

Unlimited And Limited

by Steve Finan

Herb had no idea where he'd been. He wished they'd stop asking. All he knew was he'd been away. No memories. There didn't seem to be any good reason to keep him in hospital. This isn't the America of movies, you know. There isn't an X Files-type government department alerted to deal with these sort of things. Not in Redditch. In fact Worcestershire in general just isn't that sort of county. He was healthy. They'd asked just about every question they could. Every test they could think of.

A year ago, Herb's car, or more accurately Mother's car, was found stopped in the road. Some parts of it were missing, as was Herb. It was briefly sensational. It looked like someone had lasered out a spherical chunk of the car. Impressive. Like a movie. Some of the tarmac was gone too. Again, as if a sphere had appeared and then disappeared. It was a mystery. But only for a day before a tasty sex-and-chocolate-smearing-celebrities scandal overtook the front pages. A video of the chocolate smearing somehow found its way to the internet. Careers were enhanced.

But now, after a year and a day, Herb was back. Same cardigan. They did the 'in for observation' thing. He wasn't a prisoner. Herb was very frightened but didn't let it show. Herb tried not to let things show. The police interviewed him too, which was scariest of all, but couldn't think of a crime that had been committed. So eventually, not knowing quite what to do, they released him back into his old life.

The newspapers wanted interviews. Herb had nothing to say. Even sensationalist reporters find it difficult to construct a story out of continual "I'm sorry, I don't know" answers.

But Herb had become different. He didn't say anything. It was a bit frightening. For one thing, he had more teeth than before. He'd once had a tooth removed. A pre-molar. It broke badly when he was 18. But now it was back. Herb didn't tell the doctors and no-one asked. Also, he knew things he hadn't known before. He knew

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mathematics. Not just minor stuff either. Optimal Golomb Rulers of Order-27 and Order-28 just popped into his head. The Reimann hypothesis, and the answer to it, just floated in too. The Hodge conjecture was conjecture no more. He didn't tell anyone. Herb thought it might make him seem odd. Enough people already thought Herb odd.

He could also do things he couldn't do before. He could levitate objects just by thinking. He could gather the light particles that had bounced off any person, object or event in the past and replay it in front of him like a 3D movie. A hologram show. The worst thing was, he didn't have to try. It was quite disturbing. All he had to do was calculate where the light particles might be, out in space or floating around earth's atmosphere. Or recover those that had regenerated into other particles. Then bring them back in the same way he mind-moved objects. It was easy-peasy as Mother would say. Herb didn't want to do it much in case someone said it was against the law. It might technically be spying. But no-one knocked at the door to say he'd done anything wrong. Herb viewed the battle of Trafalgar one evening for his own enjoyment. Then the first steam train. He reviewed incidents from his childhood, which amusingly were sometimes very different to how he remembered them.

He discovered Mother had had a brief but very physical sexual affair with, of all people, his late father's sister, conducted it would seem, in local fields and behind hedgerows. Probably because there was nowhere else to do it. It was nasty and frightening. There wasn't a chance on this good earth that Herb would broach this subject with her. He quickly changed the scene to safer things like the building of Stonehenge, the great pyramids and the erection of the Easter Island moai. It was all rather amusing. His own personal BBC4. He didn't think he could tell Mother or indeed anyone. It's a difficult conversation to start.

He tried to find the light particles of various Biblical events, but there didn't seem to have been a parting of the Red Sea. Or anyone turned to a pillar of salt. Herb decided not to meddle any further in those sorts of things. It just starts arguments.

Mother, the part-time lesbian, took him home from hospital in her new car. Herb wasn't trusted to drive as it hadn't gone well the last time. And seemingly the insurance firm had taken months to pay out on the old car. Herb heard this several times. Mentally, to get a rest from the verbal battering, Herb calculated the coefficient of the friction between the car tyre and the road surface. This was strange, not least because Herb didn't think he'd been aware of the term "coefficient of friction" before calculating it to be 1.68064666 recurring. Mother's "and-just-where-HAVE-you-been-that's-what-I'd-like-to-know-not-even-contacting-your-own-Mother" questioning was straying close to nagging, if we were to impose definitions upon things. Herb said nothing.

His room was largely as he'd left it. The room of a 42-year-old man living with his single parent. Stuck somewhere between the freedom of childhood and the responsibility of utility bills in his own name. As soon as he'd shut the door, Herb made every object weighing less than a kilo dance in the air. Then he swapped some of the particle geometry around so his radio alarm became a perfect sphere and a pair of socks metamorphosed into a carbonised cuboid. He changed them back. After a glance at the door to see if Mother's feet were casting shadows at the bottom (she stood there listening sometimes, secret lesbians are obviously suspicious people) as an experiment he called up a life-size image of Jane Russell sunbathing naked on the patio of a Beverley Hills mansion. Nice. It seemed there wasn't any censoring of his image-calling-up abilities. It was probably illegal though. Copyright issues would surely apply to naked images of film stars. Even dead ones.

