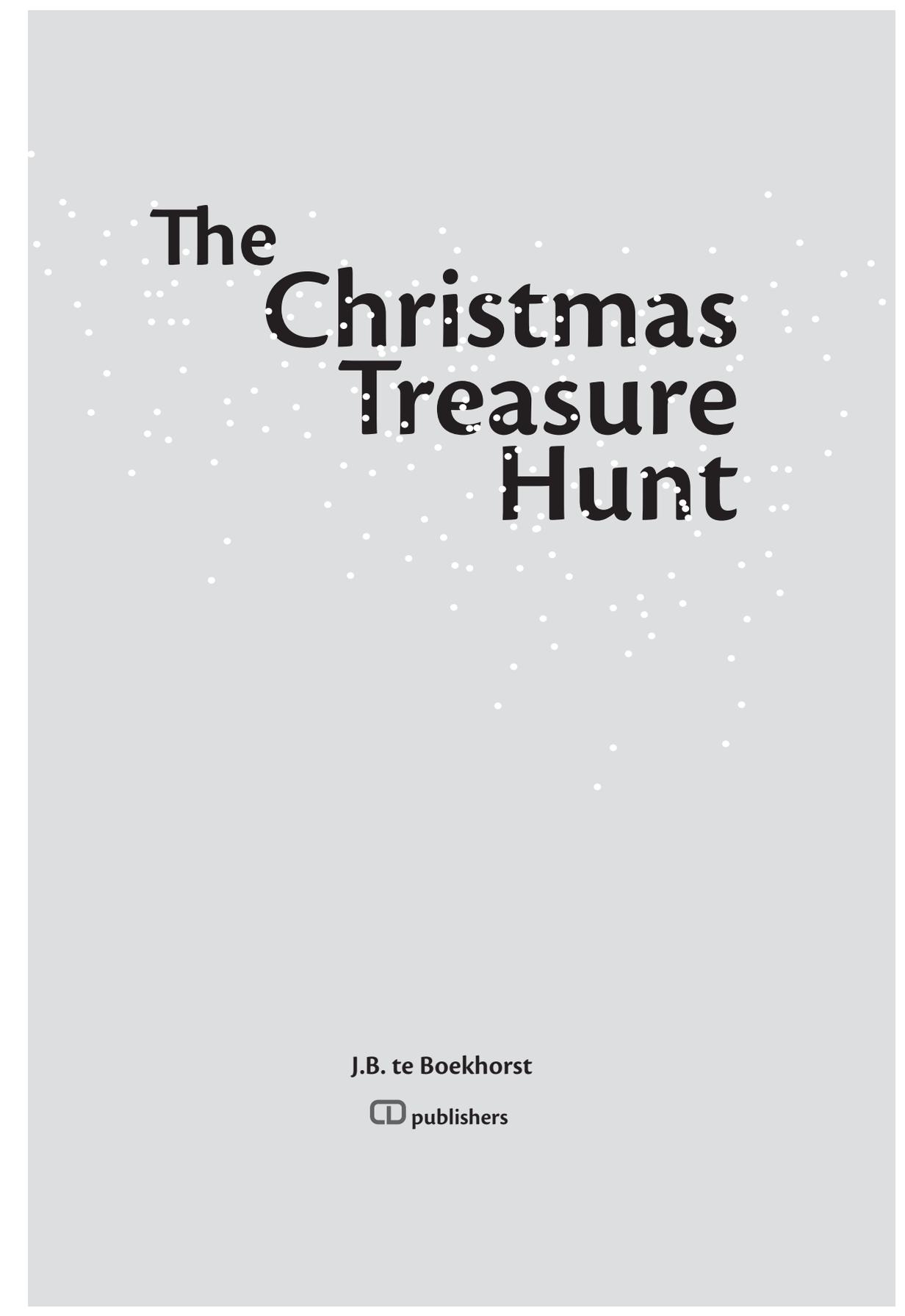


The Christmas Treasure Hunt



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J.B. te Boekhorst

 publishers

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Prologue

Their assignment seemed straightforward: Travel to the North Pole with the competitors; lie low in a shed for ten days; go and hunt for the Christmas treasure; take the treasure and make off with it. As is often the case, things would turn out differently. Instead of ten days, they stayed for only two days in the shed at Greenland's military airfield, and the time spent at the North Pole would turn into a fortnight. Their client had anticipated unexpected problems, and the two cousins now found themselves standing beneath a grey sky in freezing cold weather, waiting to sneak surreptitiously over a ramp into a helicopter standing by. All that in order to leave the military base as quickly as possible.

The ramp was opened and a small torch shone its light into a very cramped room where the two had to hide until they would land at the North Pole. After the ramp was closed it became pitch-dark. They felt the vibration of the helicopter's motor and heard the swishing of the rotor blades. This fat Sikorsky would take them to the place where they were to make a bivouac within two hours. The participants of the competition they were to sabotage already had started their assignments.

The cousins' months of training was about to finally pay off. Surviving the freezing cold, their client had called it, hammering home that they had to master every aspect of that surviving to perfection. One tiny mistake and the whole operation would fall through. How they had perspired in their thick suits, despite the hard wind the fans produced to make their work that more realistic. 'There will be a fierce wind blowing at the North Pole, making your work all the harder,' their client had told them.

