

THE MORRIS DANCE IS common to all inhabited worlds in the multiverse.

It is danced under blue skies to celebrate the quickening of the soil and under bare stars because it's springtime and with any luck the carbon dioxide will unfreeze again. The imperative is felt by deep-sea beings who have never seen the sun and urban humans whose only connection with the cycles of nature is that their Volvo once ran over a sheep.

It is danced innocently by raggedy-bearded young mathematicians to an inexpert accordion rendering of 'Mrs Widgery's Lodger' and ruthlessly by such as the Ninja Morris Men of New Ankh, who can do strange and terrible things with a simple handkerchief and a bell.

And it is never danced properly.

Except on the Discworld, which is flat and supported on the backs of four elephants which travel through space on the shell of Great A'Tuin, the world turtle.

And even there, only in one place have they got it right. It's a small village high in the Ramtop Mountains, where the big and simple secret is handed down across the generations.

There, the men dance on the first day of spring,

backwards and forwards, bells tied under their knees, white shirts flapping. People come and watch. There's an ox roast afterwards, and it's generally considered a nice day out for all the family.

But that isn't the secret.

The secret is the *other* dance.

And that won't happen for a while yet.

There is a ticking, such as might be made by a clock. And, indeed, in the sky there is a clock, and the ticking of freshly minted seconds flows out from it.

At least, it looks like a clock. But it is in fact exactly the opposite of a clock, and the biggest hand goes around just once.

There is a plain under a dim sky. It is covered with gentle rolling curves that might remind you of something else if you saw it from a long way away, and if you did see it from a long way away you'd be very glad that you were, in fact, a long way away.

Three grey figures floated just above it. Exactly what they were can't be described in normal language. Some people might call them cherubs, although there was nothing rosy-cheeked about them. They might be numbered among those who see to it that gravity operates and that time stays separate from space. Call them auditors. Auditors of reality.

They were in conversation without speaking. They didn't need to speak. They just changed reality so that they had spoken.

One said, It has never happened before. Can it be done?

One said, It will have to be done. There is a

personality. Personalities come to an end. Only forces endure.

It said this with a certain satisfaction.

One said, Besides . . . there have been irregularities. Where you get personality, you get irregularities. Well-known fact.

One said, He has worked inefficiently?

One said, No. We can't get him there.

One said, That is the point. The word is *him*. Becoming a personality *is* inefficient. We don't want it to spread. Supposing gravity developed a personality? Supposing it decided to *like* people?

One said, Got a crush on them, sort of thing?

One said, in a voice that would have been even chillier if it was not already at absolute zero, No.

One said, Sorry. Just my little joke.

One said, Besides, sometimes he wonders about his job. Such speculation is dangerous.

One said, No argument there.

One said, Then we are agreed?

One, who seemed to have been thinking about something, said, Just one moment. Did you not just use the singular pronoun, 'my'? Not developing a personality, are you?

One said, guiltily, Who? Us?

One said, Where there is personality, there is discord.

One said, Yes. Yes. Very true.

One said, All right. But watch it in future.

One said, Then we are agreed?

They looked up at the face of Azrael, outlined against the sky. In fact, it *was* the sky.

Azrael nodded, slowly.

One said, Very well. Where is this place?

One said, It is the Discworld. It rides through space on the back of a giant turtle.

One said, Oh, one of *that* sort. I hate them.

One said, You're doing it again. You said 'T'.

One said, No! No! I didn't! I never said 'T'! . . . oh, bugger . . .

It burst into flame and burned in the same way that a small cloud of vapour burns, quickly and with no residual mess. Almost immediately, another one appeared. It was identical in appearance to its vanished sibling.

One said, Let that be a lesson. To become a personality is to end. And now . . . let us go.

Azrael watched them skim away.

It is hard to fathom the thoughts of a creature so big that, in real space, his length would be measured only in terms of the speed of light. But he turned his enormous bulk and, with eyes that stars could be lost in, sought among the myriad worlds for a flat one.

On the back of a turtle. The Discworld – world and mirror of worlds.

It sounded interesting. And, in his prison of a billion years, Azrael was bored.

And this is the room where the future pours into the past via the pinch of the now.

