may have entered the world by mistake, been abandoned and nearly killed, but I am here to tell my story.

This may have given you the wrong impression of my mum, Fay, who was the strong centre of the family. She was nearly forty when I was born on 24 March 1947 at Hackney Hospital and she had a difficult labour. To use her words, 'They were very worried about me – I was on the gates.' (On the gates of heaven, she meant.) In the end, I was born by Caesarean section, and was pulled out with a pair of tongs which grabbed me by my upper lip, according to Mum. Later in life, when I was at the swimming baths or at the seaside and came out of the water shivering with cold, two dark marks would appear on my upper lip. Mum would say, 'Look at Alan's upper lip. See those two blue marks? That's where they schlapped him out.' Is that an old wives' tale or what?!

My dad Nathan (Nat to everyone) was also nearly forty when I was born. My parents' relatively advanced age endorses my theory that I wasn't a planned arrival. I was always slightly embarrassed at school on parents' day because they looked much older than the other mums and dads – more like grandparents.

They were both born in the East End of London, my mum on 31 December 1907. She was one of twins, but sadly her twin sister died at birth. Mum was only fourteen when her mother died and, as the eldest of six children, she had the heavy task of running the home – cooking, cleaning and shopping for everyone. Her father, Aaron, had a horse and cart and his business was hauling stuff – I guess in modern-day terms he would be a man with a van. Mum told me one of the highlights in her life was a Sunday out on the horse and cart. They would set off from the East End and venture as far afield as Whipps Cross, where east London meets Essex. I never met my maternal grandfather, who died before I was born, but I was named after him, Alan being the anglicised version of the Hebrew name Aaron.

My dad was born on 3 August 1907, and was also one of six children. I'm told that his father, Simon, was a cobbler, and I think the whole family, as with so many other Jewish families, derived their income from the garment industry one way or another. Anyway, it's safe to say that my parents both

came from ordinary, low-income, working-class families. Certainly there was no inheritance coming my way.

Mum and Dad married on 1 March 1931 at Philpot Street Synagogue. My eldest sister, Shirley, was born on 10 January 1932, ten months after Mum and Dad got married – they didn't hang about. The twins, Daphne and Derek, were born on 28 August 1934. In terms of appearance, Derek and Shirley take after Dad, and Daphne and I take after Mum.

My mum was short, around 5 ft 3 in., and stocky – not fat but strongly built and fit. She got her exercise humping two full shopping bags on and off buses, walking the long distance from the bus stop to our block of flats and then climbing the three flights of stairs up to our flat – and that was when she was in her forties and fifties. It makes me laugh these days how most housewives have cars and, if they can afford it, go down to the gym to keep fit by walking on a treadmill! My build is just like hers and fortunately I am blessed with her fitness. Dad was also stockily built and quite short, around 5 ft 6 in. Although he wasn't fat, he would go up and down in weight and have to cut back on what he ate from time to time and I inherited that tendency too.

By the way, to correct some of the snipers in the media who have in the past used some colourful language to describe me, including 'the short, stocky, 5 ft 6 in. midget', my official height is 5 ft 8 in. and has been since I was sixteen.

My parents' first married home was at 11 Langdown Mansions, near Hessle Street Market in Stepney. They moved to 16 Woolmer House, Upper Clapton – in the borough of Hackney – on 7 June 1942. At that time, people were being moved out of Stepney and the docks area, as it was a prime target for German bombing.

Woolmer House, where I was brought up, was part of a very large council estate on the main Upper Clapton Road. Our block was three storeys high, with no lift, and was situated in a cluster of about three other blocks, with what I called a playground in the middle which had some poles for the housewives to hang out their washing. Opposite ours was another block, Weald Square, where the famous writer Arnold Wesker lived.

Compared to Langdown Mansions, Woolmer House was unashamed luxury. Our corner flat was on the top floor, and it was unusual because it had two levels. It had a toilet and separate bathroom, with a bath that doubled up as a table (you lifted up the hinged top when you wanted a bath), a kitchen, a lounge and one large bedroom on the first level, which was where Mum and Dad slept, while upstairs there were two more bedrooms for the kids.

