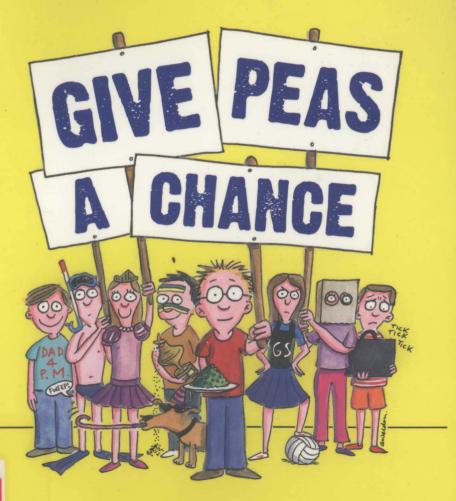
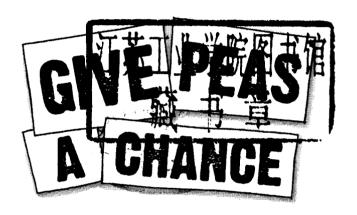
MORRIS GLEITZMAN



AND OTHER FUNNY STORIES

MORRIS



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Fifteen funny stories from one of Australia's favourite authors.

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Mission Impossible

our mission,' said Dad to Jake, 'if you choose to accept it, is to take full command of this operation and to achieve victory using only cunning, daring, ruthlessness and cotton buds.'

Dad didn't use those exact words.

What he actually said was, 'Jake, could you keep an eye on things for a couple of hours. The twins kept me and Mum awake most of the night and we're pooped.'

Jake knew exactly what Dad meant.

He and Mum needed sleep.

A motel could be a noisy place, specially when you owned it and lived in it and never got away from it.

Mum and Dad needed him to keep things quiet. It was a big responsibility for someone who'd recently been voted the biggest daydreamer in year six. 'I accept the mission,' said Jake.

Dad gave Jake a grateful but weary smile and tiptoed into the bedroom.

Jake held his breath, hoping Dad wouldn't trip over yesterday's underpants and wake the babies.

He didn't, and the babies were still asleep a few minutes later as Jake sat in the big leather chair in the office and reviewed the situation.

Everything was quiet.

The guests were all checked out or at the beach. Sharnelle and Patsy who cleaned the units had finished and gone. Out Of Order signs in Jake's neatest writing were on the ping-pong table, the laundry, the ice machine, the swimming pool and the crazy golf, all three holes. The rattly door on the cold drinks cabinet in the office was wedged firmly and silently shut with cotton buds.

Jake glanced at the clock.

Two-fifteen.

With a bit of luck, nobody would want to check in for at least two hours. Everything would stay peaceful as long as a sea breeze didn't spring up and make the sheets on the line flap too loudly.

Mission accomplished.

Jake couldn't hear a peep from Mum and Dad's room.

Not even a snore.

He looked proudly through the office window at the big sign out the front.

Off-Highway Motor Lodge.

Quietest Motel In Town.

Which it is, thought Jake, when I'm running it.

He wondered whether to quietly get the ladder and a red texta and underline the *Quietest Motel In Town* bit. Before he could, three cars roared past the reception window and screeched into the parking area.

Jake leaped out of the chair with the lithe grace and superb reflexes of Tom Cruise. Or would have done if he hadn't hooked his foot in a worn patch of carpet and gone sprawling.

Jake picked himself up, glared at the carpet with the silent indignation and bruised elbows of Tom Cruise, spat out a bit of carpet fluff and peered through the window at the cars.

At first he thought they were the very thing he didn't want. A gang of early check-ins. Then he saw he was wrong. They were the other thing he didn't want. Units 7, 8 and 9 back early from the beach.

Several mums and dads and lots of little kids were getting out of the cars. Slamming the doors. Chattering loudly.

Jake's thoughts raced so fast he didn't even have time to compare them to Tom Cruise's.

Perhaps, he said to himself, units 7, 8 and 9 have just forgotten their sunblock. Perhaps if I help them find it they'll go back to the beach.

Jake hurried outside.

A mum in a green beach smock and sun-visor

slammed one of the car boots, turned, saw Jake approaching and glared at him.

Jake hoped he'd got that wrong. He hoped she was actually glaring past him at the sign out the front and realising that this was the quietest motel in town and thinking that her kids shouldn't be dragging their plastic spades along the ground so noisily.

She wasn't.

She was glaring at Jake.

'Oi,' she said, jabbing her finger at him. 'Why didn't you tell us that beach hasn't got a shark net?' Iake was stunned.

Shark net?

The beach was the shallowest beach on the coast. It was famous for its shallowness. If you walked the length of three footy fields out to sea, the water was still only up to your ankles. A shark would need a lift from the rescue helicopter to get anywhere close to the beach.

Jake started to explain this.

Then he stopped.

The rest of the adults and kids were heading for the swimming pool.

'This sign reckons the gate's out of order,' one of the dads was saying. He pushed the pool gate open. 'Seems OK to me.'

They all crowded into the pool enclosure.

Jake hurried after them.

He knew he had about five seconds to think

of something before they all started throwing themselves into the water and yelling and splashing and waking up Mum and Dad and Gwen and Mabel and making Jake's mission completely impossible.

Dirty water.

That's it, thought Jake.

I'll tell them the pool water's dirty and not safe to swim in.

Except there was one little problem. The pool was clear and blue and sparkling. Dad was a genius with pool chemicals. He liked to say you could eat your dinner off his pool if you didn't mind soup.

Jake stood helplessly in the pool enclosure, surrounded by adults and kids stripping down to their swimmers. He wished he had Tom Cruise's Hollywood screenwriters to tell him what to do next.

But he didn't.

And one of the little girls was clambering onto the diving board.