Timers line the walls. Not hour-glasses, although they have the same shape. Not egg-timers, such as you might buy as a souvenir attached to a small board with the name of the holiday resort of your choice

jauntily inscribed on it by someone with the same sense of style as a jelly doughnut.

It's not even sand in there. It's seconds, endlessly turning the *maybe* into the *was*.

And every lifetimer has a name on it.

And the room is full of the soft hissing of people living.

Picture the scene . . .

And now add the sharp clicking of bone on stone, getting closer.

A dark shape crosses the field of vision and moves up the endless shelves of sibilant glassware. Click, click. Here's a glass with the top bulb nearly empty. Bone fingers rise and reach out. Select. And another. Select. And more. Many, many more. Select, select.

It's all in a day's work. Or it would be, if days existed here.

Click, click, as the dark shape moves patiently along the rows.

And stops.

And hesitates.

Because here's a small gold timer, not much bigger than a watch.

It wasn't there yesterday, or wouldn't have been if yesterdays existed here.

Bony fingers close around it and hold it up to the light.

It's got a name on it, in small capital letters. The name is *DEATH*.

Death put down the timer, and then picked it up again. The sands of time were already pouring through. He turned it over experimentally, just in

case. The sand went on pouring, only now it was going upwards. He hadn't really expected anything else.

It meant that, even if tomorrows could exist here, there weren't going to be any. Not any more.

There was a movement in the air behind him.

Death turned slowly, and addressed the figure that wavered indistinctly in the gloom.

WHY?

It told him.

BUT THAT IS . . . NOT RIGHT.

It told him that No, it was right.

Not a muscle moved on Death's face, because he hadn't got any.

I SHALL APPEAL.

It told him, *he* should know that there was no appeal. Never any appeal. Never any appeal.

Death thought about this, and then he said:

I HAVE ALWAYS DONE MY DUTY AS I SAW FIT.

The figure floated closer. It looked vaguely like a grey-robed and hooded monk.

It told him, We know. That is why we're letting you keep the horse.

The sun was near the horizon.

The shortest-lived creatures on the Disc were mayflies, which barely make it through twenty-four hours. Two of the oldest zigzagged aimlessly over the waters of a trout stream, discussing history with some younger members of the evening hatching.

'You don't get the kind of sun now that you used to get,' said one of them.

'You're right there. We had proper sun in the good old hours. It were all yellow. None of this red stuff.'

'It were higher, too.'

'It was. You're right.'

'And nymphs and larvae showed you a bit of respect.'

'They did. They did,' said the other mayfly vehemently.

'I reckon, if mayflies these hours behaved a bit better, we'd still be having proper sun.'

The younger mayflies listened politely.

'I remember,' said one of the oldest mayflies, 'when all this was fields, as far as you could see.'

The younger mayflies looked around.

'It's still fields,' one of them ventured, after a polite interval.

'I remember when it was *better* fields,' said the old mayfly sharply.

'Yeah,' said his colleague. 'And there was a cow.'

'That's right! You're right! I remember that cow! Stood right over there for, oh, forty, fifty minutes. It was brown, as I recall.'

'You don't get cows like that these hours.'

'You don't get cows at all.'

'What's a cow?' said one of the hatchlings.

'See?' said the oldest mayfly triumphantly. 'That's modern Ephemeroptera for you.' It paused. 'What were we doing before we were talking about the sun?'

'Zigzagging aimlessly over the water,' said one of the young flies. This was a fair bet in any case.

'No, before that.'

'Er . . . you were telling us about the Great Trout.'

‘Ah. Yes. Right. The Trout. Well, you see, if you’ve been a good mayfly, zigzagging up and down properly—’

‘– taking heed of your elders and betters –’

‘– yes, and taking heed of your elders and betters, then eventually the Great Trout—’

Clop

Clop

‘Yes?’ said one of the younger mayflies.

There was no reply.

‘The Great Trout what?’ said another mayfly, nervously.

They looked down at a series of expanding concentric rings on the water.

‘The holy sign!’ said a mayfly. ‘I remember being told about that! A Great Circle in the water! Thus shall be the sign of the Great Trout!’

The oldest of the young mayflies watched the water thoughtfully. It was beginning to realise that, as the most senior fly present, it now had the privilege of hovering closest to the surface.

