

By the author of the international bestseller **THE EYRE AFFAIR**

**JASPER
FFORDE**



**THE WELL
OF LOST
PLOTS**

'DON'T ASK, JUST READ IT.
FFORDE IS A TRUE ORIGINAL'

Sunday Express on Lost In a Good Book

Annotation

Thursday Next: the story so far ...

Swindon, Wessex, England, *circa* 1985. SpecOps is the agency responsible for policing areas considered too specialised to be tackled by the regular force, and Thursday Next is attached to the literary detectives at SpecOps 27. Following the successful return of Jane Eyre to the novel of the same name, vanquishing master criminal Acheron Hades and bringing peace to the Crimean peninsula, she finds herself a minor celebrity.

On the trail of the seemingly miraculous discovery of the lost Shakespeare play *Cardenio*, she crosses swords with Yorrick Kaine, escapee from fiction and neo-fascist politician. She also finds herself blackmailed by the vast multinational known as the Goliath Corporation, who want their operative Jack Schitt out of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Raven' in which he was imprisoned. To achieve this they call on Lavoisier, a corrupt member of the time-travelling SpecOps elite, the ChronoGuard, to kill off Thursday's husband. Travelling back thirty-eight years, Lavoisier engineers a fatal accident for the two-year-old Landen, but leaves Thursday's memories of him intact — she finds herself the only person who knows he once lived.

In an attempt to rescue her eradicated husband, she finds a way to enter fiction itself — and discovers that not only is there a policing agency within the BookWorld known as Jurisfiction, but that she has been apprenticed as a trainee agent to Miss Havisham of *Great Expectations*. With her skills at bookjumping growing under Miss Havisham's stern and often unorthodox tuition, Thursday rescues Jack Schitt, only to discover she has been duped. Goliath have no intention of reactualising her husband, and instead want her to open a door into fiction, something Goliath has decided is a 'rich untapped marketplace' for their varied but ultimately worthless products and services.

Thursday, pregnant with Landen's child and pursued by Goliath and Acheron's little sister Aornis, an evil genius with a penchant for clothes shopping and memory modification, decides to enter the BookWorld and retire temporarily to the place where all fiction is created: the Well of Lost

Plots. Taking refuge in an unpublished book of dubious quality as part of the Character Exchange Programme, she *thinks* she will have a quiet time.

- [Jasper Fforde](#)
 - [Acknowledgements](#)
 - [1](#)
 - [2](#)
 - [3](#)
 - [4](#)
 - [5](#)
 - [6](#)
 - [7](#)
 - [8](#)
 - [9](#)
 - [10](#)
 - [11](#)
 - [12](#)
 - [14](#)
 - [15](#)
 - [16](#)
 - [17](#)
 - [18](#)
 - [19](#)
 - [20](#)
 - [21](#)
 - [22](#)
 - [23](#)
 - [24](#)
 - [25](#)
 - [26](#)
 - [27](#)
 - [28](#)
 - [29](#)
 - [30](#)

- [31](#)
- [32](#)
- [33](#)
- [34](#)
- [Credits](#)
- [notes](#)
 - [1](#)
 - [2](#)
 - [3](#)
 - [4](#)
 - [5](#)
 - [6](#)
 - [7](#)
 - [8](#)
 - [9](#)
 - [10](#)
 - [11](#)
 - [12](#)
 - [13](#)
 - [14](#)
 - [15](#)
 - [16](#)
 - [17](#)
 - [18](#)
 - [19](#)
 - [20](#)
 - [21](#)
 - [22](#)
 - [23](#)
 - [24](#)
 - [25](#)
 - [26](#)
 - [27](#)

Jasper Fforde
The Well of Lost Plots
(Thursday Next #3)

*For Mari Who
makes the torches
burn brighter*

*A wise man
wants for only
nourishing cabbage
soup; seek not other
things. Except
perhaps a toaster.*

*— from the
teachings of St
Zvlkx™ the wisdom
of St Zvlkx™ is
wholly owned by the
Toast Marketing
Board*

Acknowledgements

Extract from *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh (copyright © Evelyn Waugh 1945) by permission of Peters, Fraser and Dunlop on behalf of the Evelyn Waugh Trust and the Estate of Laura Waugh.

Reference to the *Just So Stories* by Rudyard Kipling (copyright © The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty) by kind permission of A. P. Watt Ltd.

References to *Shadow the Sheepdog* by Enid Blyton by kind permission of Enid Blyton Limited and with thanks to Chorion pic.

Frederick Warne & Co. is the owner of all rights, copyrights and trademarks in the Beatrix Potter character names and illustrations.

Extract from *Tiger Tiger* (copyright © Alfred Bester 1955) by kind permission of the Estate of Alfred Bester and The Sayle Literary Agency.

This book has been bundled with **Special Features** including: the 'making of' wordamentary, deleted scenes from all three books, out-takes and much more. To access all these free bonus features, log on to: www.jasperfforde.com/specialfeatures.html and enter the code word as directed.

OceanofPDF.com

1

The absence of breakfast

'The Well of Lost Plots: To understand the Well you have to have an idea of the layout of the Great Library. The library is where all published fiction is stored so it can be read by the readers in the Outland; there are twenty-six floors, one for each letter of the alphabet. The library is constructed in the layout of a cross with the four corridors radiating from the centre point. On all the walls, end after end, shelf after shelf, are books. Hundreds, thousands, millions of books. Hardbacks, paperbacks, leather-bound, everything. But beneath the Great Library are twenty-six floors of

*dingy yet industrious
sub-basements
known as the Well of
Lost Plots. This is
where books are
constructed, honed
and polished in
readiness for a place
in the library above.
But the similarity of
all these books to the
copies we read back
home is no more
than the similarity a
photograph has to its
subject; these books
are alive.'*

*THURSDAY NEXT
— The Jurisdiction
Chronicles*

Making one's home in an unpublished novel wasn't without its compensations. All the boring day-to-day mundanities that we conduct in the real world get in the way of narrative flow and are thus generally avoided. The car didn't need refuelling, there were never any wrong numbers, there was always enough hot water, and vacuum-cleaner bags came in only two sizes — upright and pull-along. There were other, more subtle differences, too. For instance, no one ever needed to repeat themselves in case you didn't hear, no one shared the same name, talked at the same time or had a word annoyingly 'on the tip of their tongue'. Best of all, the bad guy was always someone you knew of and — Chaucer aside — there wasn't much farting. But there were some downsides. The relative absence of breakfast was the first and most notable difference to my daily timetable. Inside books, dinners are often written about and therefore

feature frequently, as do lunches and afternoon tea; probably because they offer more opportunities to further the story. Breakfast wasn't all that was missing. There was a peculiar lack of cinemas, wallpaper, toilets, colours, books, animals, underwear, smells, haircuts and, strangely enough, minor illnesses. If someone was ill in a book it was either terminal and dramatically unpleasant or a mild head cold — there wasn't much in between.

I was able to take up residence inside fiction by virtue of a scheme entitled the Character Exchange Programme. Owing to a spate of bored and disgruntled bookpeople escaping from their novels and becoming what we called 'PageRunners', the authorities set up the scheme to allow characters a change of scenery. In any year there are close to ten thousand exchanges, few of which result in any major plot or dialogue infringements — the reader rarely suspects anything at all. Since I was from the real world and not actually a character at all, the Bellman and Miss Havisham had agreed to let me live inside the BookWorld in exchange for helping out at Jurisdiction — at least as long as my pregnancy would allow.

The choice of book for my self-enforced exile had not been arbitrary; when Miss Havisham asked me in which novel I would care to reside I had thought long and hard. *Robinson Crusoe* would have been ideal considering the climate but there was no one female to exchange with. I could have gone to *Pride and Prejudice* but I wasn't wild about high collars, bonnets, corsets — and delicate manners. No, to avoid any complications and reduce the possibility of having to move, I had decided to make my home in a book of such dubious and uneven quality that publication and my subsequent enforced ejection were unlikely in the extreme. I found just such a book deep within the Well of Lost Plots among failed attempts at prose and half-finished epics of such dazzling ineptness that they would never see the light of day. The book was a dreary crime thriller set in Reading entitled *Caversham Heights*. I had planned to stay there for only a year but it didn't work out that way. Plans with me are like De Floss novels — try as you might, you never know *quite* how they are going to turn out.

I read my way into *Caversham Heights*. The air felt warm after the wintry conditions back home and I found myself standing on a wooden jetty at the edge of a lake. In front of me there was a large and seemingly derelict

flying boat of the sort that still plied the coastal routes back home. I had flown on one myself not six months before on the trail of someone claiming to have found some unpublished Burns poetry. But that was another lifetime ago, when I was with SpecOps in Swindon, the world I had temporarily left behind.

I donned a pair of dark glasses and stared at the ancient flying boat, which rocked gently in the breeze, tautening the mooring ropes and creaking gently. As I watched the old aircraft, wondering just how long something this decrepit could stay afloat, a well-dressed young woman stepped out of an oval-shaped door in the high-sided hull. She was carrying a suitcase. I had read *Caversham Heights* so I knew Mary well, although she didn't know me.

'Hello!' she shouted, trotting up and offering me a hand. 'I'm Mary. You must be Thursday. My goodness! What's that?'

'A dodo. Her name's Pickwick.'

Pickwick plooked and stared at Mary suspiciously.

'Really?' she replied, looking at the bird curiously. 'I'm no expert, of course, but ... I *thought* dodos were extinct.'

'Where I come from they're a bit of a pest.'

'Oh?' mused Mary. 'I'm not sure I've heard of a book with *live* dodos in it.'

'I'm not a bookperson,' I told her, 'I'm real.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Mary, opening her eyes wide. 'An *Outlander*.'

She touched me inquisitively with a slender index finger, as though I might be made of glass.

'I've never seen someone from the other side before,' she announced, clearly relieved to find that I wasn't going to shatter into a thousand pieces. 'Tell me, is it true you have to cut your hair on a regular basis? I mean, your hair actually *grows*?'

'Yes.' I smiled. 'And my fingernails, too.'

'Really?' Mary reflected. 'I've heard rumours about that but I thought it was just one of those Outlandish legends. I suppose you have to eat, too? To stay alive, I mean, not just when the story calls for it?'

'One of the great pleasures of life,' I assured her.

I didn't think I'd tell her about the real-world downsides such as tooth decay, incontinence or old age. Mary lived in a three-year window and

neither aged, died, married, had children, got sick nor changed in any way. Although appearing resolute and strong minded she was only like this because she was *written* that way. For all her qualities, Mary was simply a foil to Jack Spratt, the detective in *Caversham Heights*, the loyal sergeant figure to whom Jack explained things so the readers knew what was going on. She was what writers called an *expositional*, but I'd never be as impolite as to say so to her face.

'Is this where I'm going to live?'

I was pointing at the shabby flying boat.

'I know what you're thinking.' Mary smiled proudly. 'Isn't she just the most beautiful thing ever? She's a Sunderland; built in 1943 but last flew in '68. I'm midway through converting her to a houseboat, but don't feel shy if you want to help out. Just keep the bilges pumped out, and if you can run the number-three engine once a month I'd be very grateful — the start-up checklist is on the flight deck.'

'Well — okay,' I muttered.

'Good. I've left a précis of the story taped to the fridge and a rough idea of what you have to say, but don't worry about being word perfect; since we're not published you can say almost anything you want — within reason, of course.'

'Of course.'

I thought for a moment.

'I'm new to the Character Exchange Programme,' I said. 'When will I be called to do something?'

'Wyatt is the inbook exchange liaison officer; he'll let you know. Jack might seem gruff to begin with,' continued Mary, 'but he has a heart of gold. If he asks you to drive his Allegro, make sure you depress the clutch fully before changing gear. He takes his coffee black and the love interest between myself and DC Baker is *strictly* unrequited, is that clear?'

'Very clear,' I returned, thankful I would not have to do any love scenes.

'Good. Did they supply you with all the necessary paperwork, IDs, that sort of thing?'

I patted my pocket and she handed me a scrap of paper and a bunch of keys.

'Good. This is my footnoterphone number in case of emergencies, these are the keys to the flying boat and my BMW. If a loser named Arnold calls, tell him I hope he rots in hell. Any questions?'

'I don't think so.'

She smiled.

'Then we're done. You'll like it here. I'll see you in about a year. So long!'

She gave a cheery wave and walked off up the dusty track. I watched until she was out of sight then sat upon a rickety wooden seat next to a long-dead tub of flowers. I let Pickwick out of her bag. She ruffled her feathers indignantly and blinked in the sunlight. I looked across the lake at the sailing dinghies, which were little more than brightly coloured triangles that tacked backwards and forwards in the distance. Nearer to shore a pair of swans beat their wings furiously and pedalled the water in an attempt to take off, landing almost as soon as they were airborne, and throwing up a long streak of spray on the calm waters. It seemed a lot of effort to go a few hundred yards.

I turned my attention to the flying boat. The layers of paint that covered and protected the riveted hull had partly peeled off, to reveal the colourful livery of long-forgotten airlines. The perspex windows had clouded with age, and high in the massive wing untidy cables hung lazily from the oil-stained cowlings of the three empty engine bays, their safe inaccessibility now a haven for nesting birds. Goliath, Aornis and SpecOps seemed a million miles away — but then, so did Landen. *Landen*. Memories of my husband were never far away. I thought of all the times we had spent together that hadn't actually happened. All the places we hadn't visited, all the things we hadn't done. He may have been eradicated at the age of two, but I still had our memories — just no one to share them with.

I was interrupted in my thoughts by the sound of a motorcycle approaching. The rider didn't have much control of the vehicle; I was glad that he stopped short of the jetty — his erratic riding may well have led him straight into the lake.

'Hello!' he said cheerfully, removing his helmet to reveal a youngish man with a dark Mediterranean complexion and deep sunken eyes. 'My name's Arnold. I haven't seen you around here before, have I?'

I got up and shook his hand.

'The name's Next. Thursday Next. Character Exchange Programme.'

'Oh, blast!' he muttered. 'Blast and double blast! I suppose that means I've missed her?'

I nodded and he stared up the road, shaking his head sadly.

'Did she leave a message for me?'

'Y-es,' I said uncertainly, 'she said she would — um — see you when she gets back.'

'She did?' replied Arnold, brightening up. 'That's a good sign. Normally she calls me a loser and tells me to go rot in hell.'

'She probably won't be back for a while,' I added, trying to make up for not passing on Mary's message properly, 'maybe a year — maybe more.'

'I see,' he murmured, sighing deeply and staring off across the lake. He caught sight of Pickwick, who was attempting to out-stare a strange aquatic bird with a rounded bill.

'What's that?' he asked suddenly.

'I think it's a duck although I can't be sure — we don't have any where I come from.'

'No, the other thing.'

'A dodo.'^[1]

'What's the matter?' asked Arnold.

I was getting a footnoterphone signal; in the BookWorld people generally communicated like this.

'A footnoterphone call,' I replied, 'but it's not a message — it's like the wireless back home.'^[2]

Arnold stared at me.

'You're not from around here, are you?'

'I'm from what you call the Outland'^[3]

He opened his eyes wide.

'You mean ... you're *real*?'

'I'm afraid so,' I replied, slightly bemused.

'Goodness! Is it true that Outlanders can't say "Red-Buick-Blue-Buick" many times quickly?'

'It's true. We call it a tongue-twister.'

'Fascinating!' he replied. 'There's nothing like that *here*, you know. I can say: "The sixth sheikh's sixth sheep's sick" over and over as many times

as I want!

And he did, three times.

'Now you try.'

I took a deep breath.

'The sixth sleeps sics sleeks sick.'

Arnold laughed like a drain. I don't think he'd come across anything quite so funny in his life. I smiled.

'Do it again!' he urged.

'No thanks.^[4] How do I stop this footnoterphone blabbering inside my skull?'

'Just think "off" very strongly.'

I did, and the footnoterphone stopped.

'Better?'

I nodded.

'You'll get the hang of it.'

He thought for a minute, looked up and down the lake in an overtly innocent manner, and then said:

'Do you want to buy some verbs? Not any of your rubbish, either. Good, strong, healthy regulars — straight from the Text Sea — I have a friend on a scrawltrawler.'

I smiled.

'I don't think so, Arnold — and I don't think you should ask me — I'm Jurisdiction.'

'Oh,' said Arnold, looking pale all of a sudden. He bit his lip and gave such an imploring look that I almost laughed.

'Don't sweat,' I told him, 'I won't report it.'

He sighed a deep sigh of relief, muttered his thanks, remounted his motorbike and drove off in a jerky fashion, narrowly missing the mail boxes at the top of the track.

The interior of the flying boat was lighter and more airy than I had imagined but it smelt a bit musty. Mary was mistaken; she had not been halfway through the craft's conversion — it was more like one tenth. The walls were half panelled with pine tongue-and-groove, and rock wool insulation stuck out untidily along with unused electrical cables. There was room for two floors within the boat's cavernous hull, the downstairs a large

open-plan living room with a couple of old sofas pointing towards a television set. I tried to switch it on but it was dead — there was no TV in the BookWorld unless called for in the narrative. Much of what I could see around me was merely props, necessary for the chapter in which Jack Spratt visits the Sunderland to discuss the case. On the mantelpiece above a small wood-burning stove were pictures of Mary from her days at the police training college, and another from when she was promoted to detective sergeant.

I opened a door that led into a small kitchenette. Attached to the fridge was the précis of *Caversham Heights*. I flicked through it. The sequence of events was pretty much as I remembered from my first reading in the Well, although it seemed that Mary had overstated her role in some of the puzzle-solving areas. I put the précis down, found a bowl and filled it with water for Pickwick, took her egg from my bag and laid it on the sofa, where she quickly set about turning it over and tapping it gently with her beak. I went forward and discovered a bedroom where the nose turret would have been, and climbed a narrow aluminium ladder to the flight deck directly above. This was the best view in the house, the large greenhouse-like perspex windows affording a good view of the lake. The massive control wheels were set in front of two comfortable chairs, and facing them and ahead of a tangled mass of engine control levers was a complex panel of broken and faded instruments. To my right I could see the one remaining engine looking forlorn, the propeller blades streaked with bird droppings.