I have no memories of my eldest sister Shirley when she lived at home,

but I'm told that because I had a mop of curly blond hair she would call me Mopsy! I was a page boy at her wedding when I was five, and a day or so before the event I got hold of a pair of scissors and cut all my curls off. Everyone, including Shirley, went bananas. Why did they let a five-year-old near a pair of scissors, you may ask.

I also have only a vague recollection of Daphne and Derek living at home. Derek had his own room after Shirley moved out and Daphne slept in the same room as me. She got married when I was nine and I was a page boy again. Derek did his National Service in Singapore, and when he came back he worked in a garment factory as a machinist. He was very bright and these days would have gone to university, but back then there was no chance my parents would have been able to support him. While working in the factory he studied for the Knowledge, to become a London taxi driver. I'd sometimes help him study – I'd call out, 'Balls Pond Road to Piccadilly Circus' and he'd have to tell me the route.

As we lived at the top of a block of flats, I never had the chance to play with other kids of my age when I was very young. All I knew were teenagers and adults. It's not so much that I lacked confidence, but it was a definite shock to the system when Mum dropped me off on my first day at Northwold Road Primary School, as I didn't like the idea of going to school and not being with her. At breaktime, when they let us out into the playground, I saw my chance, escaped through the open gate and ran all the way home, crying my eyes out, with a member of staff chasing after me. When I got there, I was greeted by Daphne, who asked, 'What are you doing?' She could see I was upset and then she spotted an out-of-breath teacher, puffing and panting behind me. Between them they calmed me down, and I went back to school like a good boy. I guess this nervousness at the first day of school is quite typical and it can't have taken me long to settle in, as the teachers were soon telling me to stop talking.

I got on like a house on fire with the other kids, who were all from the local area. There were quite a few Jewish kids, but the majority were non-Jewish. At that time, 1953–9, there were only a couple of Asian and black kids, who obviously stood out. I mention this because all of us kids were totally unaware of anything to do with race or religion. We behaved like all children do – joking, larking around, sometimes spiteful to each other, as you would expect. But one thing that was definitely, and pleasantly, missing was racism. It's wonderful to think back to, and I guess it's proof that it is adults who poison the minds of youngsters.

In my last year at Northwold Road Primary, when I was about eleven, we

had an 'open day'. The event took place in the grand hall where the whole school met for assembly each morning. The hall was decked out with pupils' schoolwork, displayed for visiting dignitaries, parents and headteachers of secondary schools.

Typically, a member of each class would take the visitors through his or her class's work. I was chosen by my teacher to talk to the parents of the kids from our class. It came naturally to me, explaining in detail the work on show. Knowing me, I imagine I was offering *too much* detail and maybe repeating myself, especially if I thought the audience wasn't grasping what I was saying. I recall explaining to one parent why a conker tree is called a horse chestnut tree: if you break a leaf off a branch, at the base of its stem you'll see a series of dots in the shape of a horseshoe.

While I was talking, I could see people smiling and whispering to each other and I had no idea why. I know now they were smiling at this little kid who was nevertheless a good presenter. I must have been, because a couple of days later, to my surprise, the headmaster and headmistress, Mr Kershaw and Miss Chitty, came into my classroom and told my teacher, Mr Granger, that I was to come immediately to the assembly hall. I had been chosen to give a presentation on behalf of the whole school to an audience which included the Lord Mayor and an array of visiting secondary school headteachers (one of whom was Mr Harris, my future headmaster at Joseph Priestley Secondary School). Clearly I was already set on the path to what I've been doing for the rest of my life: selling, presenting and marketing.

I wasn't one of the brainy ones at school. In those days, in your final year at primary school, everyone would sit the Eleven Plus exam. If you passed, you would get a place at a grammar school, somewhere like the prestigious Grocers in Hackney Downs. I got a 'marginal pass' in my Eleven Plus, a polite way of saying, 'You failed, but only just.' However, it did allow me to apply for one of the limited number of places the grammar schools would give at their discretion, known as 'governors' places'. You went along for interviews to see whether you could project yourself in such a manner that they would overlook the marginal failure of the Eleven Plus.

