

## Pat Swindells

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list of titles in this series

# JUNK FOOD HERO

Pat Swindells



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Legal page

Dedication page

To the memory of Tony  
without whose expertise and encouragement  
none of my books would have  
ever reached completion

and with loving thanks to  
Duncan, Georgia and Corin for  
always being there for me.

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## FIRST COURSE

### The Rebel

It is sometimes said that heroes appear in all shapes and sizes. If they do, remarkably few of them appear in the shape (roughly spherical) or size (extra extra large) of thirteen-year-old George Guzell who weighed seventeen and a half stone while still growing in all directions.

Heroes do *not* usually have big bellies and fat necks or open-pored complexions. They are *not* generally as thick as the proverbial two short planks. Although they are sometimes obsessed, it is rarely with *food*. Nevertheless, George was destined to become a hero. Exactly how he accomplished this makes a strange but helpful story which I shall now relate.

It must be admitted that George never gave the smallest indication to anyone that, one day, he would achieve the lofty status of hero. In fact, most people who knew him would have said he was the *least* likely teenager to do any such thing. Some people thought he was boring, others thought him repulsive. A few despised him for his complete lack of willpower.

Of course, there were those who took the uncharitable view that he was not so much congenitally fat, as congenitally greedy. And while George tried to ignore his vast unpopularity, the unpalatable fact was that George did not particularly like *himself*.

It was George's firmly held belief that his body needed a constant intake of food, which is why, on the day our story begins, unable to wait one moment longer for the school dinner bell to ring, he had puffed and panted his way from school to chippy. Upon his return, he stuffed the last handful of chips into his mouth, dropped the empty paper into a bin and turned his attention to the inviting, savoury smells ahead. Perfect timing!

Lurching lopsidedly towards the end of the dinner queue, George left a trail of scattered chairs and tables in his wake. Unmoved by the shouts of protest that followed him, there was just one thing on his mind — the day's menu.

Meals at Worthington Knight Comprehensive School had been a big disappointment since the recent visit of Manx-born TV chef and restaurateur Del Dingley or "Salad Man" as George contemptuously called him. To George, a "balanced diet" meant a hamburger in each hand, and no salad. As he reached the end of the queue, he neared the platform where the staff were busy eating and where the imposing figure of "Gruff" the Headmaster stared unblinkingly down the length of the dining hall.

"I've got my eyes on you," Gruff had once said to George and George felt that he still had. Even today, as his position in the queue gradually improved, he imagined himself to be the target of Gruff's attention, the centre of his bull's-eye.

However, he was quite wrong. Robert Canterbury Knight, the Head, had not even noticed him. Although he enjoyed giving the impression that he was all-seeing and all-hearing, the truth was quite different. For a moment, his eyes dwelt fondly on the dining hall's warm, walnut panelling, original features of a one-time Victorian Ragged School. Founded as a charitable institution for poor children, the school



continued to benefit from the will of one Worthington Knight, distant ancestor of the Head.

Although payment of one such seasonal legacy was about due, Mr Knight's mind had been distracted from consideration of how to distribute the funds, to the more urgent question of the staff and pupils' reaction to the new menu. Del Dingley's new thinking (or was it old thinking with its sleeves rolled up?) had not been an unqualified success. Good ideas needed a sound landing strip as well as wings if they were to take flight.

Signed petitions and deputations to both the staff and the School Council had followed actively hostile demonstrations. The fact that some pupils went along with the new food was no consolation. Lunch had become a ticking time-bomb, the tension was palpable. "Any sign of uprising amongst the natives, Headmaster?" He was joined by his Deputy, Jack Champion.

"Thankfully, no! Though I had one or two pertinent letters in this morning's mailbag. Usual stuff! Children must have what they want to eat, whenever and wherever they like, no questions asked etc... Don't they read the information we send home? Or don't they care?"

Jack Champion uttered a humourless laugh. "When it comes to personal freedom, people care a great deal. Eating, drinking and smoking, despite the risks, are all part of that freedom. Freedom to be bloody-minded, if you like."