Behind the pilots' seats, where the flight engineer would have sat, there was a desk with reading lamp, footnoterphone and typewriter. On the bookshelf were mainly magazines of a police nature and lots of forensic textbooks. I walked through a narrow doorway and found a pleasant bedroom. The headroom was not over-generous but it was cosy and dry and was panelled in pine with a porthole above the double bed. Behind the bedroom was a storeroom, a hot-water boiler, stacks of wood and a spiral staircase. I was just about to go downstairs when I heard someone speak from the living room below.

'What do you think that is?'

The voice had an empty ring to it and was neuter in its inflection — I couldn't tell whether it was male or female.

I stopped and instinctively pulled my automatic from my shoulder holster. Mary lived alone — or so it had said in the book. As I moved slowly downstairs I heard another voice answer the first:

'I think it's a bird of some sort.'

The second voice was no more distinctive than the first; indeed, if the second voice had not been *answering* the first, I might have thought they belonged to the same person.

As I descended the staircase I saw two figures standing in the middle of the room staring at Pickwick, who stared back, courageously protecting her egg from behind the sofa.

'Hey!' I said, pointing my gun in their direction. 'Hold it right there!'

The two figures looked up and stared at me without expression from features that were as insipid and muted as their voices. Because of their equal blandness it was impossible to tell them apart. Their arms hung limply by their sides, exhibiting no body language. They might have been angry, or curious, or worried, or elated — but I couldn't tell.

'Who are you?' I asked.

'We are nobody,' replied the one on the left.

'Everyone is *someone*,' I replied.

'Not altogether correct,' said the one on the right. 'We have a code number but nothing more. I am TSI-I4O49I2-A and this is TSI-I4049I2-C.'

'What happened to -B?'

'Taken by a grammasite last Tuesday.'

I lowered my gun. Miss Havisham had told me about Generics. They were created here in the Well to populate the books that were to be written. At the point of creation they were simply a human canvas without paint — blank like a coin, ready to be stamped with individualism. They had no history, no conflicts, no foibles — nothing that might make them either readable or interesting in any way. It was up to various institutions to teach them to be useful members of fiction. They were graded, too. A to D, one through ten. Any that were D-graded were like worker bees in crowds and busy streets. Small speaking parts were C-grades; B-grades usually made up the bulk of featured but not *leading* characters. These parts usually — but not always — went to the A-grades, hand picked for their skills at character projection and multi-dimensionality. Huckleberry Finn, Tess and Anna Karenina were all A-grades, but then so were Mr Hyde, Hannibal Lecter

and Professor Moriarty. I looked at the ungraded Generics again. Murderers or heroes? It was impossible to tell how they would turn out. Still, at this stage of their development they would be harmless. I reholstered my automatic.

'You're Generics, right?'

'Indeed,' they said in unison.

'What are you doing here?'

'You remember the craze for minimalism?' asked the one on the right.

'Yes?' I replied, moving closer to stare at their blank faces curiously. There was a lot about the Well that I was going to have to get used to. They were harmless enough — but decidedly creepy. Pickwick was still hiding behind the sofa.

'It was caused by the 1982 character shortage,' said the one on the left. 'Vikram Seth is planning a large book in the next few years and I don't think the Well wants to be caught out again — we're being manufactured and then sent to stay in unpublished novels until we are called into service.'

'Sort of stockpiled, you mean?'

'I'd prefer the word *billeted*,' replied the one on the left, the slight indignation indicating that it wouldn't be without a personality for ever.

'How long have you been here?'

'Two months,' replied the one on the right. 'We are awaiting placement at St Tabularasa's Generic College for basic character training. I live in the spare bedroom in the tail.'

'So do I,' added the one on the left. 'Likewise.'

I paused for a moment.

'O-kay,' I began. 'Since we all have to live together I had better give you names. You,' I said, pointing a finger at the one on the right, are henceforth called *ibb*. You,' I added, pointing to the other, 'are now called *obb*.'

I pointed at them again in case they missed it as they made no sign of either comprehending what I'd said or even hearing it.

'*You* are *ibb*, and *you* are *obb*.'

I paused. Something didn't sound right about their names but I couldn't place it.

'*ibb*,' I said to myself, then: '*obb. ibb. ibb-obb*. Does that sound odd to you?'

'No capitals,' said obb. 'We don't get capitalised until we start school — we didn't expect names so soon, either. Can we keep them?'

'A gift from me,' I told them.

'I am ibb,' said the other one, as if to make the point.

'And I am obb,' said obb.

'And I'm Thursday,' I told them, offering my hand. They shook it in turn slowly and without emotion. I could see that this pair weren't going to be a huge bundle of fun.

'And that's Pickwick.'

They looked at Pickwick, who plocked quietly, came out from behind the sofa, settled herself on her egg and pretended to go to sleep.

'Well,' I announced, clapping my hands together, 'does anyone know how to cook? I'm not very good at it and if you don't want to eat beans on toast for the next year, you had better start to learn. I'm standing in for Mary, and if you don't get in my way I won't get in yours. I go to bed late and wake up early. I have a husband who doesn't exist and I'm going to have a baby later this year so might get a little cranky — and overweight. Any questions?'

'Yes,' said the one on the left. 'Which one of us is *obb*, did you say?'

I unpacked my few things in the small room behind the flight deck. I had sketched a picture of Landen from memory and I placed it on the bedside table, staring at it for a moment. I missed him dreadfully and wondered, for the umpteenth time, whether perhaps I shouldn't be here hiding, but out *there*, in my own world, trying to get him back. Trouble was, I'd tried that and made a complete pig's ear of it — if it hadn't have been for Miss Havisham's timely rescue I would still be locked up in a Goliath vault somewhere. With our child growing within me I had decided that flight was not a coward's option but a sensible one — I would stay here until the baby was born. I could then plan my return, and following that, Landen's.

I went downstairs and explained to obb the rudiments of cooking, which were as alien to it as having a name. Fortunately I found an old copy of Mrs Beeton's *Complete Housekeeper*, which I told obb to study, half jokingly, as research. Three hours later it had roasted a perfect leg of lamb with all the trimmings. I had discovered one thing about Generics already: dull and uninteresting they may be — but they learn fast.

OceanofPDF.com

2

Inside Caversham Heights

'Book/YGIO/12

04961/:

Title: *Caversham*

*Heights. UK, 1976,
90,000 words.*

Genre: *Detective
Fiction. Book*

Operating System:
BOOK V7.2.

Grammasite

infestation: *1 (one)
nesting pair of
Parenthiums*

*(protected). Plot:
Routine detective
thriller with
stereotypical*

*detective Jack
Spratt. Set in
Reading (England),
the plot (such as it
is) revolves around a
drugs czar hoping to
muscle in on
Reading's seedy
underworld. Routine
and unremarkable,
Caversham Heights
represents all the
worst aspects of
amateur writing.*

*Flat characters,
unconvincing police
work and a pace so
slow that snails pass
it in the night.*

Recommendation:

Unpublishable.

*Suggest book be
broken up for
salvage at soonest
available*

*opportunity. **Current
status:** Awaiting
Council of Genre's
Book Inspectorate's
report before
ordering demolition.'*

*Library Sub-
Basement Gazetteer
1982, Volume CLXI*

I explained the rudiments of breakfast to ibb and obb the following morning. I told them that cereal traditionally came *before* the bacon and eggs but that toast and coffee had no fixed place within the meal; they had problems with the fact that marmalade was almost exclusively the preserve of breakfast and I was just trying to explain the technical possibilities of dippy egg fingers when a copy of *The Toad* dropped on the mat. The only news story was about some sort of drug-related gang warfare in Reading. It was part of the plot in *Caversham Heights* and reminded me that sooner or later — and quite possibly sooner — I would be expected to take on the mantle of Mary as part of the Character Exchange Programme. I had another careful read of the précis, which gave me a good idea of the plot chapter by chapter, but no precise dialogue or indication as to what I should

be doing, or when. I didn't have to wonder very long as a knock at the door revealed a very agitated man holding a clipboard.

'Miss Next?'

'Yes?'

'The name's Wyatt.'

'What?'

'No, not Watt, *Wyatt* — W-Y-A-T-T.'

'What can I do for you?'

'You can get your arse into Reading, that's what you can do.'

'Steady on—'

'I don't know why people in the Character Exchange Programme think they can treat it like a holiday,' he added, clearly annoyed. 'Just because we've had a demolition order hanging over us for the past ten years, you think you can all muck about.'

'I assure you I thought no such thing,' I replied, attempting to pacify the minor character who had taken it upon himself to keep me in check. From my reading of the book I knew that he featured as nothing more than a voice on the end of a telephone.

'I'll be on to it straight away,' I told him, fetching my coat and heading for Mary's car. 'Do you have an address for me?'

He handed over a scrap of paper and reminded me I was late.

'And no ad-libbing,' he added as an afterthought. I promised I wouldn't and trotted up the lane towards Mary's car.

I drove off slowly into Reading, across the M4, which seemed as busy as it was back home; I used the same road myself when travelling between Swindon and London. It was only when I was approaching the junction at the top of Burghfield Road that I realised there were, at most, only a half-dozen or so different vehicles on the roads. The vehicle that first drew my attention to this strange phenomenon was a large white truck with *Dr Spongg's Footcare Products* painted on the side. I saw three in under a minute, all with an identical driver dressed in a blue boiler suit and flat cap. The next most obvious vehicle was a red VW Beetle driven by a young lady, then a battered blue Morris Marina with an elderly man at the wheel. By the time I had drawn up outside the scene of *Caversham Heights'* first murder, I had counted forty-three white trucks, twenty-two red Beetles and sixteen identically battered Morris Marinas, not to mention several green

Ford Escorts and a brace of white Chevrolets. It was obviously a limitation within the text and nothing more, so I hurriedly parked, read Mary's notes again to make sure I knew what I had to do, took a deep breath and walked across to the area that had been taped off. A few uniformed police officers were milling around. I showed my warrant card and ducked under the 'Police: do not cross' tape.

The yard was oblong shaped, fifteen foot wide and about twenty foot long, surrounded by a high red brick wall with crumbling mortar. There was a large white SOCO tent over the scene and a forensic pathologist was kneeling next to a well-described corpse dictating notes into a tape recorder.

'Hello!' said a jovial voice close by. I turned to see a large man in a macintosh grinning at me.

'Detective Sergeant Mary,' I told him obediently. 'Transferred here from Basingstoke.'

'You don't have to worry about all that *yet*.' He smiled. 'The story is with Jack at the moment — he's meeting Officer Tibbit on the street outside. My name's DCI Briggs and I'm your friendly yet long-suffering boss in this little caper. Crusty and prone to outbursts of temper yet secretly supportive, I will have to suspend Jack at least once before the story is over.'

'How do you do?' I spluttered.

'Excellent!' cried Briggs, shaking my hand gratefully. 'Mary told me you're with Jurisdiction. Is that true?'

'Yes.'

'Any news about when the Council of Genres Book Inspectorate will be in?' he asked. 'It would be a help to know.'

'Council of Genres?' I echoed, trying not to let my ignorance show. 'I'm sorry, I've not spent that much time in the BookWorld.'

'An Outlander?' replied Briggs, eyes wide in wonderment. 'Here, in *Caversham Heights*?'

'Yes,' I admitted, 'I'm—'

'Tell me,' interrupted Briggs, 'what do waves look like when they crash on the shore?'

'Who's an Outlander?' echoed the pathologist, a middle-aged Indian woman who suddenly leaped to her feet and stared at me intently. 'You?'

'Y-es,' I admitted.

'I'm Dr Singh,' explained the pathologist, shaking my hand vigorously. 'I'm matter-of-fact, apparently without humour, like cats and people who like cats, don't suffer fools, yet on occasion I do exhibit a certain warmth. Tell me, do you think I'm anything like a *real* pathologist?'

'Of course,' I answered, trying to think of her brief appearances in the book.

'You see,' she went on, 'I've never seen a real pathologist and I'm really not sure what I'm meant to do.'

'You're doing fine,' I assured her.

'What about me?' asked Briggs. 'Do you think I need to develop more as a character? Am I like all those *real* people you rub shoulders with, or am I a bit one-dimensional?'

'Well—' I began.

'I knew it!' he cried unhappily. 'It's the hair, isn't it? Do you think it should be shorter? Longer? What about having a bizarre character trait? I've been learning the trombone — that would be unusual, yes?'

'Someone said there was an Outlander in the book—!' interrupted a uniformed officer, one of a pair who had just walked into the yard. 'I'm Unnamed Police Officer #1, this is my colleague, Unnamed Police Officer #2. Can I ask a question about the Outland?'

'Sure.'

'What's the point of alphabet soup?'

'I don't know.'

'Are you sure you're from the Outland?' he asked suspiciously, adding 'Then tell me this: why is there no singular for *scampi*?''

'I'm not sure.'

'You're *not* from the Outland,' said Unnamed Police Officer #1 sadly. 'You should be ashamed of yourself, lying and raising our hopes like that!'

'Very well,' I replied, covering my eyes. 'I'll prove it to you. Speak to me in turn but leave off your speech designators.'

'Okay,' said Unnamed Police Officer #1, 'who is this talking?'

'And who is this?' added Dr Singh.

'I said leave *off* your speech designators. Try again.'

'It's harder than you think,' sighed Unnamed Police Officer #1. 'Okay, here goes.'

There was a pause.

'Which one of us is talking now?'

'And who am I?'

'Mrs Singh first, Unnamed Police Officer #1 second. Was I correct?'

'Amazing!' murmured Mrs Singh. 'How do you do that?'

'I can recognise your voices. I have a sense of smell, too.'

'No kidding? Do you know anyone in publishing?'

'None who would help. My husband is, or was, an author, but his contacts wouldn't know me from Eve at present. I'm a SpecOps officer; I don't have much to do with contemporary fiction.'

'SpecOps?' queried UPO #2. 'What's that?'

'We're going to be scrapped, you know,' interrupted Briggs, 'unless we can get a publisher.'

'We could be broken down into letters,' added UPO #1 in a hushed tone, 'cast into the Text Sea; and I have a wife and two kids — or at least, in my backstory I do.'

'I can't help you,' I told them, 'I'm not even—'

'Places, please!' yelled Briggs so suddenly I jumped.

The pathologist and the two unnamed officers hurried back to their places and awaited Jack, who I could hear talking to someone in the house.

'Good luck,' hissed Briggs from the side of his mouth as he motioned me to sit on a low wall. 'I'll prompt you if you dry.'

'Thanks.'

DCI Briggs was sitting on a low wall with a plainclothes policewoman who busied herself taking notes and did not look up. Briggs stood as Jack entered and looked at his watch in an unobtrusive way. Jack answered the unasked question in the defensive, which he soon realised was a mistake

'I'm sorry, sir, I came here as quick as I could.'

Briggs grunted and waved a hand in the direction of the corpse.

'It looks like he died from gunshot wounds,' he said grimly, 'discovered dead at 8.47 this morning.'

'Anything else I need to know?' asked Spratt.

'A couple of points. First, the deceased is the nephew of crime boss Angel DeFablio, so I wanted someone good with the press in case the media decide to have a bonanza. Second, I'm giving you this job as a

favour. You're not exactly first seed with the seventh floor at the moment. There are some people who want to see you take a fall — and I don't want that to happen.'

'Is there a third point?'

'No one else is available.'

'I preferred it when there were only two.'

'Listen, Jack,' went on Briggs, 'you're a good officer if a little , sprung loaded at times and I want you on my team without any mishaps.'

'Is this where I say thank you?'

'You do. Mop it up nice and neat and give me an initial report as soon as you can. Okay?'

Briggs nodded in the direction of the young lady who had been waiting patiently.

'Jack, I want you to meet Thurs — I mean, DS Mary Jones.'

'Hello,' said Jack.

'Pleased to meet you, sir,' said the young woman.

'And you. Who are you working with?'

'Next — I mean *Jones* is your new Detective Sergeant,' said Briggs beginning to sweat for some inexplicable reason. 'Transferred with an Al record from Swindon.'

'Basingstoke,' corrected Mary.

'Sorry. *Basingstoke*.'

'No offence to DS Jones, sir, but I was hoping for Butcher, Spooner or—'

'Not possible, Jack,' said Briggs in the tone of voice that made arguing useless. 'Well, I'm off. I'll leave you here with, er—'

'Jones.'

'Yes, Jones, so you can get acquainted. Remember: I need that report as soon as possible. Got it?'

Jack did indeed get it and Briggs departed.

He shivered in the cold and looked at the young DS again.

'Mary Jones, eh?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What have you found out so far?'

She dug in her pocket for a notebook, couldn't find it so counted the points off on her fingers instead.

'Deceased's name is Sonny DeFablio.'

There was a pause. Jack didn't say anything so Jones, now slightly startled, continued as though he had.

'Time of death? Too early to tell. Probably 3 a.m. last night, give or take an hour. We'll know more when we get the corpse. Gun? We'll know when...'

'... Jack, are you okay?'

He had sat down wearily and was staring at the ground, head in hands.

I looked around but Dr Singh, her assistants and the unnamed officers were busily getting on with their parts, unwilling, it seemed, to get embroiled — or perhaps they were just embarrassed.

'I can't do this any more,' muttered Jack.

'Sir,' I persisted, trying to ad-lib, **'do you want to see the body or can we remove it?'**

'What's the use?' sobbed the crushed protagonist. **'No one is reading us; it doesn't matter.'**

I placed my hand on his shoulder.

'I've *tried* to make it more interesting,' he sobbed, **'but nothing seems to work. My wife won't speak to me, my job's on the line, drugs are flooding into Reading, and if I don't make the narrative even remotely readable then we all get demolished and there's nothing left at all except an empty hole on the bookshelf and the memory of a might-have-been in the head of the author.'**

'Your wife only left you because *all* loner maverick detectives have domestic problems,' I explained. **'I'm sure she loves you really.'**

'No, no, she doesn't,' he sobbed again. **'All is lost. Don't you see? It's customary for detectives to drive unusual cars and I had a wonderful 1924 Delage-Talbot Supersport. The idea was stolen and replaced with that dreadful Austin Allegro. If any *scenes* get deleted, we'll really be stuffed.'**

He looked up at me.