Frank was lying at the back of the helicopter, with his head resting against a wooden crate. He had thought about that period of training a lot lately. Were they sufficiently prepared? Even for unexpected events? What if, for instance, a dangerous animal would appear at their tent, or if they encountered a polar bear when they were sledging through the snow? Going on a sledge with wheels was much easier than sledging through snow with four savage dogs in front of you. Frank also worried about his cousin. Would Paul be able to endure the cold and boredom? Would he, come to that? He was so lost in thought he wasn't aware of his head bumping systematically against the wooden crate. This helicopter flight wouldn't take long. Paul had been given a sedative in his tea without his knowing, to suppress his fear of flying. Frank couldn't see how

his cousin was doing at the moment. Even if he talked to him, Paul probably wouldn't hear him for the noise of the rotor blades.

Frank felt a jolt. Their flying taxi seemed to have begun an abrupt downwards movement, as if their client had spotted all of a sudden where the two cousins had to be parked.

The noise of the rotor blades diminished. He now noticed the bumping of his head against the crate, that decreased in the same rhythm.

Unexpectedly, and all too hard to Frank's liking, the helicopter hit the ground. The noise of the rotor blades died away slowly and he heard the doors being opened. With the opening of their ramp the biting cold and the lashing wind immediately beat in his face. Snow drifted from beneath the helicopter and turned a cloudless night into a white, hazy one.

Someone pulled at Frank's anorak and he almost tumbled out of the helicopter. His cousin jumped out rather flexibly, despite having sat still for more than two hours. They glanced around and saw vague outlines. Stars pierced through the drifting snow. Their client pointed to the crates: 'You have one minute to cover all that up with the white fabric and hide underneath it with the dogs until the helicopter has disappeared. Nobody should know you are here, not even the pilots.'

In an experienced manner the two cousins started to work. Both thought about the exercises they had to do over and over again in almost the same circumstances bar the extreme cold. The fabric was fastened to the crates with fat rubber bands. The dogs were happy to stretch their legs. Plying them with chunks of meat, they were directed underneath the fabric with some difficulty. Their client banged the ramp shut and walked to the front of the helicopter.

With a noise that surpassed that of the wind, the large Sikorsky lifted off, leaving both cousins in the cold. Curious as they were, they didn't hide underneath the white fabric. They watched the helicopter leave and kept watching until it was completely gone. There were long, exhausting days to come, spent in the dark for most of the time. Waiting and more waiting, until they could finally execute their assignment. But things would turn out differently.

It wouldn't be long before they met me.

1 February

'Can I have your attention, please?' John Bowman looked tired. Two financially difficult years had taken their toll. The economic crisis had left its mark. His face was ashen and hollow-cheeked. For the last three months his eyes had had a desperate look. The sparse hair he had left on a practically bald head had turned grey at the temples during the last two years. He would have liked to step out of it all, throw in the towel. He couldn't see a way out of it, though. If only he could pack it all in. No longer chairing Salfrinch, the reputable toy chain with more than 1,200 branches worldwide. Yet John knew that that wasn't feasible. First he would have to accomplish the impossible this year: take Salfrinch to the top yet again.

John had wound up the formal part of the meeting. The poor figures from the previous financial year had left a profound impression on the assembly, having gathered around the oval mahogany table inlaid with fine mosaic work eight hours before. Eight men, two women and Chairman John, son-in-law of the grandson of Salfrinch's founder.

Two years ago Salfrinch attained a turnover of 900 million. To John it seemed an opportune moment to leave his job as chairman when Salfrinch made a turnover of one billion, possibly in the following year. He would have liked to take a year off and enjoy his hobbies: his children and fly-fishing. Instead of reaching one billion, Salfrinch's turnover plummeted by 15 percent. Last year it went down another 12 percent, resulting in a turnover of 675 million. They had had to hand over their lead as the world's largest toy store to Toytotoy, a Japanese toy chain that made its fortune in computer games. Salfrinch had to accept that even a second place wasn't attainable. Gimmytoy had surpassed them and now even drew near the Japanese competitor. The difference between their turnovers wasn't that big; being in third place that was much more embarrassing. And that, of all times, in this year, Salfrinch's centenary! John knew that something had to be done. They had to regain their first position, by hook or by crook. The centenary year should be looked back on as the year in which Salfrinch got back at the top of the world's bestselling toy stores. He didn't yet know how to achieve this but there were no two ways about it – it would happen. He would brush up the old name of Salfrinch so fanatically until every single one of the thousand critics who had steamrolled over him lately was silenced once and for all.

‘It has been a hard, strenuous day,’ John said. ‘The figures speak for themselves. We know where we stand. Nevertheless, I want to mention one more thing: our company’s centenary. This year provides the perfect opportunity to leave all our competitors behind and become once again the world’s bestselling toy store. We cannot do that if we continue our business on the same footing. We will have to cut down even more but what is more important: we need new toys. Merchandise with which we can astonish the world. Now, I want to ask all of you to think of a way we can generate more publicity, market more new products and achieve quick returns to beat the competition.’

