



Iqbal Hussain

CAN I HAVE A P PLEASE, BOB?

I was on the *Blockbusters* set, marvelling at the flashing hexagonal board before me. Bright lights shone down, creating a surprising amount of heat. I felt like the child in the Ready Brek ad.

In the 1980s and 90s, *Blockbusters* was a hugely popular game show in the teatime slot on ITV. You answered general knowledge questions while completing a path across or down the board, each answer beginning with the letter on the hexagon.

As I arranged a furry gonk on the ledge in front of the presenter, Bob Holness, walked on. Except he didn't walk, but executed a flying Kung Fu kick with a heart-curdling yell that wouldn't have been out of place on *The Karate Kid*. He then strolled over as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

With trembling hands, I handed over a sketch I'd made of him, copied from an annual and coloured in mainly with an orange pencil. He accepted his Judith Chalmers-tinged portrait with an admirably straight face.

Just as cringeworthy was the performance itself, recorded on VHS and now transferred to DVD. I can only watch through splayed fingers. The sixteen-year-old me wore a white shirt covered in multi-coloured vertical stripes, the top half sporting a flange all the way round. My hair was spiked, with a choppy fringe, inspired by Michael Groth from *That's Life!* My vowels were pure *Coronation Street*.

'And who's the little chap?' asked Bob, referring to the gonk.

My mind went blank.

‘Becca ’aaaar-greaves!’ I finally croaked in a Northern accent straight from the central school of casting, coming out with the only name I could think of: that of my A level English Language teacher.

I was up against the mighty Clares, who had just won their fourth Gold Run and were gee’d up for their big one. Watching the show at home was quite different to taking part in the studio. Words eluded me, or I got them wrong when it was my turn. The Clares were pumped, jumping in their seats when they thumped the buzzer. The board rapidly filled up with their blue hexagons.

‘What ‘A’ was the name of three Scottish kings, eight popes and three tsars of Russia?’

Boing! Damn those Clares.

‘Is it ... is it Alexander?’

My six white hexagons skulked pitifully amid the sea of blue ones. I still have two of the three consolation prizes: the Psion organiser – the size and weight of a brick – and the dictionary, with messages inside from my fellow contestants as we gathered at the hotel that night. Instead of trashing our rooms, we signed each other’s dictionaries. The sweatshirt unravelled at the seams within a couple of washes.

Despite the humiliating defeat, the quiz show bug had taken hold. Even though I couldn’t bear to watch myself on screen, I loved having people talking about me, relatives ringing up from around the country wondering if the Asian boy on the TV had been me. Also you didn’t see many non-white people on TV in those days, and I realised I had an advantage when going for auditions, as the chances were I would be picked.

A year later, I went on *Countdown*. I sat in a dressing room in Leeds, a hair-and-make-up lady touching up my demi-wave, done the week before at Nigel’s Cutting Room. Carol Vorderman came in and plonked herself next to me, asking if anyone had seen last night’s *Twin Peaks*. I thought I’d died and gone to heaven.

On set, Richard Whiteley left an extra strong mint for me and my opponent, Tracey, on our desks. Sylvia Syms joined Freda Thornton in

Dictionary Corner.

The games weren't filmed as shown. Carol had extra time in which to compute her solutions, sometimes helped by the floor manager. They asked the studio audience – a sea of grey and white heads – for their best words, which Sylvia would then pass off as her own.

The first game fell in my favour. Years of playing Scrabble meant I excelled at anagrams and wordplay. With a love of maths, I also did well in the numbers rounds. Tracey beat me to the conundrum, but it didn't matter. I had a clear victory.

'What a lovely couple of young people,' simpered Sylvia, just before the titles rolled. I smiled, trying to look modest. The graduated tint of my Reactolite glasses matched the brown band in my rugby shirt. My demi-wave gave me added height. I looked the biz.

In my second game, with a quick change of clothes to suggest the next day, I faced a tougher adversary – a Scotsman called Gino. Evenly pitched, the scoring reflected the same. Against much fevered scribbling on paper, the *Countdown* clock ticked down in the background, its familiar music muted in the studio and the final bong barely audible.

'The last letters round,' said Richard. 'Iqbal?'

'Seven,' I said confidently.

'Gino?'

'Er, just six.'

'Iqbal, what's your seven?'

'BOSSILY.'

And that was that. This ordinary-looking word wasn't in Freda's dictionary. Sylvia sympathised, but it was all over. The next morning, I was on the train home, with a mug and a two-volume *Collins Deluxe* to add to my collection.

After a foray into lesser-known shows such as *Catchword*, with Paul Coia, *Win, Lose or Draw*, with Shane Richie, and the hostless 100%, I returned to cult form with *The Crystal Maze*.

The show was on Channel 4, a sexier version of BBC2's *The Adventure Game*. Teams of contestants attempted a range of challenges, and you

received a golf-ball sized crystal if you succeeded, or nothing if you didn't – and a lock-in if you failed to get out in time.

You could slip climbing up the rope ladders. The 'stone' walls were made of polystyrene. As you ran between Zones in the labyrinth, you had to know when to stop as some of the passageways ended suddenly without warning, and with no safety rails – a sheer drop on the other side.

I played two games: the first, a 'physical', involving moving barrels around to get to the one containing the crystal. Each one weighed the same as a Newfoundland dog. After three barrels, I gave up.

'I can't lift it,' I panted, 'It's too heavy!'

Like a T-shirt slogan, the line stuck to me for weeks afterwards.

In my other challenge – 'skill' – I had to tilt a long tube on a rotating axis to align three crystals inside with various holes from which they could exit. I'd have had more success juggling bubbles. After an infuriating ninety seconds rolling the crystals from one end to the other, I knocked on the door, yelling to be let out.

To no-one's surprise, we did pitifully in the Dome at the end, securing a paltry number of gold tokens. Instead of a dictionary as a consolation prize, we got a commemorative Swarovski crystal that read 'I CRACKED THE CRYSTAL MAZE' – even though we hadn't.

That was the last game show I went on. Nothing could beat the steam-punk glamour of the Maze. I wasn't interested in the big money shows – I preferred a wordy nerdy show. I also realised how much I hated talking about myself. So, at the grand old age of twenty, with eight or nine quiz shows under my belt, I decided to retire.

In recent weeks, with more time on my hands due to lockdown, I've found myself shouting at the 'thickos' on *Pointless*. In my mind I'm already scooping the jackpot, my knowledge of 'films with the word 'American' in the title' second to none. Older and more confident, I could banter with presenter Alexander, maybe even tell an amusing story. And there are still not many brown or black faces up there. It won't hurt to take a look.

'Click APPLY NOW to get started!'

Iqbal Hussain lives in Chingford with his partner and labradoodle puppy.