

Excerpt

The Salmon of Doubt

By Douglas Adams

Chapter 1

Life

Dear Editor,

The sweat was dripping down my face and into my lap, making my clothes very wet and sticky. I sat there, walking, watching. I was trembling violently as I sat, looking at the small slot, waiting—ever waiting. My nails dug into my flesh as I clenched my hands. I passed my arm over my hot, wet face, down which sweat was pouring. The suspense was unbearable. I bit my lip in an attempt to stop trembling with the terrible burden of anxiety. Suddenly, the slot opened and in dropped the mail. I grabbed at my Eagle and ripped off the wrapping paper.

My ordeal was over for another week!

*D. N. Adams (12), Brentwood, Essex,
January 23, 1965,
Eagle and Boys' World Magazine*

[Editor's Note: In the sixties The Eagle was an enormously popular English science-fiction magazine. This letter is the first known published work of Douglas Adams, then age twelve.]

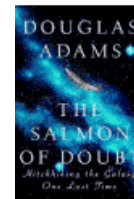
The Voices of All Our Yesterdays

I vaguely remember my schooldays. They were what was going on in the background while I was trying to listen to the Beatles.

When "Can't Buy Me Love" came out, I was twelve. I sneaked out of school during morning milk break, bought the record, and broke into matron's room because she had a record player. Then I played it, not loud enough to get caught, but just loud enough to hear with my ear pressed up against the speaker. Then I played it again for the other ear. Then I turned the record over and did the same for "You Can't Do That." That was when the housemaster found me and put me into detention, which is what I had expected. It seemed a small price to pay for what I now realize was art.

I didn't know it was art then, of course. I only knew that the Beatles were the most exciting thing in the universe. It wasn't always an easy view to live with. First you had to fight the Stones fans, which was tricky because they fought dirty and had their knuckles nearer the ground. Then you had to fight the grownups, parents and teachers who said that you were wasting your time and pocket money on rubbish that you would have forgotten by next week.

I found it hard to understand why they were telling me this. I sang in the school choir and knew how to listen for harmony and counterpoint, and it was clear to me that the Beatles were something extraordinarily clever. It bewildered me that no one else could hear it: impossible harmonies and part playing you had never heard in pop songs before. The Beatles were obviously just putting all this stuff in for some secret fun of



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their own, and it seemed exciting to me that people could have fun in that way.

The next exciting thing was that they kept on losing me. They would bring out a new album and for a few listenings it would leave me cold and confused. Then gradually it would begin to unravel itself in my mind. I would realize that the reason I was confused was that I was listening to something that was simply unlike anything that anybody had done before. "Another Girl," "Good Day Sunshine," and the extraordinary "Drive My Car." These tracks are so familiar now that it takes a special effort of will to remember how alien they seemed at first to me. The Beatles were now not just writing songs, they were inventing the very medium in which they were working.

I never got to see them. Difficult to believe, I know. I was alive at the time the Beatles were performing and never got to see them. I tend to go on about this rather a lot. Do not go to San Francisco with me, or I will insist on pointing out Candlestick Park to you and bleating on about the fact that in 1966 the Beatles played their last concert there, just shortly before I'd woken up to the fact that rock concerts were things you could actually go to, even if you lived in Brentwood.

A friend of mine at school once had some studio tickets to see David Frost's show being recorded, but we ended up not going. I watched the show that night, and the Beatles were on it playing "Hey Jude." I was ill for about a year. Another day that I happened not to go to London after all was the day they played their rooftop concert in Savile Row. I can't—ever—speak about that.

Well, the years passed. The Beatles passed. But Paul McCartney has gone on and on. A few months ago the guitarist Robbie McIntosh phoned me and said, "We're playing at the Mean Fiddler in a few days, do you want to come along?"

Now this is one of the daftest questions I've ever been asked, and I think it took me a few moments even to work out what he meant. The Mean Fiddler, for those who don't know, is a pub in an unlovely part of northwest London with a room at the back where bands play. You can probably get about two hundred people in.

It was the word we that temporarily confused me, because I knew that the band that Robbie was currently playing in was Paul McCartney's, and I didn't think that Paul McCartney played in pubs. If Paul McCartney did play in pubs, then it would be daft to think that I would not saw my own leg off in order to go. I went.

In front of two hundred people in a pub, Paul McCartney stood up and played songs he'd never, I think, played in public before. "Here, There and Everywhere" and "Blackbird," to name but two. I've played "Blackbird" in pubs, for heaven's sake. I spent weeks learning the guitar part when I was supposed to be revising for A-levels. I almost wondered if I was hallucinating.

There were two moments of complete astonishment. One was the last encore, which was an immaculate, thunderous performance of, believe it or not, "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." (Remember, this was in a pub.) And the other was one of the world's greatest rock 'n' roll songs, "Can't Buy Me Love," which I had first heard crouching with my ear cupped to the Dansette record player in the school matron's room.

There is a game people like to play that goes, "When would you most like to have lived and why?" The Italian Renaissance? Mozart's Vienna? Shakespeare's England? Personally, I would like to have been around Bach. But I have a real difficulty with the game, which is that living at any other period of history would have meant missing the Beatles, and I honestly don't think I could do that. Mozart and Bach and Shakespeare are always with us, but I grew up with the Beatles and I'm not sure what else has affected me as much as that.