From his place in the dinner queue George observed the two men in conversation. Although he feared Gruff, it was the presence of Mr Champion which really terrified him. Involuntarily, he straightened up a bit, trying in vain to tighten the sagging muscles of his belly, whilst concentrating on not catching Champion's eye. The two men watched the restless line of boys and girls waiting for food. For the present, all seemed quiet. No disruption in the queue lining up at the serving hatch. No loud displays of dissatisfaction at the tables. Perhaps the trouble-makers had already decamped to the local chippy or to the burger van parked round the corner. Satisfied that all was well, Mr Knight returned to his table and accepted the Tuna Crisp placed before him. It looked

good... Tasted excellent... Full marks to Mrs. Dulgence, the cook, who had given it her best shot.

Mr Knight watched as George approached the serving hatch and engaged the cook in conversation. Her folded arms suggested she was none too pleased with the way things were developing.

“Trouble, Headmaster?” Jack Champion materialised immediately. “Not Guzell again?” The Deputy’s mouth tightened at the sound of raised voices; it was most unusual for the cook to lose her temper.

“No! I won’t!” George’s voice rang out loud and clear. He pointed a threatening finger at the neatly written lunch menu.

“Chicken Curry – dog poo!” Loud giggles from the rest of the queue. “Tuna Crisp. Yuck!” More laughter. “Fish Pie!” George made retching sounds so realistic that several teachers put down their knives and forks and stared.

Jack Champion leapt off the platform, covering the distance in six strapping strides. Yet he was not the first. The dinner queue had already disgorged the petite figure of Miss Jemima Walker, Head of Geography, and currently on dinner duty. “Enough of that, George! That’s insulting to Mrs. Dulgence.” The cook was looking flushed and almost on the verge of tears. “Apologise, at once.”

“No!” George’s answer was unequivocal. “Why should I?” And in all honesty - and ignorance - he didn’t know why he should. He stared belligerently at the woman behind the counter and then, as an after-thought, at Miss Walker. “It’s my food,” he told them. “My dinner. I paid for it and I ought to get what I want to eat. It’s not like other things in school where I’ve got to do what you lot say. It’s not the same.” He didn’t know how to explain exactly what he meant but clearly the rest of the queue had no difficulty understanding and supported him with shrill whistles and stamping feet.

The Deputy Head had halted close by to assess the situation. He was surprised to find himself slightly in agreement with some of the boy’s thinking, badly expressed though it was. Food wasn’t really a school

issue, was it? Well, it never had been up to now. He cringed as he heard the newly qualified Miss Walker taking a different tack. “Be fair, George. You voted that we should all give this a try.”

The boy went from pink to puce in seconds. Definitely not Miss Walker’s finest hour. “I didn’t! I didn’t! I didn’t!” The words spat out with a spray of spit.

“Actually, George, you did.” Mr Champion intervened. He turned to his younger colleague and whispered. A nod of thanks and Miss Walker returned to her duties, at the other end of the hall.

“I didn’t!” The boy blinked. Tears threatened. The fire had gone out of him leaving his skin ashen and sweating.

“We all did,” the Deputy Head corrected. He spoke quietly, but there was no suggestion of compromise. “We all had a vote.” George gulped to steady himself.

“Not me! I voted against it.” He was surprised to hear muttered murmurings of agreement. Were they agreeing with him? Some of the girls were actually nodding their heads and clapping. Nelson Ward even went so far as to slap George’s back with one hand while delivering a surreptitious two-fingered salute in the direction of the kitchen. George wasn’t used to gaining support from anybody, least of all the members of his class.

“If you remember, we all agreed to abide by the majority vote. You ...,” Mr Champion paused, “you and a lot of other people who thought as you did – lost – including Ward here who will be enjoying the pleasure of my company a little later in the day. So George, you must agree to give the food a chance. Up to now, there’s not been much evidence of that.”

He looked across the counter where Mrs. Dulgence had regained her normal, unruffled appearance but was clearly upset by the stream of pupils who were taking one look at her healthy menu and heading straight for the doors. “What’s the problem here then, Dot?” Mr Champion asked lightly.

Dot's smile embraced them both. "It's no chips for George, today," she informed him pleasantly.

"Just so! We all agreed chips once a week. Your day?" He looked at George who chose not to reply. "Tuesday," Mrs. Dulgence had consulted a list behind the counter.