‘They say,’ said the mayfly at the top of the zigzagging crowd, ‘that when the Great Trout comes for you, you go to a land flowing with . . . flowing with . . .’ Mayflies don’t eat. It was at a loss. ‘Flowing with water,’ it finished lamely.

‘I wonder,’ said the oldest mayfly.

‘It must be really good there,’ said the youngest.

‘Oh? Why?’

‘’Cos no-one ever wants to come back.’

Whereas the oldest things on the Discworld were the

famous Counting Pines, which grow right on the permanent snowline of the high Ramtop Mountains.

The Counting Pine is one of the few known examples of borrowed evolution.

Most species do their own evolving, making it up as they go along, which is the way Nature intended. And this is all very natural and organic and in tune with mysterious cycles of the cosmos, which believes that there's nothing like millions of years of really frustrating trial and error to give a species moral fibre and, in some cases, backbone.

This is probably fine from the species' point of view, but from the perspective of the actual individuals involved it can be a real pig, or at least a small pink root-eating reptile that might one day evolve into a real pig.

So the Counting Pines avoided all this by letting other vegetables do their evolving for them. A pine seed, coming to rest anywhere on the Disc, immediately picks up the most effective local genetic code via morphic resonance and grows into whatever best suits the soil and climate, usually doing much better at it than the native trees themselves, which it usually usurps.

What makes the Counting Pines particularly noteworthy, however, is the way they count.

Being dimly aware that human beings had learned to tell the age of a tree by counting the rings, the original Counting Pines decided that this was *why humans cut trees down*.

Overnight every Counting Pine readjusted its genetic code to produce, at about eye-level on

its trunk, in pale letters, its precise age. Within a year they were felled almost into extinction by the ornamental house number plate industry, and only a very few survive in hard-to-reach areas.

The six Counting Pines in this clump were listening to the oldest, whose gnarled trunk declared it to be thirty-one thousand, seven hundred and thirty-four years old. The conversation took seventeen years, but has been speeded up.

‘I remember when all this wasn’t fields.’

The pines stared out over a thousand miles of landscape. The sky flickered like a bad special effect from a time travel movie. Snow appeared, stayed for an instant, and melted.

‘What was it, then?’ said the nearest pine.

‘Ice. If you can call it ice. We had *proper* glaciers in those days. Not like the ice you get now, here one season and gone the next. It hung around for ages.’

‘What happened to it, then?’

‘It went.’

‘Went where?’

‘Where things go. Everything’s always rushing off.’

‘Wow. That was a sharp one.’

‘What was?’

‘That winter just then.’

‘Call that a winter? When I was a sapling we had winters—’

Then the tree vanished.

After a shocked pause for a couple of years, one of the clump said: ‘He just went! Just like that! One day he was here, next he was gone!’

If the other trees had been humans, they would have shuffled their feet.

‘It happens, lad,’ said one of them, carefully. ‘He’s been taken to a Better Place,* you can be sure of that. He was a *good* tree.’

The young tree, which was a mere five thousand, one hundred and eleven years old, said: ‘What sort of Better Place?’

‘We’re not sure,’ said one of the clump. It trembled uneasily in a week-long gale. ‘But we think it involves . . . sawdust.’

Since the trees were unable even to sense any event that took place in less than a day, they never heard the sound of axes.

Windle Poons, oldest wizard in the entire faculty of Unseen University –

- home of magic, wizardry and big dinners –
- was also going to die.

He knew it, in a frail and shaky sort of way.

Of course, he mused, as he wheeled his wheelchair over the flagstones towards his ground-floor study, in a *general* sort of way everyone knew they were going to die, even the common people. No-one knew where you were before you were born, but when you *were* born, it wasn’t long before you found you’d arrived with your return ticket already punched.

But wizards *really* knew. Not if death involved violence or murder, of course, but if the cause of

*In this case, three better places. The front gates of Nos 31, 7, and 34 Elm Street, Ankh-Morpork.

death was simply a case of running out of life then . . . well, you knew. You generally got the premonition in time to return your library books and make sure your best suit was clean and borrow quite large sums of money from your friends.

He was one hundred and thirty. It occurred to him that for most of his life he'd been an old man. Didn't seem fair, really.