'What's your name?'

'Thursday Next.'

He perked up suddenly.

'Thursday Next? The Outlander Jurisfiction agent apprenticed to Miss Havisham Thursday Next?'

I nodded. News travels fast in the Well.

An excited gleam came into his eye.

'I read about you in *The Word*. Tell me, would you have any way of finding out when the Book Inspectorate are due to read our story? I've lined up seven three-dimensional B-2 freelancers to come in and give the book a bit of an edge — just for an hour or so. With their help we might be able to hang on to it; all I need to know is the *when*.'

'I'm sorry, Mr Spratt.' I sighed. 'I'm new to all this; what exactly is the Council of Genres?'

'They look after fictional legislature,' he replied. 'Dramatic conventions, mainly. A representative from every genre sits on the council — it is *they* who decide the conventions of storytelling and it is *they* — through the Book Inspectorate — who decide whether an unpublished book is to be kept — or demolished.'

'Oh,' I replied, realising that the BookWorld was governed by almost as many rules and regulations as my own, 'then I can't help you.'

'What about Text Grand Central? Do you know anyone there?'

TGC I *had* heard of: they monitored the books in the Great Library and passed any textual problems on to us at Jurisfiction, who were purely a policing agency — but I knew no more than that. I shook my head again.

'Blast!' he muttered, staring at the ground. 'I've applied to the C of G for a cross-genre makeover but you might as well try and speak to the Great Panjandrum himself.'

'Why don't you change the book from *within*?' I asked.

'Change without permission?' he replied, shocked at my suggestion. 'That would mean rebellion. I want to get the C of G's attention but not like that — we'd be crushed in less than a chapter!'

'But if the inspectorate haven't been round yet,' I said slowly, 'then how would they even know anything had changed?'

He thought about this for a moment.

'Easier said than done — if I start to fool with the narrative it might all collapse like a pack of cards!'

'Then start small,' I proposed, 'change *yourself* first. If that works, you can try to bend the plot slightly.'

'Y-esss,' said Jack slowly. 'What did you have in mind?'

'Give up the booze.'

'How did you know about my drink problem?'

'All maverick loner detectives with domestic strife have drink problems,' I commented. 'Give up the liquor and go home to your wife.'

'That's not how I've been written,' replied Jack slowly. 'I just can't do it — it would be going against type — the readers—!'

'Jack, there are no readers. And if you don't at least try what I suggest, there *never* will be any readers — or any Jack Spratt. But if things go well, you might even be in ... a sequel.'

'A sequel?' repeated Jack with a sort of dreamy look in his eyes. 'You mean — a Jack Spratt *series*?'

'Who knows,' I added, 'maybe even one day a boxed set.'

His eyes gleamed and he stood up.

'A boxed set,' he whispered, staring into the middle distance. 'It's up to me, isn't it?' he added in a slow voice.

'Yes. Change yourself, change the book — and soon, before it's too late, make the novel into something the Book Inspectorate will *want* to read.'

'Okay,' he said at last, 'beginning with the next chapter. Instead of arguing with Briggs about letting a suspect go without charging them, I'll take my ex-wife out to lunch.'

'No.'

'No?'

'No,' I affirmed. 'Not tomorrow or next chapter or even next page or paragraph — you're going to change *now*.'

'We can't!' he protested. 'There are at least nine more pages while you and I discuss the state of the body with Dr Singh and go through all that boring forensic stuff.'

'Leave it to me,' I told him. 'We'll jump back a paragraph or two. Ready?'

He nodded and we moved to the top of the previous page, just as Briggs was leaving.

Jack did indeed get it and Briggs departed.

He shivered in the cold and looked at the young DS again. 'Mary Jones, eh?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What have you found out so far?'

She dug in her pocket for a notebook, couldn't find it so counted the points off on her fingers instead.

'Deceased's name is Sonny DeFablo.'

'What else?'

'Your wife phoned.'

'She ... did?'

'Yes. Said it was important.'

'I'll drop by this evening.'

'She said it was very urgent,' stressed Jones.

'Hold the fort for me, would you?'

'Certainly, sir.'

Jack walked from the crime scene leaving Jones with Dr Singh.

'Right,' said Mary, 'what have we got? ...'

* * *

We ran the scene together, Dr Singh telling me all the information that she was more used to relating to Jack. She went into a huge amount of detail regarding the time of death and a more-than-graphic explanation of how she thought it had happened. Ballistics, trajectory, blood-splatter patterns, you name it. I was really quite glad when she finished and the chapter moved off to Jack's improvised meeting with his ex-wife. As soon as we were done, Dr Singh turned to me and said in an anxious tone:

'I hope you know what you're doing.'

'Not a clue.'

'Me neither,' replied the quasi-pathologist. 'You know that long speech I made just now about post-mortem bruising, angles of bullet entry and discoloration of body tissues—?'

'Yes?'

She leaned closer.

'Didn't understand a word. Eight pages of technical dialogue and haven't the foggiest what I'm talking about. I only trained at Generic college as a mother figure in domestic potboilers. If I'd known I was to be drafted to *this* I would have spent a few hours in a Cornwell. Do you have any clues as to what I'm actually meant to do?'

I rummaged in her bag and brought out a large thermometer.

'Try this.'

'What do I do with it?'

I pointed.

'You're *kidding* me,' replied Dr Singh, aghast.

OceanofPDF.com

3

Three witches, multiple choice and sarcasm

'Jurisdiction' is the name given to the policing agency that works inside books. Under a remit from the Council of Genres and working with the intelligence-gathering capabilities of Text Grand Central, the Prose Resource Operatives at Jurisdiction comprise a mixed bag of characters, most drawn from the ranks of fiction but some, like Harris Tweed and myself, from the real world. Problems in fiction are noticed by "spotters" employed at Text Grand Central, and from there relayed to the Bellman, a ten-yearly elected figure who runs Jurisdiction under strict

*guidelines laid down
by the Council of
Genres. Jurisfiction
has its own code of
conduct, technical
department, canteen,
and resident
washerwoman.'*

*THURSDAY NEXT
— The Jurisfiction
Chronicles*

Mrs Singh didn't waste the opportunity, and she gathered together several other trainee pathologists she knew from the Well. They all sat spellbound as I recounted the limited information I possessed. Exhausted, I managed to escape four hours later. It was evening when I finally got home. I opened the door to the flying boat and kicked off my shoes. Pickwick rushed up to greet me and tugged excitedly at my trouser leg. I followed her through to the living room and then had to wait while she remembered where she had left her egg. We finally found it rolled behind the hi-fi and I congratulated her, despite there being no change in its appearance.

I returned to the kitchen, *ibb* and *obb* had been studying Mrs Beeton all day, and *ibb* was attempting steak Diane with french fries. Landen used to cook that for me and I suddenly felt very lonesome and small, so far from home I might very well be on Pluto, *obb* was putting the final touches to a fully decorated four-tier wedding cake.

'Hello, *ibb*,' I said, 'how's it going?'

'How's what going?' replied the Generic in that annoying literal way in which they speak. 'And I'm *obb*.'

'Sorry — *obb*.'

'Why are you sorry? Have you done something?'

'Never mind.'

I sat down at the table and opened a package that had arrived. It was from Miss Havisham and contained the *Jurisfiction Standard Entrance*

Exam. Jurisdiction was the policing agency within fiction that I had joined almost by accident — I had wanted to get Jack Schitt out of 'The Raven' and getting involved with the agency seemed to be the best way to learn. But Jurisdiction had grown on me and I now felt strongly about maintaining the solidity of the written word. It was the same job I had undertaken at SpecOps, just from the other side. But it struck me that, on this occasion, Miss Havisham was wrong — I was not yet ready for full membership.

The hefty tome consisted of five hundred questions, nearly all of them multiple choice. I noticed that the exam was self-invigilating; as soon as I opened the book a clock in the top left-hand corner started to count down from two hours. They were mostly questions about literature, which I had no problem with. Jurisdiction law was trickier and I would probably need to consult Miss Havisham. I made a start and ten minutes later was pondering question forty-six: *Which of the following poets never used the outlawed word 'majestic' in their work?* when there was a knock at the door accompanied by a peal of thunder.

I closed the exam book and opened the door. On the jetty were three ugly old crones dressed in filthy rags. They had bony features, rough and warty skin, and they launched into a well-rehearsed act as soon as the door opened.

'When shall we three meet again?' said the first witch. 'In Thurber, Wodehouse, or in Greene?'

'When the hurly-burly's done,' added the second, 'when the story's thought and spun!'

There was a pause until the second witch nudged the third.

'That will be Eyre the set of sun,' she said quickly.

'Where the place?'

'Within the text.'

'There to meet with MsNext!'

They stopped talking and I stared, unsure of what I was meant to do.

'Thank you very much,' I replied, but the first witch snorted disparagingly and "wedged her foot in the door as I tried to close it.

'Prophecies, kind lady?' she asked as the other two cackled hideously.

'I really don't think so,' I answered, pushing her foot away. 'Perhaps another time.'

'All hail, MsNext! hail to thee, citizen of Swindon!'

'Really, I'm sorry — and I'm out of change.'

'All hail, MsNext, hail to thee, full Jurisdiction agent, thou shalt be!'

'If you don't go,' I began, starting to get annoyed, 'I'll—'

'All hail, MsNext, thou shalt be Bellman thereafter!'

'Sure I will. Go on, clear off, you imperfect speakers — bother someone else with your nonsense!'

'A shilling!' said the first. 'And we shall tell you more — or less, as you please.'

I closed the door despite their grumbling and went back to my multiple choice. I'd only just answered question forty-nine: *Which of the following is not a gerund?* when there was another knock at the door.

'Blast!' I muttered, getting up and striking my ankle on the table leg. It was the three witches again.

'I thought I told you—'

'Sixpence, then,' said the chief hag, putting out a bony hand.

'No,' I replied firmly, rubbing my ankle. 'I *never* buy anything at the door.'

They all started up then:

'Thrice to thine and thrice to mine, and thrice again, to make up—'

I shut the door again. I wasn't superstitious and had far more important things to worry about. I had just sat down again, sipped my tea and answered the next question: *Who wrote 'Toad of Toad Hall'?* when there was another rap at the door.

'Right,' I said to myself, marching across the room, 'I've had it with you three.'

I pulled open the door and said:

'Listen here, hag, I'm really not interested, nor ever will be in your ... Oh.'

I stared. Granny Next. If it had been Admiral Lord Nelson himself I don't think I could have been more surprised.

'Gran!?!' I exclaimed. 'What on earth are you doing here?'

She was dressed in a spectacular outfit of blue gingham, from her dress to her overcoat and even her hat, shoes and bag.

I hugged her. She smelt of Bodmin for Women. She hugged me in return in that sort of fragile way that very elderly people do. And she was elderly — a hundred and eight, at the last count.

'I have come to look after you, young Thursday,' she announced.

'Er — thank you, Gran,' I replied, wondering quite how she got here.

'You're going to have a baby and need attending to,' she added grandly.

'My suitcase is on the jetty and you're going to have to pay the taxi.'

'Of course,' I muttered, going outside and finding a yellow cab with *TransGenreTaxis* written on the door.

'How much?' I asked the cabby.

'Seventeen and six.'

'Oh yes?' I replied sarcastically. 'Took the long way round?'

'Trips to the the Well cost double,' said the cabby. 'Pay up or I'll make sure Jurisdiction hears about it.'

I handed him a pound and he patted his pockets.

'Sorry,' he said, 'have you got anything smaller? I don't carry much change.'

'Keep it,' I told him as his footnoterphone muttered something about a party often wanting to get out of Florence in *The Decameron*. I got a receipt and he vanished from view. I picked up Gran's suitcase and hauled it into the Sunderland.

'This is ibb and obb,' I explained, 'Generics billeted with me. The one on the left is ibb.'

'I'm obb.'

'Sorry. *That's* ibb and *that's* obb. This is my grandmother.'

'Hello,' said Granny Next, gazing at my two house guests.

'You're very old,' observed ibb.

'One hundred and eight,' announced Gran proudly. 'Do you two do anything but stare?'

'Not really,' said ibb.

'Plock,' said Pickwick, who had popped her head round the door. She ruffled her feathers excitedly and rushed up to greet Gran, who always seemed to have a few spare marshmallows about her.

'What's it like being old?' asked ibb, who was peering closely at the soft pink folds in Gran's skin.

'Death's adolescence,' replied Gran, 'but you know the worst part?'

Ibb and obb shook their heads.

'I'm going to miss my funeral by three days.'

'Gran!' I scolded. 'You'll confuse them — they tend to take things literally.'

It was too late.

'Miss your own funeral?' muttered ibb, thinking hard. 'How is that possible?'

'Think about it, ibb,' said obb. 'If she lived three days longer, she'd be able to *speak* at her own funeral — get it?'

'Of course,' said ibb, 'stupid of me.'

And they went into the kitchen, talking about Mrs Beeton and the best way to deal with amorous liaisons between the scullery maid and the boot boy — it must have been an old edition.

'When's supper?' asked Gran, looking disdainfully at the interior of the flying boat. 'I'm absolutely famished — but nothing tougher than suet, mind. The gnashers aren't what they were.'

I delicately helped her out of her gingham coat and sat her down at the table. Steak Diane would be like eating railway sleepers to her, so I started to make an omelette.

'Now, Gran,' I said, cracking some eggs into a bowl, 'I want you to tell me what you're doing here.'

'I need to be here to remind you of things you might forget, young Thursday.'

'Such as what?'

'Such as Landen. They eradicated my husband too, and the one thing I needed was someone to help me through it, so that's what I'm here to do for you.'

'I'm not going to forget him, Gran!'

'Yes,' she agreed in a slightly peculiar way, 'I'm here to make sure of it.'

'That's the *why*,' I persisted, 'but what about the *how*?'

'I too used to do the occasional job for Jurisdiction in the old days,' she explained, 'a long time ago, mind, but it was just one of many jobs that I did in my life — and not the strangest, either.'

'What *was*?' I asked, knowing in my heart that I really shouldn't be asking.

'Well, I was God Emperor of the Universe once,' she answered in the same manner in which she might have admitted to going to the pictures, 'and being a man for twenty-four hours was pretty weird.'

'Yes,' I replied, 'I expect it was.'

Ibb laid the table and we sat down to eat ten minutes later. As Gran sucked on her omelette I tried to make conversation with ibb and obb. The trouble was, neither of them had the requisite powers of social communication to assimilate anything from speech other than the bald facts it contained. I tried a joke I had heard from Bowden, my partner at SpecOps, about an octopus and a set of bagpipes. But when I delivered the punchline they both stared at me.

'Why would the bagpipes be dressed in pyjamas?' asked ibb.

'They weren't,' I replied, 'it was the tartan. That's just what the octopus *thought* they were.'

'I see,' said obb, not seeing at all. 'Would you mind going over it again?'

'That's it,' I said resolutely, 'you're going to have a personality if it kills me.'

'Kill you?' enquired ibb in all seriousness. 'Why would it kill you?'

I thought carefully. There had to be *somewhere* to begin. I clicked my fingers.

'Sarcasm,' I said. 'We'll start with that.'

They both looked at me blankly.

'Well,' I began, 'sarcasm is closely related to irony and implies a twofold view — a literal meaning yet a wholly *different* intention from what is said. For instance, if you were lying to me about who ate all the anchovies I left in the cupboard, and you *had* eaten them, you might say: "It wasn't me" and I would say: "*Sure* it wasn't," meaning I'm sure it *was* but in an ironic or sarcastic manner.'

'What's an anchovy?' asked ibb.

'A small and very salty fish.'

'I see,' replied ibb. 'Does sarcasm work with other things or is it only fish?'

'No, the stolen anchovies was only by way of an example. Now you try.'

'An anchovy?'

'No, you try some sarcasm.'

They continued to look at me blankly. I sighed.

'Like trying to nail jelly to the wall,' I muttered under my breath.

'Plock,' said Pickwick in her sleep as she gently keeled over. 'Plocketty-plock.'

'Sarcasm is better explained through humour,' put in Gran, who had been watching my efforts with interest. 'You know that Pickwick isn't too clever?'

Pickwick stirred in her sleep where she had fallen, resting on her head with her claws in the air.

'Yes, we know that,' replied ibb and obb, who were nothing if not observant.

'Well, if I were to say that it is easier to get yeast to perform tricks than Pickwick, I'm using mild sarcasm to make a joke.'

'Yeast?' queried ibb. 'But yeast has no intelligence.'

'*Exactly*,' replied Gran. 'So I am making a sarcastic observation that Pickwick has less brain power than yeast. You try.'

The Generic thought long and hard.

'So,' said ibb slowly, 'how about ... Pickwick is so clever she sits on the TV and stares at the sofa?'

'It's a start,' said Gran.

'And,' added ibb, gaining confidence by the second, 'if Pickwick went on *Mastermind*, she'd do best to choose "Dodo eggs" as her specialist subject.'

Obb was getting the hang of it, too.

'If a thought crossed her mind it would be the shortest journey on record—'

'Pickwick would cause a sensation at Oxford — but only from within a specimen jar—'

'All right, that's enough sarcasm,' I said quickly. 'I know Pickwick won't win "Brain of BookWorld" but she's a loyal companion.'

I looked across at Pickwick, who slid off the sofa and landed with a thump on the floor. She woke up and started plocking loudly at the sofa, coffee table, rug — in fact, anything close by — before calming down, climbing on top of her egg and falling asleep again.

'You did well, guys,' I said. 'Another time we'll tackle subtext.'