For the first time that day there was a buzz of voices. Even the members who had looked out of the window for distraction – the conference room was on the top floor of Salfrinch’s head office and was encompassed by three glass walls: the view was phenomenal – showed some excitement. On this early spring-like day the air conditioner worked noiselessly. All day long the sun had been shining brightly. Bowman had pulled down the Venetian blinds several times during the meeting under the guise of blaming ‘the annoyingly glaring sun’ but in reality one was very much distracted by the breathtaking surroundings in this fine weather.

‘I will send you away open-minded. Without any ideas, without any guidelines, without any examples. We will deliberate about how to push Salfrinch upwards for the next few weeks. At the next meeting I expect every one of you to come up with at least two proposals how to tackle the competition.’

Once again there was some agitation. Some members of the board looked startled. There was something actually expected of them!

‘That’s what advertising companies are for, surely?’ exclaimed Winston Schmitts, the incumbent who at 74 years of age was the oldest director on the board. He couldn’t imagine himself sitting at home behind his desk, racking his brains over trivial toy-things, as he used to call them.

There was some nodding in assent. It seemed other members were worried about their own creativity as well. Most of all they worried about the time they would have to devote to this task they were given.

‘Before we spend our money on an advertising campaign which will set us back millions, I want us to shed some light on alternatives ourselves. All of us here are highly educated, intelligent people, of whom I expect a certain amount of creativity. We can always bring in an advertising company later on, which we’ll need anyway when we seek publicity. First, though, we will have a go at it ourselves. It will give you a chance to finally do what Salfrinch is paying you for: thinking about and devising solutions to push the turnover up again. Just as Salfrinch’s first board laid the foundation for our multinational a cen-

tury ago, so will we make certain that Salfrinch will be known once again as the most creative toy store in the world. We will use the next meeting to analyse all the proposals. At the end of that day I want to have at least three good ideas, which we will elaborate on. Next month we should have a starting point with which we can conquer the world once again. If it turns out that this board doesn't possess much resolution and mental capacity, I will have to reconsider its set-up. I wish you all a safe journey home and much creativeness.'

John hit his 100-year-old chairman's gavel on the nicely designed square leather block. For most of the members that was the best sound of the day.

The conference room was empty. John was standing at the window facing south. The sun was setting and its rays slanted through the window from the west, touching his face. His thoughts wandered off to the next meeting in exactly four weeks' time. He didn't expect many creative proposals going to be put forward. During his chairmanship, not one person had ever put forward an actual proposal to increase production or to add a new product to the line. Now he had put them on the spot: creativity or else possible dismissal.

1 March Bob and Liza Young

It was pitch-dark in Bob Young's attic room, even though it was already ten o'clock in the morning on this first day in March. Bob's rooms in the Grotesque building were a mere twenty square metres. This was the space he had to live in, sleep in and eat in. The bathroom was situated in a small adjacent room. Every other weekend his daughter Liza, the apple of his eye, stayed over. On those occasions Bob slept on a mattress on the floor so Liza could use the bed. This morning the skylight was covered with twelve centimetres of snow. To deal with nuisances like this, Bob had bought a large tub, measuring well over the width of the skylight. Carefully he twisted the handle of the window. He tried to apply pressure on the top of the window, so the bottom half would slowly move downwards into the room. The snow glided steadily downwards and dropped into the tub Bob had placed on the table. Most of the snow fell directly into the tub and not onto the plastic sheet he had placed on the carpet for protection. The sun was shining fiercely inside, setting the room ablaze. That's not what I wanted, Bob thought. He closed the tilting window and drew its curtain. That stopped the room from being overexposed like a bad picture. Bob got his cup of coffee, sat down and thought about the coming weekend, when his daughter would be staying with him for two days. He understood that presently she had to do a talk at school. Maybe he could help her. After all, he had plenty of time on his hands.

Two years ago Bob was a manager in a medium-sized supermarket in a small town twelve miles away. Now he was unemployed and awaiting the court's decision regarding a charge of embezzlement of a significant part of the supermarket's turnover for some months. According to Bob, he had been set up by a colleague, who was up to his eyeballs in debt. Indeed was, because since this whole business had started, said colleague had miraculously become debt-free. After one year of lawsuits, the final verdict would be announced in two weeks' time. Should Bob be declared guilty, a prison sentence one year max would be in store for him of. However, according to his lawyer, they had good credentials and a lawsuit against the now ex-colleague would follow suit. Should Bob be acquitted, a tidy amount of money could be expected. A sum he desperately needed to rebuild his life after his divorce.

It was exactly twenty-one months ago to the day that Bob divorced the woman he still loved in spite of everything: Marie-Ann Pickleforth. She had taken her maiden name again. She didn't want to be associated with the nasty

business her ex-husband had found himself in over the last two years. Marie-Ann was an interior designer and a most adequate one, judging by the size of her own home. Marie-Ann lived with her daughter Liza in the largest house in the residential area she had settled in after the divorce.

