

According to the *First Scroll of Wen the Eternally Surprised*, Wen stepped out of the cave where he had received enlightenment and into the dawning light of the first day of the rest of his life. He stared at the rising sun for some time, because he had never seen it before.

He prodded with a sandal the dozing form of Clodpool the apprentice, and said: 'I have seen. Now I understand.'

Then he stopped, and looked at the thing next to Clodpool.

'What is that amazing thing?' he said.

'Er . . . er . . . it's a tree, master,' said Clodpool, still not quite awake. 'Remember? It was there yesterday.'

'There was no yesterday.'

'Er . . . er . . . I think there *was*, master,' said Clodpool, struggling to his feet. 'Remember? We came up here and I cooked a meal, and had the rind off your *sklang* because you didn't want it.'

'I *remember* yesterday,' said Wen thoughtfully. 'But the memory is in my head *now*. Was yesterday real? Or is it only the memory that is real? Truly, yesterday I was not born.'

Clodpool's face became a mask of agonized incomprehension.

‘Dear stupid Clodpool, I have learned everything,’ said Wen. ‘In the cup of the hand there is no past, no future. There is only now. There is no time but the present. We have a great deal to do.’

Clodpool hesitated. There was something new about his master. There was a glow in his eyes and, when he moved, there were strange silvery-blue lights in the air, like reflections from liquid mirrors.

‘She has told me everything,’ Wen went on. ‘I know that time was made for men, not the other way round. I have learned how to shape it and bend it. I know how to make a moment last for ever, because it already has. And I can teach these skills even to you, Clodpool. I have heard the heartbeat of the universe. I know the answers to many questions. Ask me.’

The apprentice gave him a bleary look. It was too early in the morning for it to be early in the morning. That was the only thing that he currently knew for sure.

‘Er . . . what does master want for breakfast?’ he said.

Wen looked down from their camp and across the snowfields and purple mountains to the golden daylight creating the world, and mused upon certain aspects of humanity.

‘Ah,’ he said. ‘One of the *difficult* ones.’

For something to exist, it has to be observed.

For something to exist, it has to have a position in time and space.

And this explains why nine-tenths of the mass of the universe is unaccounted for.

Nine-tenths of the universe is the knowledge of the position and direction of everything in the other tenth. Every atom has its biography, every star its file, every chemical exchange its equivalent of the inspector with a clipboard. It is unaccounted for because it is doing the accounting for the rest of it, and you cannot see the back of your own head.*

Nine-tenths of the universe, in fact, is the paperwork.

And if you want the story, then remember that a story does not unwind. It weaves. Events that start in different places and different times all bear down on that one tiny point in space-time, which is the perfect moment.

Supposing an emperor was persuaded to wear a new suit of clothes whose material was so fine that, to the common eye, the clothes weren't there. And suppose a little boy pointed out this fact in a loud, clear voice . . .

Then you have The Story of the Emperor Who Had No Clothes.

But if you knew a bit more, it would be The Story of the Boy Who Got a Well-Deserved Thrashing from His Dad for Being Rude to Royalty, and Was Locked Up.

Or The Story of the Whole Crowd Who Were Rounded Up by the Guards and Told 'This Didn't Happen, okay? Does Anyone Want to Argue?'

* Except in very small universes.

Or it could be a story of how a whole kingdom suddenly saw the benefits of the 'new clothes', and developed an enthusiasm for healthy sports* in a lively and refreshing atmosphere which got many new adherents every year, and led to a recession caused by the collapse of the conventional clothing industry.

It could even be a story about The Great Pneumonia Epidemic of '09.

It all depends on how much you know.

Supposing you'd watched the slow accretion of snow over thousands of years as it was compressed and pushed over the deep rock until the glacier calved its icebergs into the sea, and you watched an iceberg drift out through the chilly waters, and you got to know its cargo of happy polar bears and seals as they looked forward to a brave new life in the other hemisphere where they say the ice floes are lined with crunchy penguins, and then *wham!* Tragedy loomed in the shape of thousands of tons of unaccountably floating iron and an exciting soundtrack . . .

. . . you'd want to know the *whole* story.

And this one starts with desks.

This is the desk of a professional. It is clear that their job is their life. There are . . . human touches, but these are the human touches that strict usage allows in a chilly world of duty and routine.

Mostly they're on the only piece of real colour in this picture of blacks and greys. It's a coffee mug. Someone somewhere wanted to make it a *jolly* mug. It bears a rather unconvincing picture of a teddy bear,

* Mostly involving big, big beachballs.

and the legend 'To The World's Greatest Grandad' and the slight change in the style of lettering on the word 'Grandad' makes it clear that this has come from one of those stalls that have *hundreds* of mugs like this, declaring that they're for the world's greatest Grandad/Dad/Mum/Granny/Uncle/Aunt/Blank. Only someone whose life contains very little else, one feels, would treasure a piece of gimcrackery like this.

It currently holds tea, with a slice of lemon.

The bleak desktop also contains a paperknife in the shape of a scythe and a number of hourglasses.

Death picks up the mug in a skeletal hand . . .

. . . and took a sip, pausing only to look again at the wording he'd read thousands of times before, and then put it down.

VERY WELL, he said, in tones of funeral bells. SHOW ME.