"And today is Wednesday. So, as they say, you've had your chips for this week." He looked for an answering smile. But George had no intention of being mollified. Champion tried again. "Apologise to Mrs. Dulgence, George, choose something from the menu without any chips today, and," he paused significantly, "we'll say no more about it." He turned back to the counter. "Now, what have we on offer, Mrs. Dulgence?"

"Fish Pie..."

George's howl of agony drowned the rest of her suggestions and could be heard the length and breadth of the dining-hall. It was like an animal in pain. "I'm not eating fish pie or any other muck! I WANT MY CHIPS!"

"Right! That's it." George felt one of Champion's hands on the collar of his blazer and the other tightening on the folds at the back of his jacket. To have seized the seat of his pants would have been quite impossible as the seat of George's pants were skin-tight and fold-free. "Out!" said Champion.

"Get off!" George shouted and fought.

Now the Head was certainly watching him. From the staff table, Mr Knight saw his Deputy manhandle the snivelling, protesting boy out of the dining-hall and into the quietness of the corridor where he would, presumably, try to reach some sort of compromise.

What remained of the queue moved forward again to the accompaniment of overly-loud sighs of relief and comments about empty bellies.

On their way to collect – or reject – a Dingley/Dulgence dinner, every student paused for a moment to stir a giant pudding mixture in a huge cauldron. It was “Stir Up Wednesday,” the school’s own version of the traditional “Stir Up Sunday.” Today, the whole school was taking turns to stir the swirling mass of organic pudding without which no Christmas celebration could ever be complete.

Contrary to popular belief, the mixture now being enthusiastically churned by members of the Lower School, was not the same as the one they would consume at that year’s Christmas dinner. Mrs. Dulgence and her army of dinner ladies cooked the new pudding but served “the one they’d made earlier.” Thus, the school was guaranteed a rich, moist, full-fruited offering which had been maturing for twelve months.

As far as the pupils were concerned, size was everything. Let Mrs. Dulgence worry about quality; what really counted was that the pudding be large enough to be paraded, with due pomp and circumstance, before the multitude – a mouth-watering pageant.

This year, it was especially important to make the Christmas meal doubly enjoyable. Mr Knight used the remaining lunch break to check his table plan, the positioning of the Christmas tree and other decorations.

## SECOND COURSE

### George In The Looking Glass

Meanwhile, outside the dining-hall, Jack Champion had swiftly removed the still protesting George to the privacy of his study. He waited, shuffled some papers around his desk and, only when loud gulps announced the cessation of the protestation did he bother to speak. "Sit down, George!"

"I don't want to sit down." The man raised an eyebrow and George reluctantly added, "sir". But there was no mistaking the belligerence in George's declaration, "I want my chips! And you can't stop me."

"Well, you can't have them. Whether or not I can stop you, is perhaps, a moot point." He hoped that George didn't understand the word "moot." "If we let you do whatever you like," Champion walked around the office, emphasizing who was boss, "every other boy or girl who voted as you did – and lost - will expect the same – chips on demand. Now! Do as I tell you. Sit down!" George sat, with the maximum noise and scraping of chair legs. Jack Champion remained unimpressed. "Let's see if we can talk this through like two reasonable human beings."

“I was most disappointed by your behaviour in the dining-hall, today, George.” – (As if I care, thought George.) “Your reactions were extremely childish... I shall be watching you closely in the future, George.” (Big deal, thought George, who was still too angry to realise this might be a good time to back down) “And,” continued Mr Champion, “I shall be hoping for a big improvement. Throwing a tantrum is never the answer. Nature gave you two ends – one to sit on and one to think with. Your success or failure in life will depend upon which one you use the most... Do you have anything to say?”

George could have said plenty, but as it included several four-letter words and featured a plate of fat-laden chips, he chose the silent option. Fixing his eyes on the floor and taking good care neither to speak nor to meet the master’s questioning gaze, he waited. (Perhaps “sir” might let him off with a warning.)

But Mr Champion had other ideas, now. He removed a mirror from the wall and shoved it, none too gently, onto the boy’s lap. “Who’s that?” George looked away. Jack Champion raised the mirror closer until George had no choice but to consider his reflection. “I say again, George: who is that?”

“Me, of course.” He didn’t want to look. He knew only too well what the mirror would show: perspiring, spot-ridden skin bulging from ear to ear like a mask without folds.

“Yes, you, of course. And are you satisfied with what you see?”

