

Lucky Break

For the first ten years of my life my father was in the RAF (Royal Air Force). This meant that he was frequently posted to different air bases around the UK and I, as frequently, changed schools. One year we moved no fewer than three times and each time I tried, in vain, to settle and make friends. For a young child this frequency of change can only have a detrimental effect and I still have school reports stating that I was "lazy" and a "dreamer".

When I reached ten, my worried parents decided I needed a personal tutor. She turned out to be a kindly and patient old lady who presented me with a large, black book of tests. She made me complete it as a home task and I scored about 20 out of 100. At our next meeting, on a Saturday morning, she went through it with me item by item, until I completely understood each task. She then made me retake the test and of course I got almost every question correct. Then we again moved house!

In our new town I took and failed the 11 plus exam (my excuse was that I was still only ten!) and my prospects looked dim. I was destined to go to the local comprehensive which had a reputation for being quite rough. But also nearby was an ancient public school, set in a castle. This was a place for rich kids only — apart from every year they gave 2 free places to the highest performing local boys (it was a boys only school) in their entrance exam.

My crazy parents decided I should enter the exam. I had as much chance of succeeding as going to the moon — or so I thought. But when I sat down to take the test, a rather familiar black book of 100 tests was placed on the desk!

I did the test and kept quiet and the next term, as a terror struck 11 year old in an ill fitting suit, I arrived for my first day at "the castle".

Clearly I was going to have problems in this new, intensely academic environment and I did. There were 31 boys in my class and in every subject, despite my best efforts, I finished in the bottom 5 in every test, exam and report.

We were then streamed into "sets" for each subject and I ended up being taught with boys closer to my own ability. I worked really hard and at the end of my third year there, I won my first form prize. I was top of the bottom class! But I was really motivated and in time got "promoted" to higher "sets". I worked really hard and won prizes every year until I left after A Levels. My grades were all A's — the highest you can get — and I was offered a place to study at a prestigious university.

So when a certain old Lady presented me with a large black book full of tests, you could say it was my lucky break. Although I would argue that if you work really hard and keep your wits about you — then you begin to make your own luck.

What helped the boy to enter the public school?

1. Familiarity with the tests.
2. His parents.
3. His knowledge.
4. Keeping quiet.