The last item on the desktop was a mechanical contrivance. 'Contrivance' was exactly the right kind of word for it. Most of it was two discs. One was horizontal and contained a circlet of very small squares of what would prove to be carpet. The other was set vertically and had a large number of arms, each one of which held a very small slice of buttered toast. Each slice was set so that it could spin freely as the turning of the wheel brought it down towards the carpet disc.

I BELIEVE I AM BEGINNING TO GET THE IDEA, said Death.

The small figure by the machine saluted smartly and beamed, if a rat skull could beam. It pulled a pair

of goggles over its eye sockets, hitched up its robe and clambered into the machine.

Death was never quite sure why he allowed the Death of Rats to have an independent existence. After all, being Death meant being the Death of *everything*, including rodents of all descriptions. But perhaps everyone needs a tiny part of themselves that can, metaphorically, be allowed to run naked in the rain*, to think the unthinkable thoughts, to hide in corners and spy on the world, to do the forbidden but enjoyable deeds.

Slowly, the Death of Rats pushed the treadles. The wheels began to spin.

‘Exciting, eh?’ said a hoarse voice by Death’s ear. It belonged to Quoth, the raven, who had attached himself to the household as the Death of Rats’ personal transport and crony. He was, he always said, only in it for the eyeballs.

The carpets began to turn. The tiny toasties slapped down randomly, sometimes with a buttery squelch, sometimes without. Quoth watched carefully, in case any eyeballs were involved.

Death saw that some time and effort had been spent devising a mechanism to rebutter each returning slice. An even more complex one measured the number of buttered carpets.

After a couple of complete turns the lever of the buttered carpet ratio device had moved to 60 per cent, and the wheels stopped.

WELL? said Death. IF YOU DID IT AGAIN, IT COULD WELL BE THAT—

* Quite an overrated activity.

The Death of Rats shifted a gear lever and began to pedal again.

SQUEAK, it commanded. Death obediently leaned closer.

This time the needle went only as high as 40 per cent.

Death leaned closer still.

The eight pieces of carpet that had been buttered this time were, in their entirety, the pieces that had been missed first time round.

Spidery cogwheels whirred in the machine. A sign emerged, rather shakily, on springs, with an effect that was the visual equivalent of the word 'boing'.

A moment later two sparklers spluttered fitfully into life and sizzled away on either side of the word: MALIGNITY.

Death nodded. It was just as he'd suspected.

He crossed his study, the Death of Rats scampering ahead of him, and reached a full-length mirror. It was dark, like the bottom of a well. There was a pattern of skulls and bones around the frame, for the sake of appearances; Death could not look himself in the skull in a mirror with cherubs and roses around it.

The Death of Rats climbed the frame in a scrabble of claws and looked at Death expectantly from the top. Quoth fluttered over and pecked briefly at his own reflection, on the basis that anything was worth a try.

SHOW ME, said Death. SHOW ME . . . MY THOUGHTS.

A chessboard appeared, but it was triangular, and so big that only the nearest point could be seen. Right on this point was the world – turtle, elephants, the

little orbiting sun and all. It was the Discworld, which existed only just this side of total improbability and, therefore, in border country. In border country the border gets crossed, and sometimes things creep into the universe that have rather more on their mind than a better life for their children and a wonderful future in the fruit-picking and domestic service industries.

On every other black or white triangle of the chessboard, all the way to infinity, was a small grey shape, rather like an empty hooded robe.

Why now? thought Death.

He recognized them. They were not life forms. They were . . . non-life forms. They were the observers of the operation of the universe, its clerks, its *auditors*. They saw to it that things spun and rocks fell.

And they believed that for a thing to exist it had to have a position in time and space. Humanity had arrived as a nasty shock. Humanity practically *was* things that didn't have a position in time and space, such as imagination, pity, hope, history and belief. Take those away and all you had was an ape that fell out of trees a lot.

Intelligent life was, therefore, an anomaly. It made the filing untidy. The Auditors *hated* things like that. Periodically, they tried to tidy things up a little.

The year before, astronomers across the Discworld had been puzzled to see the stars wheel gently across the sky as the world-turtle executed a roll. The thickness of the world never allowed them to see why, but Great A'Tuin's ancient head had snaked out and down and had snapped right out of the sky the speeding asteroid that would, had it hit, have meant that

no one would have needed to buy a diary ever again.

No, the world could take care of obvious threats like that. So now the grey robes preferred more subtle, cowardly skirmishes in their endless desire for a universe where nothing happened that was not completely predictable.

The butter-side-down effect was only a trivial but telling indicator. It showed an increase in activity. Give up, was their eternal message. Go back to being blobs in the ocean. Blobs are easy.

But the great game went on at many levels, Death knew. And often it was hard to know who was playing.

EVERY CAUSE HAS ITS EFFECT, he said aloud. SO EVERY EFFECT HAS ITS CAUSE.

He nodded at the Death of Rats. SHOW ME, said Death. SHOW ME . . . A BEGINNING.

Tick

It was a bitter winter's night. The man hammered on the back door, sending snow sliding off the roof.

The girl, who had been admiring her new hat in the mirror, tweaked the already low neckline of her dress for slightly more exposure, just in case the caller was male, and went and opened the door.

A figure was outlined against the freezing starlight. Flakes were already building up on his cloak.

'Mrs Ogg? The midwife?' he said.

