

*The Amazing Brain of*

**O C LONGBOTHAM**

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Philip



Mum



Anna



Kitty

# CHAPTER 1

*... in which Philip meets a nosy wasp*

Philip James Longbotham lived with his mother and two sisters, Anna and Kitty, in a semi-detached house with three-and-a-half bedrooms. Being the youngest Philip had to make do with the half. His bed had been built against its longest wall, which measured one metre seventy-four centimetres; his wardrobe stood on top of the stairwell which ran into his room and his shoes, which he always arranged in a neat line, were level with his knees.



*There was nothing particularly unusual about Philip. He was not tall but not short, not wide but not narrow, not dark but not fair. When asked, Kitty said he was medium. 'He's so medium, if I had to write a story, it would only have one word in it – medium. The medium story – that's what I'd call it.'*

The only thing different were his two sisters, Kitty and Anna, and his love of tidying and measuring. When they first moved into their new house, Philip insisted on measuring his room every day in case it had grown in the night.

'It's not likely to do that, Phil,' Mum tried explaining to the (almost) five-year old.

'Mushrooms grow in the night,' he protested stubbornly, holding one end of the tape measure. 'I watched a programme on television about it, and Mrs Peters next door said her bedroom was so damp, she had mushrooms growing on the wall.'

'Oh, I doubt that, dear. I think she was probably exaggerating.'

'What does exaggerating mean, Mum?'

Mrs Longbotham carefully jotted down the dimensions of the room on her notepad. 'It's when you say something that is not quite ... er ... um ... true.'

'Like when Anna tells you, she's going to die and she doesn't.'

Mum laughed. 'Exactly,' she agreed.

After the third time of measuring, Mrs Longbotham sensibly printed the dimensions on a card and blue-tacked them to the wall. She also hung two lengths of white tape from a hook; one the exact length of the room, one the exact width of the room.

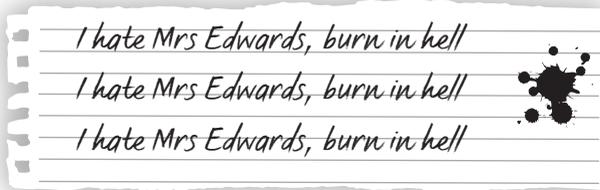
Apart from that, Philip was a pretty unremarkable kid until two days before he started school, he was stung by a wasp.\*

\* At least, Mrs Longbotham insisted it was the wasp sting that caused Philip's brain to seize up.



It was Sunday and all across Britain families were doing what they always did on a Sunday. Mrs Longbotham was in

the kitchen tidying away the lunch things, Anna was sprawled on the sofa, idly flicking through a magazine, and Kitty was curled up on the floor scribbling madly.



Anna, the eldest, was tallish and had been born with blond hair that had turned mousy by age five. To celebrate her last year at primary school, she had dyed it bright red.

Mrs Longbotham had been furious and Kitty dead jealous.

Kitty, eighteen months younger, was a tad less than tall. She had also been fair at birth and that too had turned mousy. Determined not to be upstaged by her sister, her hair also began changing colour, becoming a teensy-weensy bit darker each time she washed it, as if she was using mud instead of shampoo.

'What are you doing?' Philip asked, kneeling beside her, his neatly brushed hair very different from his sister's, which looked as if a witch, a broomstick, and her cat had taken up residence.

'None of your business.' Kitty glowered.

'Can I help?'

'No!'

Having completed eight lines of writing, Kitty picked up a pair of scissors and began cutting the paper into strips.

'So, what are you doing now?'

Kitty glared. 'Climbing Everest.'

'Oh!' The small boy looked puzzled. 'What's Everest?'

'A mountain and small boys aren't allowed

– **GO AWAY!**

'What are you up to, Kitty?' Anna called.

'I'm trying to put a hex on my teacher before the new term starts. I've only gone and got Mrs Edwards,' Kitty moaned. 'She hated you so what chance have I got.'

'How do you intend to do that?' Anna leaned up on one elbow, staring across the room at her sister.

'Found this book of spells in the school library. It's got great tips ... like this killing potion.' Kitty scribbled the words:

**I hate Mrs Edwards, burn in hell**

across the top of a clean sheet of paper.

'Does it work?'

'It had better. I'll never survive a year of Mrs Edwards telling me off. It should work, it's Goth – and that's the most powerful spell on Earth.