And no-one had said anything. He'd mentioned it in the Uncommon Room last week, and no-one had taken the hint. And at lunch today they'd hardly spoken to him. Even his old so-called friends seemed to be avoiding him, and he wasn't even *trying* to borrow money.

It was like not having your birthday remembered, only worse.

He was going to die all alone, and no-one cared.

He bumped the door open with the wheel of the chair and fumbled on the table by the door for the tinder box.

That was another thing. Hardly anyone used tinder boxes these days. They bought the big smelly yellow matches the alchemists made. Windle disapproved. Fire was important. You shouldn't be able to switch it on just like that, it didn't show any respect. That was people these days, always rushing around and . . . fires. Yes, it had been a lot warmer in the old days, too. The kind of fires they had these days didn't warm you up unless you were nearly on top of them. It was something in the wood . . . it was the wrong sort of wood. Everything was wrong these days. More *thin*. More fuzzy. No real life in anything. And the days

were shorter. Mmm. Something had gone wrong with the days. They were shorter days. Mmm. Every day took an age to go by, which was odd, because days *plural* went past like a stampede. There weren't many things people wanted a 130-year-old wizard to do, and Windle had got into the habit of arriving at the dining-table up to two hours before each meal, simply to pass the time.

Endless days, going by fast. Didn't make sense. Mmm. Mind you, you didn't get the sense now that you used to get in the old days.

And they let the University be run by mere boys now. In the old days it had been run by *proper* wizards, great big men built like barges, the kind of wizards you could look up to. Then suddenly they'd all gone off somewhere and Windle was being patronised by these boys who still had some of their own teeth. Like that Ridcully lad. Windle remembered him clearly. Thin lad, sticking-out ears, never wiped his nose properly, cried for his mother in the dorm on the first night. Always up to mischief. Someone had tried to tell Windle that Ridcully was Archchancellor now. Mmm. They must think he was daft.

Where was that damn tinder box? Fingers . . . you used to get proper fingers in the old days . . .

Someone pulled the covers off a lantern. Someone else pushed a drink into his groping hand.

'Surprise!'

In the hall of the house of Death is a clock with a pendulum like a blade but with no hands, because in the house of Death there is no time but the present.

(There was, of course, a present *before* the present now, but that was also the present. It was just an older one.)

The pendulum is a blade that would have made Edgar Allan Poe give it all up and start again as a stand-up comedian on the scampi-in-a-casket circuit. It swings with a faint whum-whum noise, gently slicing thin rashers of interval from the bacon of eternity.

Death stalked past the clock and into the sombre gloom of his study. Albert, his servant, was waiting for him with the towel and dusters.

‘Good morning, master.’

Death sat down silently in his big chair. Albert draped the towel over the angular shoulders.

‘Another nice day,’ he said, conversationally.

Death said nothing.

Albert flapped the polishing cloth and pulled back Death’s cowl.

ALBERT.

‘Sir?’

Death pulled out the tiny golden timer.

DO YOU SEE THIS?

‘Yes, sir. Very nice. Never seen one like that before. Whose is it?’

MINE.

Albert’s eyes swivelled sideways. On one corner of Death’s desk was a large timer in a black frame. It contained no sand.

‘I thought that one was yours, sir?’ he said.

IT WAS. NOW THIS IS. A RETIREMENT PRESENT. FROM AZRAEL HIMSELF.

Albert peered at the thing in Death's hand.

'But . . . the sand, sir. It's *pouring*.'

QUITE SO.

'But that means . . . I mean . . .?'

IT MEANS THAT ONE DAY THE SAND WILL ALL BE
POURED, ALBERT.

'I know that, sir, but . . . you . . . I thought Time was something that happened to other people, sir. Doesn't it? Not to *you*, sir.' By the end of the sentence Albert's voice was beseeching.

Death pulled off the towel and stood up.

COME WITH ME.

'But you're *Death*, master,' said Albert, running crab-legged after the tall figure as it led the way out into the hall and down the passage to the stable. 'This isn't some sort of joke, is it?' he added hopefully.

I AM NOT KNOWN FOR MY SENSE OF FUN.

'Well, of course not, no offence meant. But listen, you can't die, because you're Death, you'd have to happen to yourself, it'd be like that snake that eats its own tail—'

NEVERTHELESS, I AM GOING TO DIE. THERE IS NO
APPEAL.