'It's Miss, actually,' she said proudly. 'And witch, too, o'course.' She indicated her new black pointy hat. She was still at the stage of wearing it in the house.

'You must come at once. It's very urgent.'

The girl looked suddenly panic-stricken. 'Is it Mrs Weaver? I didn't reckon she was due for another couple of we—'

'I have come a long way,' said the figure. 'They say you are the best in the world.'

'What? Me? I've only delivered one!' said Miss Ogg, now looking hunted. 'Biddy Spective is a lot more experienced than me! And old Minnie Forthwright! Mrs Weaver was going to be my first solo, 'cos she's built like a wardro—'

'I do beg your pardon. I will not trespass further on your time.'

The stranger retreated into the flake-speckled shadows.

'Hello?' said Miss Ogg. 'Hello?'

But there was nothing there, except footprints. Which stopped in the middle of the snow-covered path . . .

Tick

There was a hammering on the door. Mrs Ogg put down the child that had been sitting on her knee and went and raised the latch.

A dark figure stood outlined against the warm summer evening sky, and there was something strange about its shoulders.

'Mrs Ogg? You are married now?'

'Yep. Twice,' said Mrs Ogg cheerfully. 'What can I do for y—'

'You must come at once. It's very urgent.'

'I didn't know anyone was—'

‘I have come a long way,’ said the figure.

Mrs Ogg paused. There was something in the way he had pronounced *long*. And now she could see that the whiteness on the cloak was snow, melting fast. Faint memory stirred.

‘Well, now,’ she said, because she’d learned a lot in the last twenty years or so, ‘that’s as may be, and I’ll always do the best I can, ask anyone. But I wouldn’t say I’m *the* best. Always learnin’ something new, that’s me.’

‘Oh. In that case I will call at a more convenient . . . moment.’

‘Why’ve you got snow on—?’

But, without ever quite vanishing, the stranger was no longer present . . .

Tick

There was a hammering on the door. Nanny Ogg carefully put down her brandy nightcap and stared at the wall for a moment. Now a lifetime of edge witchery* had honed senses that most people never really knew they had, and something in her head went ‘click’.

On the hob the kettle for her hot-water bottle was just coming to the boil.

She laid down her pipe, got up and opened the door on this springtime midnight.

* An edge witch is one who makes her living on the edges, in that moment when boundary conditions apply – between life and death, light and dark, good and evil and, most dangerously of all, today and tomorrow.

‘You’ve come a long way, I’m thinking,’ she said, showing no surprise at the dark figure.

‘That is true, Mrs Ogg.’

‘Everyone who knows me calls me Nanny.’

She looked down at the melting snow dripping off the cloak. It hadn’t snowed up here for a month.

‘And it’s urgent, I expect?’ she said, as memory unrolled.

‘Indeed.’

‘And now you got to say, “You must come at once.”’

‘You *must* come at once.’

‘Well, now,’ she said. ‘I’d say, *yes*, I’m a pretty good midwife, though I do say it myself. I’ve seen hundreds into the world. Even trolls, which is no errand for the inexperienced. I know birthing backwards and forwards and damn near sideways at times. Always been ready to learn something new, though.’ She looked down modestly. ‘I wouldn’t say I’m the best,’ she said, ‘but I can’t think of anyone better, I have to say.’

‘You must leave with me now.’

‘Oh, I must, must I?’ said Nanny Ogg.

‘Yes!’

An edge witch thinks fast, because edges can shift so quickly. And she learns to tell when a mythology is unfolding, and when the best you can do is put yourself in its path and run to keep up.

‘I’ll just go and get—’

‘There is *no time*.’

‘But I can’t just walk right out and—’

‘*Now*.’

Nanny reached behind the door for her birthing bag,

always kept there for just such occasions as this, full of the things she knew she'd want and a few of the things she always prayed she'd never need.

'Right,' she said.

She left.

Tick

The kettle was just boiling when Nanny walked back into her kitchen. She stared at it for a moment and then moved it off the fire.

There was still a drop of brandy left in the glass by her chair. She drained that, then refilled the glass to the brim from the bottle.

She picked up her pipe. The bowl was still warm. She pulled on it, and the coals crackled.

Then she took something out of her bag, which was now a good deal emptier, and, brandy glass in her hand, sat down to look at it.

'Well,' she said at last. 'That was . . . very unusual . . .'

Tick

Death watched the image fade. A few flakes of snow that had blown out of the mirror had already melted on the floor, but there was still a whiff of pipe smoke in the air.

AH, I SEE, he said. A BIRTHING, IN STRANGE CIRCUMSTANCES. BUT IS THAT WHAT THE PROBLEM WAS OR WAS THAT WHAT THE SOLUTION WILL BE?

SQUEAK, said the Death of Rats.

QUITE SO, said Death. YOU MAY VERY WELL BE RIGHT. I DO KNOW THAT THE MIDWIFE WILL NEVER TELL ME.

The Death of Rats looked surprised. SQUEAK?

Death smiled. DEATH? ASKING AFTER THE LIFE OF A CHILD? NO. SHE WOULD NOT.

‘Scuse me,’ said the raven, ‘but how come Miss Ogg became Mrs Ogg? Sounds like a bit of a rural arrangement, if you catch my meaning.’

WITCHES ARE MATRILINEAL, said Death. THEY FIND IT MUCH EASIER TO CHANGE MEN THAN TO CHANGE NAMES.