Between you and me, though, I'm not all that bothered if it doesn't kill her as long as it



sends her off long term sick, like Miss Brown. She was off the whole summer with stress, lucky thing.'

'That was 'cos a you.'

'Not true,' Kitty retorted indignantly. 'I never even touched her.'

'So how does it work?'

'I gotta write loads of strips and then burn them at midnight.'

'Are we going to have a fire?' Philip shouted excitedly.

'Shush!' Kitty hissed and Anna threw a cushion at him.

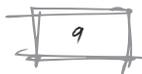
'Why don't you go upstairs and measure your bedroom,' Kitty said. 'I'll lend you my ruler. It's been raining all week; it's bound to have shrunk.'



'Okay,' Philip said, and trotted upstairs, the plastic ruler waving up and down in his fist like a floppy banana.

Placing Kitty's ruler neatly on the bed, Philip checked the wall with the tapes and was relieved to find they hadn't shrunk in the night. Carefully replacing the tapes on a hook, he ran downstairs instantly forgetting about the ruler.

Ann climbed off the couch and crouched on the floor next to her sister. 'Are you really going to try it?'



Kitty picked up the scissors again. 'Totally! It's full moon tonight. I've got matches and I already dug a hole to bury the ashes. Actually,' she admitted, 'Phil dug the hole 'cos I just painted my nails. Told him I wanted to visit a friend in Australia. You know Phil. He'll believe anything. But I need twenty-seven strips; three times three times three. If you give me a hand with the writing, I'll add your teacher's name.'

Just at that moment, Mrs Longbotham called from the kitchen, 'I could do with some help washing up. Anna?'

Anna convulsed into motion. 'I'm just going to the shop to get the *TV Times* and the newspaper, Mum,' she called. 'I know you like one on a Sunday.'

Kitty **glowered** daggers.

Mrs Longbotham's head appeared round the kitchen door. 'That's so thoughtful, Anna. Take some money from my purse. Kitty, come and ...'



'Can't. I'm doing homework.'

'You mean, you've *still got homework*,' Mum spluttered. 'It's the end of the holidays ... whatever ...'

'Kitty's going to climb Everest,' Philip put in helpfully. 'She was telling me.'

'Oh!' Mum stopped dead, shooting a doubtful glance at her middle daughter. 'Well, in that case ...'

'I'll help,' he said. 'I like washing up.'

'Yes, well ... er ... thank you, Philip. Um ... but haven't you got some tidying in your bedroom you can do.'



'No!' The little boy shook his head firmly. 'It's tidy. And I already measured it, Kitty told me to.'

'Oh dear,' Mum sighed. 'Well, in that case, thank you, Philip.'

'Mum!' Kitty laughed. 'You know perfectly well, he'll make you wash them at least twice. I keep telling you to buy a washing-up machine.'

'And I keep telling you, we can't afford one. Oh dear!'

'All right! I give in. The things I do for this family ...' Kitty gave a dramatic sigh. 'You do the washing up, Mum, and Phil can watch me cut paper.'

'Thank you, Kitty. You are such a sweet child.'

A little while later, unaware that Anna had filched a pound from her purse to buy two chocolate bars, which she and Kitty were secretly scoffing behind the sofa, Mum sat down to read the *Sunday Echo*.

The front page was dominated by an account of a daring robbery. 'Girls, listen to this,' she read aloud.

Last night a raid took place at Manchester Airport, resulting in the theft of gold and jewellery worth half-a-million pounds.

Can you believe it?

Constable Sheppard ...

'Girls?' she rattled the newspaper. 'Look! There's a picture. Apparently, he was on duty outside and, when he went to investigate, got a very nasty bump on the head. It says here, there were no clues but he did get a look at the number plate. **YA BOO** something or other.'

When asked by our reporter, Constable Sheppard said: 'I know who did it,' although he agreed the miscreants (bad guys to you) were all masked and therefore unidentifiable. 'But I will get them, if it takes me 20 years.'

'I don't know, what is this world coming to?' Mrs Longbotham was in the middle of saying, when the doorbell chimed.

Philip jumped to his feet and, running over to the window, pulled back the net curtains and peered through.

'It's Grandmother,' he announced.

A choking sound erupted from behind the sofa, followed by the rustle of silver paper as Anna and Kitty tried to hide all evidence of their guilt.



'Can't we pretend we're not in?' Kitty wailed, arriving upright first, unaware she had smears of chocolate round her mouth.

