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Going Off Alarming

Written by Danny Baker

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Going Off Alarming

A MEMOIR

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Teas, Light Refreshments And Minerals

To say that nobody in my family had ever been in show business would be an understatement. I may as well reveal that none of my mother's collection of teapots had ever spoken to her or that our tortoise, Tom, was not the local MP. Although – and less than fifty words in, here comes our first diversion – I can see why I just put those two examples in harness. Our tortoise, Tom, completely destroyed my mother's teapot collection, trashing it into smithereens as thoroughly as Keith Moon hepped up on a five-drug cocktail.

Tortoises, by nature, are not destructive animals and, until the Great Teapot Massacre, the only time Tom had been shouted at was when he had lunched too well on my father's tomato plants. My dad's voice actually woke me that morning. He was up early to go to work in the docks and had gone out in the back garden because, as he later told me, 'I thought I heard someone chuck a wallet over the wall last night.' Anyway, the old man wasn't a bad gardener and as he was out there anyway he decided to quickly do a job that was normally one of my duties. His favourite flowers were chrysanthemums – or as he always called them, 'crizzants'. He had once read in a magazine called *Titbits* that the greatest threat to the healthy chrysanthemum was the earwig and the best way to keep these pests off the plants was to fill a small flowerpot with straw, put this upside down on a stick and then place it beside the vulnerable flora. The idea was that Brer Earwig, journeying with a few friends to have a slap-up meal amidst my old man's cherished crizzants, would see the straw up the stick and immediately alert his company that there had been a change of venue. Apparently earwigs are attracted to compacted straw in

the same way some old actresses are drawn to cat-rescue centres. Therefore every few days it would be my job to evict these insects from their new digs and, to quote *Apocalypse Now*, 'terminate with extreme prejudice'. Well, I know it's wicked, and these days I am so respectful of any living thing that even Buddhists might find me a bit wet, but back then I approached this grisly task with out-and-out relish. I became tremendously inventive in coming up with new and shocking ways to dispatch these pincer squatters to the great flowerpot in the sky. Indeed I, as my mum once told me with shaking head, was 'a fucker for it'. Seriously, if earwigs have any kind of oral history then I am surely recalled as their own Vlad the Impaler and invoked by mother earwigs as a final resort when the little ones are playing up. However, on this particular morning my dad had deprived me of my murderous fun by deciding to do it himself. It was as he was shaking the bundles of straw and stepping upon any of the half-asleep occupants that tumbled out that his eye fell on his tomato plants.

'Oh, you little ponce!' I heard him shout (my brother and I shared a bedroom that faced on to the garden). 'You wilful little fucker! Where are you?'

Scrambling up to the window I looked out to see why the old man was creating ructions at barely seven in the morning.

'Where the fucking hell you hiding, you THING!' he bellowed, while making a frantic patrol of our small patch of green laid out below the railway arches. This garden, roughly twelve feet by six, sat at the end of our block of twelve council flats arranged on two storeys. We were the first flat on the ground floor and as such had a six-foot wall enclosing us on two sides at the back to separate our scratchy turf from the municipal builder's yard on the other side. You could drive a car down our turning almost as far as our garden, but not quite, and so when one of my dad's few work mates who had a motor would come to pick him up they would get as close as they could and then 'pump up'. It was one of these short blasts from an idling Granada that I heard next. Dad, by now in something of a righteous fury, sprang over the roadside wall and, placing his fingertips atop it and standing on tiptoe, roared, 'Two seconds, George!

I'm about to aim the poxy tortoise on to the fucking railway – mind I don't hit you!'

I had absolutely no idea at that point what Tom the tortoise could possibly have done. Usually Spud – the name by which my dad, Fred, was universally known – doted on the creature. He fed him by hand most days, and when he found out that Tom was partial to Bourbon biscuits – I don't recall how – he laid in packets of the things so he wouldn't run short. On more than one occasion I heard him say proudly that Tom was 'the best thing I ever got out of the dock' – meaning that his little shelled pal had been smuggled out of the port gates one day when the dockers were unloading them as cargo bound for the pet stores of Britain. When I think about the endless booty that my old man had liberated from his place of work over the years this really was some claim. And now he was threatening to launch the rugged little reptile on to the electrified tracks.