He went back to his desk and opened a drawer.

There was a thick book there, bound in night. On the cover, where a book like this might otherwise say ‘Our Wedding’ or ‘Acme Photo Album’, it said ‘MEMORIES’.

Death turned the heavy pages carefully. Some of the memories escaped as he did so, forming brief pictures in the air before the page turned, and they went flying and fading into the distant, dark corners of the room. There were snatches of sound, too, of laughter, tears, screams and for some reason a brief burst of xylophone music, which caused him to pause for a moment.

An immortal has a great deal to remember. Sometimes it’s better to put things where they will be safe.

One ancient memory, brown and cracking round the edges, lingered in the air over the desk. It showed five figures, four on horseback, one in a chariot, all apparently riding out of a thunderstorm. The horses were at a flat gallop. There was a lot of smoke and flame and general excitement.

AH, THE OLD DAYS, said Death. BEFORE THERE WAS THIS FASHION FOR HAVING A SOLO CAREER.

SQUEAK? the Death of Rats enquired.

OH, YES, said Death. ONCE THERE WERE FIVE OF US. FIVE HORSEMEN. BUT YOU KNOW HOW THINGS ARE. THERE'S ALWAYS A ROW. CREATIVE DISAGREEMENTS, ROOMS BEING TRASHED, THAT SORT OF THING. He sighed. AND THINGS SAID THAT PERHAPS SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN SAID.

He turned a few more pages and sighed again. When you needed an ally, and you were Death, on whom could you absolutely rely?

His thoughtful gaze fell on the teddy bear mug.

Of course, there was always family. Yes. He'd promised not to do this again, but he'd never got the hang of promises.

He got up and went back to the mirror. There was not a lot of time. Things in the mirror were closer than they appeared.

There was a slithering noise, a breathless moment of silence, and a crash like a bag of skittles being dropped.

The Death of Rats winced. The raven took off hurriedly.

HELP ME UP, PLEASE, said a voice from the shadows. AND THEN PLEASE CLEAN UP THE DAMN BUTTER.

Tick

This desk was a field of galaxies.

Things twinkled. There were complex wheels and spirals, brilliant against the blackness . . .

Jeremy always liked the moment when he had a clock in pieces, with every wheel and spring carefully laid out on the black velvet cloth in front of him. It was like looking at Time, dismantled, controllable, every part of it understood . . .

He wished his life was like that. It would be nice to reduce it to bits, spread them all out on the table, clean and oil them properly and put them together so that they coiled and spun as they ought to. But sometimes it seemed that the life of Jeremy had been assembled by a not very competent craftsman, who had allowed a number of small but important things to go *ping* into the corners of the room.

He wished he liked people more, but somehow he could never get on with them. He never knew what to say. If life was a party, he wasn't even in the kitchen. He envied the people who made it as far as the kitchen. There would probably be the remains of the dip to eat, and a bottle or two of cheap wine that someone had brought along that'd probably be okay if you took out the drowned cigarette stubs. There might even be a girl in the kitchen, although Jeremy knew the limits of his imagination.

But Jeremy never even got an invitation.

Clocks, now . . . clocks were different. He knew what made clocks tick.

His full name was Jeremy Clockson, and that was no accident. He'd been a member of the Guild of Clockmakers since he was a few days old, and everyone knew what *that* meant. It meant his life had begun in a basket, on a doorstep. Everyone knew how it worked. All the Guilds took in the foundlings that

arrived with the morning milk. It was an ancient form of charity, and there were far worse fates. The orphans got a life, and an upbringing of a sort, and a trade, and a future, and a name. Many a fine lady or master craftsman or city dignitary had a telltale surname like Ludd or Doughy or Pune or Clockson. They'd been named after trade heroes or patron deities, and this turned them into a family, of a sort. The older ones remembered where they came from, and at Hogswatch they were free with donations of food and clothing to the various younger brothers and sisters of the basket. It wasn't perfect, but, then, what is?

So Jeremy had grown up healthy, and rather strange, and with a gift for his adoptive craft that almost made up for every other personal endowment that he did not possess.

The shop bell rang. He sighed and put down his eyeglass. He didn't rush, though. There was a lot to look at in the shop. Sometimes he even had to cough to attract the customer's attention. That being said, sometimes Jeremy had to cough to attract the attention of his reflection when he was shaving.

Jeremy *tried* to be an interesting person. The trouble was that he was the kind of person who, having decided to be an interesting person, would first of all try to find a book called *How to Be An Interesting Person* and then see whether there were any courses available. He was puzzled that people seemed to think he was a boring conversationalist. Why, he could talk about all *kinds* of clock. Mechanical clocks, magical clocks, water clocks, fire clocks, floral clocks,

candle clocks, sand clocks, cuckoo clocks, the rare Hershebian beetle clocks . . . But for some reason he always ran out of listeners before he ran out of clocks.

He stepped out into his shop, and stopped.

‘Oh . . . I’m so sorry to have kept you,’ he said. It was a *woman*. And two trolls had taken up positions just inside the door. Their dark glasses and huge ill-fitting black suits put them down as people who put people down. One of them cracked his knuckles when he saw Jeremy looking at him.

