



# SPOTTY HERBERT and the POLICEMAN'S BALL

## Spotty Herbert and the Policeman's Ball

(Volume One)

### BIRTHDAY

“Oh my God her tits have fallen off. What, what, who said that?”

Herbert Snodgrass woke up in a cold sweat. Was it a dream? Was it a nightmare? That never really happened, did it? Or even worse, is it ever going to happen? He opened one eye; he yawned and scratched his bum through his striped pyjamas. He turned over in bed and a thought slowly filtered into his empty brain. What day was it, school day or weekend? The question hung there like a damp cloud on a foggy morning, waiting for an answer. Err weekend, I think. What do I have to do today? The thought cloud drifted a bit. Oh yes Granny Tilda's Birthday. Have I bought her a present yet? Don't think so or I would have remembered, or would I?

Herbert yawned, stretched and rolled out of bed onto the cold lino floor. He rubbed the sleep from his bloodshot eyes and rummaged under the sheets for his socks. Before he tried to put them on he sniffed them. Phew! They were a bit high. So he turned them inside out then danced around on one leg until his foot forced an entry into the reluctant sock.

In the bathroom Herbert looked at the vacant expression of a person aping his every move. He saw a tired looking youth slightly on the gangly side of tall and thin. He saw a boy at an awkward age desperate to kick off the traits of childhood and struggling to come to terms with adulthood.

He saw someone now with more pubic hairs than he could count in one session. What had happened to him? Why was he thinking in long words? He splashed some cold water into his bleary eyes, then squeezed the last drops of ointment from the Rub-on-Spots-Gone tube onto his red nose and spotty chin.

Why did it always have that odd smell? Why didn't it cure his spots, and why was he always plagued by a cloud of flies? It said on the telly that it was, almost guaranteed to cure spots if you used enough of it. Why did the tube say Mustard Paste on it? This was the first time Herbert had actually read the label.

The night before he had hung his clothes in a neat pile on the floor so he would know exactly where they would be the next morning, and as usual the trick had worked. He dressed and staggered down to the kitchen. Breakfast was last night's left-overs, cold. Sprouts and soggy Yorkshire pudding lose any appeal they may have had the night before, but needs must. He spread some jam onto the limp Yorkshire pudding, and as he sat there chewing it his mind pondered on Granny Tilda.

She seemed to be the greatest mystery in the known universe. He always wondered what colour her hair would be this week. What would she be dressed as? She must spend a lot of her days in the charity shops looking for the most unusual and bizarre outfits.

He remembered the acute embarrassment of that evening when she had turned up at the school open night, dressed as a pirate. She was smoking a pipe and sucking dark Navy Rum from a baby's bottle,

and swearing at a stuffed budgie which she had glued to her shoulder. Then farting loudly and pointing at the head master.

Thank God she couldn't afford to buy a suit of armour: farting in that could have caused an explosion and could even have proved fatal. Dad said that he would have lent her the extra money. But despite her unpredictability (most called it lunacy) Herbert liked her.

Right, he thought: a birthday present for Granny Tilda. Dad said that he wasn't going to buy her another present until she used the last one. Herbert thought hard about the last present, then he remembered. Oh yes that plot in the cemetery.

Herbert rescued the local newspaper from the cat litter tray and read the clean adverts. Wilsons Winners were having a closing down sale. They were always having closing down sales. Herbert wondered if there was a legal limit to the number of closing down sales anyone could have before they actually had to close down. Anyway this week it was a Whoopee Cushion Special Event, with up to half price off selected models, whatever that meant. He caught the bus into town, except that it was going the other way. The factories on the industrial estate lose their charm on a wet and cold Saturday morning. It was only the police cars buzzing around that provided him with any excitement. Herbert scratched his head as he wondered why he didn't bother to read the destination boards on the front of buses. Three buses later he found himself in the town centre in front of *Wilson's Winners*. *Massive closing down sale* – same torn banner that they'd used for the last closing down sale, and the sale before that. *Whoopee Cushion Clearance*. They made it sound like an Olympic event. *Everything must go! Yea, yea, yea!*

Herbert bought her a green one. Not that she needed it: she could already fart for England. She said that she was just old and creaked a bit. But even Herbert knew that creaks didn't smell of boiled cabbage and rotten eggs.

Granny Tilda's house at the other end of Victoria Street was stuck in a time warp like a scene from the past. It hadn't moved backwards or forwards for as long as Herbert could remember. The dark and mysterious daily routine of her life was ruled by the loud ticking of several clocks. Long gone Grandad Bert had been a collector of sorts. Each clock showed a different time so Herbert had made a routine of asking the same question:

"What's the time, Granny Tilda?" "It's five and twenty to three, boy."

*Five and twenty*: that always puzzled him. It was an expression from the past and it sort of matched her house.

"But that big clock on the mantelpiece says twenty past two." "Yes, well, that one is always fifteen minutes slow."

"Yes, Gran, but the one in the glass case says a quarter to three." "Yes, that one is always ten minutes fast."

"Then the cuckoo clock says twenty five minutes to four."

"Look, boy, that one is an hour fast. It's kept like that for when we go onto summertime so I don't have to change it. If I put it into winter time the cuckoo wouldn't come out because they are only here in the summer." "Ah, right, Granny. I sort of see where you are coming from, but the grandfather clock with the policeman's hat on the top of it says half past twelve."

"Oh that one doesn't work. Your dear departed Grandad Bert always kept his walnuts in there. You were named after him you know."

He already knew that and worried that keeping walnuts in a grandfather clock might be hereditary.

"Well, Gran, why don't you put them all right?"

"Oh I can't do that or I wouldn't know the proper time."

The logic somehow defeated him but he always got the same answer and he loved the twisted sense of it. Although Grandad Bert's walnuts and the policeman's hat always baffled him. And so did Grandad's Bert's mysterious disappearance, which coincided perfectly with the disappearance of the milkman's horse from the last horse-drawn milk round in the county. Was that really a coincidence? He knew that Grandad Bert had always had a secret ambition to be a cowboy but would he go that far? Well after being married to Grandma Tilda for thousands of years Herbert somehow believed that he would. On those nights when he couldn't sleep – usually the ones when the Glaswegian thug in the skirt from number fifteen was practising his bagpipes – Herbert would lay awake thinking about Grandad Bert and of course about the milkman. How did he get that cart load of milk back to the dairy... horseless?

"Do you want some special pudding? I made it myself."

Herbert's mind boggled when he thought of what ingredients she might have used. On the eccentric scale of one to ten Granny Tilda was on par with the grandfather clock, walnuts and all. "Here, Gran. I've bought you a present for your birthday." "

Oh, Herby boy, that's wonderful."

He hated being called Herby just as much as he hated being called Herbert. It somehow reminded him of a cheap frozen pizza.

"OK, Gran, I want to be called H. It sounds more cool and fits my image better."

"Oh sorry, Herby, I can't do that." "Why not Gran?"

"Well I never did learn to spell so I can't go using letters. What would the rest of the gang think? Anyway what's this present?"

She had already torn open the paper and was staring at it blankly.

"It's a special cushion with unusual sound effects."

"Oh that's wonderful, dear. I have got the vicar coming to try to convert me tomorrow. He'll appreciate sitting on that. He's always complaining about his piles. I blame those hard wooden pews in the church. What do you think about it, dear?"

"Yes, Granny. I suppose that's one of the drawbacks of religion."

"Yes, Herby, and there's another big drawback."

"What's that Gran?" She smirked a bit.

"An Elephant's foreskin!" Oh no, he had fallen for that old one again!