Herb was also, extremely surprisingly, in great physical shape. He could make a 'washboard stomach', if he tensed his muscles. The pot belly was gone. He attempted some press-ups (in privacy of course) and was still going at around 440 when he was disturbed by his mother wanting to use the toilet. Herb hadn't even broken sweat and, if anything, would have said the exertion was pleasurable. This was a new experience. None of his trousers fitted properly anymore though.

It was time to take stock. Herb often stopped to take stock. It kept him on an even keel. It would appear he'd gone missing for a year and a day, then returned with the powers of a comic book superhero. The obvious answer was that he'd been abducted by an alien race greater intelligence, taught how to manipulate objects with thought and had been given the body of an Olympic athlete. But no new clothes. No doubt the higher intelligence had intended he should enlighten mankind, educate them or save them from some forthcoming disaster. This was terrifying. How are impending disasters averted by the ability to do sums and make objects float? Herb didn't know.

He wondered if he might make some money. He knew he could make a roulette ball land in any slot he wanted. He'd never been to a casino, but had seen them on TV. They always had rough men who wouldn't look kindly upon manipulation of their balls. He thought about making cash float out of banks and into his hands. But people would see. Herb wasn't sure what he'd do with a lot of money anyway. It would be difficult to explain to Mother.

Then he thought he might be able to do something with Sandra Chisholm. No woman, not even the magnificently-chested but scathingly-tongued Sandra, could resist him now. Surely. Herb worked under Sandra in the builder's merchant's where Herb did the books. Sandra flirted, in her slightly aggressive way, with everyone who came in. All the rough-tongued brickies and plumbers' mates. The slick (they thought) trade salesmen. The DIY guys who appeared at the counter looking for just a couple of lengths of four-by-two.

Sandra called him Herby. He didn't much like it, but he did like her talking to him. Herb wasn't good at flirting. He had been good at organising his collection of football cards (although he didn't really much like football) and good at certain word games. He was less good at chess, but lacked anyone to play with anyway. Herb reckoned he'd be better at chess now because he could visualise all the moves made by all the grand masters in history.

Herb was tempted to assemble scenes of Sandra naked, but decided not to look. He thought of what she'd say if she ever discovered he'd been looking at her naked.

Sandra was probably best left alone. Herb knew the phrase "be careful what you wish for" very much applied to his feelings for Sandra. If he did ever manage to get her naked, he wouldn't do anything. Probably cover his eyes and apologise. Herb hadn't ever seen a real woman naked. He had a computer but didn't look at the sort of website that had naked women. Herb knew there were police officers who put men in prison for looking at unmentionable things on the internet. Herb had also seen those magazines on the top shelves of newsagents, but couldn't imagine how anyone could actually march up to the counter and buy them. What would Mr Ashwarri think if he'd gone to buy such a thing? Herb bought the BBC History magazine.

Herb thought about how to add to his collection of football cards using his new powers, but couldn't think how to do it.

He looked out of the window and wondered how strong his new powers were. It was dark. He decided to pull up the fir tree in the next-door-neighbours garden. It was too big for a suburban garden anyway, Mother often said so. It blocked the light. Herb imagined it rising into the air, pulling up its roots. The tree rose, ripping its roots with it, and the fence collapsed into the resulting hole. Herb was horrified and tried to squeeze the tree back into place, but it wouldn't go. Herb panicked. He twisted it a bit, this way and that, but it wasn't going to fit securely. He tried forcing it in, but the neighbours' greenhouse started to tilt. Herb became terrified that someone might be watching and laid the tree down, fairly gently, across the garden. He tried to position it so it looked like a freak gust of wind blew it over or it had just, somehow, fallen over. But he didn't think it looked convincing. It looked like someone had been meddling with it. Herb closed the curtains.

The next day, when Herb's mother told him the neighbours' tree had fallen, Herb bent his head over his porridge and concentrated on the now ridiculously easy Telegraph crossword. Herb hoped no-

one thought it was his fault. A landscape gardener came to saw up the tree later in the day. Herb was too frightened to look, but re-ran the scene for himself in the toilet, the light particles being particularly easy to gather as they hadn't gone very far. It was a heavy tree, the gardener had quite a bit of trouble getting it all sawn up. Herb decided his powers were rather dangerous.