Eleven years of age, with long dark hair and highly imaginative, Liza liked making scale models, especially buildings that had made an indelible impression in history: the pyramids of Giza, the Taj Mahal, the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building. She had a weakness for towers. She kept up to date meticulously with which tower was the highest in the world and how many people died whilst building them. She was going to give a talk at school in two weeks' time. That was what she enjoyed the most: conveying her love of towers and their fatalities to her classmates. Initially she wanted to talk about the Eiffel Tower, which was built at the end of the nineteenth century. No one was killed during the erection of the tower. Just the one builder but he didn't count, Liza reckoned. He climbed the tower after working hours to show off to his girlfriend. Liza didn't want to devote her talk to someone who had fallen off a tower under construction after working hours, never mind how famous the tower was.

Although something tended to go wrong during the reconstruction of impressive buildings many times, it turned out to be difficult to find a famous building that actually had some workers killed during the process. Fifty-one people were killed during the reconstruction of the cooling towers of the Pleasants Power Station in Willow Island in the United States some thirty years ago, when the men tried to pull up a large tub with cement. This was assumed to be the biggest disaster in construction yet. Who knew about this construction anyway? Hardly anybody. Therefore not a very interesting topic.

Eleven construction workers were killed in February 1937, when scaffolding on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco collapsed, leaving the men falling through the safety nets. An awkward death but not exciting enough for Liza to talk about to her classmates.

That is why she settled on the Burj Khalifa in Dubai as the subject of her talk. Since 21 July 2007 it had been the tallest building in the world. On 4 January 2010 the tower was festively opened. On that day, the tower was 828 metres high. So far she hadn't found out if any construction workers got killed. The talk would be in two weeks' time. Hopefully she would have gleaned more information by then.

Liza often wondered why she had such a fascination for large buildings and their dead construction workers. Probably because she herself had a fear of heights. She couldn't bear to think about falling down and breaking all her

bones. When she stood on the first floor of a building she didn't dare look down. For that reason she was actually glad her father's room only had a skylight. That way she wouldn't be able to look outside – never mind look down – but just up and she wouldn't suffer acrophobia. Thinking of her father's room, her mind wandered off to the scale models she had made and were displayed there. There wasn't much room for furniture in her father's small flat but her mother decidedly didn't want that 'junk' in her large house, on account of her using it as a show home for her activities as an interior decorator. There was no room for an eleven-years-old's trifling work. Her mother's house was always spic and span. Much too clean and tidy, Liza often complained but her mother wasn't too bothered about Liza's complaining. She only had eyes for her work, the accompanied income and of course the expenditures she thus could afford. Liza still didn't get her mother's fascination with shoes and handbags. She had never seen as many of them as in her mother's walk-in wardrobe. Possibly a thousand pairs of shoes and several hundred handbags.

She liked it much better at her father's, despite the lack of room. Whenever she stayed over at weekends, she wouldn't drink anything after eight o'clock in the evening. She hoped she wouldn't have to go to the toilet at night if she didn't drink late at night. For to find her way to the toilet in complete darkness at night was quite a venture, as she had once told her father. In actual fact she was afraid of the dark, even in that small room. Last December was the last time she tried that and she had nearly wet her bed. It had been Christmas Eve and they had had a late dinner and had drunk lots of beverages. She would rather not experience a night like that again. Her father had given her a torch, on that same Christmas Day and had said that she could definitely turn on the lights at night. She felt uncomfortable doing that. She didn't want her father to wake up at night. She knew he often didn't sleep well. Brooding over the lawsuit and over divorcing her mother. Within a few days' time she was going to stay at her father's again and they were going to work on her talk together.

'Dad, I'm bored.' This was the standard phrase of Jimbo Jones, invariably called 'Jumbo' by his classmates, due to his large ears, as well as his generally ungainly antics during gymnastics. For example, he once managed to run down the pommel horse during vaulting. The springboard in front of the pommel horse provided so much extra speed forwards instead of upwards, that he had no time to put his hands on top of the pommel, push off and land neatly on the other side. For his classmates this had been a hilarious climax but it had been an all-time low for Jimbo. Everyone, including the gym teacher, fell about laughing. Ever since, Jimbo's nickname had been Jumbo, after the elephant that lived more than a hundred years ago and that was famous for its size.

(In 1882, Jumbo was sold for six thousand pounds to the then famous circus of Phineas Taylor. I remember this well. What a gigantic circus that was! It had three rings and in every ring there was something going on. You didn't know where to look first. That's where I saw Jumbo for the first time. I often returned to the circus to see him: a huge elephant with sad eyes.)

Not that Jimbo's classmates knew all this about Jumbo but in this way the name of the great elephant lived on in this fat, spoiled son of self-made billionaire Jim Jones, who owed his fortune to the sale of his telecom empire just before the crisis of 2008. Jim was forty years old at that time and he had no intention to ever work again.

Jimbo didn't have any friends, despite all the money Dad Jim was throwing about. Jimbo was merely the butt of ridicule. Not only because of his size but also because of his laziness and sadistic nature. Jimbo enjoyed torturing animals and killed all the insects he came across. He liked blowing up frogs and pushing tortoises on their backs onto the water.

Dad Jim had been married for just one year. His money, experience of life and intelligence hadn't helped him see Norma using him as a pension insurance. Nevertheless, Jim thought she had been worth the money. After all, she had provided him with an heir. She had renounced her rights to her child for an alimony of forty thousand pounds net per month (!) until her death. Although there were months when she was short of cash, she wasn't entirely unsatisfied with this amount. Every year she tried to increase the amount in court, so far without any luck.