So Paul McCartney is fifty tomorrow. Happy birthday, Paul. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

The [London] Sunday Times, June 17, 1992

Brentwood School

I was at Brentwood School for twelve whole years. And they were, by and large, in an up and downy kind of way, pretty good years: fairly happy, reasonably leafy, a bit sportier than I was in the mood for at the time, but full of good (and sometimes highly eccentric) teaching. In fact, it was only later that I gradually came to realise how well I had been taught at Brentwood—particularly in English, and particularly in Physics. (Odd, that.) However, the whole twelve-year experience is, for me, completely overshadowed by the memory of one terrible, mind-scarring experience. I am referring to the episode of The Trousers. Let me explain.

I have always been absurdly, ridiculously tall. To give you an idea—when we went on school expeditions to Interesting and Improving Places, the form-master wouldn't say "Meet under the clock tower," or "Meet under the War Memorial," but "Meet under Adams." I was at least as visible as anything else on the horizon, and could be repositioned at will. When, in Physics, we were asked to repeat Galileo's demonstration that two bodies of different weight fall to the ground at the same speed, I was the one who was given the task of dropping the cricket ball and the pea, because it was quicker than going to an upstairs window. I always towered over everybody. Right back at the very beginning of my school career, aged seven, I introduced myself to another new boy (Robert Neary) by coming up behind him and, in a spirit of experiment, dropping a cricket ball on his head and saying, "Hello, my name's Adams, what's yours?" This, for Robert Neary, I'm sure was his one terrible, mind-scarring memory.

In the Prep School, where I was for five years out of my twelve, we all wore short trousers: grey shorts with blazers in the summer, and in the winter those pepper-and-salt tweed suits with short trousers. There is of course an extremely good reason for wearing shorts when you're young, even in the depths of an English winter (and they were colder then, weren't they?). According to Wired magazine, we can't expect to see self-repairing fabrics until about the year 2020, but ever since we emerged from whatever trees or swamps we lived in five million years ago, we have had self-repairing knees.

So, shorts made sense. Even though we all had to wear them, it did begin to get a bit ridiculous in my case. It wasn't towering over the other boys I minded so much, it was towering over the masters. Wearing shorts. My mother pleaded with the principal on one occasion to please make an exception in my case and let me wear long trousers. But Jack Higgs, ever fair but firm, said no: I was only six months away from going up to the main

school, whereupon I, along with everybody else, would be able to wear long trousers. I would have to wait.

At last I left the Prep School. And two weeks before the beginning of the Michaelmas term, my mother took me along to the school shop to buy—at last—a long-trousered school suit. And guess what? They didn't make them in a size long enough for me. Let me just repeat that, so that the full horror of the situation can settle on you reading this as it did on me that day in the summer of 1964, standing in the school shop. They didn't have any school trousers long enough for me. They would have to make them specially. That would take six weeks. Six weeks. Six minus two was, as we had been so carefully and painstakingly taught, four. Which meant that for four whole weeks of the next term I was going to be the only boy in school wearing shorts. For the next two weeks I took up playing in the traffic, being careless with kitchen knives, and neglecting to stand clear of the doors on station platforms, but, sadly, I led a charmed life, and I had to go through with it: four weeks of the greatest humiliation and embarrassment known to man or, rather, to that most easily humiliated and embarrassed of all creatures, the overgrown twelve-year-old boy. We've all experienced those painful dreams in which we suddenly discover we are stark naked in the middle of the high street. Believe me, this was worse, and it wasn't a dream.

The story rather fizzles out there because a month later, of course, I got my long trousers and was readmitted into polite society. But, believe me, I still carry the scars inside, and though I try my best to bestride the world like a Colossus, writing best-selling books and... (well, that's about it, really, I suppose), if I ever come across as a maladjusted, socially isolated, sad, hunched emotional cripple (I'm thinking mainly of Sunday mornings in February, here), then it's those four weeks of having to wear short trousers in September 1964 that are to blame.

Y

"Why" is the only question that bothers people enough to have an entire letter of the alphabet named after it.

The alphabet does not go "A B C D What? When? How?" but it does go "V W X Why? Z."

"Why?" is always the most difficult question to answer. You know where you are when someone asks you "What's the time?" or "When was the battle of 1066?" or "How do these seatbelts work that go tight when you slam the brakes on, Daddy?" The answers are easy and are, respectively, "Seventy-three in the evening," "Ten-fifteen in the morning," and "Don't ask stupid questions."

But when you hear the word "Why?," you know you've got one of the biggest unanswerables on your hands, such as "Why are we born?" or "Why do we die?" and "Why do we spend so much of the intervening time receiving junk mail?"

Or this one:

"Will you go to bed with me?"

"Why?"

There's only ever been one good answer to that question "Why?" and perhaps we should have that in the alphabet as well. There's room for it. "Why?" doesn't have to be the last

word, it isn't even the last letter. How would it be if the alphabet ended, "V W X Why? Z," but "V W X Why not?"

Don't ask stupid questions.

—From *Hockney's Alphabet* (Faber & Faber)

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