Over the next few months, Herb tried a few things. He could jump very high. He went jogging once and found he could run like the wind. He ran out past Studley, down the A435 to the turn-off for Wixford and then back. He calculated his time was well inside world record marathon pace. He assured Mother, who was amazed by this out-of-character desire to take exercise, that he'd just jogged to the industrial estate. People would ask awkward questions if he suddenly became the best athlete in history.

He also, daringly while watching TV one Saturday night, made ball number 33 be selected in the Lotto so he could win £10. But he didn't take his ticket to Mr Ashwarri's to collect the £10 because he thought they might be able to trace who had manipulated ball 33. Herb knew that cheating the National Lottery would get him years and years in jail. He reasoned, of course, that if he wanted to, he could have bent the jail bars and unlocked any door. But then he'd be a fugitive. It's no life for a respectable Englishman to be a fugitive. They're not cut out for it. Fugitives belong in Arizona or New Mexico, not Worcestershire.

He did, successfully, mentally manipulate the blades of his lawnmower so they became hypersensitive and accordingly lengthened or shortened themselves so that every blade of grass was cut to precisely four centimetres long, which gave a very pleasing effect. He quietly levitated out the dandelions and most of the moss so the lawn looked as well as it ever had done. Herb was rather proud of it. He made the piece of wallpaper on the bathroom ceiling stick because it previously had bulged quite noticeably. Despite his earlier misgivings he sometimes found it difficult to resist viewing the naked antics of certain celebrities and found himself watching a few scenes he wasn't comfortable with. Then he

saw the Leveson Inquiry on TV and decided to quickly give up on the assembly of light particles that had touched public figures. If everyone was so upset about mobile phone hacking, goodness knows what they'd do about reconstructed scenes of . . . well . . . that lady from Emmerdale doing THAT!

But all things considered, Herb became rather comfortable with his superpowers. It was nice. He didn't quite know what to do with the mathematical formulas that just seemed to appear in his head. Some of the ideas would probably, he knew, be of some use to the type of people who are interested in these things. But Herb didn't know any mathematicians. Occasionally at work, where Herb had been welcomed back as a good worker, he'd do the accounts with his powers, but didn't push it. No-one likes someone who "pushes it". Sandra continued her flirty ways with the customers. It had always been this way and Herb didn't think it was his place to change things.

There were a few quite disturbing things. One day he thought he could read the thoughts of the American president, who was considering invading another Middle Eastern country. Herb shut his mind to it. Iran was nothing to do with him.

He also realised he could fly. He didn't try it, of course. It was an extremely alarming prospect. But he knew he could do it if he wanted to.

One day, at work, a badly balanced timber bundle fell on him. But he didn't feel it, it just bounced off. It weighed 4.3308 metric tonnes, he calculated. Thankfully, no-one saw and he put it back where it belonged. It was sometimes jolly useful to have superpowers.

Then, one day, Herb disappeared again.

He wasn't gone for a year and a day this time. It was a Sunday. He'd been out with Father's old fishing rod. He'd run all the way to Battlefield Brook, on the other side of Bromsgrove, to try his hand for a trout. He wasn't even out of breath, despite the lengthy distance. He'd been alone on the riverbank when the laser sphere thing happened again. He was gone for about an hour, then returned. Again, no idea where he'd been, no memory of what had

happened. He pulled out the long grass sined where the sphere had appeared so no-one would know what happened. It wouldn't do to be known as the man who had been 'away' AGAIN.

He decided to run home as quickly as possible. But he couldn't run. He couldn't make things move with his mind either. The mathematical theorems seemed to be gone too, along with the ability to reconstruct light particle scenarios. This was awful, how was he going to get home? Luckily, he had enough for a bus fare and still had two of the four corned beef sandwiches he'd set out with, so it wasn't all bad news. He made it home before arousing the suspicion of Mother.

And so life went on. He missed and also didn't miss the superpowers. The tooth had disappeared. It wasn't much of a loss. Dandelions returned to the lawn and he walked more warily in the timber warehouse in case there were more unstable bundles.

Just over 12 months passed before Herb read about Jacinta, who, it was reported, no-one had seen for a year. Then he was on TV too. A lot. It seemed Jacinta had also been 'away'. He lived in the town of Cochrane, Alberta, in Canada, but he had marched into the debating chamber of the UN in New York and lifted all the delegates 10 feet from their seats. Guards had gone crazy and, this being America, had shot at him with handguns. The bullets just dropped to the floor. Jacinta told the United Nations representatives what they were going to do. They were to disband their armies and redistribute world resources so that everyone got an equal share. Herb wondered if "redistribution of wealth" would apply to Worcestershire. Not in Redditch, surely. And if it did, would he be richer or poorer?