“It doesn’t matter whether I am or I’m not.” He took care not to meet the teacher’s eyes, afraid of the intensity of his own emotion. “I’m me. I’m what I am.” He shrugged his shoulders, cockily pretending an aggression he no longer felt.

“You’re quite right.” Mr Champion agreed. “You are what you are. It’s not how you started, though. It’s what you have become. And what really concerns me is what you may become, if you don’t do something about it. Heart disease, strokes, diabetes, any or all of these things.” George tried to shut out all this extra, unasked-for information. (Why do teachers have to go on and on and on?) But there was no stopping

Champion in full flow. “According to those who know about these things, you’re what is called “fat”. And you’re not the only one. This school, indeed, this town, is full of people who have allowed themselves to become seriously overweight.”

“Can’t help that! Can’t help being fat! It’s an illness. Not my fault.” George mumbled away into the top of his collar. “It’s my glands. My mum says I’ve got fatty tubes.” George waited for this startling fact to amaze his teacher.

Years of straight-face practice helped Jack Champion not to laugh. “Well! Far be it from me to contradict your mum, George, but in all honesty, any doctor or health club would be unhappy with that diagnosis. You’re fat. That is what they would say. Fat, lad. Face it. And remember this – and think about it: if you could kick the bottom of the person who is most responsible for your fatness, you wouldn’t be able to sit down for a week.”

“I’ll bring my mum up to you, sir. You’ll see! She’ll tell you!” George was hopping mad.

“Please do,” Mr Champion could not have been more correct or more untruthful, “I always enjoy meeting parents.”

He ignored George’s aside: “You’d not enjoy meeting mine.”

“As I said, I always enjoy meeting parents, especially so when we have a mutual problem. After all, she must be just as worried about you as we at the school are.”

“I’m just saying what she says – she and my dad.” He felt suddenly nervous about the whole idea of his parents meeting Mr Champion.

“And are those fatty tubes,” Mr Champion enquired, “inherited?”

Although there had been nothing to suggest that the teacher was amused – no quirky smile – no hint of laughter, George still had the feeling that he was being mocked.



“It’s not a joke,” his voice was serious and he contrived to look hurt.

“No, indeed,” agreed Jack Champion. “Far from it. I think that is the point I have been trying to make, without too much success, ever since you came in.”

“Imagine if you had fatty tubes, sir.” George continued, “You’d want people to like you for what you are.” Vaguely, he remembered hearing somebody somewhere saying something like that.

“I couldn’t agree more. In the final analysis it’s who we are that really counts.” George perked up. That was what he had been trying to say. “But, George, if you want to be liked by others, you have to work at it. And you start by asking yourself the question: am I likeable as I am? If the answer is “no,” you have to do something about it... the first step is always the same: you must say to yourself, “I’ll try –”. Every achievement, great or small starts with “I’ll try –” and then you do it.” There was a short pause while Mr Champion eyed George’s flabby, powerless physique. “You may as well face up to your problems, George... you can’t run fast enough or far enough to get away from them.”

Mr Champion had a dim recollection of the last parents’ night when a couple had waddled in, huffing and puffing, to commandeer the first available chairs, where they remained anchored all night. George’s parents – Ivor and Nora Guzell – fat and formidable! Fictitious fatty tubes... Hereditary glandular problems... No way! George’s obesity and that of his parents had more than likely been acquired from their unhealthy life-style, rather than inherited from their ancestors.

For the moment, though, he had to be satisfied that he and George had reached an uneasy sort of truce. Aloud, he said, “Well, George, we can’t have you going into lessons without some food. That’s a recipe for disaster if I ever heard one. It’s one the Headmaster won’t accept.” George wriggled uncomfortably at the mention of Mr Knight. The last thing he wanted was an eyeball-to-eyeball with old Gruff. “Do you want to take this as far as Headmaster, George?” Champion had noticed and seized upon his discomfort. “Or do you think we can sort it, if only for today?”

“Mr Knight is very busy, sir. Perhaps it would be better not to bother him.” Champion paused as though considering the point, then nodded slowly. But he couldn’t persuade George to try any of the healthy options on the menu.