Jimbo was sitting in the TV room, watching a film that hadn't featured in the cinemas yet. Dad Jim made a deal with all the film production companies to

send him a copy of every new film directly off the editing table. Of course he had to pay a vast sum for this privilege, ordinarily by co-funding the film with several millions, but he had earned a lot of millions in return. So Jimbo was watching a film. It didn't take him more than ten minutes to decide he didn't like it and he started to look around him wearily. Just fifteen minutes ago he had been in the games room, which housed fruit machines, pinball machines, the Wii and other modern slot machines to entertain dozens of children. Jimbo was easily bored, although today he bettered his record. The slot machines and the Wii had captivated him for no less than twenty-five minutes. By then his concentration was gone and he had decided to watch a film. Presently he was calling his father, who filled his days mostly with staring at a computer screen. Shares had his main interest, as had the financial and economic news. He noticed that the Salfrinch-shares had dropped again. Those shares, worth millions, should have been sold two years ago. Then he wouldn't have made such a big loss today. He read that the company had its centenary this year and decided to take a gamble. He would buy new Salfrinch-shares. That had to go well, since they were so low at this moment. He suspected that Salfrinch would come up with some kind of activity because of their centenary. Maybe he could rake in a nice little return at the end of the year after all.

'Dad, I'm bored.' Jimbo walked into the study and startled his father, who had his mind completely on his Salfrinch-shares.

'I have to finish this first. Shall we go out afterwards? We can go and grab something to eat, or go to the shopping centre.'

'Can I have the latest game for the Wii?'

Jim had no clue as to what game had been issued for the Wii recently but he was pleased that he could keep Jimbo quiet on his day off.

'All right. Let me finish this and then we'll go. Ask Smart if he will drive the Rolls out, so we can leave as soon as I have finished, within a few minutes at the very most.'

Jimbo went downstairs, looking for Smart the butler, happily distracted by the thought of buying something new. Because that was Jimbo's favourite pastime: buying something. Even when he was younger he had enjoyed getting something new rather than actually having it. The joy of unwrapping was many times greater than playing with the present itself. Smart had put his toys on display and every month he swept his feather duster across them to wipe off the dust as best as he could. Once they were set out Jimbo never touched his toys again. There were three rooms full of things he hadn't touched during the past year. After a year Smart obtained Jim's permission to take the 'old' toys to a children's home. That was about the only kindness Jim allowed himself to do.

1 March Helen and Alice Addup

Quite a long distance away from the Jones's residence, more towards the south of the country, was where Helen Addup lived, an accountant who was mad about numbers. As a child she always had the highest grades for arithmetic. She had a penchant for calculating things. For instance, she knew exactly how long it took her to go from home to school via six different routes. Those six routes were split up into public transport, by bicycle, by car and by foot. She even once calculated how long on average it took her family members to get up, have breakfast and go to work or school. As a child she calculated anything and everything and kept records of it in her notebook, or notebooks, to be more precise. In her youth she filled no less than twenty-three of them. Not with stories of her daily routines. Not with secret loves and not with comments on the weather. No, Helen had, as a child, noted everything down she could calculate. From the rise in prices in supermarkets to the differences in night and day temperatures. (A bit about the weather after all.) It was no surprise that Helen wanted to pursue a career in accountancy. She earned every certificate there was to become an accountant. She got a first at university. She could have worked for any of the largest accountancies in the country, or even start her own successful accountancy. Helen was contented working for a medium-sized company, because, although it was hard to imagine, Helen had an even bigger love: her daughter Alice.

There couldn't have been a bigger contrast between mother Helen and daughter Alice. Whereas mother Helen had short dark hair, was engaged in anything that had to do with numbers and was in perfect health, her daughter Alice was quite the opposite: long blond hair, always with her nose in a book, thus preferring letters and not numbers and always sickly, to say the least. Despite her being just thirteen years old, she had been hospitalised six times already. Her muscles didn't always do what she wanted them to do. This resulted in her having had an arm dislocated several times, one time her leg – a painful memory – and even her jaw, caused by a very long yawn. She spent that whole ride to the hospital with her mouth wide open. Afterwards, she and her parents had seen the funny side of that. That hadn't made it any less painful. Nowadays Alice could put her own arm back into its socket. This happened once a month on average. Every year she had to go to hospital for a medical, to test her ligaments. She had had an operation on them twice already. The ligaments were drawn tighter, like curtains on a windy night and then she would

be all right for a while, until her arm popped out of its socket and she had to put it back again herself. She always went to the hospital for a check-up afterwards. In a worst-case scenario, she would have to have another operation. It was a never-ending story. Just like in the books she so much loved to read. There were stories she wished would never end. She would rather the author wrote as fast as she read. Every single week a new instalment of the story. The most wonderful stories she loved to read took place in wintertime, with thick layers of snow and ice and wretched, hungry animals that had to be fed. The best were the fairy tales, with non-existent ravenous animals, of which the drawings were so beautiful that she could spend half the day just staring at them. By doing so, her thoughts often wandered off. Just like Liza, Alice liked to hold talks. Whereas Liza stuck to history and reality, Alice liked to think up her talks. Make up a story about non-existent creatures that lived in the bitter cold of Scandinavia, where in the north it could be dark for six months at a time. Where the animals and other creatures could hardly see one another. Stories to dream away by, stories to give you goose bumps, stories that have your classmates think at the ending, it just might be true. Alice would give anything to make a long trip to such a country. She had heard that Siberia had frost the whole year round. She could hardly believe that that was true. How thick would the ice be, if it never melted? Perhaps several miles thick.