'But what will happen to *me*?' Albert said. Terror glittered on his words like flakes of metal on the edge of a knife.

THERE WILL BE A NEW DEATH.

Albert drew himself up.

'I really don't think I could serve a new master,' he said.

THEN GO BACK INTO THE WORLD. I WILL GIVE YOU
MONEY. YOU HAVE BEEN A GOOD SERVANT, ALBERT.

‘But if I go back—’

YES, said Death. YOU WILL DIE.

In the warm, horsey gloom of the stable, Death’s pale horse looked up from its oats and gave a little whinny of greeting. The horse’s name was Binky. He was a real horse. Death had tried fiery steeds and skeletal horses in the past, and found them impractical, especially the fiery ones, which tended to set light to their own bedding and stand in the middle of it looking embarrassed.

Death took the saddle down from its hook and glanced at Albert, who was suffering a crisis of conscience.

Thousands of years before, Albert had opted to serve Death rather than die. He wasn’t exactly immortal. Real time was forbidden in Death’s realm. There was only the ever-changing *now*, but it went on for a very long time. He had less than two months of real time left; he hoarded his days like bars of gold.

‘I, er . . .’ he began. ‘That is—’

YOU FEAR TO DIE?

‘It’s not that I don’t want . . . I mean, I’ve always . . . it’s just that life is a habit that’s hard to break . . .’

Death watched him curiously, as one might watch a beetle that had landed on its back and couldn’t turn over.

Finally Albert lapsed into silence.

I UNDERSTAND, said Death, unhooking Binky’s bridle.

‘But you don’t seem worried! You’re really going to *die*?’

YES. IT WILL BE A GREAT ADVENTURE.

‘It will? You’re not afraid?’

I DO NOT KNOW HOW TO BE AFRAID.

‘I could show you, if you like,’ Albert ventured.

NO. I SHOULD LIKE TO LEARN BY MYSELF. I SHALL HAVE EXPERIENCES. AT LAST.

‘Master . . . if you go, will there be—?’

I TOLD YOU. A NEW DEATH WILL ARISE FROM THE MINDS OF THE LIVING, ALBERT.

‘Oh.’ Albert looked relieved. ‘You don’t happen to know what He’ll be like, do you?’

NO.

‘Perhaps I’d better, you know, clean the place up a bit, get an inventory prepared, that sort of thing?’

GOOD IDEA, said Death, as kindly as possible. WHEN I SEE THE NEW DEATH, I SHALL HEARTILY RECOMMEND YOU.

‘Oh. You’ll see him, then?’

OH, YES. AND I MUST LEAVE NOW.

‘What, so soon?’

CERTAINLY. MUSTN’T WASTE TIME! Death adjusted the saddle, and then turned and held the tiny hour-glass proudly in front of Albert’s hooked nose.

SEE! I HAVE TIME. AT LAST, I HAVE *TIME!*

Albert backed away nervously.

‘And now that you have it, what are you going to do with it?’ he said.

Death mounted his horse.

I AM GOING TO *SPEND* IT.

The party was in full swing. The banner with the legend ‘Goodebye Windle 130 Glorouse Years’ was drooping a bit in the heat. Things were getting to the

point where there was nothing to drink but the punch and nothing to eat but the strange yellow dip with the highly suspicious tortillas and *nobody minded*. The wizards chatted with the forced jolliness of people who see one another all day and are now seeing one another all evening.

In the middle of it all Windle Poons sat with a huge glass of rum and a funny hat on his head. He was almost in tears.

‘A genuine Going-Away party!’ he kept muttering. ‘Haven’t had one of them since old “Scratcher” Hocksole Went Away,’ the capital letters fell into place easily, ‘back in, mm, the Year of the Intimidating, mm, Porpoise. Thought everyone had forgotten about ’em.’

‘The Librarian looked up the details for us,’ said the Bursar, indicating a large orangutan who was trying to blow into a party squeaker. ‘He also made the banana dip. I hope someone eats it soon.’

He leaned down.

‘Can I help you to some more potato salad?’ he said, in the loud deliberate voice used for talking to imbeciles and odd people.

Windle cupped a trembling hand to his ear.

‘What? What?’