Eventually he located Tom in, of all places, the wooden fruit box that was Tom's actual house, stowed on the back porch. Pulling the sleepy pet from his lair, he carted him up the path and stood above the five or so tomato plants from which each year we harvested an impressive amount of fruit. This year, it seemed, we were going to be below the usual quota.

'I've fucking told you and told you – THAT'S your one there. Leave. These. Alone.' My dad was still holding our bemused tortoise by the shell and up at face level. 'You've taken fucking great lumps off all them! I'm not having it. That one. That's yours.'

Satisfied it was no major crisis, I slid back into bed.

'What's Dad shouting about?' mumbled my brother, Mike, from his single bed two feet away.

'Oh, he's got the hump with Tom,' I answered, not entirely unaware that this line probably wouldn't play outside our immediate family. In our house, actually in the entire world, every living thing was fair play for one of the old man's notoriously explosive 'volleys' if the provocation warranted it. He often spoke to our dog Blackie as though he was a particularly irritating cellmate and they were doing twenty years together. If, for example, the dog broke wind while

reposing in front of the fire, Dad would say, 'Are you gonna do that all night, you dirty bastard? One more and I'll stick an air freshener right up your arse.'

Following outbursts like this, my mum wouldn't even look up from her book but just say calmly, 'He don't know what you're saying, Fred. It's all noise to him.'

Should Blackie lazily turn round to see what the outburst was about, Spud would follow up with:

'He knows all right. Don't keep looking at me like that, Black – I'm too old at the game and you're too close to that fire. Drop another one and you're going on it.'

Any time a rogue bluebottle arrived in the living room and buzzed by his bald head he would allow it a few laps and then say, completely normally, 'Go on. Land on my fucking leg. See what you get.' If our budgerigar Joey was in a particularly good mood and was chirping to express just how well the world stood with her at that moment, Dad might say directly to her, 'I'm trying to watch the fucking telly here,' and then turning to the rest of us say, 'Ain't it all right, eh? A poxy bird in charge.' However, it was he who brought all our many and varied pets into the house and he who dutifully took care of each and every one. If anything, he respected them as equals and as such expected them to take some no-nonsense advice when required. This even extended to a lizard he'd chanced across on the quay and brought home in a paper bag. For a few days it lived in my sister's small, wooden, pink-satin-lined sewing box that, because we figured the reptile must have come from a hot climate, we put on the top shelf of the airing cupboard by the immersion heater. The lizard remained disappointingly inert at first, completely ignoring the pieces of lemon we had provided for its dinner. Dad naturally advised my brother and I to tell it to 'liven its fucking ideas up'. My brother duly went to have a look at it – possibly to deliver this caustic piece of pep talk – and as soon as the lid of the sewing box was open half an inch, it bolted out at lightning speed into the furthest reaches of the narrow airing cupboard itself. The whole family gathered around to see if we could spot it, the old man shining a torch about the un-ironed piles of shirts,

blouses, pillowcases, football socks and underwear that clogged up the shelves. My mum refused to make the job easier by emptying the space because, as she fairly reasoned, 'I'm not taking all that lot out and have to put it all back in again, because none of you mob'll help me AND its all for a bleedin' tupenny-ha'penny lizard.'

Eventually, though, this is just what she did and we all took an item each, shaking it nervously, with our hearts in our mouths, all too aware one of these pieces was sure to reveal a surprise package. We were actually very close to calling off the search when suddenly from inside one of Michael's V-necked pullovers our fugitive made a break for it. The collective scream that went up almost shattered the lantern-style light fixture hanging from the passage ceiling. The lizard now skedaddled into the bathroom at the other end of the short landing and we hared off in pursuit. Dad spotted it first. Or rather, he spotted a portion of it. Sticking out of a tiny gap under the skirting board was a glimpse of lizard tail. Shushing us all quiet, he gingerly crouched down and with his thumb and finger made a sudden grab. Now I don't know about you but I thought all this stuff about lizards being able to snap off their tails at will and without prior written notice was a bunch of hooey. However, as my father slowly retrieved from the bathroom wall nothing more than three inches of twitching gristle, this wonder of nature was laid bare to us all. My sister Sharon probably best summed up the spectacle when she declared it to be the single most revolting thing anyone had ever seen. Dad, on the other hand, seemed fascinated by the still-jerking sliver of lizard and inspected it closely.