In fact, this story wasn't correct, although it is true that Siberia has very cold winters.

Her mind wandered off again. She found herself in the middle of ice, suddenly getting so cold that she dropped her book and looked up startled. Her mother was standing in the doorway, smiling and carrying a mug of hot chocolate. Despite the fact that it was already March it had snowed heavily, some ten centimetres. Alice had been outside very early that morning. It had still been dark. There had been no prints in the snow yet. She had walked down the street, taking care to walk only in the gutter, leaving no visible traces so that it looked as if nobody had walked in the street yet. The snow had been nice and smooth. Today the temperature would rise above freezing, so she had to enjoy that thick layer of snow while it lasted. Beyond their residential area were pastures and a bit of woodland. She had walked to the woods to see if she could find any animal tracks. She liked squirrels the best but in this kind of weather they usually stayed high up in the trees, in their nests. Every now and then she saw tracks of a fox or a fawn. This part of the wood was really too near to civilization, although last winter it had been so cold, that even the roes ventured to the outskirts of the wood to see if the people had scattered something edible.

She had been back home for a while and had started to read her umpteenth book. The hot chocolate her mother brought her was a welcome distraction. Not that the story was boring but after peering for hours at the pages she now had the opportunity to cast her eyes onto something else and relax.

1 March Sarah and Bill Averidge

Whereas Alice would love to visit the distant north, Sarah Averidge and her son Bill preferred to go to the south as far as they possibly could. There the temperature was far better for Bill's asthma. A good long holiday, ideally for the whole of the winter, so Bill's lungs could settle down a bit. Not to be in the moist climate where they were now. To make matters worse, they lived near the sea. The only advantage was that the blowing wind made the air purer than it was inland but the briny sea air strained his weak lungs to their limit. Frequently Bill had to be attached to a respirator. When he was allowed to go to school again afterwards, he made sure he carried his inhaler, which he used almost continuously.

Sarah and Bill had never had such a holiday in a warmer climate. Sarah was on social benefits and worked at night as a cleaner to pay for Bill's additional health costs. Cash in hand that was, otherwise there would be no point in doing it. Because his mother worked so hard for him, Bill felt compelled to work as hard as he could at school. He had to do that anyway because he was, at best, an average student. Averidge by name, average by nature, he sometimes thought. Nothing special, he didn't excel at any subject except when the chosen subjects demanded computer and software knowledge, for he was a wizard with computers. There had yet to be a jammed hard disk he couldn't release again. Hardly a weekend went by without someone making an appeal to him and his computer knowledge. Sometimes it was a printer that didn't work properly, at other times someone's laptop that wouldn't start up or a program that couldn't be installed. Bill could do anything. That made him feel very proud, but he was most proud of the payments he received for his jobs. Every penny of it he gave to his Mum. She even resigned from one night's cleaning job thanks to his financial contributions. Presently Bill was captivated by making his own computer programs. A security program for instance, that enabled you to see from somewhere else, via your mobile or computer, if someone was in your house. Useful for when you went on holiday. Not that he had ever been on a holiday. Three of their neighbours had already bought his program and had it installed on their computers. It really worked! Bill had ambitious plans: establishing his own software development business. He could sell software packages in his home town, maybe even in the whole country. Maybe his earnings would allow them to go on those longed-for holidays to warm, sunny countries, where he and his mother could both get their breath back.

Yes, he and his Mum, because Bill's father died several years ago: just like that, all of a sudden, of a heart attack. In the morning when Bill went to school there had been nothing to indicate something was wrong. His father had gone to work as usual. In the evening Bill had to go straight to the hospital to say goodbye to his father. He had only just been in time. If he had been ten minutes later he would have missed his father's dying words. They were so softly spoken, he had hardly been able to make them out. His father had asked him to look after his Mum. He remembered it as if it happened only yesterday. He couldn't quite understand how a nine-year-old boy could look after his Mum. Now, five years on, he sort of got the message. That it was meant symbolically and that it also meant he should take care of himself. He tried to but keeping an eye on his Mum was far easier than keeping himself in line. He didn't do a lot of crazy stuff, though. Only sometimes he got out of bed late at night, when his lungs prevented him from sleeping and he had to get outside to breathe in a bit of fresh air. His mother would be out cleaning, so he liked to roam the sand dunes by himself. Every now and then he came across something that didn't pass muster. Like a poacher, walking with something large thrown over his shoulder. Or boys on their mopeds, who were driving full speed across the sand dunes. He himself had never done anything that foolish. Walking around was tiring enough. More so when he had to duck away when encountering a poacher or a group of boys. Those kind of movements demanded all his strength. Most of the time he went to bed afterwards even more exhausted. Sometimes he was just in time before his mother got home. He knew she would finish work at two o'clock in the morning. It took her about fifteen minutes on her bike to arrive home. He always made sure he was in bed at ten past two at the latest.