‘More! salad! Windle?’

‘No, thank you.’

‘Another sausage, then?’

‘What?’

‘Sausage!’

‘They give me terrible gas all night,’ said Windle. He considered this for a moment, and then took five.

‘Er,’ shouted the Bursar, ‘do you happen to know what time—?’

‘Eh?’

‘What! Time?’

‘Half past nine,’ said Windle, promptly if indistinctly.

‘Well, that’s nice,’ said the Bursar. ‘It gives you the rest of the evening, er, free.’

Windle rummaged in the dreadful recesses of his wheelchair, a graveyard for old cushions, dog-eared books and ancient, half-sucked sweets. He flourished a small green-covered book and pushed it into the Bursar’s hands.

The Bursar turned it over. Scrawled on the cover were the words: Windle Poons Hys Dyary. A piece of bacon rind marked today’s date.

Under Things to Do, a crabbed hand had written: Die.

The Bursar couldn’t stop himself from turning the page.

Yes. Under tomorrow’s date, Things to Do: Get Born.

His gaze slid sideways to a small table at the side of the room. Despite the fact that the room was quite crowded, there was an area of clear floor around the table, as if it had some kind of personal space that no-one was about to invade.

There had been special instructions in the Going Away ceremony concerning the table. It had to have a black cloth, with a few magic sigils embroidered on it. It had a plate, containing a selection of the better canapés. It had a glass of wine. After considerable

discussion among the wizards, a funny paper hat had been added as well.

They all had an expectant look.

The Bursar took out his watch and flicked open the lid.

It was one of the new-fangled pocket watches, with hands. They pointed to a quarter past nine. He shook it. A small hatch opened under the 12 and a very small demon poked its head out and said, 'Knock it off, guv'nor, I'm pedalling as fast as I can.'

He closed the watch again and looked around desperately. No-one else seemed anxious to come too near Windle Poons. The Bursar felt it was up to him to make polite conversation. He surveyed possible topics. They all presented problems.

Windle Poons helped him out.

'I'm thinking of coming back as a woman,' he said conversationally.

The Bursar opened and shut his mouth a few times.

'I'm looking forward to it,' Poons went on. 'I think it might, mm, be jolly good fun.'

The Bursar riffled desperately through his limited repertoire of small talk relating to women. He leaned down to Windle's gnarled ear.

'Isn't there rather a lot of,' he struck out aimlessly, 'washing things? And making beds and cookery and all that sort of thing?'

'Not in the kind of, mm, life *I* have in mind,' said Windle firmly.

The Bursar shut his mouth. The Archchancellor banged on a table with a spoon.

'Brothers—' he began, when there was something

approaching silence. This prompted a loud and ragged chorus of cheering.

‘—As you all know we are here tonight to mark the, ah, *retirement*’ – nervous laughter – ‘of our old friend and colleague Windle Poons. You know, seeing old Windle sitting here tonight puts me in mind, as luck would have it, of the story of the cow with three wooden legs. It appears that there was this cow, and—’

The Bursar let his mind wander. He knew the story. The Archchancellor always mucked up the punch line, and in any case he had other things on his mind.

He kept looking back at the little table.

The Bursar was a kindly if nervous soul, and quite enjoyed his job. Apart from anything else, no other wizard wanted it. Lots of wizards wanted to be Archchancellor, for example, or the head of one of the eight orders of magic, but practically no wizards wanted to spend lots of time in an office shuffling bits of paper and doing sums. All the paperwork of the University tended to accumulate in the Bursar’s office, which meant that he went to bed tired at nights but at least slept soundly and didn’t have to check very hard for unexpected scorpions in his night-shirt.

Killing off a wizard of a higher grade was a recognised way of getting advancement in the orders. However, the only person likely to want to kill the Bursar was someone else who derived a quiet pleasure from columns of numbers, all neatly arranged, and people like that don’t often go in for murder.*

*At least, until the day they suddenly pick up a paperknife and carve their way out through Cost Accounting and into forensic history.

He recalled his childhood, long ago, in the Ramtop Mountains. He and his sister used to leave a glass of wine and a cake out every Hogswatchnight for the Hogfather. Things had been different, then. He'd been a lot younger and hadn't known much and had probably been a lot happier.

