Rules of Talent TV No. 1: Come up with a great story

Elfie

I've always been good at making up stories. I get it from me mam. She reckons the more outrageous you make a story, the more likely people are to believe it – and she's had plenty of practice at telling whoppers, so she should know.

Me mam's always been obsessed with TV talent shows – you know, the ones where a load of wannabes compete to become a star? I think she reckoned she was going to be discovered one day and be an overnight singing sensation. I said you'd never catch me dead doing one of them competitions. But if I ever did, I knew I'd win no problem. Cos I'd worked out the formula, see. Forget about talent, there are a few simple rules every contestant must follow if they want to go all the way: The Rules of Talent TV.

The first rule is that you have to come up with such

a cracking back story that the whole nation will jam the phone lines to vote for you. Cos everyone who enters a TV talent show has a story, haven't they? At least, the ones who get through to the final round always do. It might be a battle with cancer or drugs, or a dead dad/dog/goldfish who told you to 'follow that dream!', or a crippling stutter or stage fright or one-legged-ness or just chronic ugliness . . . it doesn't matter: if you want to win, you need a healthy dose of misery in your back catalogue.

Not that I'd have needed to make much of it up, mind you. My real life was tragic and miserable enough, mostly because of me useless, walkabout, good-for-nothing mam. In fact, I reckon storytelling was about the only good thing I ever got from her. That and our Alfie.

Only if you ask Jimmy Wigmore he probably wouldn't agree. He'd probably tell you that my stories and my crazy plans were what landed us in so much bother in the first place. And . . . I suppose he might have a point.

Jimmy

I first saw Elfie Baguley when I was eight years old. Her family had just moved into the house opposite and she was doing handstands up against the wheelie bins, flashing her knickers in full view of the whole estate. I reckon I sort of fell in love with her right there and then.

When we were kids we hung out together all the time, out on the marshes by the power plant. Our dads worked together at the plant so Elfie reckoned that made us family – sort of. We would rescue baby frogs and play at being fire-eaters or pop stars (Elfie), or pretend to be escapologists and crop-circle makers (me). We smoked home-made dandelion cigarettes, graffitied our names in crayon under the railway bridge and dug for oil next to the river. Elfie even camped out there one time when her mam did a runner. Her dad didn't find her till the next day.

I taught Elfie how to swim off the muddy banks of the Mersey, and she taught me how to play hooky and steal strawberry laces from the corner shop.

One time she persuaded me to numb her ear with a frozen fish finger and then pierce it with a safety pin. Another time, she tattooed her name on my arm with a permanent marker and it didn't come off for weeks. And I was the only one she ever talked to about her runaway mam.

But in the last year or so everything had changed. The developers came and built more affordable housing by the marshes. Then the immos came from abroad and took loads of the contract jobs in the factory and the local men – my dad and Elfie's dad included – started striking about it and spending all their time down at the picket line outside the factory, shouting at the scabs who refused to strike. And Elfie got all cool and trendy and even more mouthy, while I just got big-footed and tongue-tied and really, really good at swimming. And although we were still best mates, things were different somehow.

Oh, and Elfie's mam started going walkabout again. She'd stopped her invisible mam act for a bit when she was pregnant with Elfie's baby brother, Alfie, but after he was born she started it up again. 'The human

yo-yo', Elfie calls her. Each time she did one of her disappearing acts, Elfie came up with yet another new scheme to distract her from the 'mindless tragedy of her life'. That's the way Elfie talks these days: like she's in an American teen drama, or one of those daytime chat shows.

Elfie's plans got more and more mental each time. Which wasn't good news for me cos her schemes are usually a bit dangerous, sometimes illegal and they always – always – get us into a heap of trouble.

But at least they're not boring. Life with Elfie never is.

Agnes

When no one talks to you or even looks at you, when everyone just pretends you aren't really there, after a while you begin to wonder if you have actually become invisible. Or if you might forget how to speak: like if someone *did* speak to you, you would open your mouth and nothing would come out, because all the

words you had stored inside your head had dried up.

That's how it felt when we moved to England and my dad started working at the power plant. Nobody looked at me; nobody spoke to me. I heard them whispering behind my back, saw the looks they shot at me when they thought I didn't notice, read the words they graffitied on my locker. I hated being invisible; being mute. I felt like I was dissolving into silence.