Ibb and obb went to their room soon afterwards, discussing how sarcasm was related to irony, and whether irony itself could be generated in

laboratory conditions. Gran and I chatted about home. Mother was very well, it seemed, and Joffy and Wilbur and Orville were as mad as ever. Gran, conscious of my dealings with Yorrick Kaine in the past, reported that Kaine had returned soon after the episode with the Glatissant at Volescamper Towers, lost his seat in the house and been back at the helm of his newspaper and publishing company soon after. I knew he was fictional and a danger to my world but couldn't see what to do about it from here. We talked into the night about the BookWorld, Landen, eradications and having children. Gran had had three herself so she told me all the stuff they don't tell you when you sign on the dotted line.

'Think of swollen ankles as trophies,' she said, somewhat unhelpfully.

That night I put Gran in my room and slept in the bedroom under the flight deck. I washed, undressed and climbed into bed, weary after the day's work. I lay there, staring at the pattern of reflected light dancing on the ceiling, and thought of my father, Emma Hamilton, Jack Spratt, Dream Topping and babies. I was meant to be here resting but the demolition problem of *Caversham Heights* couldn't be ignored — I could have moved but I liked it here, and besides, I had done enough running away already. The arrival of Gran had been strange, but since much was odd here in the Well, weird had become commonplace. If things carried on like this the dull and meaningless would become items of spectacular interest.

Landen Parke-Laine

'They say that no one really dies until you forget them, and in Landen's case it was especially true. Since Landen had been eradicated I had discovered that I could bring him back to life in my memories and my dreams, and I had begun to look forward to falling asleep and returning to treasured moments which we could share, albeit only fleetingly.

'Landen lost a leg to a landmine and his best friend to a military blunder. The friend had been my brother, Anton — and Landen testified against him at the hearing that followed the disastrous "Charge

*of the Light
Armoured Brigade"
in 1973. My brother
was blamed for the
debacle, Landen was
honourably
discharged and I
was awarded the
Crimea Star for
gallantry. We didn't
speak for ten years,
and we were married
two months ago.
Some people say it
was an unorthodox
romance — but I
never noticed this
myself*

*THURSDAY NEXT
— TheJurisdiction
Chronicles*

That night, I went to the Crimea again. Not, you might think, the most obvious port of call in my sleep. The peninsula had been a constant source of anguish in my waking hours: a time of stress, of pain, and violent death. But the Crimea was where I met Landen, and where we fell in love. The memories were more dear to me now because it had never happened, and it was for this reason that the Crimea's sometimes painful recollections came back to me. I relaxed and was transported in the arms of Morpheus to the Black Sea peninsula, twelve years before.

No shots had been fired for ten years when I arrived on the peninsula in the May of 1973 although the conflict itself had been going for a hundred and twenty years. I was attached to the 3rd Wessex Tank Light Armoured Brigade as a driver — I was twenty-three years old and drove thirteen tons

of armoured vehicle under the command of Major Phelps, who was later to lose his lower arm and his mind during a badly timed charge into the massed Russian artillery. In my youthful *naïveté*, I had thought the Crimea was fun — a notion that was soon to change.

'Report to the vehicle pool at fourteen hundred hours,' I was told one morning by our sergeant, a kindly yet brusque man by the name of Tozer. He would survive the charge but be lost in a training accident eight years later. I was at his funeral. He was a good man.

'Any idea what I'll be doing, Sarge?' I asked.

Sergeant Tozer shrugged.

'Special duties. I was told to allocate someone intelligent — but they weren't available, so you'll have to do.'

I laughed.

'Thanks, Sarge.'

I dreamed this scene more often these days, and the reason was clear — it was the first time Landen and I spent any time together. My brother Anton was also serving out here and he had introduced us a few weeks before — but Anton did that a lot. Today I was to drive Landen in an armoured scout car to an observation post overlooking a valley in which a build-up of Imperial Russian artillery had been reported. We referred to the incident as 'our first date'.

I arrived for duty and was told to sign for a Dingo scout car, a small two-person armoured vehicle with enough power to get out of trouble quick — or into it, depending on one's level of competency. I duly picked up the scout car and waited for nearly an hour, standing in a tent with a lot of other drivers, talking and laughing, drinking tea and telling unlikely stories. It was a chilly day but I was glad I was doing this instead of daily orders, which generally meant cleaning up the camp and other tedious tasks.

'Corporal Next?' said an officer who poked his head into the tent. 'Drop the tea — we're off!'

He wasn't handsome but he was *intriguing*, and, unlike many of the officers, he seemed to have a certain relaxed manner about him.

'Good morning, sir,' I said, unsure of whether he remembered me. I needn't have worried. I didn't know it yet, but he had specifically asked Sergeant Tozer for me. He was intrigued too, but fraternising on active duty was a subtle art. The penalties could be severe.

I led him to where the Dingo was parked and climbed in. I pressed the starter and the engine rumbled into life. Landen lowered himself into the commander's seat.

'Seen Anton recently?' he asked.

'He's up the coast for a few weeks,' I told him.

'Ah,' he replied, 'you made me fifty pounds when you won the ladies' boxing last weekend. I'm very grateful.'

I smiled and thanked him but he wasn't paying me any attention — he was busy studying a map.

'We're going here, Corporal.'

I studied the chart. It was the closest to the front lines I'd ever been. To my shame, I found the perceived danger somewhat intoxicating. Landen sensed it.

'It's not as wildly exciting as you might think, Next. I've been up there twenty times and was only shelled once.'

'What was it like?'

'Disagreeably noisy. Take the road to Balaclava — I'll tell you when to turn right.'

So we bumped off up the road, past a scene of such rural tranquillity that it was hard to imagine that two armies were facing each other not ten miles away with enough firepower to lay the whole peninsula to waste.

'Ever seen a Russian?' he asked as we passed military trucks supporting the front-line artillery batteries; their sole job was to lob a few shells towards the Russians — just to show we were still about.

'Never, sir.'

'They look just like you and me, you know.'

'You mean they don't wear big furry hats and have snow on their shoulders?'

The sarcasm wasn't wasted.

'Sorry,' he said, 'I didn't mean to patronise. How long have you been out here?'

'Two weeks.'

'I've been here two *years*,' said Landen, 'but it might as well be two weeks. Take a right at the farmhouse just ahead.'

I slowed down and cranked the wheel round to enter the dusty farm track. The springs on a Dingo are quite hard — it was a jarring ride along

the track, which passed empty farm buildings, all bearing the scars of long-past battles. There was old and rusting armour and other war debris lying abandoned in the countryside, reminders of just how long this static war had been going on. Rumour had it that in the middle of no man's land there were still artillery pieces dating from the nineteenth century. We stopped at a checkpoint, Landen showed his pass and we drove on, a soldier joining us up top 'as a precaution'. He had a second ammunition clip taped to the first in his weapon — always a sign of someone who expected trouble — and a dagger in his boot. He had only fourteen words and twenty-one minutes left before he was to die in a small spinney of trees that in happier times might have been a good place for a picnic. The bullet would enter below his left shoulder blade, deflect against his spine, go straight through his heart and exit three inches below his armpit, whereupon it would lodge in the fuel gauge of the Dingo. He would die instantly and I would relate what happened to his parents eighteen months later. His mother would cry and his father would thank me with a dry throat. But the soldier didn't know that. These were my memories, not his.

'Russian spotter plane!' hissed the doomed soldier.

Landen ordered me back to the trees. The soldier had eleven words left. He would be the first person I saw killed in the conflict but by no means the last. As a civvy you are protected from such unpleasanties but in the forces it is commonplace — and you never get used to it.

I pulled the wheel hard over and doubled back towards the spinney as fast as I could. We halted under the protective cover of the trees and watched the small observation plane from the dappled shade. We didn't know it at the time but an advance party of Russian commandos were pushing towards the lines in our direction. The observation post we were heading for had been overrun half an hour previously and the commandos were being supported by the spotter plane we had seen — and behind them, twenty Russian battle tanks with infantry in support. The attack was to fail, of course, but only by virtue of the VHF wireless set carried in the Dingo. I would drive us out of there and Landen would call in an air strike. That was the way it had happened. That was the way it had *always* happened. Brought together in the white heat and fear of combat. But as we sat beneath the cover of the birch trees, huddled down in the scout car, the only sound the coo of a partridge and the gentle thrum of the Dingo's engine, we

knew nothing — and were concerned only that the spotter plane that wheeled above us would delay our arrival at the OP.

'What's it doing?' whispered Landen, shielding his eyes to get a better look.

'Looks like a Yak-12,' replied the soldier.

Six words left and under a minute. I had been looking up with them but now glanced out of the hatch at the front of the scout car. My heart missed a beat as I saw a Russian run and jump into a natural hollow a hundred yards in front of the Dingo.

'Russkie! I gasped. 'Hundred yards twelve o'clock!'

I reached up to close the viewing hatch but Landen grabbed my wrist.

'Not yet!' he whispered. 'Put her in gear.'

I did as I was told as Landen and the soldier twisted around to look.

'What have you got?' hissed Landen.

'Five, maybe six,' the soldier whispered back, 'heading this way.'

'Me too,' muttered Landen. 'Go, Corporal, go!'

I revved the engine, dropped the clutch and the Dingo lunged forward. Almost instantaneously there was a rasp of machine-gun fire as the Russians opened up. To them, we were a surprise ruined. I heard the closer rattle of gunfire as our soldier replied, along with the sporadic crack of a pistol that I knew was Landen. I didn't close the steel viewing hatch; I needed to be able to see as much as I could. The scout car bounced across the track and swerved before gathering speed with the metallic *spang* of small-arms fire hitting the armour plate. I felt a weight slump against my back and a bloodied arm fell into my vision.

'Keep going!' shouted the soldier. 'And don't stop until I say!' He let go another burst of fire, took out the spent clip, knocked the new magazine on his helmet, reloaded and fired again.

'That wasn't how it happened—!' I muttered aloud, the soldier having gone way over his allotted time and word count. I looked at the bloodied hand that had fallen against me. A feeling of dread began to gnaw slowly inside me. The fuel gauge was still intact — shouldn't it have been shattered when the soldier was shot? Then I realised. The soldier had survived and the *officer* was dead.

I sat bolt upright in bed, covered in sweat and breathing hard. The strength of the memories had lessened with the years but here was something new, something unexpected. I replayed the images in my head, watching the bloodstained hand fall again and again. It all felt so horribly real. But there was something, just there outside my grasp, something that I should know but didn't — a loss that I couldn't explain, an absence of some sort I couldn't place—

'Landen,' said a soft voice in the darkness, 'his name was *Landen*.'

'Landen—!' I cried. 'Yes, yes, his name was Landen.'

'And he didn't die in the Crimea. The soldier did.'

'No, no, I just remembered him dying—!'

'You remembered *wrong*.'

It was Gran, sitting beside me in her gingham nightie. She held my hand tightly and gazed at me through her spectacles, her grey hair adrift and hanging down in wispy strands. And with her words, I began to remember. Landen *had* survived — he must have done in order to call up the air strike. But even now, awake, I could remember him lying dead beside me. It didn't make sense.

'He didn't die?'

'No.'

I picked up the picture I had sketched of him from the bedside table.

'Did I ever see him again?' I asked, studying the unfamiliar face.

'Oh, yes,' replied Gran. 'Lots and lots. In fact, you married him.'

'I did, didn't I?' I cried, tears coming to my eyes as the memories returned. 'At the Blessed Lady of the Lobster in Swindon! Were you there?'

'Yes,' said Gran, 'wouldn't have missed it for the world.'

I was still confused.

'What happened to him? Why isn't he with me now?'

'He was eradicated,' replied Gran in a low voice, 'by Lavoisier — and Goliath.'

'I remember,' I answered, the darkness in my mind made light as a curtain seemed to draw back and everything that had happened flooded in. 'Jack Schitt. Goliath. They eradicated Landen to blackmail me. But I failed. I didn't get him back — and that's why I'm here.'

I stopped.

'But ... but how could I possibly forget him? I was only thinking about him yesterday! What's happening to me?'

'It's Aornis, my dear,' explained Gran, 'she is a mnemonomorph. A memory-changer. Remember the trouble you had with her back home?'

I did, now she mentioned it. Gran's prompting broke the delicate veil of forgetfulness that cloaked her presence in my mind — and everything about Hades' little sister returned to me as though hidden from my conscious memory. Aornis, who had sworn revenge for her brother's death at my hands; Aornis, who could manipulate memories as she chose; Aornis, who had nearly brought about a gooey Dream Topping armageddon. But Aornis wasn't from here. She lived in—

'—the *real* world,' I murmured out loud. 'How can she be here, inside fiction? In *Caversham Heights* of all places?'

'She isn't,' replied Gran. 'Aornis is only in your mind. It isn't all of her, either — simply a mindworm, a sort of mental virus. She is — resourceful, adaptable and spiteful; I know of no one else who can have an independent life within someone else's memory.'

'So how do I get rid of her?'

I have some experience of mnemonomorphs from my youth,' replied Gran, 'but some things you have to defeat on your own. Stay on your toes and we will speak often and at length.'

'Then this isn't over yet?'

'No,' replied Gran sadly, shaking her head, 'I wish it were. Be prepared for a shock, young Thursday — tell me Landen's name in full.'

'Don't be ridiculous!' I scoffed. 'It's Landen Parke—'

I stopped as a cold fear welled up inside my chest. Surely I could remember my own husband's name? But try as I might, I could not. I looked at Gran.

'Yes, I do know,' she replied, 'but I'm not going to tell you. When you remember, you will know you have won.'

The Well of Lost Plots

'Footnoterphone: Although the idea of using footnotes as a communication medium was suggested by Dr Faustus as far back as 1622, it wasn't until 1856 that the first practical footnoterphone was demonstrated. By 1895 an experimental version was built into *Hard Times*, and within the next three years most of Dickens was connected. The system was expanded rapidly, culminating in the first trans-genre trunk line, opened with much fanfare in 1915 between *Human Drama* and *Crime*. The network has been expanded and improved ever since, but just

recently the advent
of mass
junkfootnoterphones
and the deregulation
of news and
entertainment
channels have
almost clogged the
system. A
mobilefootnoterphon
e network was
introduced in 1985.'

UA OF W CAT —
The Jurisfiction
Guide to the Creat
Library (glossary)

Gran had got up early to make my breakfast and I found her asleep in the armchair with the kettle almost molten on the stove and Pickwick firmly ensnared in her knitting. I made some coffee and cooked myself breakfast despite feeling nauseous. ibb and obb wandered in a little later and told me they had 'slept like dead people' and were so hungry they could 'eat a horse between two mattresses'. They were just tucking in to my breakfast when there was a rap at the door. It was Akrid Snell, one half of the Perkins & Snell series of detective fiction. He was about forty, dressed in a sharp fawn suit with a matching fedora and with a luxuriant red moustache. He was one of Jurisfiction's lawyers and had been appointed to represent me; I was still facing a charge of fiction infraction after I changed the ending of *Jane Eyre*.

'Hello!' he said. 'Welcome to the BookWorld!'

'Thank you. Are you well?'

'Just dandy!' he replied. 'I got Oedipus off the incest charge. Technicality, of course — he didn't know it was his mother at the time.'

'Of course,' I remarked, 'and Fagin?'

'Still due to hang, I'm afraid,' he said more sadly. 'The Gryphon is on to it — he'll find a way out, I'm sure.'

He was looking around the shabby flying boat as he spoke.

'Well!' he said at last. 'You do make some odd decisions. I've heard the latest Daphne Farquitt novel is being built just down the shelf — it's set in the eighteenth century and would be a lot more comfortable than this. Did you see the review of my latest book?'

He meant the book he was featured in, of course — Snell was fictional from the soles of his brogues to the crown of his fedora and, like most fictioneers, a little sensitive about it. I had read the review of *Wax Lyrical for Death* and it was pretty scathing; tact was of the essence in situations like these.

'No, I think I must have missed it.'

'Oh!' he replied. 'Well, it was really ... really quite good, actually. I was glowingly praised as: "Snell is ... very good ... well rounded is ... the phrase I would use" and the book itself was described as: "Surely the biggest piece of ... 1986." There's talk of a boxed set, too. Listen, I wanted to tell you that your fiction infraction trial will probably be next week. I tried to get another postponement but Hopkins is nothing if not tenacious; place and time to be decided upon.'

'Should I be worried?' I asked, thinking about the last time I had faced a court here in the BookWorld. It had been in Kafka's *The Trial* and had turned out predictably unpredictable.

'Not really,' admitted Snell. 'Our "strong readership approval" defence should count for something — after all, you did actually do it, so just plain lying might not help so much after all. Listen,' he went on without stopping for breath, 'Miss Havisham asked me to introduce you to the wonders of the Well — she would have been here this morning but she's on a grammasite extermination course.'

'We saw a grammasite in *Great Expectations*,' I told him.

'So I heard. You can never be too careful as far as grammasites are concerned.' He looked at ibb and obb, who were just finishing off my bacon and eggs. 'Is this breakfast?'

I nodded.

'Fascinating! I've always wondered what a breakfast looked like. In our books we have twenty-three dinners, twelve lunches and eighteen afternoon

teas — but no breakfasts.' He paused for a moment. 'And why is orange jam called marmalade, do you suppose?'

I told him I didn't know and passed him a mug of coffee.

'Do you have any Generics living in your books?' I asked.

'A half-dozen or so at any one time,' he replied, spooning in some sugar and staring at Ibb and Obb, who, true to form, stared back. 'Boring bunch until they develop a personality, then they can be quite fun. Trouble is, they have an annoying habit of assimilating themselves into a strong leading character, and it can spread among them like a rash. They used to be billeted en masse but that all changed after we lodged six thousand Generics inside *Rebecca*. In under a month all but eight had become Mrs Danvers. Listen, I don't suppose I could interest you in a couple of housekeepers, could I?'

'I don't think so,' I replied, recalling Mrs Danvers' slightly abrasive personality.

'Don't blame you,' replied Snell with a laugh.

'So now it's only limited numbers per novel?'

'You learn fast. We had a similar problem with Merlins. We've had aged-male-bearded-wizard-mentor types coming out of our ears for years.'

He leaned closer.

'Do you know how many Merlins the Well of Lost Plots has placed over the past fifty years?'