For example, he hadn't known that he might one day be a wizard and join other wizards in leaving a glass of wine and a cake and a rather suspect chicken vol-au-vent and a paper party hat for . . .

. . . someone else.

There'd been Hogswatch parties, too, when he was a little boy. They'd always follow a certain pattern. Just when all the children were nearly sick with excitement, one of the grown-ups would say, archly, 'I think we're going to have a special visitor!' and, amazingly on cue, there'd be a suspicious ringing of hog bells outside the window and in would come . . .

. . . in would come . . .

The Bursar shook his head. Someone's grandad in false whiskers, of course. Some jolly old boy with a sack of toys, stamping the snow off his boots. Someone who *gave* you something.

Whereas *tonight* . . .

Of course, old Windle probably felt different about it. After one hundred and thirty years, death probably had a certain attraction. You probably became quite interested in finding out what happened next.

The Archchancellor's convoluted anecdote wound jerkily to its close. The assembled wizards laughed dutifully, and then tried to work out the joke.

The Bursar looked surreptitiously at his watch. It was now twenty minutes past nine.

Windle Poons made a speech. It was long and rambling and disjointed and went on about the good old days and he seemed to think that most of the people around him were people who had been, in fact, dead for about fifty years, but that didn't matter because you got into the habit of not listening to old Windle.

The Bursar couldn't tear his eyes away from his watch. From inside came the squeak of the treadle as the demon patiently pedalled his way towards infinity.

Twenty-five minutes past the hour.

The Bursar wondered how it was supposed to happen. Did you hear – *I think we're going to have a very special visitor* – hoofbeats outside?

Did the door actually open or did He come through it? Silly question. He was renowned for His ability to get into sealed places – *especially* into sealed places, if you thought about it logically. Seal yourself in anywhere and it was only a matter of time.

The Bursar hoped He'd use the door properly. His nerves were twanging as it was.

The conversational level was dropping. Quite a few other wizards, the Bursar noticed, were glancing at the door.

Windle was at the centre of a very tactfully widening circle. No-one was actually avoiding him, it was just that an apparent random Brownian motion was gently moving everyone away.

Wizards can see Death. And when a wizard dies, Death arrives in person to usher him into the Beyond. The Bursar wondered why this was considered a plus—

‘Don’t know what you’re all looking at,’ said Windle, cheerfully.

The Bursar opened his watch.

The hatch under the 12 snapped up.

‘Can you knock it off with all this shaking around?’ squeaked the demon. ‘It keeps on losing count.’

‘Sorry,’ the Bursar hissed. It was nine twenty-nine.

The Archchancellor stepped forward.

‘Bye, then, Windle,’ he said, shaking the old man’s parchment-like hand. ‘The old place won’t seem the same without you.’

‘Don’t know how we’ll manage,’ said the Bursar, thankfully.

‘Good luck in the next life,’ said the Dean. ‘Drop in if you’re ever passing and happen to, you know, remember who you’ve been.’

‘Don’t be a stranger, you hear?’ said the Archchancellor.

Windle Poons nodded amiably. He hadn’t heard what they were saying. He nodded on general principles.

The wizards, as one man, faced the door.

The hatch under the 12 snapped up again.

‘Bing bing bong bing,’ said the demon. ‘Bingely-bingely bong bing bing.’

‘What?’ said the Bursar, jolted.

‘Half past nine,’ said the demon.

The wizards turned to Windle Poons. They looked faintly accusing.

‘What’re you all looking at?’ he said.

The seconds hand on the watch squeaked onwards.

‘How are you feeling?’ said the Dean loudly.

‘Never felt better,’ said Windle. ‘Is there any more of that, mm, rum left?’

The assembled wizards watched him pour a generous measure into his beaker.

‘You want to go easy on that stuff,’ said the Dean nervously.

‘Good health!’ said Windle Poons.

The Archchancellor drummed his fingers on the table.

‘Mr Poons,’ he said, ‘are you quite *sure*?’

Windle had gone off at a tangent. ‘Any more of these toturerillas? Not that I call it proper food,’ he said, ‘dippin’ bits of hard bikky in sludge, what’s so special about that? What I could do with right now is one of Mr Dibbler’s famous meat pies—’

And then he died.