1 March The cousins Frank and Paul

Frank Rich was studying the newspaper. Always on the lookout for announcements of changes of address or obituary notices. In summer he was also looking for companies or individuals who were on holiday. Sometimes people made it only too easy. They virtually advertised their absences in the newspapers. You only had to find the proper address, put it in your satnav and as soon as it was dark you could set off. It had been quite different this past winter. There had never been so much snow in one winter as this year and snow meant a forced stay at home. Any apt burglar – and he counted himself as one – knew it was plain stupidity to operate in the snow. All the police had to do was follow your prints and the game was up. He had made that mistake in the remote past. Ever since, he was on winter break. At one time he even tried to qualify for special benefits, just like house-painters or builders who couldn't do their jobs due to bad weather conditions. He had a hard time trying to make this clear to the desk worker. He couldn't simply say that due to the snow he wasn't able to do his work as a burglar. Now he had reconciled himself with the situation. The moment the first snowflakes whirled down from the sky he stayed in bed. The snow had beaten him. Today was a fine first March day, though, and spring was on its way. Although you wouldn't think so given the thick layer of snow in front of his door. Instead of staying in bed he was cutting out address announcements and obituary notices. One couldn't deny that he had a lack of foresight. The weather forecast said it would be five degrees Celsius today. With a little luck the snow would have thawed away by the evening and he would be able to pay a visit to the people who weren't home.

He looked at the time. He had to fill in his cousin before twelve o'clock about what they were going to do that night. His cousin Paul was a good, big headed lad with a crew cut and a tad too heavy for his height. Or how did they put it: too short for his weight? Paul wasn't exactly bright but he did mean well. That didn't always suit Frank. Indeed, it had cost them a lot of money many times. Frank had a soft spot for Paul, son of his aunt and uncle Groope, who both died in a car accident ten years ago. There were stories circulating that it had been Paul's fault, because he was behind the wheel and had pushed his foot on the accelerator. There had been a sharp bend coming up, a bit too sharp. Wonder of wonders Paul survived, despite having broken several bones. He had got stuck round the steering wheel, fracturing his sternum. His parents died on the spot. Both had been hurled out of the car.

The accident also caused Paul to get overweight. Broken bones and convalescence kept him hospitalised for a year. You didn't lose weight convalescing. Paul couldn't remember any of it happening but it had given him a troubled conscience. The moment that the troubling had stopped, his conscience had also gone away. Instead he had got an exceptionally large and solid body. More body than brains, they used to say sometimes. Paul didn't care. He had left the past behind and had forgotten it for the greatest part. Now he tried to focus as best as he could on the jobs big cousin Frank thought out for them. Although being fairly big himself, Frank was a small boy compared to Paul. While one body was lean and small and the other broad and big, no job was too difficult for them, physically, that is. Intellectually, both their capabilities were lacking. Especially Paul's intelligence let them down at times.

For instance, that time they burgled a place and Frank had stood guard outside, carrying a walkie-talkie. It had been at a large bank. Paul had disconnected the alarm but it had been a long way to the vault. That demanded speed and power. Brainless power and that was Paul's strength. Unfortunately, Paul was always hungry. When he had come across a canteen, he hadn't been able to resist inspecting the fridge and the store cupboard. There he found some goodies. His thoughts had been completely caught up by the food. He forgot all about his assignment and his walkie-talkie was off. The guard who passed by saw the fridge's light shining. Sizing up the situation, he found Paul surrounded by empty wrappers of all sorts of crisps and bars and two empty cans of beer. The sentence Paul served for this burglary turned out to be much shorter than had been expected, because it could not be proven the bank had actually been robbed. After all, the burglar hadn't come any further than the canteen.

Today Frank would inform his cousin Paul about the next job he had his eyes on. Banks and other large buildings that had canteens in them were out of the question. They would simply concentrate on residences and large mansions owned by people who were away for some amount of time. For at least half a day. Frank wanted enough time to have a good look around. At the moment Paul was often the lookout. Although that once went almost wrong too, because Paul was standing guard at the wrong house. When the family came back from a funeral and were let off at their home by the undertakers' cars, Paul showed a keen interest in the make of the cars and their horsepower. It had totally slipped his mind, as he told Frank later, that those were the people living in the house where Frank actually was. Fortunately the front door had made some noise and Frank managed to jump out of a window at the back of the house, onto the lower roof of a kitchen extension. Via the other side of the

kitchen and the neighbours' garden he popped up next to Paul, who had been delighted that all had run so quickly and smoothly.

'What did you take?' asked Paul eagerly.

'Nothing, you idiot! Those people came home too early.'

'That's impossible,' said Paul. 'I haven't seen anybody go inside.'

'And exactly where haven't you seen anybody go inside?'

'Well, here at number 52.'

'And who did go inside at number 54?'

'Oh, some people who were brought home by two very large black cars.'

'Well, well,' said Frank, 'two very large black cars. Maybe those people were at a funeral today.'

'Now, there's a coincidence!' exclaimed Paul. 'Two funerals in the same road!'

'Yes,' replied Frank. 'Or maybe I was in the house those people just came home to?'

'Weren't you at number 52, then?'