The woman was wrapped in an enormous and expensive white fur coat, which might have explained the trolls. Long black hair cascaded over her shoulders, and her face was made up so pale that it was almost the shade of the coat. She was . . . quite attractive, thought Jeremy, who was admittedly no judge whatsoever, but it was a monochromatic beauty. He wondered if she was a zombie. There were quite a few in the city now, and the prudent ones *had* taken it with them when they died, and probably could afford a coat like that.

‘A *beetle* clock?’ she said. She had turned away from the glass dome.

‘Oh, er, yes . . . The Hershebian lawyer beetle has a very consistent daily routine,’ said Jeremy. ‘I, er, only keep it for, um, interest.’

‘How very . . . organic,’ said the woman. She stared at him as if he was another kind of beetle. ‘We are Myria LeJean. *Lady* Myria LeJean.’

Jeremy obediently held out a hand. Patient men at the Clockmakers’ Guild had spent a long time teaching him how to Relate to People before giving it up in despair, but some things had stuck.

Her ladyship looked at the waiting hand. Finally, one of the trolls lumbered over.

‘Der lady does not shake hands,’ it said, in a reverberating whisper. ‘She are not a tactile kinda person.’

‘Oh?’ said Jeremy.

‘But enough of this, perhaps,’ said Lady LeJean, stepping back. ‘You make clocks, and we—’

There was a jingling noise from Jeremy’s shirt pocket. He pulled out a large watch.

‘If that was chiming the hour, you are fast,’ said the woman.

‘Er . . . um . . . no . . . you might find it a good idea to, um, put your hands over your ears . . .’

It was three o’clock. And every clock struck it at once. Cuckoos cuckooed, the hour pins fell out of the candle clock, the water clocks gurgled and see-sawed as the buckets emptied, bells clanged, gongs banged, chimes tinkled and the Hershebian lawyer beetle turned a somersault.

The trolls had clapped their huge hands over their ears, but Lady LeJean merely stood with her hands on her hips, head on one side, until the last echo died away.

‘All correct, we see,’ she said.

‘What?’ said Jeremy. He’d been thinking: perhaps a vampire, then?

‘You keep all your clocks at the right time,’ said Lady LeJean. ‘You’re very *particular* about that, Mr Jeremy?’

‘A clock that doesn’t tell the right time is . . . wrong,’ said Jeremy. Now he was wishing she’d go away. Her eyes were worrying him. He’d heard about people

having grey eyes, and her eyes *were* grey, like the eyes of a blind person, but she was clearly looking at him and through him.

‘Yes, there was a little bit of trouble over that, wasn’t there?’ said Lady LeJean.

‘I . . . I don’t . . . I don’t . . . don’t know what you’re—’

‘At the Clockmakers’ Guild? Williamson, who kept his clock five minutes fast? And you—’

‘I am much better now,’ said Jeremy stiffly. ‘I have medicine. The Guild was very kind. Now please go away.’

‘Mr Jeremy, we want you to build us a clock that is accurate.’

‘All my clocks are accurate,’ said Jeremy, staring at his feet. He wasn’t due to take his medicine for another five hours and seventeen minutes, but he was feeling the need for it now. ‘And now I must ask—’

‘How accurate are your clocks?’

‘Better than a second in eleven months,’ said Jeremy promptly.

‘That is very good?’

‘Yes.’ It had been *very* good. That was why the Guild had been so understanding. Genius is always allowed some leeway, once the hammer has been pried from its hands and the blood has been cleaned up.

‘We want much better accuracy than that.’

‘It can’t be done.’

‘Oh? You mean that you can’t do it?’

‘No, I can’t. And if I can’t, then neither can any other clockmaker in the city. I’d know about it if they could!’

‘So proud? Are you sure?’

‘I’d know.’ And he would. He’d know for certain. The candle clocks and the water clocks . . . they were toys, which he kept out of a sort of respect for the early days of timekeeping, and even then he’d spent weeks experimenting with waxes and buckets and had turned out primitive clocks that you could, well, very nearly set your watch by. It was okay that they couldn’t be *that* accurate. They were simple, organic things, parodies of time. They didn’t grind across his nerves. But a real clock . . . well, that was a mechanism, a thing of numbers, and numbers had to be perfect.

She put her head on one side again. ‘How do you *test* to that accuracy?’ she said.

They’d often asked him that in the Guild, once his talent had revealed itself. He hadn’t been able to answer the question then, either, because it didn’t make *sense*. You built a clock to be accurate. A portrait painter painted a picture. If it looked like the subject, then it was an accurate picture. If you built the clock right, it would be accurate. You didn’t have to test it. You’d *know*.

‘I’d know,’ he said.

‘We want you to build a clock that is *very* accurate.’

‘How accurate?’

‘*Accurate*.’

‘But I can only build to the limit of my materials,’ said Jeremy. ‘I have . . . developed certain techniques, but there are things like . . . the vibration of the traffic in the street, little changes in temperature, that sort of thing.’

Lady LeJean was now inspecting a range of fat

imp-powered watches. She picked one up and opened the back. There was the tiny saddle, and the pedals, but they were forlorn and empty.

‘No imps?’ she said.

‘I keep them for historical interest,’ said Jeremy. ‘They were barely accurate to a few seconds a minute, and they’d stop completely overnight. They were only any good if your idea of accuracy was “around two-ish”.’ He grimaced when he used the term. It felt like hearing fingernails on a blackboard.