'Fucking hell, look,' he said, 'I got the poor bastard's arse.'

Now the reason I give such weight to this story is that Spud, who on the surface seemed so indifferent to the sensibilities of different life forms, refused to simply chuck that lizard's tail away. He formally buried it, wrapped in a Handy Andies tissue, in the reptile section of our garden previously only occupied by my brother's two terrapins – called, I promise you, Terry and Pin – that had proved such a short-lived failure just a few months before. So yes, verbally

he made no allowance for any domestic fish or four-leggers but, by the same token, always did the right thing by them.

It was very rare that we got to see my mum in a fury – which finally brings us to the time Tom smashed her teapots. As anyone who has ever kept a tortoise will tell you, they are, at heart, vagabonds: rugged, rootless creatures within whom the wanderlust runs very deep. Our Tom, possibly because his earliest memories would have been aboard that ship bound for the London docks, was as restless as the ocean itself and recognized no man-made boundaries. Tom knew that, thanks to the four-foot fence that separated us from the Brimbles' garden next door, his dreams of a life on the open road were destined to remain unfulfilled; he would never be able to scale this towering barrier, let alone vault over it. After a few frustrating years, however, it dawned on him that there might be another way. Employing a thoroughness that only someone to whom time is no object can muster, he began to tunnel down. Though they're renowned for being slow, let me tell you a tortoise with a plan can actually shift solid earth like a gravedigger on piecework. The first time Tom performed his subterranean escape he was hailed on both sides of the fence as something of a marvel. His audience grew less appreciative once he started repeating the gag on the hour, every hour. We began to wonder if he was quite right in the head. In the early stages, Mrs Brimble would laugh at the sight of him mooching about her garden and tap on our back window with her wedding ring to alert my mum to the wayward pet's latest bid for freedom. After a while, this lapsed into an exasperated, 'Bleedin' 'ell, Bet – can't you keep this tortoise of yours under control? My ice plant ain't got a leaf left on it.'

We had always gotten along wonderfully with all our neighbours and Tom's adventures underground were the first time any kind of strain had ever been put upon east-west relations in the block. The difficulty, of course, was just how does one corral such a determined beast? Tortoise collars, leads and harnesses were then very much things of the future. Actually, now I think about it, they still are. So what was to be done? My brother suggested that a small hole might be drilled through the back of Tom's shell through which a piece of

string could be affixed, but this was soon voted down as both cruel and demeaning. Besides, to what would the other end of the string be attached? When Michael said some sort of metal ring embedded in the wall, Dad pointed out, 'He's a tortoise, not fucking King Kong.'

Within days though the situation had escalated to a point where some sort of action had to be taken. Tom, having fully mapped out the Brimbles' yard, now turned his roving eye to the next fence standing in his way: the one separating him from the undoubtedly lush lawn at number 15. Decision made, his front legs began furiously excavating once more and within hours he was emerging into the hitherto uncharted territory of Mr & Mrs Punt's cherished dahlia beds. Forty-eight hours after that – having been returned to us five times – he was managing to get as far as the Dalligans' geraniums at number 21. Enough was enough and my father was forced to erect a wire mesh stockade that restricted Tom's beat to the small concrete porch area immediately outside our back door. This was not meant to be a permanent enclosure but, as Dad said, 'Just till he gets the idea.' The only idea Tom got was that there might be New Worlds to be discovered beyond the rough mat that lay at the threshold to our front room. And so he became a house-tortoise, entering our home at a moment's notice should anyone leave the back door open more than a few inches. During the summer, this would be the norm. It was very common to hear Mum break off washing up at the kitchen sink to look down over her shoulder and say, 'Oh, hello. What do you bleedin' want?' as Tom appeared, charging around on his latest lap. The apogee of Tom's perambulations came one day when there was a knock at our door and a man we had never seen before was standing on the doorstep holding our tortoise in his left hand.

'Mrs Baker,' began the fellow. 'I've just got off the number one bus up at the top of the turning and I nearly trod on this tortoise. The man from the post office says he's yours.'

Well, Mum couldn't thank the chap enough, although Tom, clearly furious at such busy-bodying, had withdrawn deep into his shell and was refusing to assist in the inquest. I later got the blame

for leaving the front door open, ‘When you know full well he’d be off like a shot.’

It was a few nights after this, while we were watching *Take Your Pick* with Michael Miles – a wonderful and extremely popular peak-time games show in which members of the public could win tiny caravans, a carpet or £50 in five-pound notes – that Tom’s indoor visa was abruptly cancelled.

My mother, like most 1960s mothers, loved a knick-knack. In our front room we had a madly contemporary, if mass-produced, glass-fronted cabinet full of things like chalk poodles, Toby jugs, little highly glazed ladies’ boots as well as decorative ash trays and faux Georgian porcelain figurines. What my mum liked best though was a novelty teapot. Since these were too large to fit into the spaces in the cabinet, she displayed her collection on a tall but narrow corner unit that could house about three teapots on each of its five triangular shelves. As we sat watching *Take Your Pick* that night, the fixture, which stood a few feet behind our television set, was full to capacity. Never the sturdiest of structures, it was nevertheless well grounded by the combined weight of Mum’s pride and joys and topped by her favourite piece of all, a china cabbage leaf arrangement whose lid featured several caterpillars hurrying away from a radish.

I can’t remember which of us first noticed that the entire column had begun to move. Not too much initially, but before long it was swaying back and forth like a Japanese city bank during one of their regular earthquakes. It turned out Tom the Tortoise had strolled into the front room earlier that afternoon and, having patrolled his usual haunts, decided to find somewhere enclosed and shady to take a nap. The base of my mother’s teapot unit offered just such a darkened area, a space at floor level where the unit’s feet supported the bottom-most shelf. The gap was about four inches high which, happily, if at a pinch, was exactly the same height as Tom himself. Having snuggled into this retreat he had dozed off facing the wall. Now, many hours later, it seemed Tom had awoken and had momentarily forgotten where he was. What’s more, this accommodation no longer exactly fit his requirements. Somehow

the den appeared to have shrunk. Or possibly he had swelled. Whatever the science involved, Tom the Tortoise suddenly felt constrained and horribly claustrophobic. In an attempt to free up a little shell space he began vigorously shunting himself to and fro, and it was this repeated motion that had manifested itself in the upper decks of the unit. As the giddy rhythm gathered pace, Mum leapt from her chair, one arm outstretched, shrieking 'Fred! Do something!' But it was too late. Like Tom, Fred had only just surfaced, the fatal combination of a hard day's work, an open fire and average TV having sent him off into a beautiful kip. Helpless to prevent disaster, we looked on as with one final lurch Mum's teapot collection toppled forward like a punchy heavyweight who'd taken one too many on the chin. The noise! Dear God, the cacophony of that moment what with the shattering pottery, the impact of shelving on television set, our massed family screams as we rose to our feet and, because one unseen teapot had yanked the aerial out of its socket, a burst of loud white noise cutting across it all. Amid the sobs and recriminations I looked over the wreckage and there was Tom, free at last and casually making his way toward the back door, his thoughts seemingly anchored on that half a strawberry he had earmarked for supper. Mum, absolutely distraught, saw him too. Taking her slipper off, she hurled it at him as hard as she could.

'You fucker! You destructive little fucker!' she screeched. The slipper missed its target and Tom appeared not to notice. Arriving at the back door he saw it to be closed. I swear he then craned his scaly old neck round to peer at our hysterical tableau. He followed this up with a sanguine look that seemed to say, 'I say, could one of you get this for me? Don't know about you lot, but I'm starving.'

Mum cried all the next day and the Great Tortoise Teapot Disaster would be something she measured all other breakages and disappointments against for the rest of her life. Needless to add, our garden door was never, ever, allowed to be left open after that and Tom remained penned in on the porch until some concrete mix was applied to the base of the four-foot fence between us and

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the Brimbles, bringing to a close that particular avenue of reptile escape.

Anyway, the point is, nobody in my family had ever been in show business. But in the spring of 1982, without actually trying, in show business was exactly where I found myself.