'Have you seen me go inside there?'

'No but you went round the back, didn't you? I thought you would go inside number 52.'

It was like pulling teeth. One in two jobs failed because Paul made a mistake, didn't pay attention during the explanation, or was distracted on the spot by fancy cars or beautiful ladies. Frank had an easy job in mind for tonight. Provided, of course, that the snow had melted.

1 March John Bowman

John Bowman was standing in the sun lounge of his large residence in one of the city's suburbs. His stomach ached. Not because of the wonderful view. Presently he was looking at the sloping lawn the size of a football pitch, with a frozen oval pond in its centre. Last night's snow had turned his large garden into a wonderful fairy-like scenery. Slowly the sun ascended and altered his garden into a golden vista. The splendid scenery couldn't ease his pessimistic feeling. He spent last night more awake than asleep. His thoughts had been on today's meeting almost constantly. Exactly four weeks ago he sent his executive board and chief executive officers home with a near-impossible task. The future of the century-old toy store Salfrinch hung by a thread. If there weren't any good ideas by tonight he would take a gloomy view of the future. He had sent the assembly home with a threat: creative ideas or else... perhaps redundancy. Of course he himself had been thinking long and hard the last four weeks. He had realised that creativity and a demanding job do not go well together. He used to complain that the directors never came forward with any ideas. Now he understood. When you are too engrossed in your work, there isn't much room for creativity. You had to empty your head in order to fill it with creativity. Most directors held more commissionerships than just the one at Salfrinch's and the executive officers had to pull out all the stops in these hard times to manage their departments. They didn't have the time and perhaps not the capacity either to come up with new products. That could mean that they had to engage an expensive advertising agency, that, for their part, would bring in a product development company. Ultimately there were going to be far too many people involved in launching just a few new products. Maybe he should leave it with an advertising agency to develop a new marketing strategy for Salfrinch. Perhaps that would boost the turnover. The crisis was coming to an end. With a little luck the turnover would increase this year. Maybe he could still resign at the end of the year. Not with the intended turnover of a billion but still with having turned round the downward spiral. Leave it to his successor to reach the turnover of a billion. However, a worldwide company needed more than a little luck to increase its turnover. It took knowledge, creativity and hard work. One thing he definitely knew: today they would take the first step. The meeting was going to be at two in the afternoon. At six he would know how things stood.

Presently it was eight o'clock and time for breakfast. That was to say... May-

be a cup of tea and some fresh orange juice. He didn't feel much like eating. He tried to remain positive and told himself he would have a good reason to go out to dinner with his wife Ava tonight. The last two years he hadn't been his usual jolly self. Problems at work had made him dejected and depressed. The more so because his brother-in-law Steve Salfrinch, great-grandson of Salfrinch's founder and the son of his father-in-law, had tried to make his life a misery. Steve constantly emphasised everything that showed John in an unfavourable light. Steve resented the fact that he, Steve, being the great-grandson of the founder and the company's eponym, hadn't been elected chairman. No, brother-in-law John had been given the chairman's gavel and had steered the company successfully through a couple of difficult years. Steve would never admit he admired John for what he had done: keeping the business afloat despite hard times. All right, maybe they weren't the market leader anymore, that was hardly surprising in view of those low salaries they handed out in Asia. All things considered, John hadn't done too badly. Steve had embraced the crisis as a way to slowly but steadily undermine John's power. Steve wanted to be chairman, by whatever means necessary and perhaps even against his better judgement. He wanted to re-establish the Salfrinch-name. Although, in all fairness, he knew that the job of chairman probably wouldn't suit him well. He was hoping the executive board and executive officers would show enough support that he could last a few years as chairman of the board of the largest toy company in the world.

John knew that Steve was undermining his authority. Up until the crisis he hadn't taken much notice. All departments were running smoothly. There had been no reason for concern. All this had changed. This was a decisive year for Salfrinch, as well as for John.

John heard a sound behind him. His wife Ava entered the room.

'Are you having breakfast?' she said.

'I'll just have a cup of tea and a glass of juice.'

'Then I'll have the table cleared.'

She walked out of the room, looking for the maid-cum-au pair for their two children, John Jr, aged twelve and Annette, aged ten. A good wife, beautiful children, a nice job – if the economy was favourable – and an incredible house. He couldn't have asked for more. Well, good health, perhaps. As far as he knew, he wasn't suffering ill-health. What could go wrong today? At the very most he could lose his job. Another chairman might manage to put Salfrinch in the right direction again. That wasn't what troubled him. In his own mind he would have breached his father-in-law's faith in him if he didn't succeed in

making Salfrinch the number one company again. He gazed across the lawn. Slowly everything golden had turned into yellow. He had five hours to think of some ideas himself. Then he would get his car out. It would take him forty-five minutes to get to the head office. His secretary would already have started to get the conference room ready with pens, paper and drinks. No laptops or mobiles, because he didn't want the members being distracted during meetings. Everything would be ready to have a positive meeting with profitable output. He was very anxious to know what kind of ideas would be brought up. Indeed, he was looking forward to it. First he had to scribble something down himself. After all, he had to set a good example. The garden glistened. Droplets trickled slowly from the bare branches. Before he went, the last snow would have melted away and the garden would be green again.