‘How about invar?’ said the lady, still apparently inspecting the museum of clocks.

Jeremy looked shocked. ‘The alloy? I didn’t think anyone outside the Guild knew about that. And it is *very* expensive. Worth a lot more than its weight in gold.’

Lady LeJean straightened up. ‘Money is no object,’ she said. ‘Would invar allow you to reach total accuracy?’

‘No. I already use it. It’s true that it is not affected by temperature, but there are always . . . *barriers*. Smaller and smaller interferences become bigger and bigger problems. It’s Xeno’s Paradox.’

‘Ah, yes. He was the Ephesian philosopher who said you couldn’t hit a running man with an arrow, wasn’t he?’ said the lady.

‘In theory, because—’

‘But Xeno came up with four paradoxes, I believe,’ said Lady LeJean. ‘They involved the idea that there is such a thing as the smallest possible unit of time. And it must exist, mustn’t it? Consider the present. It must have a length, because one end of it is connected to

the past and the other is connected to the future, and if it *didn't* have a length then the present couldn't exist at all. There would be no *time* for it to be the present in.'

Jeremy was suddenly in love. He hadn't felt like this since he'd taken the back off the nursery clock when he was fourteen months old.

'Then you're talking about . . . the famous "tick of the universe";' he said. 'And no gear cutter could possibly make gears that small . . .'

'It depends on what you would call a gear. Have you read this?'

Lady LeJean waved a hand at one of the trolls, who lumbered over and dropped an oblong package on the counter.

Jeremy undid it. It contained a small book. '*Grim Fairy Tales?*' he said.

'Read the story about the glass clock of Bad Schüschein,' said Lady LeJean.

'Children's stories?' said Jeremy. 'What can they tell me?'

'Who knows? We will call again tomorrow,' said Lady LeJean, 'to hear about your plans. In the meantime, here is a little token of our good faith.'

The troll laid a large leather bag on the counter. It clinked with the heavy, rich clink of gold. Jeremy didn't pay it a great deal of attention. He had quite a lot of gold. Even skilled clockmakers came to buy his clocks. Gold was useful because it gave him the time to work on more clocks. These earned him more gold. Gold was, more or less, something that occupied the space between clocks.

‘I can also obtain invar for you, in large quantities,’ she said. ‘That will be part of your payment, although I agree that even invar will not serve your purpose. Mr Jeremy, both you and I know that your payment for making the first truly accurate clock *will be* the opportunity to make the first truly accurate clock, yes?’

He smiled nervously. ‘It would be . . . wonderful, if it could be done,’ he said. ‘Really, it would . . . be the end of clockmaking.’

‘Yes,’ said Lady LeJean. ‘No one would ever have to make a clock again.’

Tick

This desk is neat.

There is a pile of books on it, and a ruler.

There is also, at the moment, a clock made out of cardboard.

Miss picked it up.

The other teachers in the school were known as Stephanie and Joan and so on, but to her class she was very strictly *Miss* Susan. ‘Strict’, in fact, was a word that seemed to cover everything about Miss Susan and, in the classroom, she insisted on the *Miss* in the same way that a king insists upon *Your Majesty*, and for pretty much the same reason.

Miss Susan wore black, which the headmistress disapproved of but could do nothing about because black *was*, well, a respectable colour. She was young, but with an indefinable air of age about her. She wore her hair, which was blond-white with one black

streak, in a tight bun. The headmistress disapproved of that, too – it suggested an Archaic Image of Teaching, she said, with the assurance of someone who could pronounce a capital letter. But she didn't ever dare disapprove of the way Miss Susan moved, because Miss Susan moved like a tiger.

It was in fact always very hard to disapprove of Miss Susan in her presence, because if you did she gave you a Look. It was not in any way a threatening look. It was cool and calm. You just didn't want to see it again.

The Look worked in the classroom, too. Take homework, another Archaic Practice the headmistress was ineffectually Against. No dog ever ate the homework of one of Miss Susan's students, because there was something about Miss Susan that went home with them; instead the dog brought them a pen and watched imploringly while they finished it. Miss Susan seemed to have an unerring instinct for spotting laziness and effort, too. Contrary to the headmistress's instructions, Miss Susan did not let the children do what they liked. She let them do what she liked. It had turned out to be a lot more interesting for everyone.

Miss Susan held up the cardboard clock and said: 'Who can tell me what this is?'

A forest of hands shot up.

'Yes, Miranda?'

'It's a clock, miss.'

Miss Susan smiled, carefully avoided the hand that was being waved by a boy called Vincent, who was also making frantically keen 'ooo, ooo, ooo' noises, and chose the one behind him.

‘Nearly right,’ she said. ‘Yes, Samuel?’

‘It’s all cardboard made to *look* like a clock,’ said the boy.

‘Correct. Always see what’s really there. And I’m supposed to teach you to tell the time with this.’ Miss Susan gave it a sneer and tossed it away.

‘Shall we try a different way?’ she said, and snapped her fingers.

‘Yes!’ the class chorused, and then it went ‘Aah!’ as the walls, floor and ceiling dropped away and the desks hovered high over the city.

A few feet away was the huge cracked face of the tower clock of Unseen University.