'Uh ... uh...' Mum stared wildly round the room, wishing she had the courage to say: *hide quick*. 'Anna, get a duster and run it along the mantelshelf while I check the kitchen. Kitty, wash your face and Phil, you stay put... Phil! *Phill!*' she hissed. 'Come back.'

**Too late!** Philip ran to the front door, opened it, and Grandmother sailed in.

She was a fierce old lady, very tall with a large chest and several chins that made her look rather like a pouter pigeon. She always carried a walking stick in the street, which she mostly used to shoo away boisterous dogs, whip the heads off her neighbours' flowers (*when they weren't looking*), and bash the ankles of any one that got in her way.

'As you never visit me, I thought I'd visit you for a change.' She glanced gimlet-eyed at Kitty and Anna. 'Haven't your daughters changed, I hardly recognised them.'

'Really, Mother. You've just forgotten how quickly children

grow,' Mrs Longbotham said, her smile a little patronising. 'Remember, it's quite a while since you've seen them.'

'Nonsense, and I'm not senile,' snapped her mother. 'I know perfectly well that children make a habit of growing. However, these two resemble the flag of Albania. Both my granddaughters were fair.'

'That was when they were born, Mother. Since then, I admit, their hair has gone a little ...' Mrs Longbotham trailed off into silence, noticing that Kitty's hair was several shades darker than it had been the day before\*

\*Exactly as if she had put her head down a coal mine



while Anna's still resembled the *burning bush* from the bible.

'Oh dear! Er ... yes. Well ... er,' she murmured. 'Anna. We had a bit of an accident there. It'll grow out in a few months.'

'It was an alien, I saw him. He ate Anna,' Philip shouted joyfully.

'No, Phil, dear,' Mrs Longbotham patted his hand. 'He didn't. Don't you remember I explained – it was still Anna, only her hair had gone green by mistake.'

'Hm!' Grandmother pointed with her walking stick. 'And just look at their nails – purple and green. Disgraceful.'

Mrs Longbotham stared wildly. 'They like dressing-up, Mother,' she mumbled. 'And it is the weekend.'

Grandmother ignored her. 'Why aren't they outside playing in the garden, it's a nice day?'

'What a good idea,' Mrs Longbotham said, breathing heavily. 'Go and play tennis, you two. I'll get tea.' She fled into the kitchen, pursued by her mother.

'Did you read about that robbery?' Mrs Longbotham said, her fair hair drooping lifelessly.

'I'd bring back the stocks,' retorted the old lady. 'That would sort it. *Your girls,*' she said, returning to her favourite subject, like a homing pigeon to its roost. 'I trust you will keep Anna in sensible shoes until, at least, sixteen.' She shook her head slowly from side to side. 'The damage bad shoes does to feet doesn't bear thinking about. Speak to my chiropodist, if you don't believe me.'

'I do believe you, Mother.' Mrs Longbotham grabbed the kettle as it started to whistle and hastily poured boiling water into the teapot.

'Come and have some tea. You'll feel better afterwards.'

'And this craze for short skirts and skimpy tops. Disgraceful. In my day ...'

Mrs Longbotham groaned silently. 'Girls – tea,' she called through the open garden doors, too busy pouring tea to notice that a nosy wasp had drifted into the room.





Fed-up with a diet of windfalls, from the apple tree in the garden, the wasp had smelled strawberry jam and decided to investigate.



Philip had been quietly playing with his train set behind the sofa. He hadn't bothered to go into the garden, there really was no point since neither of his sisters would have given him a turn with the tennis racket. Now, remembering he was thirsty, he stood up to ask for a glass of milk.

'Philip!' Grandmother shouted triumphantly, as if she was watching a football match and he had just scored the winning goal. 'Just the person. I want a word with you.'\*



\*Have you ever noticed that when someone says, I want a word with you, it usually means at least half-an-hours' worth.)

She crooked her finger, beckoning. 'I hear you are starting school tomorrow. Stand up straight now.'

Philip carefully replaced his glass on the tray. 'Yes, Grandmother. I am going to learn how to read.'

'Precisely. Now, there are a few things you need to know. I remember telling Anna and Kitty ...'

'Yes, Mother, so you did.' Mrs Longbotham gave a long, despairing sigh as she watched her mother take a deep – deep – breath.



The wasp, hit with a force-10 gale, with a loud shrieking

**BUZZ**

crashed into Philip's face and really angry now plunged its stinger into his forehead.

**'OMG!'** Kitty yelled. 'I just heard Phil's brain go ping.'

'Don't be so ridiculous, Kitty,' Anna shouted. 'Isn't that just like you, always trying to hog the limelight. That was me killing the wasp with my tennis racket.'

Noticing her grandson's face about to burst into flames, his mouth open and flapping like a fish, Grandmother uttered a piercing scream and fainted.

Mrs Longbotham stared helplessly at the crumpled figure on the floor. '*Oh dear, whatever can we do?*' she moaned, dithering from one foot to the other, rather like someone dancing the cha-cha-cha.

'Anna, dear, pour a cup of tea for your grandmother, it will help revive her. Philip, *Phil, speak to me.*' She patted his hand gently.



'Oh, for goodness sake, Mum, that's so useless.' Kitty thumped her brother on the back. 'Come on, Phil,' she screeched. '*Breathe, breathe – breathe.*'

'Does Grandmother take sugar?' Anna yelled into the confusion. Not getting a response, she hastily picked up the cup, and tossed its contents over the comatose figure.

*'Anna! What did you do that for? I didn't mean over your grandmother,'* Mrs Longbotham shrieked, watching the brown liquid roll down her mother's face.

'Didn't you?' Anna smiled sweetly. 'But, hey, look, it's done the trick,' she added as Grandmother opened her eyes. 'She's revived.'

As Kitty gave Philip's back another thump, he hiccupped loudly and took a breath. Even his face returned to its normal colour. 'What were you telling me, Grandmother?' he said sounding his usual cheery self, exactly as if he had stepped out of the room for a minute and had just returned.

'Ooh!' Grandmother moaned, clutching her heart. 'I'm all wet. I think I'd better go home.'

If Mrs Longbotham hadn't been so worried about her son, she might well have danced a highland-fling or limbo-ed under the table. 'What a good idea, Mother,' she said, 'I'll phone for a taxi.'



## CHAPTER 2

... in which Philip learns to read

Next morning, leaving Anna in bed, Mrs Longbotham telephoned the surgery and rushed off for an appointment, taking both Philip and Kitty with her.

Dr Benson, who was new to the practice and had never met Mrs Longbotham or her children before, pulled out a form filling in the first three lines:

Name: *Philip James Longbotham* DOB: *23.8.1998*  
Height: *Medium* Build: *Medium* Colouring: *Medium*

Steeping his fingers, he leaned over the desk. 'Now, what seems to be the trouble?'

'He had a bit of a do yesterday afternoon, Doctor,' Mum whispered, pointing with her index finger at the back of Philip's head.

'Ah, did he now? So what happened? Philip is it or do you prefer Phil?'

Philip wasn't listening, his attention fastened on the picture of a skeleton hanging from the wall.

'He got stung by a wasp; his brain went ping and then he stopped breathing,' Kitty said, answering for her brother. 'Anna says it didn't go ping but it really did. She was so busy chasing the wasp, she didn't hear. And you can call him Phil if you like, or pest.'

Dr Benson looked puzzled.

'That's what I call him,' she explained.

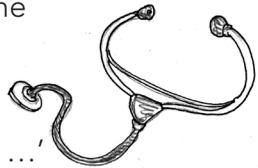
'Kitty!' Mrs Longbotham shushed her.

'I was only saying.' Kitty glowered and lapsed into a sulky silence.

'I'm sorry, Doctor. I have three children and some days it feels more like three thousand.'

'Well, his chest and heart sound fine,' the doctor said after a bit, listening to Philip's back and chest through his stethoscope.

'Right, Phil. I'll just take a look in your ears ...'



'Why?' Philip said, suddenly noticing that he was being prodded and poked.

'Because of the wasp, silly.'

'Kitty!'

'You mean I've got a wasp in my ear,' Philip shouted and clamped his hands over his ears.

Mrs Longbotham leaned back and covered her eyes with her hand. 'Now look what you done, Kitty! Why do you say such ridiculous things? You know how he is.'

The doctor suddenly looked serious. 'And how is he?'

'Weird,' said Kitty gloomily, before her mum could answer.

'Kitty!' said Mrs Longbotham, sounding like a saucepan of milk boiling over.

'Well, he is, Mum. Very weird. He likes to help and he likes to clean things. If that's not weird, I don't know what is.'



'He is very *particular*, Doctor,' Mrs Longbotham rushed to explain. 'He also likes measuring things.'

'That sounds quite normal to me.'

Kitty shook her head as if to say, *no, it doesn't*.

'Well, we'll get him checked out. Now, don't worry, Mrs Longbotham ...' Noticing she was about to burst into tears, the doctor leaned forward and gently patted her hand. 'I am sure it's a one off. Nothing to worry about.'

The following morning Mrs Longbotham, still feeling a bit tearful, took Philip to school since it was his first day and, at the end of the afternoon, went to collect him. Arriving early, she waited in the corridor for the bell to ring.

Inside the classroom were 28 children plus Miss Smith, their teacher. From force of habit, Mrs Longbotham counted each one, writing the total in her diary.



*The previous year Miss Smith had been in charge of class three, which was Kitty's class. After parents' evening, Kitty reported to her mother that Miss Smith was only fat because she was really a vampire and ate at least two of her pupils every other day. Mrs Longbotham, although convinced Kitty was fibbing, decided it might be wise to keep count of the numbers (just in case), and became seriously worried if any child was absent for a week or more.*

Spotting Mrs Longbotham outside the classroom, Miss Smith trotted out.

'May I have a word?'

Mrs Longbotham glanced up from helping Philip on with his coat. 'Mmm?'

'About Philip!'

'Is he all right? He was stung by a wasp yesterday and had a bit of a do.'

'He's absolutely fine. But did you know he could read?'

'I don't think so, Miss Smith.' Mrs Longbotham said, her smile a little patronising. 'Philip knows his numbers but not his letters.'

'I know them now, Mum.'

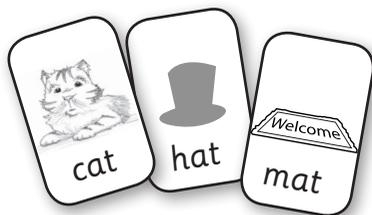
'What!' she exclaimed. 'But how?'

'I don't know how.'

'That's exactly right.' Miss Smith's smile resembled a sickly rhinoceros. 'I asked Philip to give out flash cards to the children on his table. 'Each child is given six words to take home and learn.'

'And?' said Mrs Longbotham cautiously.

'Eight children – forty-eight cards. But Philip didn't give them out, *did you, Philip?*'



'I don't know, Miss Smith. I can't remember,' Philip said politely.

'Well, I can assure you, Philip, *you didn't give them out, you kept every one.* I turned round to talk to someone,' she explained to Mrs Longbotham. 'By the time I turned back, Philip was handing me the cards. Then he asked if he could play with the Lego because he knew them.' Miss Smith's eyeballs protruded out of their sockets with indignation. 'And he did! All forty-eight, I tested him!'

Mrs Longbotham shook her head. 'I'm so sorry, but I promise you I didn't teach him.'

'Well, someone did,' Miss Smith insisted.

On returning home she asked her two daughters, 'Have either of you been teaching Phil to read?'

'What! You're joking, Mum, aren't you,' said Kitty. 'Phil?'

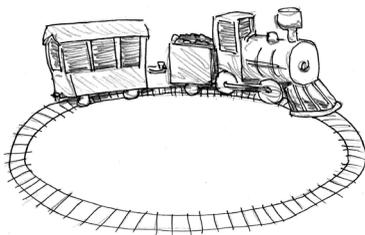
Philip, who was playing with his train on the sitting room carpet, looked up. 'Yes, Kitty?'

'You can read ... how did that happen?'

Philip smiled. 'I don't know.'

'Know anything else?' Kitty said.

Philip shook his head and went back to playing with his train.



By the end of the spring term, Mrs Longbotham had been called into school three times. 'I really don't understand. He's no trouble at home,' she said with a worried frown. 'Whatever it is, I'm very sorry.'

'So you should be,' Miss Smith's jaws snapped together like an irate tortoise. 'Just imagine how I felt. There's me explaining how one plus one equals two and I see Philip doodling. *And do you know what he was doodling?*' she said, her voice shrill and peevish sounding.

Mrs Longbotham shook her head.

'His four times table,' Miss Smith shrieked in her face.

'His *four - times - table!*'



*The following day, Miss Smith was even more furious when she noticed Philip practising long-division in his exercise book.*

'Oh dear,' murmured Mrs Longbotham. 'I'll see he doesn't do it again.'

She made another appointment with the doctor, who gave Philip some sums to do while he chatted to Mrs Longbotham. Philip smiled and did them in three minutes flat.