Jacinta also gave everyone a week to get started on dismantling their nuclear and chemical warheads. When no country complied he launched every single one that was attached to a missile, which certainly frightened everyone for an hour or so. But then Jacinta thrust them all out into space and into orbit around the sun. Herb wondered what Jacinta's teeth count was before and after being away.

Not everyone was pleased with the new stuff Jacinta was proposing. There were calls from many countries that Jacinta could not be allowed to be the dictator of the world. Jacinta said he had no wish to be a dictator. People declared that they wanted to be in charge of their own destiny, that they would not be 'ground under the heel' of the despot, even if he insisted he wasn't a despot and had done what he had to do to ensure no child ever died in a nuclear war. But, despite his obvious concern for the young and their chances of being fried in nuclear blasts, a lot of people hated Jacinta. Not least the military, who looked like they'd be out of a job. People openly talked about how to kill him. Others formed the Church of Jacinta and hailed him 'the second coming'. Jacinta said he wasn't the second coming. He ran a 3D scenario for TV cameras showing the fate of the artist formerly known as the first coming, which was vastly different to what everyone had for 2000 years been assured had happened. Jacinta said he wasn't the new messiah, not least because there hadn't even been an old messiah. It was a bit confusing, really. The 3D scenario was denounced as a conjuring trick.

It was revealed in the newspapers that just before his appearance at the UN, Jacinta had won the Canadian 6/49 lottery. And the Mega Millions and Powerball lotteries in the USA. He was very rich. People thought this wasn't fair. Some said they'd seen him fly. A neighbour swore that just after he'd got back from being away for a year she'd seen him run faster than a fast car can drive. The newspapers started calling him Superman. Another woman said she'd been mind-controlled into sleeping with him, although follow-up stories revealed she'd slept with him several times over the course of four years, usually after they'd both been drinking in Cochrane's less salubrious bars. And that she'd slept with several other customers of the bars. She was pictured topless and drunk in a UK newspaper.

A woman from California, nowhere near Alberta, said she'd been at a Satan worshipping ceremony in Calexico City, California, at which Jacinta had eaten a baby. No-one asked her why she had been

taking part in such a ceremony. Or if the baby had been cooked first, which was the question that Herb had. That was the only story Jacinta came out and flatly denied, which sparked scores more Jacinta-at-Satanic-rites claims. Jacinta said none of them were true.

The USA authorities released a statement denying he had escaped from Area 51, confirming in many people's minds that he must definitely have escaped from Area 51. Jacinto looked weary at the questioning. He was on TV every day. The cameras followed wherever he went. He denied he would be in any way affected by kryptonite — explaining this was especially true as kryptonite doesn't actually exist, which failed to convince most of the American public who knew kryptonite very much does exist as they'd seen it in films and he would say that wouldn't he because Superman is well known to be afraid of it.

There were attempts on Jacinta's life, one of them by a Chinese army unit. No-one seemed very happy about Chinese special forces units operating in Canada. The American president and British prime minister jointly declared that they had fought Nazis side by side and would meet this new threat shoulder-to-shoulder too. Not the Chinese, who had sent a team of killers to Northern America, but Jacinta who had said everyone should help feed the starving. The PM even used the phrase “fight them on the beaches” which was a bit over-dramatic as it wasn't at all clear who would be fighting who on which beach. For a moment Herb thought he was proposing to fight the starving on the beaches. Which seemed harsh. The stock markets plummeted and, oddly, many people started building themselves nuclear shelters — even though all nuclear weapons were several hundred millions of miles away getting toasted by the sun and no longer a danger to children.

Despite kryptonite not actually existing it became possible to buy, for 300 dollars, pieces of kryptonite on eBay. Personal protection, the sales pitch said. The pieces of kryptonite looked suspiciously like green plastic.

A website called JacintaLottoNumbers.com reached No. 4 on the Google traffic charts.

Jacinta held a press conference and took over every TV and radio channel simultaneously across the world to once and for all explain his peace and redistribution-of-wealth ideas and to tell people not to worry. All he wanted was for everyone to think. As a gift to mankind he revealed the mathematical formula for predicting all possible prime numbers. He did his 3D hologram thing again, showing in detail how mankind had looked just at the point where the forefathers of the species moved apart from the phenotype that would go on to become chimpanzees. He said he only wanted to do good things and for everyone to help each other.

The second question in the media session he gave after his broadcast was, "Have you, or have you not, ever eaten a baby?"

There were many opinions on Jacinta. TV shows, newspapers and discussion forum keyboard-bashers endlessly debated him. No-one knew what to think.

Except Herb. Herb knew exactly what to think. Herb quietly assured himself he'd had a very lucky escape.