Before Jake could stop her, one of the mums did.

'Charlene,' said the mum. 'Get off that. You'll hurt yourself. Come over here in the shade.'

'But I want to swim,' said the little girl.

Several of the other kids were sitting on the edge of the pool, dangling their legs in the water.

'Come away from there,' said one of the dads. 'That water could be filthy. You can never tell with motel pools. Not without a microscope.'

Jake looked admiringly at the dad.

Brilliant, he thought. You should be a Hollywood screenwriter.

The kids didn't look like they thought it was brilliant. They whinged and moaned and dragged themselves away from the pool. They stood dejectedly around the feet of the adults, who were stretched out on sun lounges under umbrellas.

'Can we do crazy golf then?' said one of the little boys.

Jake looked anxiously at the Hollywood screenwriter dad. He seemed to have fallen asleep. Jake scrambled to think of something. *Out Of Order* signs didn't work with this lot.

To his relief, he saw that one of the other mums was on the case.

'No crazy anything,' she said to the little boy. 'I'm not having you taking your eye out.'

'Ping-pong then,' said one of the little girls.

'Too dangerous,' said another dad. 'I read about a kid who choked on a ping-pong ball.'

Jake stared at him, grateful but also puzzled.

Choked on a ping-pong ball?

You'd have to have a windpipe the size of a spa bath waste duct.

Then Jake realised what was going on.

He'd heard Mum and Dad talking about this. How the modern world was making everyone feel scared, parents included. Mum reckoned it was because of global warming and terrorism and war and crime and pollution. Dad reckoned it was also because of bushfires and drought and those TV ads about germs that live on insects and kids.

Mum and Dad are right, thought Jake. People are even bringing their fears on holiday with them.

Jake thought that was a shame, but at least it made people nice and quiet.

He tried to hurry away before the green-smock mum started yelling at him about something else and woke Mum and Dad and the babies.

He almost made it, but one thing stopped him.

The sight of all the little kids sitting under umbrellas, miserable and bored.

Poor things, thought Jake. Not much of a holiday.

He wondered if there was anything he could do to cheer them up.

Quietly.

'Psst,' he said to the kids, kneeling down. He signalled for them to kneel down next to him.

Rows of tiny sugar ants were streaming out of the cracks in the concrete. The kids crowded around, curious.

'Those aren't bull ants, are they?' called an anxious dad's voice from a sun lounge.

'No,' said Jake, trying to demonstrate that it was possible to have a conversation in a quiet voice. 'They're coastal racing ants. But they're very shy and they only race if the conditions are right. They need lots and lots of absolute silence.'

He let one of the ants clamber onto his finger.

'This is my champion,' he whispered to the little kids. 'Antelope Flyer. He can beat any ant here.'

The little kids' eyes lit up.

They chose an ant each and Jake marked out a race track in the dust.

'They're off,' he whispered. 'Shhh.'

The race started.

Jake was impressed. As the ants scampered, the little kids were busting with excitement, but not one let out a squeak.

Brilliant, thought Jake. I should have thought of this ten minutes ago.

Then suddenly there were lots of squeaks. Jake looked behind him. The squeaks weren't coming from the little kids. They were coming from the mums and dads who were all crowding around as well.

Oh dear, thought Jake with a twinge of panic.

He silently begged the parents to control themselves.

They didn't.

'Go,' yelled one of the dads at his daughter's ant. 'Go, go, go, go, go.'

'That's us in the lead,' yelled a mum. 'Hey, not fair. Your brute of an ant kicked our ant.'

'That's not your ant,' shouted another mum. 'That's our ant. Charlene trod on your ant.'

Jake's panic was more than a twinge now.

'Please,' he hissed at units 7, 8 and 9. 'Argue quietly.'

They didn't hear him.

Jake prayed things would quieten down once the race was over.

'Go faster,' he whispered to the ants.

Things didn't quieten down once the race was over.

'Nathan's ant won by a mile,' yelled a dad.

'No way,' yelled another dad. 'That's Nathan's loser ant back there going round in circles.'

Jake felt like throwing himself in the pool and just letting himself sink. And taking the whole noisy bunch with him.

This was all his fault.

'Loser, eh?' Nathan's dad was yelling. 'Well you won't say loser when Nathan thrashes your lot at table tennis.'

Before Jake could stop them, the whole group stampeded over to the games room and crowded around the ping-pong table where four kids slugged the ball at each other and the adults whistled and cheered.

Jake was frantic.

The games room was even closer to Mum and Dad's room than the pool.

'Please,' he begged the group. 'Two babies and two exhausted parents are trying to sleep and they can't use sleeping pills because Mum's allergic and Dad only uses herbal medicine.'

But units 7, 8 and 9 weren't listening.

The game ended and a bitter dispute broke out

about the score-keeping. The parents of the losing team flung out a challenge to the parents of the winning team and suddenly the whole group was surging towards the crazy golf course.

Jake had a disaster-movie-sized jolt of anxiety.

The first crazy-golf hole was right outside Mum and Dad's window.

Jake hurried after units 7, 8 and 9 as their voices echoed around the entire motel.

He could kick himself.

He should have seen this coming.

Dad was saying only recently that some parents' global fears were making them incredibly competitive about their kids. Wanting their kids to always come first so their kids would be better at surviving in a tough world.

Something like that.

Mum had been a bit doubtful, but Jake could see now that Dad was right.

These mums and dads from units 7, 8 and 9 were fearful, but they were also very competitive.

Olympic competitive.

AFL grand final competitive.

Nicole Kidman and Katie Holmes playing crazy golf in Hollywood competitive.

Jake knew he had about five seconds to think of something before a golf ball smashed through Mum and Dad's bedroom window.

He had an idea.

He flung himself into the middle of units 7, 8