'Tell me.'

'Nine thousand!' he breathed. 'We even altered plot lines to include older male mentor figures! Do you think that was wrong?'

'I'm not sure,' I said, slightly confused.

'At least the Merlin type is a popular character,' added Snell. 'Stick a new hat on him and he can appear pretty much anywhere. Try getting rid of thousands of Mrs Danvers. There isn't a huge demand for creepy fifty-something housekeepers; even buy-two-get-one-free deals didn't help — we use them on anti-mispeeling duty, you know. A sort of army.'

'What's it like?' I asked.

'How do you mean?'

'Being fictional.'

'Ah!' replied Snell slowly. 'Yes — fictional.'

I realised too late that I had gone too far — it was how I imagined a dog would feel if you brought up the question of distemper in polite conversation.

'I forgive your inquisitiveness, Miss Next, and since you are an Outlander I will take no offence. If I were you I shouldn't enquire too deeply about the past of fictioneers. We all aspire to be ourselves, an original character in a litany of fiction so vast that we know we cannot. After basic training at St Tabularasa's I progressed to the Dupin School for Detectives; I went on field trips around the works of Hammett, Chandler and Sayers before attending a postgraduate course at the Agatha Christie Finishing School. I would have liked to have been an original but I was born seventy years too late for that.'

He stopped and paused for reflection. I was sorry to have raised the point. It can't be easy, being an amalgamation of all that has been written before.

'Right!' he said, finishing his coffee. 'That's enough about me. Ready?'

I nodded.

'Then let's go.'

So, taking my hand, he transported us both out of *Caversham Heights* and into the endless corridors of the Well of Lost Plots.

The Well was similar to the Library as regards the fabric of the building — dark wood, thick carpet, tons of shelves — but here the similarity ended. Firstly, it was *noisy*. Tradesmen, artisans, technicians and Generics all walked about the broad corridors appearing and vanishing as they moved from book to book, building, changing and deleting to the author's wishes. Crates and packing cases lay scattered about the corridor and people ate, slept and conducted their business in shops and small houses built in the manner of an untidy shanty town. Advertising hoardings and posters were everywhere, promoting some form of goods or services unique to the business of writing.^[5]

'I think I'm picking up junk footnoterphone messages, Snell,' I said above the hubbub. 'Should I be worried?'

'You get them all the time down here,' he replied. 'Ignore them — and never pass on chain footnotes.'^[6]

We were accosted by a stout man wearing a sandwich board advertising bespoke plot devices 'for the discerning wordsmith'.

'No thank you,' yelled Snell, taking me by the arm and walking us to a quieter spot between Dr Forthright's Chapter Ending Emporium and the Premier Mentor School.

'There are twenty-six floors in the Well,' he told me, waving a hand towards the bustling crowd. 'Most of them are chaotic factories of fictional prose like this one but the twenty-sixth sub-basement has an entrance to the Text Sea — we'll go down there and see them offloading the scrawltrawlers one evening.'

'What do they unload?'

'Words,' smiled Snell, 'words, words and more words. The building blocks of fiction, the DNA of Story.'

'But I don't see any books being written,' I observed, looking around.

He chuckled.

'You Outlanders! Books may *look* like nothing more than words on a page but they are actually an infinitely complex Imagino-Transference technology that translates odd inky squiggles into pictures inside your head — we're currently using Book Operating System V8.3. Not for long, though — Text Grand Central want to upgrade the system.'

'Someone mentioned UltraWord™ on the news last night,' I observed.

'Fancy-pants name. It's BOOK V9 to me and you. WordMaster Libris should be giving us a presentation shortly. UltraWord™ is being tested as we speak — if it's as good as they say it is, books will never be the same again!'

'Well,' I sighed, trying to get my head around this idea, 'I had always thought novels were just, well, *written*.'

'*Write* is only the word we use to describe the recording process,' replied Snell as we walked along. 'The Well of Lost Plots is where we interface the writer's imagination with the characters and plots so that it will make sense in the reader's mind. After all, reading is arguably a far more creative and imaginative process than writing; when the reader creates emotion in their head, or the colours of the sky during the setting sun, or the smell of a warm summer's breeze on their face, they should reserve as much praise for themselves as they do for the writer — perhaps more.'

This was a new approach; I ran the idea around in my head.

'Really?' I replied, slightly doubtfully.

'Of course!' Snell laughed. '*Surf pounding the shingle* wouldn't mean diddly unless you'd seen the waves cascade on to the foreshore, or felt the breakers tremble the beach beneath your feet, now, would it?'

'I suppose not.'

'Books,' said Snell, 'are a kind of magic.'

I thought about this for a moment and looked around at the chaotic fiction factory. My husband *was* or *is* a novelist — I had always wanted to know what went on inside his head and this, I figured, was about the nearest I'd ever get.^[7] We walked on, past a shop called 'A Minute Passed'. It sold descriptive devices for marking the passage of time — this week they had a special on Seasonal Changes.

'What happens to the books which are unpublished?' I asked wondering whether the characters in *Caversham Heights* really had so much to worry about.

'The failure rate is pretty high,' admitted Snell, 'and not just for reasons of dubious merit. *Bunyan's Bootscraper* by John McSquurd is one of the best books ever written but it's never been out of the author's hands. Most of the dross, rejects or otherwise unpublished just languish down here in the Well until they are broken up for salvage. Others are so bad they are just demolished — the words are pulled from the pages and tossed into the Text Sea.'

'All the characters are just recycled like waste cardboard or something?'

Snell paused and coughed politely.

'I shouldn't waste too much sympathy on the one-dimensionals, Thursday. You'll run yourself ragged and there really isn't the time or resources to recharacterise them into anything more interesting.'

'Mr Snell, sir?'

It was a young man in an expensive suit, and he carried what looked like a very stained pillowcase with something heavy in it about the size of a melon.

'Hello, Alfred!' said Snell, shaking the man's hand. 'Thursday, this is Garcia — he has been supplying the Perkins & Snell series of books with intriguing plot devices for over ten years. Remember the unidentified torso

found floating in the Humber in *Dead among the Living*? Or the twenty-year-old corpse discovered with the bag of money bricked up in the spare room in *Requiem for a Safecracker*?

'Of course!' I said, shaking the technician's hand. 'Good intriguing page-turning stuff. How do you do?'

'Well, thank you,' replied Garcia, turning back to Snell after smiling politely. 'I understand the next Perkins & Snell novel is in the pipeline and I have a little something that might interest you.'

He held the bag open and we looked inside. It was a head. More importantly, a *severed* head.

A head in a bag?' queried Snell with a frown, looking closer.

'Indeed,' murmured Garcia proudly, 'but not *any* old head-in-a-bag. This one has an intriguing tattoo on the nape of the neck. You can discover it in a skip, outside your office, in a deceased suspect's deep-freeze — the possibilities are endless.'

Snell's eyes flashed excitedly. It was the sort of thing his next book needed after the critical savaging of *Wax Lyrical for Death*.

'How much?' he asked.

'Three hundred,' ventured Garcia.

'Three hundred?!' exclaimed Snell. 'I could buy a dozen head-in-a-bag plot devices with that and still have change for a missing Nazi gold consignment.'

Garcia laughed. 'No one's using the old "missing Nazi gold consignment" plot device any more. If you don't want the head you can pass — I can sell heads pretty much anywhere I like. I just came to you first because we've done business before and I like you.'

Snell thought for a moment.

'A hundred and fifty.'

'Two hundred.'

'One seven five.'

'Two hundred and I'll throw in a case of mistaken identity, a pretty female double agent and a missing microfilm.'

'Done!'

'Pleasure doing business with you,' said Garcia as he handed over the head and took the money in return. 'Give my regards to Mr Perkins, won't you?'

He smiled, shook hands with us both, and departed.

'Oh, boy!' exclaimed Snell, excited as a kid with a new bicycle. 'Wait until Perkins sees this! Where do you think we should find it?'

I thought in all honesty that 'head-in-a-bag' plot devices were a bit lame, but being too polite to say so, I said instead:

'I liked the deep-freeze idea, myself.'

'Me too!' he enthused as we passed a small shop whose painted headboard read: *Backstories built to order. No job too difficult. Painful childhoods a speciality.*

'Backstories?'

'Sure. Every character worth their salt has a backstory. Come on in and have a look.'

We stooped and entered the low doorway. The interior was a workshop, small and smoky. There was a workbench in the middle of the room liberally piled with glass retorts, test tubes and other chemical apparatus; the walls, I noticed, were lined with shelves that held tightly stoppered bottles containing small amounts of colourful liquids, all with labels describing varying styles of backstory, from one named *idyllic childhood* to another entitled *valiant war record*.

'This one's nearly empty,' I observed, pointing to a large bottle with: *Misguided feelings of guilt over the death of a loved one/partner ten years previously* written on the label.

'Yes,' said a small man in a corduroy suit so lumpy it looked as though the tailor was still inside doing alterations, 'that one's been quite popular recently. Some are hardly used at all. Look above you.'

I looked up at the full bottles gathering dust on the shelves above. One was labelled *Studied squid in Sri Lanka* and another *Apprentice Welsh mole-catcher*.

'So what can I do for you?' enquired the backstoryist, gazing at us happily and rubbing his hands. 'Something for the lady? Ill-treatment at the hands of sadistic stepsisters? Traumatic incident with a wild animal? No? We've got a deal this week on unhappy love affairs; buy one and you get a younger brother with a drug problem at no extra charge.'

Snell showed the merchant his Jurisdiction badge.

'Business call, Mr Grnksghty — this is apprentice Next.'

'Ah!' he said, deflating slightly. 'The law.'

'Mr Grnksghty here used to write backstories for the Brontës and Thomas Hardy,' explained Snell, placing his bag on the floor and sitting on a table edge.

'Ah, yes!' replied the man, gazing at me over the top of a pair of half-moon spectacles. 'But that was a long time ago. Charlotte Brontës, now she *was* a writer. A lot of good work for her, some of it barely used—'

'Yes, speaking,' interrupted Snell, staring vacantly at the array of glassware on the table. 'I'm with Thursday down in the Well ... What's up?'

He noticed us both staring at him and explained:

'Footnoterphone. It's Miss Havisham.'

'It's so rude,' muttered Mr Grnksghty. 'Why can't he go outside if he wants to talk on one of those things?'

'It's probably nothing but I'll go and have a look,' said Snell, staring into space. He turned to look at us, saw Mr Grnksghty glaring at him and waved absently before going outside the shop, still talking.

'Where were we, young lady?'

'You were talking about Charlotte Brontë ordering backstories and then not using them.'

'Oh, yes.' The man smiled, delicately turning a tap on the apparatus and watching a small drip of an oily coloured liquid fall into a flask. 'I made the most wonderful backstory for both Edward and Bertha Rochester, but do you know she only used a very small part of it?'

'That must have been very disappointing.'

'It was.' He sighed. 'I am an artist, not a technician. But it didn't matter. I sold it lock, stock and barrel a few years back to *The Wide Sargasso Sea*. Harry Flashman from *Tom Brown's Schooldays* went the same way. I had Mr Pickwick's backstory for years but couldn't make a sale — I donated it to the Jurisfiction museum.'

'What do you make a backstory out of, Mr Grnksghty?'

'Treacle, mainly,' he replied, shaking the flask and watching the oily substance change to a gas, 'and memories. *Lots* of memories. In fact, the treacle is really only there as a binding agent. Tell me, what do you think of this upgrade to Ultra Word™?'

'I have yet to hear about it properly,' I admitted.

'I particularly like the idea of ReadZip™,' mused the small man, adding a drop of red liquid and watching the result with great interest. 'They

say they will be able to crush *War and Peace* into eighty-six words and still retain the scope and grandeur of the original.'

'Seeing is believing,' I replied.

'Not down here,' Mr Grnksghty corrected me. 'Down here, *reading* is believing.'

There was a pause as I took this in.

'Mr Grnksghty?'

'Yes?'

'How do you pronounce your name?'

At that moment Snell strolled back in.

'That was Miss Havisham,' he announced, retrieving his head. 'Thank you for your time, Mr Grnksghty — come on, we're off.'

Snell led me down the corridor past more shops and traders until we arrived at the bronze-and-wood elevators. The doors opened and several small street urchins ran out holding cleft sticks with a small scrap of paper wedged in them.

'Ideas on their way to the books-in-progress,' explained Snell as we stepped into the elevator. 'Trading must have just started. You'll find the Idea Sales and Loan department on the seventeenth floor.'

The elevator plunged rapidly downwards.

'Are you still being bothered by junk footnoterphones?'

'A little.'^[8]

'You'll get used to ignoring them.'

The bell sounded and the elevator doors slid open, introducing a chill wind. It was darker than the floor we had just visited and several disreputable-looking characters stared at us from the shadows. I moved to get out but Snell stopped me. He looked about and whispered:

'This is the twenty-second sub-basement. The roughest place in the Well. A haven for cut-throats, bounty hunters, murderers, thieves, cheats, shape-shifters, scene-stealers, brigands and plagiarists.'

'We don't tolerate these sorts of places back home,' I murmured.

'We *encourage* them here,' explained Snell. 'Fiction wouldn't be much fun without its fair share of scoundrels, and they have to live somewhere.'

I could feel the menace as soon as we stepped from the elevator.

Low mutters were exchanged among several hooded figures who stood close by, the faces obscured by the shadows, their hands bony and white. We walked past two large cats with eyes that seemed to dance with fire; they stared at us hungrily and licked their lips.

'Dinner,' said one, looking us both up and down. 'Shall we eat them together or one by one?'

'One by one,' said the second cat, who was slightly bigger and a good deal more fearsome, 'but we'd better wait until Big Martin gets here.'

'Oh yeah,' said the first cat, retracting his claws quickly, 'so we'd better.'

Snell had ignored the two cats completely; he glanced at his watch and said:

'We're going to the Slaughtered Lamb to visit a contact of mine. Someone has been cobbling together Plot Devices from half-damaged units that should have been condemned. It's not only illegal — it's dangerous. The last thing anyone needs is a *Do we cut the red wire or the blue wire?* plot device going off an hour too early and ruining the suspense — how many stories have you read where the bomb is defused with an hour to go?'

'Not many, I suppose.'

'You suppose right. We're here.'

The gloomy interior of the Slaughtered Lamb was shabby and smelt of beer. Three ceiling fans stirred the smoke-filled atmosphere and a band was playing a melancholy tune in one corner. The dark walls were spaced with individual booths where sombreness was an abundant commodity; the bar in the centre seemed to be the lightest place in the room and gathered there, like moths to a light, were an odd collection of people and creatures, all chatting and talking in low voices. The atmosphere in the room was so thick with dramatic cliches you could have cut it with a knife.

'See over there?' said Snell, indicating two men who were deep in conversation.

'Yes.'

'Mr Hyde talking to Blofeld. In the next booth are Von Stalhein and Wackford Squeers. The tall guy in the cloak is Emperor Zhark, tyrannical ruler of the known galaxy. The one with the spines is Mrs Tiggy-winkle — they'll be on a training assignment, just like us.'

'Mrs Tiggy-winkle is an apprentice?' I asked incredulously, staring at the large hedgehog who was holding a basket of laundry and sipping delicately at a dry sherry.

'No; Zhark is the apprentice — Tiggy's a full agent. She deals with children's fiction, runs the Hedge-pigs Society — and does our washing.'

'Hedge-pigs society?' I echoed. 'What does *that* do?'

'They advance hedgehogs in all branches of literature. Mrs Tiggy-winkle was the first to get star billing and she's used her position to further the lot of her species; she's got references into Kipling, Carroll, Aesop and four mentions in Shakespeare. She's also good with really stubborn stains — and never sings the cuffs.'

'*Tempest, Midsummer Night's Dream, Macbeth,*' I muttered, counting them off on my fingers. 'Where's the fourth?'

'*Henry VI Part 1, act four, scene 1: "hedge-born swaine".*'

'I always thought that was an insult, not a hedgehog,' I observed. '*Swaine* can be a *country lad* just as easily as a *pig* — perhaps more so.'

Snell sighed. 'Well, we've given her the benefit of the doubt — it helps with the indignity of being used as a croquet ball in *Alice*. Don't mention Tolstoy or Berlin when she's about, either — conversation with Tiggy is easier when you avoid talk of theoretical sociological divisions and stick to the question of washing temperatures for woollens.'

'I'll remember that,' I murmured. 'The bar doesn't look so bad with all those pot plants scattered around, does it?'

Snell sighed again.

'They're *Triffids*, Thursday. The big blobby thing practising golf swings with the Jabberwock is a Krell, and that rhino over there is Rataxis. Arrest anyone who tries to sell you Soma tablets, don't buy any Bottle Imps no matter how good the bargain, and above all *don't look at Medusa*. If Big Martin or the Questing Beast turn up, run like hell. Get me a drink and I'll see you back here in five minutes.'

'Right.'

He departed into the gloom and I was left feeling a bit ill at ease. I made my way to the bar and ordered two drinks. On the other side of the bar a third cat had joined the two I had seen previously. The newcomer pointed to me but the others shook their heads and whispered something in his ear. I turned the other way and jumped in surprise as I came face to face

with a curious creature that looked as though it had escaped from a bad science fiction novel — it was all tentacles and eyes. A smile may have flicked across my face because the creature said in a harsh tone:

'What's the problem, never seen a Thraal before?'

I didn't understand; it sounded like a form of **Courier Bold** but I wasn't sure so said nothing, hoping to brazen it out.

'Hey!' it said. 'I'm talking to you, Two-eyes.'

The altercation had attracted another man, who looked like the product of some bizarre genetic experiment gone hopelessly wrong.

'He says he doesn't like you.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I don't like you either,' said the man in a threatening tone, adding, as if I needed proof: 'I have the death sentence in seven genres.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I assured him, but this didn't seem to work.

'You're the one who'll be sorry!'

'Come, come, Nigel,' said a voice I recognised. 'Let me buy you a drink.'

This wasn't to the genetic experiment's liking, for he moved quickly to his weapon; there was a sudden blur of movement and in an instant I had my automatic pressed hard against his head — Nigel's gun was still in his shoulder holster. The bar went quiet.