I remember going on one such visit to a school in Cambridge Heath Road, Bethnal Green. Throughout the thirty-minute ride on the 653 trolleybus, I was wondering whether I wanted to make this journey for the next five years of my life. With my motor-mouth, I passed the interview with flying colours and was offered a place at the school, but by a stroke of luck I never went there. The stroke of luck was down to my soon-to-be headmaster Mr Harris who, unbeknown to me, had been soliciting Mr Kershaw and Miss

Chitty to recommend to my mum and dad that I should attend *his* school, Joseph Priestley, in Morning Lane. It was soon going to merge with another school, Upton House, to form what was to be known as Brooke House School, a very advanced and modern comprehensive – one of the first, I believe, to come into existence. Saying yes was the best move my parents made. For me it was perfect, as Brooke House was within walking distance from our flat in Clapton.

That school was a fantastic establishment, with such diversity – I performed in Shakespearian plays *and* learned bricklaying! There were science laboratories and handicraft workshops, and we were taught plumbing and metalwork, draftsmanship and technical drawing, the arts, economics – basically everything you could think of. I learned how to build a brick wall, operate a lathe, produce hydrogen in a laboratory, do calculus and to this day I can recite act one, scene one of *Twelfth Night*. Brooke House sent many pupils to universities, including Oxford and Cambridge. It was a school of great opportunity for those who wanted to learn, and offered far more than any grammar school could have.

*

I can clearly remember the day I joined Joseph Priestley – 8 September 1958. It was the day after my brother Derek's wedding to Brenda Press. Obviously it had been a big day, as Jewish weddings are, and again I was a page boy, together with Adrian, my sister-in-law's brother. As you can imagine, the next morning I was tired. I'd been up quite late the night before and now the reality was hitting home – I was about to start at a new school. I was very nervous and dreaded the prospect of having to meet a whole new bunch of people. Thankfully, there were a few kids from my class at Northwold Road joining at the same time, so at least there would be some people I knew.

I remember my mum laying out the new school uniform for me and my arrival in the playground on the first day. I stood huddled together with my friends, observing the rather boisterous behaviour of the older pupils. Within minutes, I heard racial remarks about Jews.

'Hey, Charlie, tell that bloody Jew to get out my way – he ain't playing with us.'

'The fucking Yids are using the goalposts – tell 'em to piss off.'

While the comments weren't directed at me, it was still a total shock. It was the first time I'd heard the expression 'Yids' and I couldn't quite understand what was going on. When I went home that night, I described this to my mum and dad. I can't remember whether they gave me any good counselling

on the subject, but I *was* traumatised. For the first time ever, I realised that I was, apparently, different. How could that be? We'd never heard anything like this at Northwold Road Primary.

The guys with whom I'd joined Joseph Priestley weren't Jewish, but as time went on they started to recognise the fact that I *was*, and regrettably some of them became racists. The point I am illustrating is that you could see how the innocent minds of kids coming from a school like Northwold Road were poisoned by others. One incident that sticks in my mind happened soon after I joined the new school. The Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur fell in September and, excused by a letter from Mum and Dad, I was allowed to take two days off for Rosh Hashanah and a day off the following week for Yom Kippur. When I returned there was a completely different atmosphere. I used to sit with a variety of my old friends from Northwold Road, but when I went to take my place on this particular day, the two kids near me were cold and distant. My absence had highlighted to them that I was a Jew – a matter that had never come up before, perhaps because I spoke like any other Cockney kid from Clapton and didn't look typically Jewish, being fair-haired and fair-skinned. Or perhaps these two mates *did* know I was Jewish but had thought I was just like them anyway.

At first I couldn't work out what was going on. I'd speak to them and get simple 'yes' and 'no' answers, and at breaktime they distanced themselves from me. There was no sign of friendship any more. And then, one day, one of them said something like, 'Well, you Jews are all the same.' From that point on, we never spoke again and I was isolated as a 'different' person. It was quite amazing, considering that a month or so earlier we had been the best of pals.

You have to understand that back then we kids from Northwold School, of all religions and races, knew nothing about the Holocaust or Nazis. Obviously we all knew about the Second World War. We'd learned how great Winston Churchill was and how Britain had won the war, but that's all we were ever taught there. The non-Jewish kids at Northwold Road did not have the opportunity to understand what went on in the Holocaust or form opinions on it. Who knows, if they had been made aware of it, they might have agreed with the Nazis – I'm pretty sure some of the parents did. How else could some of the kids at the new school be racist? It *must* have come from the parents.

Not all the kids at school had racist tendencies. Obviously the Jewish kids found themselves engaging with each other, myself included, but it's true to say that some of my school pals were non-Jews. I just kept way from the racist lot.

*

At Woolmer House there were a few Jewish families, but the majority were non-Jewish, and the kids played together in the same way I'd experienced in Northwold Road. Next door to us on the top floor lived the Moores. Percy and Ivy Moore had eleven children and they were a real salt-of-the-earth English family. There was mutual respect between the Sugars and the Moores.

Life was hard in the late fifties – perhaps harder than I ever understood – but for some reason we had a telephone, which was deemed a luxury in those days. I suspect it was because my dad liked to place the odd bet with his bookmaker, though he kept this very close to his chest. He shouldn't really have been betting, considering how he complained about every single penny that had to be spent. In fact, the thought of being without money and not being able to put food on the table used to worry the hell out of him.

My father was also paranoid about running out of electricity. We'd feed the meter with shillings at the start of the week, but because the single-bar heater we had in the lounge consumed electricity at a rate of knots, the meter would sometimes run out by Thursday afternoon and there'd be no money to feed it. The Moores had the same problem. Often Ivy would pop in to borrow a shilling; sometimes Mum would borrow a shilling from her. The respective dads would come home with their pay-packets on Friday, so on Saturday morning the shillings would get thrown into the meter again. It was a crazy system, but it was also a way of saving, because every so often, when the bloke from the electric company came round to empty and read the meter, there would be excess money in the coin tray which he'd refund to Mum. It was a kind of windfall.

Ted, the Co-op milkman, would come round daily. This poor sod used to climb the stairs in our block and deliver milk to every flat. He'd knock on the door at the end of the week to be paid. You'd have to give him your Co-op number (ours was 85 4 139 – how's that for memory?) and he'd hand over a little receipt. You built up points and eventually you were able to redeem them for stuff in the Co-op shops.

Then there was the rent man, who would come round monthly and pick up four weeks' rent at 8s 6d (eight shillings and sixpence) per week – that's around 42p in today's money. The fact that the Sugars and the Moores made sure that the rent was always paid on time shows the kind of discipline and decency that existed in those days.

My dad, who was a tailor, installed a sewing machine in my brother's old bedroom upstairs and called it his 'home workshop'. He wasn't the best tailor in the world – his job (when he could get one) was in the main assembly

process of making ladies' coats. He was involved in things like putting in the padding on the shoulders and working on inner linings. I recall him going to evening classes to improve his tailoring and machinist skills, to try to command better pay in the garment factories, and he'd occasionally knock up coats for relatives and friends. My mum also took a job from time to time, as a felling hand in a clothing factory. In these places it was normal to see a group of women huddled together sewing the linings of coats.

It wasn't just Dad who sharpened his tailoring skills in his makeshift workshop. I used to watch him and over the years he taught me how to do various things, so I picked up a few skills myself. He showed me an ironing technique that would reinstate the creases in a pair of trousers and he always told me off for not lifting up my trouser legs a bit before I sat down, to avoid stretching the cloth at the knees.

Another area of expertise I acquired courtesy of Dad was being able to shorten a pair of trousers. I became a dab hand at what's known as cross-stitch. Later in life, I would buy a pair of trousers, bravely cut an inch or two off the legs, fold up the bottoms, execute my cross-stitching craft and press them into place. This ability is something which fascinates my wife Ann. I haven't done it for years, but she's always telling people how I can shorten trousers and even dresses. This skill was to play a part in a funny story you'll read about later.

I would also watch my mum cook. I was the talk of the flats when one day, around the age of eleven, for some mad reason, I decided I would make a ginger cake. I'd seen Mum make them many times and knew the ingredients off by heart. You can imagine my mum's surprise when she got home and I presented her with a still-warm cake.

'When did you make this?' she said.

'I've just taken it out of the oven.'

So far, so good. She had a smile on her face and she was nodding her head in happy surprise. Then suddenly it dawned on her that she didn't have any ginger or baking powder.

'How did you make it?' she asked.

I explained that Mrs Clark, a few doors away, had lent me some baking powder and that Mrs Cohen, a floor below, had lent me some ginger powder. And by the way, while I was at it, 'We've now run out of sugar, as I used the last lot.'

She went mad. 'You can't go asking people for things – tell me again who you asked.'

She ran off to Mrs Clark and Mrs Cohen to apologise, but came back with

a smile on her face. It seems that Clarkie and Mrs Cohen were killing themselves laughing at my sheer cheek. They told Mum I'd explained to them I was making a ginger cake as a surprise for her and they just wanted to know if the cake had come out okay. In fact, it was perfect. I took them some when it had cooled down (best eaten a day after cooking). The ginger cake became a historic story in the family and a favourite amongst the neighbours for years after.

I've often wondered where my entrepreneurial spirit came from. It certainly didn't come from my father. He had a skill – making clothes – but he never exploited it. Employment wasn't secure in those days and he was constantly in and out of work. It was normal to be told on Friday night, 'Don't bother to come in on Monday, as there's no work.'

Often the out-of-work tailors would congregate in a huddle outside Black Lion Yard in Whitechapel Road. Sometimes, during school holidays, I would join him, standing around while the men exchanged stories. The conversation usually revolved around which factories might be getting work that week.

You would have thought that, having acquired the skill to make clothes, my father would have realised that by turning out one or two coats a week and selling them, he could make more than the pittance he was earning. He could even have taken it a stage further by advertising the fact that he was available to make coats. But my father was a cautious person, always careful to ensure nothing went so badly wrong that he'd be without money. I don't know why he had this fear; maybe growing up without money had left a scar. My brother Derek once told me that, shortly after the war, the family had the opportunity of buying a house in Dagenham for what sounds a ridiculously small amount of money today – around £400 – although in those days (1946–7) £400 was a fortune. Dad didn't have the foresight to do it. The story goes that he also had the opportunity of taking a small shop with a workshop at the back where he could make and sell clothes, but again he didn't go for it.

My mother's side of the family was a slightly different story. Her brother, Uncle John, was the rich uncle – every family has one. My mum's maiden name was Apple, so you can imagine the jokes when an Apple married a Sugar. Uncle John was a real character. He had a store, Apple's Hardware, in Victoria. People used to go there just to see the price tickets on his wares, on which he'd write stupid little quips. For example, a price ticket on a broom would say, 'This broom was used by a very tall girl by the name of Jean, so it's very hygienic.' Pathetic, I know, but if you can imagine the forecourt of his

shop and the pavement lined with all these silly little jokes, you can see why he got himself quite a reputation. Apparently, he exploited the post-war boom and his hardware business enabled him to accumulate money and pick up some properties in the area.

Back at home, lack of money was always the main item on the agenda. We made the most of what we could afford, but we didn't have money for anything more than the basics one needed to live. Certainly there were no luxuries. This was brought into focus for me when I saw some of the more fortunate kids at school starting to amass possessions: a pair of football boots, a ball, a new Dinky toy car, roller skates. I couldn't have these things unless the family clubbed together for my birthday. My parents did their best, but not being able to have what I wanted made me determined to do something for myself – to be self-sufficient.

I had loads of enterprises on the go. Next to Woolmer House there was a rag-and-bone merchant who would go round collecting items such as old iron and other metal, clothing and material. He'd pay scrap value for the stuff. In his yard was a sign saying, 'Wool 5s per lb [five shillings per pound of weight], cotton 1s 6d per pound [one shilling and sixpence], brass and copper 2d per pound [tuppence].' Playing out in the street when I was eleven, I noticed people taking items in and getting money in exchange and I wondered if I could get hold of any stuff, so that I too could make some money. It was during one of my other ventures – car-cleaning – that I found something.

In the back streets of Clapton, some of the big Victorian houses were converted into small garment factories with rooms full of machinists. These factories would sub-contract for bigger manufacturers using 'outdoor workers' (the old name for sub-contractors). One day, while cleaning the factory boss's car, I saw in the front garden some open sacks of material trimmings, ready for the dustman to take away. When I went inside to collect my 1s 6d, I asked the boss what was in these sacks and he explained they were remnants of the material used to make the clothes. I asked him if I could take some and he said I could, but looked puzzled.

'What are you going to do with them?' he asked.

'Don't worry, leave it to me,' I replied. The sacks were bigger than I was, so I went back to the flats and borrowed a pram. I loaded on two sacks and took them round to the rag-and-bone man.

Here was my first experience of getting 'legged over'. Unbeknown to me, the sacks contained gold dust as far as the scrap merchant was concerned, as the material was wool. This bloke took one look at this eleven-year-old and said, 'What you've got in those sacks is rubbish.' He weighed the stuff on his

scales and said, 'I'll give you half a crown [2s 6d] for the lot.' I took it. Naïve – stupid, you might say – but half a crown was a lot of money in those days.

The next week, after cleaning the boss's car, I asked him what kind of material was in those sacks. When he told me it was wool, I was furious – I should have got at least £1 10s for two sacks of wool. I took a scrap of the material to the rag-and-bone man and confronted him. 'I've just been told this is wool – you told me it was rubbish. I want some more money or I want the two sacks back,' I yelled at him angrily. I won't tell you what he said to me. He slung two shillings at me and told me to clear off.

'I can get loads more of this stuff and I'm going to find another rag-and-bone man to sell it to!'

He just laughed and virtually threw me out.

Another side of me came out now. I was wound up and angry. I wasn't frightened to speak up, but short of grabbing hold of him or kicking him, what could I do? He was a grown man and I was an eleven-year-old shnip. I went back home and told my mum and dad what had happened. They laughed, then my father asked, 'How much did you get in the end?'

'Four and six.' A sudden look of fear came over his face at the realisation that his eleven-year-old son had made 4s 6d.

'Where did you get this stuff from?' he said.

'I told you – from the factory down the road.'

'They let you take it? You sure you didn't take it without asking?'

'No. The boss gave it to me. He wanted to get rid of it. Normally the dustman takes it away.'

'Are you sure?'

I couldn't believe it. Instead of being complimented, I was being interrogated as if I'd done something wrong! It was a strange attitude, but one I'd become increasingly familiar with in later years. Many's the time I'd have to play down the success of my business activities because my father could not believe that someone so young could make so much money. To put things into perspective, his take-home pay at the time was £8 for working a forty-hour week. How could an eleven-year-old boy go out and make 4s 6d in just a couple of hours? Basically, I'd spotted some stuff in one place and seen another place to sell it. And what's more, I really enjoyed doing it.

At the numerous talks I give around the country these days, I often hear the term 'entrepreneurial spirit' bandied about. At these talks, there'll be a Q&A session and it never fails to annoy me when somebody stands up and says, 'Hello, I'm an entrepreneur . . .' It really winds me up. An entrepreneur is not a word to be used lightly and it's certainly not something you call

yourself. It should be a term used by a person when describing another's abilities. I refer to *my* entrepreneurial spirit as I have been branded an entrepreneur so many times by so many people that I feel I've earned the right, and I can see what it takes to be labelled as such. I often say that it doesn't matter which business school you go to or what books you read, you can't go into Boots and buy a bottle of entrepreneurial juice. Entrepreneurial spirit is something you are born with, just like a concert pianist's talent. Stick me in a room with a piano teacher for a year and maybe I'll end up being able to give you a rendition of 'Roll Out the Barrel', but would I ever be a concert pianist playing at the Royal Albert Hall? Not in a million years. In the same way, you've either got entrepreneurial spirit or you haven't. It resides within you and it's sparked off by ideas that come about through the various situations you find yourself in.

One such story – where a situation sparked off an idea – started with the simple need to light a fire for warmth. In those days, before everyone had central heating, raw coal was used as fuel. In our case, it heated the boiler for the bath and we had a coal fireplace. There was also a fireplace in my bedroom, but it was never used and many a winter's morning I would get up and find the windows iced over. Sometimes the glass of water by my bed would be frozen solid.

The coalmen would arrive outside Woolmer House with their large flatbed lorry loaded with sacks of coal. These poor fellows would hump their sacks up three flights of stairs and empty them into the large coal box we had in the hall. They must have been very fit, but heaven knows what today's Health and Safety brigade would have made of their working conditions, especially as they breathed in the clouds of coal dust that filled the air each time a sack was emptied. Sometimes I would give the coalman his money and my mum would tell me to add a threepenny bit as a tip.

Lighting the fire was a specialised job. You could buy fire-lighter strips, but they were a waste of money. Instead, most people bought little bundles of wooden sticks which were packaged in rolls and sold by most general hardware shops, such as Uncle John's. Many's the time I was sent down to Mr Braham's or Mr Morris's shop to buy these sticks, which sold for sixpence a bundle. You would make a little wigwam out of them, put some paraffin on them and stuff a bit of newspaper inside. Then you'd arrange the coal around the sticks. To start the fire, you lit the paper, which in turn would set light to the sticks and then the coal. It took about ten minutes to get a fire going.

Why have I told you all this? Well, it relates to another of my cheeky childhood schemes, which stemmed from, of all things, road construction. In

the late fifties the roads in Clapton were being resurfaced. I used to look out of the window and watch the workers with all their machinery, fascinated by the sights and sounds of it all – the plumes of fire and the clattering of pneumatic drills as they loosened the surface and dug it up. Nowadays, roadworks are performed quite quickly, but back then they went on for months. Sometimes I'd go down to the street and watch them more closely. I'd chat with the workers and ask what they were doing and I even started running back and forth to the café for them, getting them tea and sandwiches.

The removal of the old road surface uncovered a base layer of wooden blocks set into the ground in a herringbone pattern. New road construction techniques no longer required these blocks, so they were discarded. The workers showed me the blocks, which were impregnated with tar, and they chucked a couple onto their fire – they burned like a rocket. Bingo! It occurred to me that these discarded wooden blocks could be made into fire-lighting sticks. I could cut them up into bundles of sticks and flog them to Mr Braham and Mr Morris.

It was an education going into Morris's. This silver-haired little man, who spoke English with a high-pitched Polish accent, was renowned for his computer-like brain – he was a human checkout till. Customers would put their shopping on the counter, he would call out the items and their prices one by one, tot it all up in his head and declare the total. He was magic – faster than a calculator.

Out came the old pram and, with the permission of the workers, I loaded it up with the wooden blocks and took them back to the flats, stacking them in a corner of the playground. I went backwards and forwards collecting these blocks, and by the evening I'd amassed a big pile. Using a small axe we used to have at home – don't ask me why – I set to work chopping them up into sticks. The other kids in the flats thought this looked like fun and they too brought along various implements and helped me out, even though they didn't know why I was doing it.

My dad hoarded all manner of things, including old balls of string. I used some of it to tie the sticks into bundles and as soon as I had a few, I went round to Mr Braham and asked him if he wanted to buy some. He looked at me as if I were nuts. 'I've got enough of this stuff out in my back yard – why would I want any more?'

I knew he'd have a fire going in the back of his shop (as I once worked there on a Saturday before I jumped ship to the greengrocer's down the road) so I chucked on one of the sticks, which burst into flames. He looked at me and smiled, as if to say, 'You little sod – how did you do that?'