Back in the dining room he watched George’s half-hearted apology to Mrs Dulgence and reluctant acceptance of her newly made beef burgers. Less fat. Less salt. Some of the salt-and-fat- fancying pupils would probably have said: “and less taste, too.” On the question of chips, Mr Champion would not budge and George had to settle for a chunk of wholesome granary bread.

The afternoon was a misery for George – all he wanted out of afternoon school was himself. Yet his attempts to doze were repeatedly frustrated by his noisy classmates. “Guzell’s being gross, Miss!” shouted Sally Larkin as George’s stomach rumbled and belched right through Miss Walker’s lesson on the plight of Third World countries. George was much more concerned with his own shortages. Beef burgers and bread had done nothing to fill the aching void that was used to three – nay, four-times that quantity. The only consolation was the thought of Mr Champion going head to head with his mum. He almost felt sorry for the man. (But only “almost”.) Weighing in at eighteen and half stones, with fists like a super-heavyweight and a mouth to match, she was an equal for anyone, including Champion. His mum had always been a powerful speaker and often a simple argument had ended with her adversary thumped, bruised or bleeding.



“What shall we do?” Jack Champion stood alongside the Headmaster as they watched from the Head’s first-floor room, the school’s departure at four o’clock. “He’s not a bad lad, really.” He spoke slowly as if trying to convince himself.

The two men watched George’s progress as he lurched along to the school gates. The only thing that George did quickly was get tired. He was so slow that his self-winding watch kept stopping. At the gates he immediately sat on a wall to wait for the bus. Knight frowned in his

direction. "Look at him, for God's sake. He can barely move. That's what he *should* be doing." He pointed to a boisterous group of boys engaged in the energetic leaping and shoutings which normally accompany release from school. "And look at them!" His voice rose as he spotted some girls gyrating about and expending huge amounts of energy, as they combined talking, turning and twirling to attract the attention of passing upper school boys.

Champion laughed. "He couldn't if he tried." He paused. "You know I actually felt quite sorry for him today. Didn't want to look at himself in the mirror. And trotted out all that garbage about his fat being hereditary."

The Head turned sharply. "Is it? Garbage?" Champion nodded. "I don't want to get this wrong." Knight persisted. There was no mistaking the concern or the challenge. "Let's not forget Karen." Both men fell silent as they remembered one of the school's most successful and popular students. Karen Paxton had been a pretty girl with a vibrant personality but coping with a genetic disorder which made it impossible for her to control her massively overweight body. "So, I ask you again, Jack. Are you sure?"

"The whole family is grossly overweight, and there's never been anything in the school doctor's report to suggest that the cause is anything other than self-indulgence of the first order."

Turning away from the window, the Head looking even more thoughtful than usual, reached for the key to a small cabinet and poured a couple of modest sherries. "If I'm being truthful, Jack, I'm not too sure about some of this, myself." His Deputy was startled. It was rare for the Boss to admit to any misgivings. "Until now, we've had clear lines of demarcation between home and school," Jack Champion pricked up his ears, "food being very much the responsibility of the parents and education, in the academic sense, being down to us. I never used to worry about what went into school dinners. I thought of them as a stop-gap until kids got home for a proper meal. But now, I find that lots of them haven't been fed properly either at school or at home. And if Del Dingley is to be believed, even pupils of normal weight

could be lacking in essential body-building nutrients, through eating junk food.”

Champion sipped his sherry. “I don’t see what we can expect to achieve unless the parents do something about it, too.”

There was a long silence. “Perhaps we should talk to George’s mother,” said the Head, slowly and reluctantly.

“You’ve seen her,” Champion grimaced. The Head looked doubtful. “Course you have. That awful woman who demonstrated outside the school gates. Weighs a ton. Looks like a Sumo wrestler. Nora Guzell. The mother from hell. Young George was threatening me earlier with a visitation.”

“Worried?” Robert Knight’s eyes crinkled with amusement. This was a new side to his Deputy.

“Frankly, yes.” They both laughed. “She could fell me with a look never mind a blow.” Champion consulted his watch. “Sorry, Headmaster. Must dash.”

George was no longer at the bus stop. The thought of a five minute journey without sustenance was not to be borne. Showing considerably more energy than he’d demonstrated all day, George puffed his way round the corner and producing a fist full of small coins, treated himself to some salt and vinegar crisps and several bars of chocolate from the local sweet shop.