'You're quick, girlie,' said Nigel. 'I respect that.'

'She's with me,' said the newcomer. 'Let's all just calm down.'

I lowered my gun and replaced the safety catch. Nigel nodded respectfully and returned to his place at the bar with the odd-looking alien.

'Are you all right?'

It was Harris Tweed. He was a fellow Jurisdiction agent and Outlander, just like me. The last time I had seen him was three days ago in Lord Volescamper's library when we flushed out the renegade fictioneer Yorrick Kaine after he had invoked the Questing Beast to destroy us. Tweed had been carried off by the exuberant bark of a bookhound and I had not seen him since.

'Thanks for that, Tweed,' I said. 'What did the alien thing want?'

'He was a Thraal, Thursday — speaking in **Courier Bold**, the traditional language of the Well. Thraals are not only all eyes and tentacles, but mostly mouth, too — he'd not have harmed you. Nigel, on the other

hand, has been known to go a step too far on occasion. What are you doing alone in the twenty-second sub-basement anyway?'

'I'm not alone. Havisham's busy so Snell's showing me around.'

'Ah,' replied Tweed, looking about. 'Does this mean you're taking your entrance exams?'

'Third of the way through the written already. Did you track down Kaine?'

'No. We went all the way to London, where we lost the scent. Bookhounds don't work so well in the Outland and besides, we have to get special permission to pursue PageRunners into the real world.'

'What does the Bellman say about that?'

'He's for it, of course,' replied Tweed, 'but the launch of UltraWord™ has dominated the Council of Genre's discussion time. We'll get round to Kaine in due course.'

I was glad of this; Kaine wasn't only an escapee from fiction but a dangerous right-wing politician back home. I would be only too happy to see him back inside whatever book he'd escaped from — permanently.

At that moment Snell returned and nodded a greeting to Tweed, who returned it politely.

'Good morning, Mr Tweed,' said Snell. 'Will you join us for a drink?'

'Sadly, I cannot,' replied Tweed. 'I'll see you tomorrow morning at roll-call, yes?'

'Odd sort of fellow,' remarked Snell as soon as Tweed had left. 'What was he doing here?'

I handed Snell his drink and we sat down in an empty booth. It was near the three cats and they stared at us hungrily while consulting a large recipe book.

'I had a bit of trouble at the bar and Tweed stepped in to help.'

'Good thing, too. Ever see one of these?'

He rolled a small globe across the table and I picked it up. It was a little like a Christmas decoration but a lot more sturdy. There was a small legend complete with a barcode and ID number printed on the side.

'*Suddenly, a Shot Rang Out! FAD/167945,*' I read aloud. 'What does it mean?'

'It's a stolen freeze-dried Plot Device. Crack it open and *pow!* — the story goes off at a tangent.'

'How do we know it's stolen?'

'It doesn't have a Council of Genres seal of approval. Without one, these things are worthless. Log it as evidence when you get back to the office.'

He took a sip of his drink, coughed and stared into the glass.

'W-what is this?'

'I'm not sure but mine is just as bad.'

'Not possible. Hello, Emperor, have you met Thursday-Next? Thursday, this is Emperor Zhark.'

There was a tall man swathed in a high-collared cloak standing next to our table. He had a pale complexion, high cheekbones and a small and very precise goatee. He looked at me with cold dark eyes and raised an eyebrow imperiously.

'Greetings,' he intoned indifferently. 'You must send my regards to Miss Havisham. Snell, how is my defence looking?'

'Not too good, Your Mercilessness,' he replied. 'Annihilating all the planets in the Cygnus cluster might not have been a very good move.'

'It's those bloody Rambosians,' Zhark said angrily. 'They threatened my empire. If I didn't destroy entire star systems no one would have any respect for me; it's for the good of galactic peace, you know — *stability*, and anyway, what's the point in possessing a devastatingly destructive death-ray if you can't use it?'

'Well, I should keep that to yourself. Can't you claim you were cleaning it when it went off or something?'

'I suppose,' said Zhark grudgingly. 'Is there a head in that bag?'

'Yes,' replied Snell. 'Do you want to have a look?'

'No thanks. Special offer, yes?'

'What?'

'Special offer. You know, clearance sale. How much did you pay for it?'

'Only a ... hundred,' he said, glancing at me. 'Less than that, actually.'

'You were done.' Zhark laughed. 'They're forty a half-dozen at CrimeScene, Inc. — with double stamps, too.'

Snell's face flushed with anger and he jumped up.

'The little scumbag!' he spat. 'I'll have *him* in a bag when I see him again!'

He turned to me.

'Will you be all right getting out on your own?'

'Sure.'

'Good,' he replied through gritted teeth. 'See you later!'

'Hold it!' I said, but it was too late. He had vanished.

'Problems?' asked Zhark.

'No,' I replied slowly, holding up the dirty pillowcase. 'He just forgot his head — and careful, Emperor, there's a Triffid creeping up behind you.'

Zhark turned to face the Triffid, who stopped, thought better of an attack and rejoined his friends, who were cooling their roots at the bar.

Zhark departed and I looked around. On the next table a fourth cat had joined the other three. It was bigger than the others and considerably more battle scarred — it had only one eye and both ears had large bites taken out of them. They all licked their lips as the newest cat said in a low voice: 'Shall we eat her?'

'Not yet,' replied the first cat, 'we're waiting for Big Martin.'

They returned to their drinks but never took their eyes off me. I could imagine how a mouse felt. After ten minutes I decided that I was not going to be intimidated by outsize house pets and got up to leave, taking Snell's head with me. The cats got up and followed me out, down the dingy corridor. Here the shops sold weapons, dastardly plans for world domination and fresh ideas for murder, revenge, extortion and other general mayhem. Generics, I noticed, could just as early be trained in the dark art of being an accomplished evildoer. The cats yowled excitedly and I quickened my step, only to stumble into a clearing among the shanty town of wooden buildings. The reason for the clearing was obvious. Sitting atop an old packing case was another cat. But this one was different. No oversized house cat, this beast was four times the size of a tiger, and it stared at me with ill-disguised malevolence. Its claws were extended and fangs at the ready, glistening slightly with hungry anticipation. I stopped and looked behind me to where the four other cats had lined up and were staring at me expectantly, tails gently lashing the air. A quick glance around the corridor revealed that there was no one near who might offer me any assistance; indeed, most of the bystanders seemed to be getting ready for something of

a show. I pulled out my automatic as one of the cats bounded up to the newcomer and said:

'Can we eat her now, please?'

The large cat placed one of its claws in the packing case and drew it through the wood like a razor-sharp chisel cutting through soft clay; it stared at me with huge green eyes and said in a deep rumbling voice:

'Shouldn't we wait until Big Martin gets here?'

'Yes,' sighed the smaller cat with a strong air of disappointment, 'perhaps we should.'

Suddenly, the big cat pricked up his ears and jumped from his box into the shadows; I pointed my gun but it wasn't attacking — the overgrown tiger was departing in a panic. The other cats quickly left the scene and pretty soon the bystanders had gone, too. Within a few moments I was completely alone in the corridor, with nothing to keep me company but the rapid thumping of my own heart, and a head in a bag.

6

Night of the grammasites

'Grammasite:

Generic term for a parasitic life form that lives inside books and feeds on grammar.

Technically known as Gerunds or Ingers, they were an early attempt to transform nouns (which were plentiful) into verbs (which at the time were not) by simply attaching an 'ing'. A dismal failure at verb resource management, they escaped from captivity and now roam freely in the sub-basements.

Although thankfully quite rare in the Library itself, isolated pockets of grammasites are still found from time to time and dealt with mercilessly.'

UA OF W CAT —
The Jurisfiction
Guide to the Great
Library (glossary)

I turned, and walked quickly towards the elevators, a strong feeling of impending oddness raising the hairs on the back of my neck. I pressed the 'call' button but nothing happened; I quickly dashed across the corridor and tried the second bank of elevators but with no more success. I was just thinking of running to the stairwell when I heard a noise. It was a distant low moan that was quite unlike any other sort of low moan that I had ever heard, nor would ever want to hear again. I put down the head-in-a-bag as my palms grew sweaty, and although I *told* myself I was calm, I pressed the call button several more times and reached for my automatic as a shape hove into view from the depths of the corridor. It was flying close to the bookshelves and was something like a bat, something like a lizard and something like a vulture. Covered in patchy grey fur, it was wearing stripy socks and a brightly coloured waistcoat of questionable taste. I had seen this sort of thing before; it was a grammasite, and although dissimilar to the adjectivore I had seen in *Great Expectations*, I imagined it could do just as much harm — it was little wonder that the residents of the Well had locked themselves away. The grammasite swept past in a flash without noticing me and was soon gone with a rumble like distant artillery. I relaxed slightly, expecting to see the Well spring back into life, but nothing stirred. Far away in the distance, beyond the Slaughtered Lamb, an excited burble reached my straining ears. I pressed the call button again as the noise grew louder and a slight breeze draughted against my face, like the oily zephyr that precedes an underground train. I shuddered. Where I came from a Browning automatic spoke volumes, but how it would work on a grammar-sucking parasite I had no idea — and I didn't think this would be a good time to find out. I was preparing myself to run when there was a melodious 'bing', the call button light came on and one of the elevator pointers started to move slowly towards my floor. I ran across and leaned with my back against the doors, releasing the safety catch on my automatic as the wind and noise increased. By the time the elevator was four floors away the first

grammasites had arrived. They looked around the corridor as they flew, sniffing at books with their long snouts and giving off excited squeaks. This was the advance guard. A few seconds later the main flock arrived with a deafening roar. One or two of them poked at books until they fell off the shelves, while other grammasites fell upon the unfinished manuscripts with an excited cry. There was a scuffle as a character burst from a page, only to be impaled by a grammasite who reduced the unfortunate wretch to a few explanatory phrases which were then eaten by scavengers waiting on the sidelines. I had seen enough. I opened fire and straight away got three of them who were devoured in turn by the same scavengers — clearly there was little honour or sense of loss among grammasites; their compatriots merely shuffled into the gaps left by their fallen comrades. I picked off two who were scrabbling at the bookcases attempting to dislodge more books and then turned away to reload. As I did so, another eerie silence filled the corridor. I released the slide on my automatic and looked up. About a hundred or so grammasites were staring at me with their small black eyes, and it wasn't a look that I'd describe as anywhere near friendly. I sighed. What a way to go. I could see my headstone now:

THURSDAY NEXT

1950-1986

**SpecOps agent & beloved wife
to someone who doesn't exist**

*Killed for no adequately explained reason
in an abstract place by an abstract foe*

I raised my gun and the grammasites shuffled slightly, as though deciding among themselves who would be sacrificed in order for them to overpower me. I pointed the gun at whichever one started to move, hoping to postpone the inevitable. The one who seemed to be the leader — he had the brightest-coloured waistcoat, I noted — took a step forward and I pointed my gun at him as another grammasite seized the opportunity and made a sudden leap towards me, its sharpened beak heading straight for my chest. I whirled around in time to see its small black eyes twinkle with a

thousand well-digested verbs as a hand on my shoulder pulled me roughly backwards into the elevator. The grammasite, carried on by its own momentum, buried its beak into the wood surround. I reached to thump the close button but my wrist was deftly caught by my as yet unseen saviour.

'We *never* run from grammasites.'

It was a scolding tone of voice that I knew only too well. Miss Havisham. Dressed in her rotting wedding dress and veil, she stared at me with despair. I think I was one of the worst apprentices she had ever trained — or that was the way she made me feel, at any rate.

'We have nothing to fear except fear itself,' she intoned, whipping out her pocket derringer and dispatching two grammasites who made a rush at the elevator's open door. 'I seem to spend my waking hours extricating you from the soup, my girl!'

The grammasites were slowly advancing on us; they were now at least three hundred strong and others were joining them. We were heavily outnumbered.

'I'm sorry,' I replied quickly, curtsying just in case as I loosed off another shot, 'but don't you think we should be departing?'

'I fear only the Questing Beast,' announced Havisham imperiously. 'The Questing beast, Big Martin ... and semolina.'

She shot another grammasite with a particularly fruity waistcoat and carried on talking. 'If you had troubled to do some homework you would know that these are Verbisoids and probably the easiest grammasite to vanquish of them all.'

And almost without pausing for breath, Miss Havisham launched into a very croaky and out-of-tune rendition of 'Jerusalem'. The grammasites stopped abruptly and stared at one another. By the time I had joined her at the *holy lamb of God* line they had begun to back away in fright. We sang louder, Miss Havisham and I, and by *dark satanic mills* they had started to take flight; by the time we had got to *bring me my chariot of fire* they had departed completely.

'Quick!' said Miss Havisham. 'Grab the waistcoats — there's a bounty on each one.'

We gathered up the waistcoats from the fallen grammasites; it was not a pleasant job — the corpses smelt so strongly of ink that it made me cough. The carcasses would be taken away by a verminator who would boil

down the bodies and distil off any verbs he could. In the Well, nothing is wasted.

'What were the smaller ones?'

'I forget,' replied Havisham, tying the waistcoats into a bundle. 'Here, you're going to need this. Study it well if you want to pass your exams.'

She handed me my TravelBook, the one that Goliath had taken; within its pages were almost all the tips and equipment I needed for travel within the BookWorld.

'How did you manage that?'

Miss Havisham didn't answer. She snorted and pulled me towards the elevator again. It was clear that the twenty-second sub-basement wasn't a place she liked to be. I couldn't say I blamed her.

Miss Havisham relaxed visibly as we rose from the sub-basements and into the more ordered nature of the Library itself.

'Why do grammasites wear stripy socks?' I asked, looking at the bundle of garments on the floor.

'Probably because spotted ones are out of fashion,' she replied with a shrug, reloading her pistol. 'What's in the bag?'

'Oh, some — er — shopping of Snell's.'

Miss Havisham was a bit like a strict parent, your worst teacher and a newly appointed South American dictator all rolled into one. Which wasn't to say I didn't like her or respect her — it was just that I felt I was still nine whenever she spoke to me.

'So why did we sing "Jerusalem" to get rid of them?'

'As I said, those grammasites were Verbisoids,' she replied without looking up, 'and a Verbisoid, in common with many language students, hates and fears *irregular verbs* — they much prefer consuming regularverbs with the "ed" word endings. Strong irregulars such as "to sing" with their internal vowel changes — we will *sing*, we *sang*, we have *sung* — tend to scramble their tiny minds.'

'Any irregular verb frightens them off?' I asked with interest.

'Pretty much; but some irregulars are more easy to demonstrate than others — we could *cut*, I suppose, or even *be*, but then the proceedings change into something akin to a desperate game of charades — far easier to just sing and have done 'with it.'

'What about if we were *to go*? I ventured, thinking practically for once. 'There can't be anything more irregular than *go, went, gone*, can there?'

'Because,' replied Miss Havisham, her patience eroding by the second, 'they might misconstrue it as *walked* — note the "ed" ending?'

'Not if we *ran*," I added, not wanting to let this go, 'that's irregular, too.'

Miss Havisham stared at me icily.

'Of course we could. But *ran* might be seen in the eyes of a hungry Verbisoid to be either trotted, galloped, raced, rushed, hurried, hastened, sprinted or even departed.'

'Ah,' I said, realising that catching Miss Havisham out was about as likely as nailing Banquo's ghost to a coffee table, 'yes, it might, mightn't it?'

'Look,' said Miss Havisham, softening slightly, 'if running away killed grammasites there wouldn't be a single one left. Stick to "Jerusalem" and you won't go far wrong — just don't try it with adjectivores or the parataxis; they'd probably join in — and then eat you.'

The elevator stopped on the eleventh sub-basement, the doors opened and a large Painted Jaguar got in with her son, who had a paddy-paw full of prickles and was complaining bitterly that he had been tricked by a hedgehog and a tortoise, who had both escaped. The Mother Jaguar shook her head sadly, looked to heaven in exasperation and then turned to her son.

'Son, son,' she said, ever so many times, graciously waving her tail, 'what have you been doing that you shouldn't have?'

'So,' said Miss Havisham as the elevator moved off again, 'how are you getting along in that frightful *Caversham Heights* book?'

'Well, thank you, Miss Havisham,' I muttered, 'the people in it are worried that their book will be demolished from under their feet.'

'With good reason,' replied Havisham. 'I've read it. Hundreds of books like *Heights* are demolished every day. If you stopped to waste any sympathy, you'd go nuts — so don't. It's man eat man in the Well. I'd keep yourself to yourself and don't make too many friends — they have a habit of dying just when you get to like them. It always happens that way. It's a narrative thing.'

'*Heights* isn't a bad place to live,' I ventured, hoping to elicit a bit of compassion.

'Doubtless,' she murmured, staring off into the middle distance. 'I remember when I was in the Well, when they were building *Great Expectations*. I thought I was the luckiest girl in the world when they told me I would be working with Charles Dickens. Top of my class at Generic College and, without wanting to seem immodest, something of a beauty. I thought I would make an admirable young Estella — both refined and beautiful, haughty and proud, yet ultimately overcoming the overbearing crabbiness of her cantankerous benefactor to find true love.'

'So ... what happened?'

'I wasn't tall enough.'

'Tall enough? For a book? Isn't that like having the wrong hair colour for the wireless?'

'They gave the part to a little strumpet who was on salvage from a demolished Thackeray. Little cow. It's no wonder I treat her so rotten — the part should have been mine!'

She fell into silence.

'Let me get this straight,' said the Painted Jaguar, who was having a bit of trouble telling the difference between a hedgehog and a tortoise, 'if it's slow-and-solid I drop him in the water and then scoop him out of his shell —'

'Son, son!' said his mother, ever so many times, graciously waving her tail, 'now attend to me and remember what I say. A hedgehog curls himself up into a ball and his prickles stick out every way—'

'Did you get the Jurisdiction exam papers I sent you?' asked Miss Havisham. 'I've got your practical booked for the day after tomorrow.'

'Oh!' I said.

