



I knew the answer. But this headmistress, she took one look at me an' said, "Oh, put your hand down, Shirley, you won't know the answer", an' she started goin' round the hall, the grin on her face gettin' smugger an' smugger as she got answers like, "the sputnik", "the cathode ray tube", "the automatic washin' machine". Even the clever ones were gettin' it wrong--even Marjorie Majors. But I kept my arm up there in the air because I knew I had the right answer. I'd got it from me dad, an' he'd got it from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Ah, y' know me dad, he was still goin' on about that *Encyclopaedia Britannica* when he was on his death-bed. "How can those kids of mine be so thick when I bought them the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*?" He got a lot of pleasure out of it, though. He'd sit there for hours readin' it an' he'd try to impress us all with these dead odd facts. An' I'd remembered him sayin' about man's most important invention because it was so ordinary. So I'm stood there in assembly, me arm stuck up in the air, an' I'm like the cat with the cream because this headmistress has done the length an' breadth of the hall an' still no-one's come up with the right answer. Well, I'm the only one left so she turns to me an' she says, "All right then, Shirley, come on, you might as well get it wrong along with everyone else. Do you remember the question, Shirley--what was man's most important invention?" Well, I paused, y'know, savourin'

the moment, knowin' I was on the brink of receivin' at least forty-three thousand house-points an' a blessin' from the Pope. But when I said, "the wheel", it was like this headmistress had been shot in the back. I thought maybe she hadn't heard me squeaky little voice so I said it again, louder: "The wheel, miss. Man's most important invention was--" But I never got to finish because I was cut off by this scream from the headmistress. "You", she yelled, "you must have been told that answer!" I just stood there, reelin' with shock. An' I tried to ask her, to say-- to say, how--how the bloody hell else was I supposed to know the right answer? But she wouldn't listen. She just ignored me an' told the demented music teacher to get on with playin' the hymn. An' all me house-points, an' me blessin' from the Pope, just disappeared before me eyes as she led the hall into singin' "Glad That I Live Am I". I was never really interested in school after that. ~~I became so bored I wore me school dress so high 'y' I thought it was a costume. I was bored. I used to have the chewy gum all day. I'd spit it out. (Glad that I live am I) I'd spit it out through me nose. I hated everything. "Oh I hate him", "Oh I hate her", "I hate this", "I hate that". It's garbage, "It's last", "It's crap". "I hate it." But I didn't hate anything, y' know. The only thing I hated was ~~me~~. I didn't want to be ~~me~~. I wanted to be nice. I wanted to be like the Margate Major. I used to pick on her somethin'~~