

MY BEST WORST YEAR

By Justin Christopher

13th January

'Right, my boy,' said Dad, sitting heavily on my bed.

I cracked my knuckles. This did not sound good. The last time Dad came into my room and said, 'Right, my boy,' I was grounded for two weeks because I'd jumped off the water tank with an umbrella.

'Toby, I've decided to ban the double-bounce.'

'What?!' I sat up.

This was bad, bad news.

My sister Claire and I have double-bounced each other on the trampoline since forever. It's a wicked trick, especially if someone doesn't know you're going to do it. What you do is wait till you're both jumping really high, then bounce as hard as you can just as the other person is landing. When you land, they fly into space.

'But Dad, that's not fair!' I protested. 'Claire called me a dumb idiot!'

'I don't care.'

'And a no-hoper!'

'Toby, your sister has a broken arm because you were acting the fool. The double bounce is banned, period.'

Chapter Two

Here's what happened. I was minding my own business on the trampoline when Claire came out with her friends. She jumped on without asking and then asked me loudly if I knew what a palindrome was. I said no. I mean, seriously, who-ever heard of a palindrome?

'What a dumbo!' she said. 'What a complete no-hoper!' She laughed like a kookaburra, which made her friends all laugh like kookaburras too.

So I double-bounced her into infinity. Was it my fault she landed awkwardly and broke her arm?

Later, Mum told me a palindrome is a word that's the same spelled backwards. Like kayak, or dad, or boob!

From my bedroom I could see Claire sitting in Mum's comfy chair in the lounge room with her arm in plaster. She was watching a movie past her bedtime – and she was drinking fizzy!

'Not fair! We're never allowed fizzy!' I said to Dad.

'Correct. Especially not at this time of night.'

'But . . . look at Claire,' I said. 'She's got fizzy!'

'She's allowed to,' he said. 'She's in pain.'

I pulled the sheets up and buried my head. 'Life sucks! Why can't someone break *my* arm?'

'But I have got an offer for you,' Dad went on.

'What kind of offer?' I asked.

'The kind of offer you might like.' He cleared his throat. 'Toby, my boy, life is about redemption.'

'Yeah, yeah,' I sighed. Dad's got all these sayings from a CD he plays in the car on his way to work. Obviously this was one of them.

'It's a one-lap race.'

Ho hum.

'It's not about whether you get knocked down,' he continued, 'it's whether you get up. And if at first you don't succeed—'

'Try and try and try again,' I said.

'That's the one! Have you heard it before?'

'Dad, what's the offer?'

He moved closer and tried to whisper, but when Dad whispers it's like a normal person yelling.

'I remember being your age and trying to do everything at once. Schoolwork, sports.' He punched me lightly on the shoulder. 'Having to get along with your sister.'

'Hmph,' I said.

'What if we move on from what happened with Claire and give you something to aim for?'

I looked at him.

'Your mum and I have decided that if you get twenty wickets and ten tries before the end of the season, we'll buy you a GameBox V3.'

Can you believe it? One minute I'm in trouble for double-bouncing my sister, and the next Dad is telling me I've got the new GameBox V3!

Shot!

The GameBox V3 is the best thing since the GameBox V2. It's so new no one in my class has got one. You can choose your players and your teams, what uniform they should wear and what ground they should play on. It's also got two-player and three-player so you can verse your friends. And I can have all this for twenty wickets and ten tries? Easy-peasy.

Mum says sport is in my blood. I get Player of the Day all the time, which is good for me, but bad for Mum because whoever gets Player of the Day takes all the team shirts home for washing.

In my cricket team, I bat at number six but I'm mainly a bowler. Coach says there are fast bowlers everywhere but leg spinners are rarer than hen's teeth, which I think is his way of saying I should learn to be a good one.

I play rugby too. I'm a fullback and my famous move is the up-and-under. Coach says I remind him of Christian Cullen, who used to play for the All Blacks. If you're wondering what an up-and-under is, it's when you kick the ball as high as the sky and run and catch it before someone on the other team tackles you. Just make sure you don't practise it in the lounge when your parents are watching the Sunday-night movie.

I could kick a ball all day if I had to. I dream about scoring goals. My best dream ever was scoring a hat trick for Manchester United against Arsenal and being on the six o'clock news in England. Then the manager of the club gave me a brand-new GameBox V3 and a Ferrari 250 GTO. (But then my best dream ever turned into my worst when his wife said she loved me and kissed me on the lips. Yuck!)

I should tell you a bit more about my family and friends. You might have figured out that my name is Toby, but you won't know my surname. It's Gilligan-Flannigan.

There, I said it. I blame my parents. Thanks to them sticking both their stupid names together, I'm stuck with the stupidest, longest name in the school. All I want is to be called Smith or White. Then I wouldn't stand out like a chicken with no head every morning when Mrs Martin-Edge does the roll call.

I'm the middle one in the family. Claire is four years older than me, and my brother Max is seven years younger. They're both annoying, but at least Max doesn't use all the hot water in the shower. Then again, Claire doesn't poo her pants.

My two best friends are Terence and Sam, but I never call them Terence or Sam. None of the sports commentators on TV ever call each other by their first names. It's always Smithy or Foxy or Clarky. Terence's surname is Jones, so he's Jonesy; Sam's surname is Hughes, so he's Hughesy. My sur-name is more difficult to change so I stay as Toby, which we decided was fine because it sounds a bit like Jonesy and Hughesy.

We've got our own club called the CGC, which stands for Cool Guys Club. To join, you have to spit on a leaf and pass it to the next member, who has to lick it before spitting on it. In termtime, we have a meeting every day during spelling.

These holidays Jonesy, Hughesy and I have gone eeling lots of times. We wake up really early, go to the butcher and buy a sheep's heart for fifty cents. Then we go down to the creek and throw in a baited fishing line, which we tie to the jetty. Hughesy is best at this job because he's good with knots. Jonesy is worst because the only thing he likes on his hands is soap. Then we grab our spears and wait for the eels to take the bait.

Yesterday we caught an eel that was taller than Dad. Hughesy wanted to keep it as a pet, but his mum said no because he's already got a lizard, two geckos and a goldfish as big as a shoe.

Do you know the best feeling in the world? Coming home with dinner! Even though Mum says I stink and that I have to leave my clothes outside, she always smiles like crazy when she sees what we've caught.

Dad does too. When we put the eels on the bench, he always rubs his hands together and puts on his apron, the one with *Eat My Cooking and Always Be Good-looking* on the front, and he says, 'The hunter-gatherers are back!' Then he starts sharpening a knife. 'Good on you, boys! Let's smoke 'em!'

Dad loves fishing. He has fishing mugs, fishing T-shirts, fishing hats and fishing calendars. He's even got a smoker where he cooks the fish. We haven't got room in our garage for the car any-more because Dad's filled it up with fishing and boating gear. Dad's a part-time radio announcer on Beach FM. The 'beach' bit is important because that's where he spends most of his time when he should be emptying the dishwasher.

During dinner when Dad is grinding pepper on the smoked eel, he says things like, 'Proud of you, boy,' and 'You can be anything you want to be.'

I'm not so sure about that. I'd like to be good at schoolwork and spelling, but I'll never be anywhere near as good as Claire. She's such a nerd she could do her homework with her eyes closed. She could probably do the crossword even faster than Mum, who's an English teacher and once did the crossword in five minutes and thirty-nine seconds!

Even Dad's CD has no saying about how to be smarter than your sister or how to remember what twelve times eight equals when your head feels as if it's got bricks in it.

But at least Claire could never win a GameBox V3 by getting twenty wickets and ten tries.

Shot!