'Problems?' she asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

'No, ma'am, I just feel a bit unprepared — I think I might make a pig's ear of it.'

'I disagree,' she replied, staring at the floor indicator. 'I *know* you'll make a pig's ear of it. But wheels within wheels. All I ask is you don't make a fool of yourself or lose your life — now that *would* be awkward.'

'So,' said the Painted Jaguar, rubbing his head, 'if it can roll itself into a ball it must be a tortoise and—'

'AHHH!' cried the Mother Jaguar, lashing her tail angrily. '*Completely* wrong. Miss Havisham, what am I to do with this boy?'

'I have no idea,' she replied. 'All men are dolts, from where I'm standing.'

The Painted Jaguar looked crestfallen and stared at the floor.

'Can I make a suggestion?' I asked.

'Anything!' replied the Mother Jaguar.

'If you make a rhyme out of it he *might* be able to remember.'

The Mother Jaguar sighed.

'It won't help. Yesterday he forgot he was a Painted Jaguar. He makes my spots ache, really he does.'

'How about this?' I said, making up a rhyme on the spot:

'Can't curl, but can swim —
Slow-Solid, that's him!
Curls up, but can't swim —
Stickly-Prickly, that's him!'

The Mother Jaguar stopped lashing her tail and asked me to write it down. She was still trying to get her son to remember it when the elevator doors opened on the fifth floor and we got out.

'I thought we were going to the Jurisdiction offices?' I said as we walked along the corridors of the Great Library, the wooden shelves groaning under the weight of the collected imaginative outpourings of nearly two millennia.

'The next roll-call is tomorrow,' she replied, stopping at a shelf and dropping the grammasites' waistcoats into a heap before picking out a roughly bound manuscript, 'and I told Perkins you'd help him feed the minotaur.'

'You did?' I asked, slightly apprehensively.

'Of course. Fictionalzoology is a fascinating subject and, believe me, it's an area about which you should know more.'

She handed me the book which, I noticed, was hand-written.

'It's codeword protected,' announced Havisham, 'mumble *Sapphire* before you read yourself in.'

She gathered up the waistcoats again.

'I'll pick you up in about an hour. Perkins will be waiting for you on the other side. Please pay attention and don't let him talk you into looking after any rabbits. Don't forget the password — you'll not get in or out without it.'

'Sapphire,' I repeated.

'Very good,' she said, and vanished.

I placed the book on one of the reading desks and sat down. The marble busts of writers that dotted the Library seemed to glare at me and I was just about to start reading when I noticed, high up on the shelf opposite, an ethereal form that was coalescing, wraith-like, in front of my eyes. At home this might be considered a matter of great pith and moment, but here it was merely the Cheshire Cat making one of his celebrated appearances.

'Hello!' he said as soon as his mouth had appeared. 'How are you getting along?'

The Cheshire Cat was the librarian and the first person I had met in the BookWorld. With a penchant for non sequiturs and obtuse comments, it was hard not to like him.

'I'm not sure,' I replied. 'I was attacked by grammasites, threatened by Big Martin's friends and a Thraal. I've got two Generics billeted with me, the characters in *Caversham Heights* think I can save their book and right now I have to give the minotaur his breakfast.'

'Nothing remarkable *there*. Anything else?'

'How long have you got?'^[9]

I tapped my ears.

'Problems?'

'I can hear two Russians gossiping, right here inside my head.'

'Probably a crossed footnoterphone line,' replied the Cat. He jumped down, pressed his soft head against mine and listened intently.

'Can you hear them?' I asked after a bit.

'Not at all,' replied the Cat, 'but you do have *very* warm ears. Do you like Chinese food?'

'Yes, please,' I replied; I hadn't eaten for a while.

'Me too,' mused the Cat. 'Shame there isn't any. What's in the bag?'

'Something of Snell's.'

'Ah. What do you think of this UltraWord™ lark?'

'I'm really not sure,' I replied, truthfully enough, 'how about you?'

'How about me what?'

'What do you think of the new operating system?'

'When it comes in I shall give it my fullest attention,' he said ambiguously, adding: 'It's a laugh, isn't it?'

'What is?'

'That noise you make at the back of your throat when you hear something funny. Let me know if you need anything. 'Bye.'

And he very slowly faded out, from the tip of his tail to the tip of his nose. His grin, as usual, stayed for some time after the rest of him had gone.

I turned back to the book, murmured 'sapphire' and read the first paragraph aloud.

7

Feeding the minotaur

'Name: Perkins
— David "Pinky".

**Operator's
number:** AGD136-
323

Address: c/o
Perkins & Snell
Detective Series

Induction date:
September 1957

'Notes: Perkins joined the service and has shown exemplary conduct throughout his service career. After signing up for a twenty-year tour of duty, he extended that to another tour in 1977. After five years heading the mispeling Protection Squad, he was transferred to grammasite inspection & eradication, and in 1983 took over leadership of the

*grammasite research
facility.'*

*Entry from
Jurisdiction Service
Record (abridged)*

I found myself in a large meadow next to a babbling brook; willows and larches hung over the crystal-clear waters while mature oaks punctuated the land. It was warm and dry and quite delightful — like a perfect summer's day in England, in fact — and I suddenly felt quite homesick.

'I used to look at the view a lot,' said a voice close at hand. 'Don't seem to have the time, these days.'

I turned to see a tall man leaning against a silver birch, holding a copy of the Jurisdiction trade paper, *Movable Type*. I recognised him although we had never been introduced. It was Perkins, who partnered Snell at Jurisdiction, much as they did in the Perkins & Snell series of detective novels.

'Hello,' he said, proffering a hand and smiling broadly, 'put it there. Perkins is the name. Akrid tells me you sorted Hopkins out good and proper.'

'Thank you,' I replied. 'Akrid's very kind but it isn't over yet.'

He cast an arm towards the horizon.

'What do you think?'

I looked at the view. High snow-capped mountains rose in the distance above a green and verdant plain. At the foot of the hills were forests, and a large river wended its way through the valley.

'Beautiful.'

'We requisitioned it from the fantasy division of the Well of Lost Plots. It's a complete world in itself, written for a sword and sorcery novel entitled *The Sword of the Zenobians*. Beyond the mountains are icy wastes, deep fjords and relics of long-forgotten civilisations, castles, that sort of stuff. It was auctioned off when the book was abandoned. There were no characters or events written in, which was a shame — considering the work he did on

the world itself, this might have been a bestseller. Still, the Outland's loss is our gain. We use it to keep grammasites and other weird beasts who for one reason or another can't live safely within their own books.'

'Sanctuary?'

'Yes — and also for study and containment — hence the password.'

'There seem to be an awful lot of rabbits,' I observed, looking around.

'Ah, yes,' replied Perkins, crossing an arched stone bridge that spanned the small stream, 'we never did get the lid on reproduction within *Watership Down* — if left to their own devices, the book would be so full of dandelion-munching lagomorphs that every other word would be "rabbit" within a year. Still, Lennie enjoys it here when he has some time off.'

We walked up a path towards a ruined castle. Grass covered the mounds of masonry that had collapsed from the curtain wall, and the wood of the drawbridge had rotted and fallen into a moat now dry and full of brambles. Above us, what appeared to be ravens circled the highest of the remaining towers.

'Not birds,' said Perkins, handing me a pair of binoculars. 'Have a look.'

I peered up at the circling creatures who were soaring on large wings of stretched skin.

'Parenthiums?'

'Very good. I have six breeding pairs here — purely for research, I hasten to add. Most books can easily support forty or so with no ill effects — it's just when the numbers get out of hand that we have to take action. A swarm of grammasites can be pretty devastating.'

'I know,' I replied, 'I was almost—'

'Watch out!'

He pushed me aside as a lump of excrement splattered on to the ground near where I had been standing. I looked up at the battlements and saw a man-beast covered in coarse dark hair who glared down at us and made a strangled cry in the back of his throat.

'Yahoos,' explained Perkins with disdain. 'They're not terribly well behaved and *quite* beyond training.'

'From *Gulliver's Travels*'?

'Bingo. When truly original works like Jonathan Swift's are made into new books characters are often duplicated for evaluation and consultative

purposes. Characters can be retrained but *creatures* usually end up here. Yahoos are not exactly a favourite of mine but they're harmless enough, so the best thing to do is ignore them.'

We walked quickly under the keep to avoid any other possible missiles and entered the inner bailey, where a pair of centaurs were grazing peacefully. They looked up at us, smiled, waved and carried on eating. I noticed that one of them was listening to a Walkman.

'You have centaurs here?'

'And satyrs, troglodytes, chimeras, elves, fairies, dryads, sirens, Martians, leprechauns, goblins, harpies, aliens, Daleks, trolls — you name it.' Perkins smiled. 'A large proportion of unpublished novels are in the fantasy genre, and most of them feature mythical beasts. Whenever one of those books gets demolished I can usually be found down at the salvage yard. It would be a shame to reduce them to text now, wouldn't it?'

'Do you have unicorns?' I asked.

'Yes.' Perkins sighed. 'Sack-loads. More than I know what to do with. I wish potential writers would be more responsible with their creations. I can understand children writing about them, but adults should know better. Every unicorn in every demolished story ends up here. I had this idea for a bumper sticker. "A unicorn isn't for page twenty-seven, it's for eternity." What do you think?'

'I think you won't be able to stop people writing about them. How about taking the horn off and seeking placement in pony books?'

'I'll pretend I didn't hear that,' replied Perkins stonily, adding: 'We have dragons, too. We can hear them sometimes, at night when the wind is in the right direction. When — or *if* — Pellinore captures the Questing Beast it will come to live here. Somewhere a long way away, I hope. Careful — don't tread in the orc shit. You're an Outlander, aren't you?'

'Born and bred.'

'Has anyone realised that platypuses and sea horses are fictional?'

'Are they?'

'Of course — you don't think anything that weird could have evolved by chance, do you? By the way, how do you like Miss Havisham?'

'I like her a great deal.'

'So do we all. I think she quite likes us, too, but she'd never admit it.'

We had arrived at the inner keep and Perkins pushed open the door. Inside was his office and laboratory. One wall was covered with glass jars filled with odd creatures of all shapes and sizes, and on the table was a partially dissected grammasite. Within its gut were words in the process of being digested into letters.

'I'm not really sure how they do it,' said Perkins, prodding at the carcass with a spoon. 'Have you met Mathias?'

I looked around but could see nothing but a large chestnut horse whose flanks shone in the light. The horse looked at me and I looked at the horse, then past the horse — but there was no one else in the room. The penny dropped.

'Good morning, Mathias,' I said as politely as I could. 'I'm Thursday Next.'

Perkins laughed out loud and the horse brayed and replied in a very deep voice:

'Delighted to make your acquaintance, madam. Permit me to join you in a few moments?'

I agreed and the horse returned to what I now saw were some complicated notes it was writing in a ledger open on the floor. Every now and then it paused and dipped the quill that was attached to its hoof into an inkpot and wrote in a large copperplate script.

'A Houyhnhnm?' I asked. 'Also from *Gulliver's Travels*?'

Perkins nodded. 'Mathias, his mare and the two Yahoos were all used as consultants for Pierre Boule's 1963 remake: *La planète des singes*.'

'Louis Aragon once said,' announced Mathias from the other side of the room, 'that the function of geniuses was to furnish cretins with ideas twenty years on.'

'I hardly think that Boule was a cretin, Mathias,' said Perkins, 'and anyway, it's always the same with you, isn't it? "Voltaire said this—", Baudelaire said that—". Sometimes I think that you just ... just—'

He stopped, trying to think of the right words.

'Was it Da Vinci who said,' suggested the horse helpfully, 'that anyone who quotes authors in discussion is using their memory, not their intellect?'

'Exactly,' replied the frustrated Perkins, 'what I was about to say.'

'*Tempora mutantur, et nos mutamur in illis*,' murmured the horse, staring at the ceiling in thought.

'The only thing *that* proves is how pretentious you are,' muttered Perkins. 'It's always the same when we have visitors, isn't it?'

'Someone has to raise the tone in this miserable backwater,' replied Mathias, 'and if you call me a "pseudo-erudite ungrate" again, I shall bite you painfully on the buttock.'

Perkins and the horse glared at one another.

'You said there was a pair of Hounyhnhms?' I interjected, trying to defuse the situation.

'My partner, my love, my mare,' explained the horse, 'is currently at Oxford, *your* Oxford — studying political science at All Souls and paying her way by doing the odd job in the oral tradition.'

'Whereabouts?' I asked, wondering where a talking horse might find employment.

'Jokes about talking horses,' explained Mathias with a shiver of indignation. 'You have heard the one about the talking horse in the pub, I trust?'

'Not for a while,' I replied.

'I'm not surprised,' retorted the horse loftily. 'Her studies do tend to keep her quite busy. Whenever she runs out of funds she does the rounds with a new one. I think she is reprising the talking-horse-with-greyhound gag at the moment.'

It was true. Bowden had used that one at his Happy Squid talent contest. This was probably why jokes 'did the rounds' — it was oral tradition fictioneers going on tour. Another thought struck me.

'Don't you think they'd notice?' I asked. 'A horse, at Oxford?'

'You'd be surprised how unobservant some of the dons are,' snorted Perkins. 'Where do you think Napoleon the pig studied Marxism? The Harris bacon factory?'

'Didn't the other students complain?'

'Of course! Napoleon was expelled.'

'Was it the smell?'

'No — the cheating. This way. I keep the minotaur in the dungeons. You are fully conversant with the legend?'

'Of course,' I replied. 'It's the half-man, half-bull offspring of King Minos' wife, Pasiphaë.'

'Spot on.' He chuckled. 'The tabloids had a field day: "Cretan Queen in Bull Love-child Shock." We built a copy of the Labyrinth to hold it but the Monsters' Humane Society insisted two officials inspect it first.'

'And?'

'That was over twelve years ago; I think they're still in it. I keep the minotaur in here.'

He opened a door that led into a vaulted room below the old hall. It was dark and smelt of rotten bones and sweat.

'Er, you do keep it locked up?' I asked as my eyes struggled to see in the semi-dark.

'Of course!' he replied, nodding towards a large key hanging from a hook. 'What do you think I am, an idiot?'

As my eyes became accustomed to the gloom I could see that the back half of the vault was caged off with rusty iron bars. There was a door in the centre which was secured with a ridiculously large padlock.

'Don't get too near,' warned Perkins as he took a steel bowl down from a shelf. 'I've been feeding him on yogurt for almost five years, and to be truthful he's getting a bit bored.'

'Yogurt?'

'With some bran mixed in. Feeding him on Grecian virgins was too expensive.'

'Wasn't he slain by Theseus?' I asked, as a dark shape started moving at the back of the vault accompanied by a low growling noise. Even with the bars I really wasn't happy to be there.

'Usually,' replied Perkins, ladling out some yogurt, 'but mischievous Generics took him out of a copy of Graves' *The Greek Myths* in 1944 and dropped him in Tsaritsyn. A sharp-eyed Jurisdiction agent figured out what was going on and we took him out — he's been here ever since.'

Perkins filled the steel bowl with yogurt, mixed up some bran from a large dustbin and then placed the bowl on the floor a good five feet from the bars. He pushed the dish the remainder of the way with the handle of a floor mop.

As we watched, the minotaur appeared from the dark recesses of the cage and I felt the hairs bristle on the back of my neck. His large and muscular body was streaked with dirt and sharpened horns sprouted from his bull-like head. He moved with the low gait of an ape, using his forelegs

to steady himself. As I watched he put out two clawed hands to retrieve the bowl, then slunk off to a dark corner. I caught a glimpse of his fangs in the dim light, and a pair of deep yellow eyes which glared at me with hungry malevolence.

'I'm thinking of calling him Norman,' murmured Perkins. 'Come on, I want to show you something.'

We left the dark and fetid area beneath the old hall and walked back into the laboratory, where Perkins opened a large leather-bound book that was sitting on the table.

'This is the Jurisdiction Bestiary,' he explained, turning the page to reveal a picture of the grammasite we had encountered in *Great Expectations*.

'An adjectivore,' I murmured.

'Very good,' replied Perkins. 'Fairly common in the Well but under control in fiction generally.'

He turned a page to reveal a sort of angler fish, but instead of a light dangling on a wand sticking out of its head it had the indefinite article.

'Nounfish,' explained Perkins. 'They swim the outer banks of the Text Sea, hoping to attract and devour stray nouns eager to start an embryonic sentence.'

He turned the page to reveal a picture of a small maggot.

'A bookworm?' I suggested, having seen these before at my Uncle Mycroft's workshop.

'Indeed,' replied Perkins. 'Not strictly a pest and actually quite necessary to the existence of the BookWorld. They take words and expel alternative meanings like a hot radiator. I think earthworms are the nearest equivalent in the Outland. They aerate the soil, yes?'

I nodded.

'Bookworms do the same job down here. "Without them, words would have one meaning, and meanings would have one word. They live in thesauri but their benefit is felt throughout fiction.'

'So why are they considered a pest?'

'Useful, but not without their drawbacks. Get too many bookworms in your novel and the language becomes almost unbearably flowery.'

'I've read books like that,' I confessed.

He turned the page and I recognised the grammasites that had swarmed through the Well earlier.

'Verbisoid,' he said with a sigh, 'to be destroyed without mercy. Once the Verbisoid extracts the verb from a sentence it generally collapses; do that once too often and the whole narrative falls apart like a bread roll in a rainstorm.'

'Why do they wear waistcoats and stripy socks?'

'To keep warm, I should imagine.'

'What's this?' I asked as he turned the page again. 'Another verbinator?'

'Well, kind of,' replied Perkins. 'This is a Converbilator. It actually creates verbs out of nouns and other words. Mostly by appending *ize* or *ise* but sometimes just by a direct conversion, such as *knife*, *lunch* and *question*. During a drought they have been known to even create compound verbs such as *air-condition*, and *signpost*. Like the bookworms they are necessary — but can't be allowed to get out of hand.'

'Some would say there are too many verbs already,' I commented.

'Those that do,' replied Perkins testily, 'should come and work for Jurisdiction for a bit and try and stop them.'