The children nudged one another excitedly. The fact that their boots were over 300 feet of fresh air didn’t seem to bother them. Oddly, too, they did not seem *surprised*. This was just an interesting thing. They acted like connoisseurs who had seen other interesting things. You did, when you were in Miss Susan’s class.

‘Now, Melanie,’ said Miss Susan, as a pigeon landed on her desk. ‘The big hand is on the twelve and the *enormous* hand is nearly on the ten, so it’s . . .’

Vincent’s hand shot up. ‘Ooo, miss, ooo, ooo . . .’

‘Nearly twelve o’clock,’ Melanie managed.

‘Well done. But *here* . . .’

The air blurred. Now the desks, still in perfect formation, were firmly on the cobbles of a plaza in a different city. So was most of the classroom. There were the cupboards, and the Nature Table, and the blackboard. But the walls still lagged behind.

No one in the plaza paid the visitors any attention but, oddly, no one tried to walk into them either.

The air was warmer, and smelled of sea and swamp.

‘Anyone know where this is?’ said Miss Susan.

‘Ooo, me, miss, ooo, ooo . . .’ Vincent could only stretch his body taller if his feet left the ground.

‘How about you, Penelope?’ said Miss Susan.

‘Oh, *miss*,’ said a deflated Vincent.

Penelope, who was beautiful, docile and frankly dim, looked around at the thronged square and the whitewashed, awning-hung buildings with an expression close to panic.

‘We came here in geography last week,’ said Miss Susan. ‘City surrounded by swamps. On the Vieux river. Famous cookery. Lots of seafood . . .?’

Penelope’s exquisite brow creased. The pigeon on Miss Susan’s desk fluttered down and joined the pigeon flock prospecting for scraps among the flagstones, cooing gently to the others in pidgin pigeon.

Aware that a lot could happen while people waited for Penelope to complete a thought process, Miss Susan waved at a clock on a shop across the square and said: ‘And who can tell me the time here in Genua, please?’

‘Ooo, miss, *miss*, ooo . . .’

A boy called Gordon cautiously admitted that it might be three o’clock, to the audible disappointment of the inflatable Vincent.

‘That’s right,’ said Miss Susan. ‘Can anyone tell me why it’s three o’clock in Genua while it’s twelve o’clock in Ankh-Morpork?’

There was no avoiding it this time. If Vincent’s hand had gone up any faster it would have fried by air friction. ‘Yes, Vincent?’

‘Ooo miss speed of light miss it goes at six hundred miles an hour and at the moment the sun’s rising on the Rim near Genua so twelve o’clock takes three hours to get to us miss!’

Miss Susan sighed. ‘Very good, Vincent,’ she said, and stood up. Every eye in the room watched her as she crossed over to the Stationery Cupboard. It seemed to have travelled with them and now, if there had been anyone to note such things, they might have seen faint lines in the air that denoted walls and windows and doors. And if they were intelligent observers, they’d have said: so . . . this classroom is in some way still in Ankh-Morpork *and also* in Genua, is it? Is this a trick? Is this real? Is it imagination? Or is it that, to this particular teacher, there is not much of a difference?

The *inside* of the cupboard was also present, and it was in that shadowy, paper-smelling recess that she kept *the stars*.

There were gold stars and silver stars. One gold star was worth three silver ones.

The headmistress disapproved of these, as well. She said they encouraged Competitiveness. Miss Susan said that was the point, and the headmistress scuttled away before she got a Look.

Silver stars weren’t awarded frequently and gold stars happened less than once a fortnight, and were vied for accordingly. Right now Miss Susan selected a silver star. Pretty soon Vincent the Keen would have a galaxy of his very own. To give him his due, he was quite uninterested in which kind of star he got. Quantity, that was what he liked. Miss Susan had

privately marked him down as Boy Most Likely to Be Killed One Day By His Wife.

She walked back to her desk and laid the star, tantalizingly, in front of her.

‘And an *extra-special* question,’ she said, with a hint of malice. ‘Does that mean it’s “then” there when it’s “now” here?’

The hand slowed halfway in its rise.

‘Ooo . . .’ Vincent began, and then stopped. ‘Doesn’t make sense, miss . . .’

‘Questions don’t have to make sense, Vincent,’ said Miss Susan. ‘But answers do.’

There was a kind of sigh from Penelope. To Miss Susan’s surprise the face that one day would surely cause her father to have to hire bodyguards was emerging from its normal happy daydream and wrapping itself around an answer. Her alabaster hand was rising, too.

The class watched expectantly.

‘Yes, Penelope?’

‘It’s . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘It’s always now everywhere, miss?’

‘Exactly right. Well done! All right, Vincent, you can have the silver star. And for you, Penelope . . .’

Miss Susan went back to the cupboard of stars. Getting Penelope to step off her cloud long enough even to answer a question was worth a star, but a deep philosophical statement like that had to make it a gold one.

‘I want you all to open your notebooks and write

down what Penelope just told us,' she said brightly as she sat down.

And then she saw the inkwell on her desk beginning to rise like Penelope's hand. It was a ceramic pot, made to drop neatly into a round hole in the woodwork. It came up smoothly, and turned out to be balanced on the cheerful skull of the Death of Rats.

It winked one blue-glowing eye socket at Miss Susan.

With quick little movements, not even looking down, she whisked the inkwell aside with one hand and reached for a thick volume of stories with the other. She brought it down so hard on the hole that blue-black ink splashed onto the cobbles.

Then she raised the desk lid and peeped inside.

There was, of course, nothing there. At least, nothing macabre . . .

. . . unless you counted the piece of chocolate half gnawed by rat teeth and a note in heavy gothic lettering saying:

SEE ME

and signed by a very familiar alpha-and-omega symbol and the word

Grandfather.

Susan picked up the note and screwed it into a ball, aware that she was trembling with rage. How *dare* he? And to send the rat, too!

She tossed the ball into the wastepaper basket. She never missed. Sometimes the basket moved in order to ensure that this was the case.

'And now we'll go and see what the time is in Klatch,' she told the watching children.

On the desk, the book had fallen open at a certain page. And, later on, it would be story time. And Miss Susan would wonder, too late, why the book had been on her desk when she had never even seen it before.

And a splash of blue-black ink would stay on the cobbles of the square in Genua, until the evening rainstorm washed it away.

Tick

The first words that are read by seekers of enlightenment in the secret, gong-banging, yeti-haunted valleys near the hub of the world, are when they look into *The Life of Wen the Eternally Surprised*.

The first question they ask is: 'Why was he eternally surprised?'

And they are told: 'Wen considered the nature of time and understood that the universe is, instant by instant, recreated anew. Therefore, he understood, there is in truth no past, only a memory of the past. Blink your eyes, and the world you see next did not exist when you closed them. Therefore, he said, the only appropriate state of the mind is surprise. The only appropriate state of the heart is joy. The sky you see now, you have never seen before. The perfect moment is now. Be glad of it.'

The first words read by the young Lu-Tze when he sought perplexity in the dark, teeming, rain-soaked city of Ankh-Morpork were: 'Rooms For Rent, Very Reasonable'. And he was glad of it.

Tick

Where there is suitable country for grain, people farm. They know the taste of good soil. They grow grain.

Where there is good steel country, furnaces turn the sky to sunset red all night. The hammers never stop. People make steel.

There is coal country, and beef country, and grass country. The world is full of countries where one thing shapes the land and the people. And up here in the high valleys around the hub of the world, where the snow is never far away, this is enlightenment country.

Here are people who know that there *is* no steel, only the idea of steel.* They give names to new things, and to things that don't exist. They seek the essence of being and the nature of the soul. They make wisdom.

Temples command every glacier-headed valley, where there are particles of ice in the wind, even at the height of summer.

There are the Listening Monks, seeking to discern within the hubbub of the world the faint echoes of the sounds that set the universe in motion.

There are the Brothers of Cool, a reserved and secretive sect which believes that only through ultimate coolness can the universe be comprehended, and that black works with everything, and that chrome will never truly go out of style.

In their vertiginous temple criss-crossed with

* But they still use forks, or, at least, the idea of forks. There may, as the philosopher says, be no spoon, although this begs the question of why there is the idea of soup.

tightropes, the Balancing Monks test the tension of the world and then set out on long, perilous journeys to restore its equilibrium. Their work may be seen on high mountains and isolated islets. They use small brass weights, none of them bigger than a fist. They work. Well, *obviously* they work. The world has not tipped up yet.

And in the highest, greenest, airiest valley of all, where apricots are grown and the streams have floating ice in them even on the hottest day, is the monastery of Oi Dong and the fighting monks of the Order of Wen. The other sects call them the History Monks. Not much is known about what they do, although some have remarked on the strange fact that it is *always* a wonderful spring day in the little valley and that the cherry trees are always in bloom.

The rumour is that the monks have some kind of duty to see that tomorrow happens according to some mystic plan devised by some man who kept on being surprised.

In fact, for some time now, and it would be impossible and ridiculous to say how long, the truth has been stranger and more dangerous.

The job of the History Monks is to see that tomorrow happens at all.

The Master of Novices met with Rinpo, chief acolyte to the abbot. At the moment, at least, the position of chief acolyte was a very important post. In his current condition the abbot needed many things done for him, and his attention span was low. In circumstances like this, there is always someone willing to carry the load. There are Rinpos everywhere.

‘It’s Ludd again,’ said the Master of Novices.

‘Oh, dear. Surely one naughty child can’t trouble you?’

‘One *ordinary* naughty child, no. Where is this one from?’

‘Master Soto sent him. You know? Of our Ankh-Morpork section? He found him in the city. The boy has a natural talent, I understand,’ said Rinpo.

The Master of Novices looked shocked. ‘Talent! He is a wicked thief! He’d been apprenticed to the Guild of Thieves!’ he said.

‘Well? Children sometimes steal. Beat them a little, and they stop stealing. Basic education,’ said Rinpo.

‘Ah. There *is* a problem.’

‘Yes?’

‘He is very, very fast. Around him, things go missing. Little things. Unimportant things. But even when he is watched closely, he is never seen to take them.’

‘Then perhaps he does not?’

‘He walks through a room and things vanish!’ said the Master of Novices.

‘He’s *that* fast? It’s just as well Soto *did* find him, then. But a thief is—’

‘They turn up later, in odd places,’ said the Master of Novices, apparently grudging the admission. ‘He does it out of mischief, I’m sure.’

The breeze blew the scent of cherry blossom across the terrace.

‘Look, I am used to disobedience,’ said the Master of Novices. ‘That is part of a novice’s life. But he is also tardy.’

‘Tardy?’