The Archchancellor glanced at his fellow wizards, and then tiptoed across to the wheelchair and lifted a blue-veined wrist to check the pulse. He shook his head.

‘That’s the way I want to go,’ said the Dean.

‘What, muttering about meat pies?’ said the Bursar.

‘No. Late.’

‘Hold on. Hold on,’ said the Archchancellor. ‘This isn’t right, you know. According to tradition, Death *himself* turns up for the death of a wiz—’

‘Perhaps he was busy,’ said the Bursar hurriedly.

‘That’s right,’ said the Dean. ‘Bit of a serious flu epidemic over Quirm way, I’m told.’

‘Quite a storm last night, too. Lots of shipwrecks, I daresay,’ said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

‘And of course it’s springtime, when you get a great many avalanches in the mountains.’

‘And plagues.’

The Archchancellor stroked his beard thoughtfully.

‘Hmm,’ he said.

Alone of all the creatures in the world, trolls believe that all living things go through Time backwards. If the past is visible and the future is hidden, they say, then it means you must be facing the wrong way. Everything alive is going through life back to front. And this is a very interesting idea, considering it was invented by a race who spend most of their time hitting one another on the head with rocks.

Whichever way around it is, Time is something that living creatures possess.

Death galloped down through towering black clouds.

And now he had Time, too.

The time of his life.

Windle Poons peered into the darkness.

‘Hallo?’ he said. ‘Hallo. Anyone there? What ho?’

There was a distant, forlorn sougning, as of wind at the end of a tunnel.

‘Come out, come out, wherever you are,’ said Windle, his voice trembling with mad cheerfulness. ‘Don’t worry. I’m quite looking forward to it, to tell the truth.’

He clapped his spiritual hands and rubbed them together with forced enthusiasm.

‘Get a move on. Some of us have got new lives to go to,’ he said.

The darkness remained inert. There was no shape,

no sound. It was void, without form. The spirit of Windle Poons moved on the face of the darkness.

It shook its head. ‘Blow this for a lark,’ it muttered. ‘This isn’t right at all.’

It hung around for a while and then, because there didn’t seem anything else for it, headed for the only home it had ever known.

It was a home he’d occupied for one hundred and thirty years. It wasn’t expecting him back and put up a lot of resistance. You either had to be very determined or very powerful to overcome that sort of thing, but Windle Poons had been a wizard for more than a century. Besides, it was like breaking into your own house, the old familiar property that you’d lived in for years. You knew where the metaphorical window was that didn’t shut properly.

In short, Windle Poons went back to Windle Poons.

Wizards don’t believe in gods in the same way that most people don’t find it necessary to believe in, say, tables. They know they’re there, they know they’re there for a purpose, they’d probably agree that they have a place in a well-organised universe, but they wouldn’t see the point of *believing*, of going around saying, ‘O great table, without whom we are as naught’. Anyway, either the gods are there whether you believe or not, or exist only as a function of the belief, so either way you might as well ignore the whole business and, as it were, eat off your knees.

Nevertheless, there is a small chapel off the University’s Great Hall, because while the wizards stand right behind the philosophy as outlined above,

you don't become a successful wizard by getting up gods' noses even if those noses only exist in an ethereal or metaphorical sense. Because while wizards don't believe in gods they know for a fact that *gods* believe in gods.

And in this chapel lay the body of Windle Poons. The University had instituted twenty-four hours' lying-in-state ever since the embarrassing affair thirty years previously with the late Prissal 'Merry Prankster' Teatar.

The body of Windle Poons opened its eyes. Two coins jingled on to the stone floor.

The hands, crossed over the chest, unclenched.

Windle raised his head. Some idiot had stuck a lily on his stomach.

His eyes swivelled sideways. There was a candle on either side of his head.

He raised his head some more.

There were two more candles down there, too.

Thank goodness for old Teatar, he thought. Otherwise I'd already be looking at the underside of a rather cheap pine lid.

Funny thing, he thought. I'm thinking. Clearly.

Wow.

Windle lay back, feeling his spirit refilling his body like gleaming molten metal running through a mould. White-hot thoughts seared across the darkness of his brain, fired sluggish neurones into action.

It was never like this when I was alive.

But I'm not dead.

Not alive and not dead.

Sort of non-alive.