'What about the misspelling virus?' I asked.

'*Speltificarious Molesworthian*,' murmured Perkins, moving to where a pile of dictionaries were stacked up around a small glass jar. He picked out the container and showed it to me. A thin purple haze seemed to wisp around inside; it reminded me of one of Spike's SEBs.

'This is the larst of the virus,' explained Perkins. 'We had to distroy the wrist. It's very powarfull — can u feel it, even through the glas?'

'*Unnessary*,' I said, testing it out, '*undoutadly*, *professor*, *diarhea*, *nakijima*. You're right, it's prety strong, isn't it?'

He replaced the jar bak in the dictosafe.

'Rampant before Agent Johnson's Dictionary in 1744,' commented Perkins. 'Lavinia-Webster and the Oxford English Dictionary keep it all in check but we have to be careful. We used to contain any outbreak and offload it in the Molesworth series where no one ever notices. These days we destroy any new virus with a battery of dictionaries we keep on the seventeenth floor of the Great Library. But we can't be too careful. *Every* misspelling you come across has to be reported to the Cat on form S-I2.'

'There was the raucous blast of a car horn from outside.'

'Time's up!' Perkins smiled. 'That will be Miss Havisham.'

Miss Havisham was not on her own. She was sitting in a vast automobile the bonnet of which stretched ten feet in front of her. The large spoked and unguarded wheels carried tyres that looked woefully skinny and inadequate; eight huge exhaust pipes sprouted from either side of the bonnet, joined into one and stretched the length of the body. The tail of the car was pointed, like a boat, and just forward of the rear wheels two huge drive sprockets carried the power to the rear axle on large chains. It was a fearsome beast. It was the twenty-seven-litre Higham Special.

OceanofPDF.com

Ton sixty on the A419

'The wealthy son of a Polish count and an American mother, Louis Zborowski lived at Higham Place near Canterbury, where he built three aero-engined cars, all called Chitty Bang Bang, and a fourth monster, the Higham Special, a car he and Clive Gallop had engineered by squeezing a 27-litre aero engine into a Rubery Owen chassis and mating it with a Benz gearbox. At the time of Zborowski's death at Monza behind the wheel of a Mercedes, the Special had been lapping Brooklands at 116 mph — but her potential was as yet unproved. After a brief stint with a lady owner whose

identity has not been revealed, the Special was sold to Parry Thomas, who with careful modifications of his own pushed the land speed record up to 170.624 mph at Pendine Sands, South Wales, in 1926.'

*THE VERY REV.
TOREDLYNE — The
Land Speed Record*

'Has she been boring you, Mr Perkins?' called out Havisham.

'Not at all,' replied Perkins, giving me a wink. 'She has been a most attentive student.'

'Humph,' muttered Havisham. 'Hope springs eternal. Get in, girl, we're off!'

I paused. I had been driven by Miss Havisham once before, and that was in a car that I thought relatively safe. This beast of an automobile looked as though it could kill you twice before even reaching second gear.

'What are you waiting for, girl?' said Havisham impatiently. 'If I let the Special idle any longer we'll coke up the plugs. Besides, we need all the fuel to do the run.'

'The run?'

'Don't worry!' shouted Miss Havisham as she revved the engine. The car lurched sideways with the torque and a throaty growl filled the air. 'You won't be aboard when we do — I need you for other duties.'

I took a deep breath and climbed into the small two-seater body. It looked newly converted and was little more than a racing car with a few frills tacked on to make it roadworthy. Miss Havisham depressed the clutch and wrestled with the gearshift for a moment. The large sprockets took up

the power with a slight tug; it felt like a thoroughbred racehorse which had just got the scent of a steeplechase.

'Where are we going?' I asked.

'Home!' answered Miss Havisham as she moved the hand throttle. The car leaped forward across the grassy courtyard and gathered speed.

'To *Great Expectations*?' I asked as Miss Havisham steered in a broad circuit, fiddling with the levers in the centre of the massive steering wheel.

'Not my home,' she retorted, 'yours!'

With another deep growl and a lurch the car accelerated rapidly forward — but to where I was not sure; in front of us lay the broken drawbridge and stout stone walls of the castle.

'Fear not!' yelled Havisham above the roar of the engine. 'I'll read us into the Outland as simply as blinking!'

We gathered speed. I expected us to jump straight away, but we didn't. We carried on towards the heavy castle wall at a speed not wholly compatible with survival.

'Miss Havisham?' I asked, my voice tinged with fear.

'I'm just trying to think of the best words to get us there, girl!' she replied cheerfully.

'Stop!' I yelled as the point of no return came and went in a flash.

'Let me see ...' muttered Havisham, thinking hard, the accelerator still wide open.

I covered my eyes. The car was running too fast for me to jump out and a collision seemed inevitable. I grasped the side of the car's body and tensed as Miss Havisham took herself, me and two tons of automobile through the barriers of fiction and into the real world. *My world.*

I opened my eyes again. Miss Havisham was studying a road map as the Higham Special swerved down the middle of the road. I grabbed the steering wheel as a milk float swerved into the hedge.

'I won't use the M4 in case the C of G get wind of it,' she said, looking around. 'We'll use the A419 — are we anywhere close?'

I recognised where we were instantly. Just north of Swindon outside a small town called Highworth.

'Continue round the roundabout and up the hill into the town,' I told her, adding: 'But it's *not* your right of way, remember.'

It was too late. To Miss Havisham, her way *was* the right way. The first car braked in time but the one behind it was not so lucky — it drove into the rear of the first with a crunch. I held on tightly as Miss Havisham accelerated rapidly away up the hill into Highworth. I was pressed into my seat and for a single moment, perched above two tons of bellowing machinery, I suddenly realised why Havisham liked this sort of thing — it was, in a word, *exhilarating*.

'I've only borrowed the Special from the count,' she explained. 'Parry Thomas will take delivery of it next week and aim to lift the speed record for himself. I've been working on a new mix of fuels; the A419 is straight and smooth — I should be able to do at least a ton eighty on *that*.'

'Turn right on to the B4019 at the Jesmond,' I told her, '*after* the lights turn to greeeeeee.''

The truck missed us by about six inches.

'What's that?'

'Nothing.'

'You know, Thursday, you should really loosen up and learn to enjoy life more — you can be such an old stick-in-the-mud.'

I lapsed into silence.

'And don't sulk,' added Miss Havisham. 'If there's something I can't abide, it's a sulky apprentice.'

We bowled down the road, nearly losing it on an 'S' bend, until miraculously we reached the main Swindon—Cirencester road. It was a no right turn but we did anyway, to a chorus of screeching tyres and angry car horns. Havisham accelerated off, and we had just approached the top of the hill when we came across a large 'diversion' sign blocking the road. Havisham thumped the steering wheel angrily.

'I don't believe it!' she bellowed.

'Road closed?' I queried, trying to hide my relief. 'Good — I mean, good-ness gracious, what a shame. Another time, eh?'

Havisham clunked the Special into first gear and we moved off round the sign and motored down the hill.

'It's *him*, I can sense it!' she growled. 'Trying to steal the speed record from under my very nose!'

'Who?' I asked.

As if in answer another racing car shot past us with a loud 'poop poop!'.

'*Him*,' muttered Havisham as we pulled off the road next to a speed camera. 'A driver so bad he is a menace to himself and every sentient being on the highways.'

He must have been truly frightful for Havisham to notice. A few minutes later the other car returned and pulled up alongside.

'What ho, Havisham!' said the driver, taking the goggles from his bulging eyes and grinning broadly. 'Still using Count "Snail" Zborowski's old slowpoke Special, eh?'

'Good afternoon, Mr Toad,' said Havisham. 'Does the Bellman know you're in the Outland?'

'Of course not!' yelled Mr Toad, laughing. 'And you're not going to tell him, old girl, because you're not meant to be here either!'

Havisham was silent and looked ahead, trying to ignore him.

'Is that a Liberty aero-engine under there?' asked Mr Toad, pointing at the Special's bonnet, which trembled and shook as the vast engine idled roughly to itself.

'Perhaps,' replied Havisham.

'Ha!' replied Toad with an infectious smile. 'I had a Rolls-Royce Merlin shoehorned into this old banger!'

I watched Miss Havisham with interest. She stared ahead but her eye twitched slightly when Mr Toad revved the car's engine. In the end, she could resist it no more and her curiosity got the better of her disdain.

'How does it go?' she asked, eyes gleaming.

'Like a rocket!' replied Mr Toad, jumping up and down in his excitement. 'Over a thousand horses to the back axle — makes your Higham Special look like a motor mower!'

'We'll see about *that*,' replied Havisham, narrowing her eyes. 'Usual place, usual time, usual bet?'

'You're on!' said Mr Toad. He revved his car, pulled down his goggles and vanished in a cloud of rubber smoke. The 'poop poop' of his horn lingered on as an echo some seconds after he had gone.

'Slimy reptile,' muttered Havisham.

'Strictly speaking, he's neither,' I retorted. 'More like a dry-skinned land-based amphibian.'

It felt safe to be impertinent because I knew she wasn't listening.

'He's caused more accidents than you've had hot dinners.'

'And you're going to race him?' I asked slightly nervously.

'And beat him too, what's more,' she replied, handing me a pair of bolt-cutters.

'What do you want me to do?' I asked.

'Open up the speed camera and get the film out once I've done my run.'

I got out. She donned a pair of goggles and was gone in a howl of engine noise and screeching of tyres. I looked nervously around as she and the car hurtled off into the distance, the roar of the engine fading into a hum, occasionally punctuated by muffled cracks from the exhaust. The sun was out and I could see at least three airships droning across the sky; I wondered what was going on at SpecOps. I had written a note to Victor telling him I had to be away for a year or more, and tendered my resignation. Suddenly I was shaken from my daydream by something else. Something dark and just out of sight. Something I should have done or something I'd forgotten. I shivered and then it clicked. Last night. Gran. Aornis' mindworm. What had she been unravelling in my mind? I sighed as the pieces slowly started to merge together in my head. Gran had told me to run the facts over and over to renew the familiar memories that Aornis was trying to delete. But how do you start trying to find out what it is you've forgotten? I concentrated ... *Landen*. I hadn't thought about him all day and that was unusual. I could remember where we met and what had happened to him — no problem there. Anything else? His full name. Damn and blast! *Landen Parke-something*. Did it begin with a 'B'? I couldn't remember. I sighed and placed my hand over where I imagined our baby to be — it would now be the size of a half-crown. I remembered enough to know I loved him, and I missed him dreadfully — which was a good sign, I supposed. I thought of Lavoisier's perfidy and the Schitt brothers and started to feel rage building inside me. I closed my eyes and tried to relax. There was a phone box by the side of the road, and on an impulse I called my mother.

'Hi, Mum,' I said, 'it's Thursday.'

'Thursday!' she screamed excitedly. 'Hang on — the stove's on fire.'

'The stove?'

'Well, the kitchen really — wait a mo!'

There was a crashing noise and she came back on the line a few seconds later.

'Out now. Darling! Are you okay?'

'I'm fine, Mum.'

'And the baby?'

'Fine too. How are things with you?'

'Frightful!' she exclaimed. 'Goliath and SpecOps have been camping outside since the moment you left and Emma Hamilton is living in the spare room and eats like a horse.'

There was an angry growl and a loud whooshing noise as Havisham swept past in little more than a blur; two flashes from the speed camera went off in quick succession and there were several more loud bangs as Havisham rolled off the throttle.

'What was that noise?' asked my mother.

'You'd never believe me if I told you. My — er — *husband* hasn't been round looking for me, has he?'

'I'm afraid not, sweetheart,' she said in her most understanding voice; she knew about Landen and understood better than most — her own husband, my father, had been eradicated himself seventeen years previously. 'Why don't you come round and talk?' she went on. 'The Eradications Anonymous meeting is at eight this evening; you'll be among friends there.'

'I don't think so, Mum.'

'Are you eating regularly?'

'Yes, Mum.'

'I managed to get DH-82 to do a few tricks.'

DH-82 was her rescue Thylacine. Training a Thylacine, usually unbelievably torpid, to do anything except eat or sleep on command was almost front-page news.

'That's good. Listen, I just called to say I miss you and not to worry about me—'

'I'm going to try another run!' shouted Miss Havisham, who had drawn up. I waved to her and she drove off.

'Are you keeping Pickwick's egg warm?'

I told Mum that this was Pickwick's job, that I would call again when I could, and hung up. I thought of ringing Bowden but decided on the face of

it that this was probably not a good idea. Mum's phone was bound to have been tapped and I had given them enough already. I walked back to the road and watched as a small grey dot grew larger and larger until the Special swept past with a strident bellow. The speed camera flashed again and a belch of flame erupted from the exhaust pipe. It took Miss Havisham about a mile to slow down so I sat on a wall and waited patiently for her to return. A small four-seater airship had appeared no more than half a mile away. It seemed to be a SpecOps traffic patrol and I couldn't risk them finding out who I was. I looked urgently towards where Havisham was motoring slowly back to me.

'Come on,' I muttered under my breath, 'put some speed on, for goodness' sake.'

Havisham pulled up and shook her head sadly.

'Mixture's too rich,' she explained. 'Take the film out of the speed camera, will you?'

I pointed out the airship heading our way. It was approaching quite fast — for an airship.

Miss Havisham looked over at it, grunted and jumped down to open the huge bonnet and peer inside. I cut off the padlock, pulled the speed camera down and rewound the film as quickly as I could.

'Halt!' barked the PA system on the airship when it was within a few hundred yards. 'You are both under arrest. Wait by your vehicle.'

'We've got to go,' I said, urgently.

'Poppycock!' replied Miss Havisham.

'Place your hands on the bonnet of the car!' yelled the PA again as the airship droned past at treetop level. 'You have been warned!'

'Miss Havisham,' I said, 'if they find out who I am I could be in a lot of trouble!'

'Nonsense, girl. Why would they want someone as inconsequential as you?'

The airship swung round with the vectored engines in reverse; once they started asking questions I'd be answering them for a long time.

'We have to go, Miss Havisham!'

She sensed the urgency in my voice and beckoned for me to get in the car. Within a moment we were away from that place, car and all, back in the lobby of the Great Library.

'You're not so popular in the Outland, then?' Havisham asked, turning off the engine, which spluttered and shook to a halt, the sudden quiet a welcome break.

'You could say that.'

'Broken the law?'

'Not really.'

She stared at me for a moment.

'I thought it a bit odd that Goliath had you trapped in their deepest and most secure sub-basement. Do you have the film from the speed camera?'

I handed it over.

'I'll get double prints,' she mused. 'Thanks for your help. See you at roll-call tomorrow — don't be late!'

I waited until she had gone, then retraced my steps to the Library, where I had left Snell's 'head-in-a-bag' plot device, and made my way home. I didn't jump direct; I took the elevator. Bookjumping might be a quick way to get around, but it was also kind of knackered.

9

Apples Benedict, a hedgehog and Commander Bradshaw

'ImaginoTransference Recording Device: *A machine used to write books in the Well, the ITRD resembles a large horn (typically eight foot across and made of brass) attached to a polished mahogany mixing board a little like a church organ but with many more stops and levers. As the story is enacted in front of the collecting horn, the actions, dialogue, humour, pathos, etc., are collected, mixed and transmitted as raw data to Text Grand Central where the wordsmiths hammer it into readable story code. Once done it is beamed direct to the author's pen or*

typewriter, and from there through a live footnoterphone link back to the Well as plain text. The page is read and if all is well, it is added to the manuscript and the characters move on. The beauty of the system is that the author never suspects a thing — they think they do all the work.'

*CMDR TRAFFORD
BRADSHAW, CBE
— Bradshaw's Guide
to the BookWorld*

'I'm home!' I yelled as I walked through the door. Pickwick plocked happily up to me, realised I didn't have any marshmallows, and then left in a huff, only to return with a piece of paper she had found in the waste-paper basket, which she offered to me as a gift. I thanked her profusely and she went back to her egg.

'Hello,' said ibb, who had been experimenting, Beeton-like, in the kitchen, 'what's in the bag?'

'You don't want to know.'

'Hmm,' replied ibb thoughtfully. 'Since I wouldn't have asked if I *didn't* want to know, your response must be another way of saying: "I'm not going to tell you, so sod off." Is that correct?'

'More or less,' I replied, placing the bag in the broom cupboard. 'Is Gran around?'

'I don't think so.'

obb walked in a little later, reading a textbook entitled *Personalities for Beginners*.

'Hello, Thursday,' it said, 'a hedgehog and a tortoise came round to see you this afternoon.'

'What did they want?'

'They didn't say.'

'And Gran?'

'In the Outland. She said not to wait up for her. You look very tired; are you okay?'

It was true, I *was* tired, but I wasn't sure why. Stress? It's not every day that you have to fight swarms of grammasites and deal with Havisham's driving, Yahoos, Thraals, Big Martin's friends or head-in-a-bag plot devices. Maybe it was just the baby playing silly buggers with my hormones.

'What's for supper?' I asked, slumping into a chair and closing my eyes.

'I've been experimenting with alternative recipes,' said ibb, 'so we're having apples Benedict.'

'Apples Benedict?'

'Yes; it's like eggs Benedict but with—'

'I get the picture. Anything else?'

'Of course. You could try turnips à l'orange or macaroni custard; for pudding I've made anchovy trifle and herring fool. What will you have?'

'Beans on toast.'

I sighed. It was like being back home at Mother's.

I didn't dream that night. Landen was absent, but then so too was ... was ... what's-her-name. I slept soundly and missed the alarm. I woke up feeling terrible and just lay flat on my back, breathing deeply and trying to push away the clouds of nausea. There was a rap at the door.

'ibb!' I yelled. 'Can you get that?'

My head throbbed but there was no answer. I glanced at the clock; it was nearly nine and both of them would be out at St Tabularasa's practising whimsical asides or something. I hauled myself out of bed, steadied myself for a moment, wrapped myself in a dressing gown and went downstairs. There was no one there when I opened the door. I was just closing it when a small voice said: