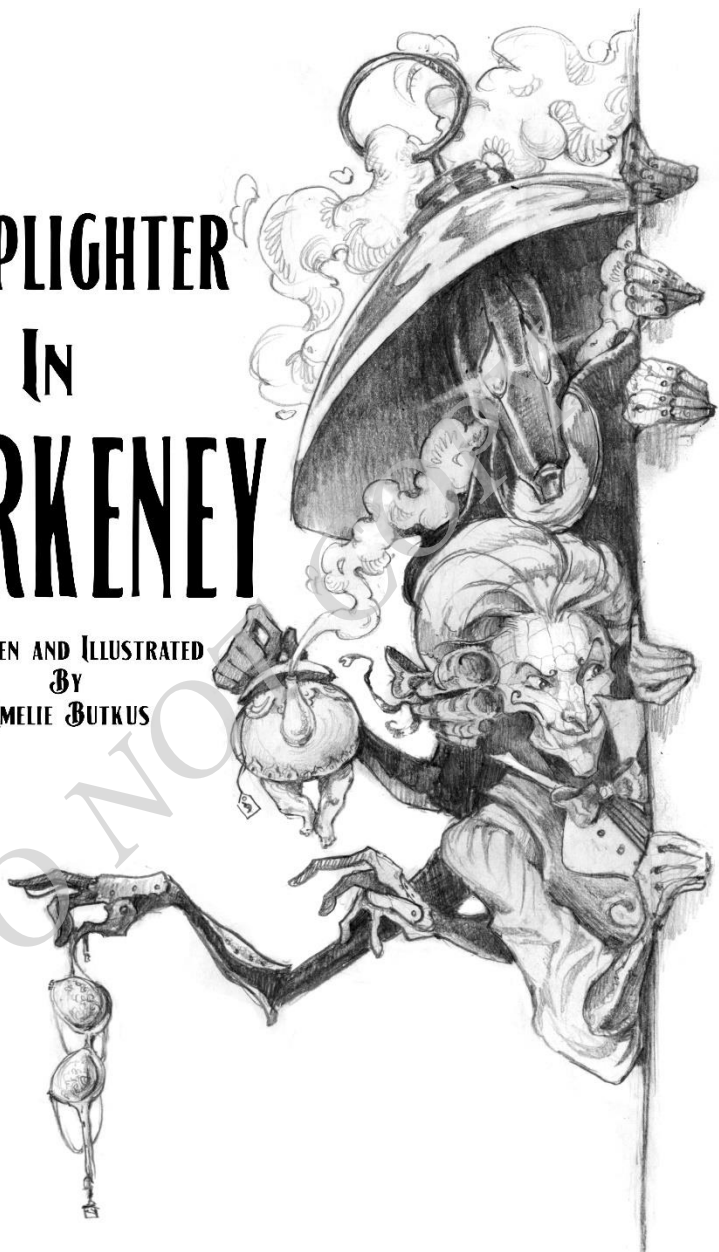


A LAMPLIGHTER IN LARKENEY

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED
BY
AMELIE BUTKUS



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To me, because nobody else wanted to write it.

And my family, who raised me this way.

I hope you're happy.

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~1~

Well...



I think I should describe to you the state of our doormat. Once upon a time, it was beige. At least I think it was beige. It was such a long time ago. I remember a flowery design. Tulips or something like that. It was one of those doormats with those thick, coarse bristles and abrasive, rubber lettering that are meant to be extremely durable

and ugly. Oh, and it said “Welcome!” in cheery orange cursive. Well, it used to at any rate.

It started with the exclamation point.

I remember it because that was our return from Thailand and my father had been experimenting with cooking. He’d brought back about sixteen glass jars of extra spicy Thai kimchi and was looking forward to concocting a cake for my brother Tim’s twelfth birthday. Three jars survived the trip back. I’d been tasked with the remaining one, Tim the other, and my father the third. Tensions were high and climbing with each broken bottle.

But there we were, the final three. My father stood on the doormat, licking his lips as he unlocked the door. Tim wiped his nose with his elbow, his hands full of luggage and kimchi.

“I have a sneeze,” he stated nasally.

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“No, Wendell, I have a *sneeze*.”

Oh. (Tim shares this trait with infants, in that his body relinquishes all motor control in the throes of a sneeze. My mother rotates out all the china for plastic during allergy season.)

“*Tim, don’t!*”

It was too late.

“Acheugh!”

Snot flew. Luggage fell. Glasses slipped. Sure enough, in one sparkling red parabola, the kimchi went straight onto the doormat.

It bounced off. There was a small *pop*. The glass lid of the mason jar hissed faintly as the seal broke. Kimchi seeped all over the rug. We were left standing there in anticlimax.

Tim narrowed his eyes.

“What’s that sizzling?”

We all looked down at the doormat as the exclamation point was slowly eaten away by the acid.

“Huh,” my father scratched his beard. “Suddenly I’m not hungry anymore.”

Three years later, the E was the next to go. This was after a particularly harrowing stay at a cattle ranch in Botswana. I’ve never had any

particular fear of bugs, but this was a BIG spider. I'll never forget Tim's screams as it fell out of my bag onto the sidewalk.

It was pretty much the most spidery of all spiders— fat and brown and hairy with eight big watery eyes. There was a fresh round of screams as it sprang high into the air and landed on the doormat. It settled itself down, recalcitrant on the E in Welcome (no exclamation point).

Tim, now aged fifteen, ran across the street and yelled his complaints from there.

“I'm going to be sick!” he called. “I'm going to die! Has it bitten me? It's bitten me. I can feel it seeping into my veins! I think I'm hallucinating! How many fingers am I holding up? Hey! Turn around you guys!”

My father was rummaging around in his bag, eyes trained on the spider. I cracked open my journal, flipping the pages.

“It's actually not poisonous— it's a copycat jumping tarantula. Wow, it's actually one of the rarest arachnids on the planet and vital to the jungles of Botsw— no don't use the—!”

ZZZT

The cattle prod burnt a deep hole into the Welcome mat, singing both the hitchhiking spider and the E out of existence.

There were several more times after that. I could tell you about how my father thought it would be a good idea to bring an ant farm back from Nigeria. They'd been suspiciously glad to be rid of it and when an icicle fell and broke the glass lid on our doorstep. I discovered why. The termites inside made a quick lunch of the L on the mat, then proceeded to eat the door. Or how Tim was playing around with a traditional Inuit firestarter and accidentally set the mat on fire. We'd put it out quickly, but not before the O had burnt away. As for the C— well... I'd rather not get into that, but it involved the four of us, a horse, and a frightening amount of mayonnaise.

Suffice it to say, that at the end of nearly a decade with the Billings family, our doormat has been trampled, trod on, and beaten down into a simple, forlorn “Wel...”

You might be wondering what it is we do for a living. Well, hold your horses, and your “C’s” you’ll find out soon enough. If we ever got inside.

“Christ on a cracker!” my father swore. He was sweaty and red in the face despite the morning chill. He scratched his head vigorously. Both his beard and salt and pepper curls were encrusted with salt and his perpetual Hawaiian shirt smelled like the underside of a pier. The key he was trying to insert into the lock had a barnacle stuck on it. He stuck out a hand.

“Boys, pocketknife.”

My brother didn’t bother. Even though his little khaki outfit had more pockets than all of us combined, he refused to put anything in them. Something about a village kid saying it looked like he had breasts. I dug around in my parka, grimacing at the long strand of seaweed and the pair of small crabs that scuttled out.

I handed my father the tool.

“Fanks.” He’d been using his teeth.

“How much longer is this going to be?” snapped Tim. He was quaking at the knees and making a sound like a coconut. Hard to believe, but he was twenty-two by this time. Skinny and angular as a spider in the corner of the shower, he had soda bottle glasses, a flop of straight brown hair, and had on what had once been a beige romper and Safari pith helmet.

When no one answered him, he snorted irritably and wrung out his blue ascot onto the doormat. Seawater joined the mud that had been pooling there. He was angry because all his outfits had been soaked and that no one had bothered to stop at the dry cleaners on the way home.

“Just a few more minutes dear,” said my mother without looking at him. She was nose deep in a book. Out of everyone, I have always admired her for her ability to completely and totally disengage from

every single situation. It is something I continually try and fail at. Tim always manages to get on my nerves.

My skin was crawling. After fourteen hours without access to a shower, layers of grey muck and lake grit had solidified on our skin and clothes. I set down my luggage, rolled up my sleeve, and began to scratch my inner arm furiously. Dirty salt flakes whirled down onto the pristine sidewalk.

I saw the neighbours watching out of the corner of my eye and ignored them. It was like they had a sixth sense for every time we (“The Billings Family”) came home. The moment we rounded the street corner, there’d be lifted blinds, binoculars, opera glasses, and telescopes, people stopped behind trees, and crouched around bushes. Once, although I couldn’t be sure, I thought I saw a manhole cover twitch. It’s funny. It’s not as if we’re really anything interesting.

“Do you have to do that?” asked Tim. Right on cue.

“Do what?”

“Get those flakes all over the doormat. Really Wendell. What will the neighbours think?”

You’d think that my mother would be the one to say that. Not in this family. I took a moment for deep reflection.

Breathe. Disengage.

I stared Tim straight in the eyes and scratched harder.

“Dad!”

There was a tinkle as my father dropped the keys. A fresh round of swears in seven languages.

“Dad, get us inside! Wendell’s flaking all over me. He’s disgusting.”

My mother looked up from her book. “Well, *you* smell like a dead fish, dear.”

“Mummy! I only smell like a dead fish because *someone* leaned too far to the left.”

I snorted angrily. “Sure, it was me. Not the seventeen suitcases of men’s garter socks and medicated sunscreen that tipped us.”

“My socks stay up just fine thankyouverymuch,” he snapped the edge of one sock to prove the point. The wool only slapped wetly

against his leg and then sagged to reveal a flesh-coloured starfish wrapped around his calf. Tim screamed.

“Shh!” I hissed.

People were staring now. Really staring. I tried to avoid the gaze of the two kids sitting on the opposite end of the curb eating popcorn.

He was hopping up and down.

“*Getitoffgetitoffgetitoff.*”

“Stop kicking for starters. You’ll only make it angrier.”

“Angrier?”

“Oh yeah,” I nodded. “Did you know that Mongolian starfish are carnivorous? They’ve got teeth and everything.”

“*What?*”

My father’s voice: “Almost got it!”

I cracked open my journal. “They also excrete a special poison that makes one’s leg fall off. Particularly those who don’t row and tip the boat four times into leech-infested waters.”

“Oh *god*—wait.” He stopped wailing and got up from his fetal position on the ground. “That’s not funny!”

I folded my arms. There was a sucking noise like a tiny plunger as my brother peeled the starfish off his leg. It dangled limply, making miserable glubbing sounds. Then I caught a glimpse of his face.

“Don’t you dare throw that starfish at me. Tim. *Don’t!*”

Tim smiled evilly, wagging the starfish. “His name is Gregory, and he wants a *friend*.”

“Tim!”

Click.

“Got it!”

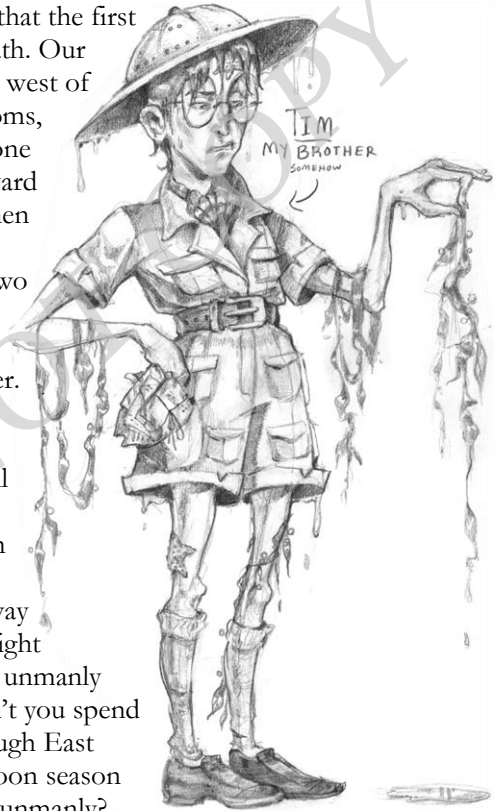
The door to our nice little suburban townhouse swung open. At this point, my father finally turned around to witness the mediaeval duel that was brewing behind him. He sighed and clapped us both on the shoulder.

“Buck up you two. We’re home!”

~2~

Home is a Place You Visit Every Couple of Months or So for a Bath

It is the unspoken rule that the first one inside gets The Bath. Our two-story house in the west of London has three bathrooms, four toilets (if you count one of the bushes in the backyard that is sometimes used when my father gets tired of conventional living) and two showers. But only one Bath. You might say, Wendell, just take a shower. It gets the job done. Sure, tell that to the man lost in the desert for months. Tell him to just take the sip of hot, dirty river water when a gallon jug of iced lemonade is just inches away from the riverbed. You might say, a scented bath is a bit unmanly don't you think? Why don't you spend three weeks slogging through East Asian marshland in monsoon season and get back to me about unmanly?



The only mistress I fantasised about was wide, hollow, and made of clear cool porcelain teaming with the smell of lavender instead of dead fish.

I *needed* a bath.

The door swung open. “Move!”

Tim’s elbow jackknifed into my ribs. I elbowed him back and he coughed up a bit of eel. As he was momentarily stupefied by the horror of that, I cut in front of him and was halfway up the stairs when a pair of bony hands tugged my ankle down and I fell.

“Boys! You’ll dirty the carpet!”

Tim and I paused for a split second to say sorry to our mother—and got back to our dash.

“I called dibs on the plane.”

“You did not.”

“You just didn’t hear because I didn’t say it very loud.”

“Then it doesn’t count, does it?”

We bounced off the walls and each other in the narrow stairwell. Tim had the advantage of height, but I had the advantage of being, well, I had a lower centre of gravity and was able to barrel into him like a bowling ball. He clung onto me though, fingers scrabbling at my coat.

We’d reached the top of the landing. I could see the door. Tim’s hand crept around my head to clap my ears. I spun and smacked them away.

THUMP.

He’d lost his balance. My brother tumbled and crumpled a few steps down. My stomach dropped.

“Tim?” I ran to him. “Tim are you alright? I’m really sorry. Tim, come on.”

His face was hidden behind a curled-up shoulder. It shook with a muffled sob.

“I’m so sorry. Where does it hurt?”

“Hah!”

And I realised at once it wasn't sobs. It was laughter. He sprang up as easy as a leaf and hopped over me, neatly rounding the corner and into the bathroom. The door clicked.

"TIM."

I decided in the end, that it wasn't worth the bother. I didn't have any energy left. I sat down. Waves of fatigue washed over me and slowly, I nodded to sleep, right there across the stairs. The sounds of my parents stepping over me with the luggage and the running bathwater made me dream of the rocking dinghy in the middle of that Mongolian lake. I fell deeper into the memory of it capsizing for the umpteenth time. The shouts of my parents, the roar of the waves and the cold sinking of waterlogged clothes. Then, the smooth heavy silence beneath them. That was where I stayed for a long time.

I got my bath eventually, but it wasn't nearly as satisfying. By that time, with the showers running and Tim having taken his hour-long sojourn, the water was lukewarm. He'd also used all the good soap. But it was fine in the end because the best part of The Bath—the very best part—were the few precious minutes where I was completely and utterly alone.

DO NOT COPY

~3~

Clickety Clack the Straw that Broke the Camel's Back



My father was an outdoorsman in every sense of the word. Maybe not in the chiselled-leaned-out-hiker sense of the word but definitely in the barrel-shaped-red-faced-jolly-pirate sense of the word. He was the type of person who thought that the inventions of walls and indoor plumbing were a travesty, and that man should be free to roam the open plains of the world with nothing

but a Hawaiian shirt, several bottles of zinc, and a talent for misinterpreting other cultures.

In some respects, I envy the way he was able to parlay his passion into a career because I don't know if I'll ever be able to do the same thing for myself. I certainly haven't inherited his robustness for life in general. I suppose you could say I look like him. A smaller, quieter, brown-haired version with the same unfortunate nose and wide stance. But other than that, we couldn't be any more different.

The typewriter was positioned so that if it were any closer to the window, it would be outside. My father had long since removed the window seats and plopped down the monstrosity that was the Toshiba BW-2127. The typewriter was as large as a man's torso and weighed at least 30 kilos. He'd found it in a Japanese junk shop fifteen years prior and had never used another since. The Thing (as we called it) wrote in rotating scripts of English, Japanese, Chinese, and something that neither of us had been able to figure out but looked distinctly satanic. Being sparingly trilingual, he often forgot to switch between these scripts, causing several newspaper editors to believe he was either pulling a joke or engaging in witchcraft.

The setup was not as impressive. The Toshiba sat on a sturdy, iron-reinforced desk. In front of this was a plain wooden chair, but around it was plants of every variety. They filled up the little octagonal space that made up the nook. Climbing vines and purple-veined ferns from Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and Myanmar. They were all a little stunted and very diagonal, creeping toward the windows and sky that would never allow the proper amount of sunlight through the proprietary layer of English cloud cover. Still, it was the best he could do to submerge himself in the relics of our travels so he wouldn't feel so cooped up.

It was always trying on the rest of us when he started to get restless. My father functioned like a miniature climate. When he was happy, we laughed and joked, and Tim and I even got along tolerably well. But when he was restless, the house prickled with it. He'd start sleeping in a hammock stretched out in the backyard and pacing the rug of the

downstairs parlour endlessly. I dreaded the moments when I came down to find travel brochures scattered all over the kitchen table. It meant we were going away soon. Somewhere far off and uncomfortable, with strange Bed and Breakfasts and biting bugs– and I would have to be there to document it all.

Click Clack. Whirr. Ding!

The sound funnelled through the stairwell. I came down from the bath feeling like a new person. As I entered the parlour, Tim was the first to comment on what I was wearing.

“You didn’t waste any time.”

He was referring to my faded woollen pyjamas and slippers. He himself was impeccably dressed in an argyle vest that made his arms look like sticks and a pair of mustard-coloured slacks. These were half-covered by a blanket. He punctuated the sentence by blowing his nose with gusto.

My brother (though he’d never admit it) would enjoy anything so long as he got the proper attention. Travelling, despite its many inconveniences, offered no shortage of that. From eager missionaries to curious natives fascinated by his paleness, his height, and his ungraceful movements, we were often treated as celebrities, especially as the popularity of my father’s travel columns grew.

In the absence of this, Tim had decided to be sick. “I feel awful,” he drawled, “I feel like my head is that hive of Mongolian hornets you made me walk into.”

“You walked into that yourself.”

“Well you didn’t stop me.”

That was true.

Click Clack. Whirr. Ding!

The curtains to the nook were closed but I could hear my father typing away. It was the first thing he did upon returning. *Globetrotters Monthly* was making a fortune off him and had started demanding their articles sooner and sooner after our travels.

My mother was coming around the kitchen island. Like me, she was already in a bathrobe and slippers. There was a new book under her arm. She sat down opposite us and cracked it open.

“Kettle on?” I asked.

“She’s just warming up.”

We all settled down to wait, listening to the rain that had begun to tap on the windows, mingling with the constant clacks and whirrs of the Toshiba-BW-2127.

The parlour was where we spent most of our time at home. It was the most comfortable room in the house with lots of chairs and big windows branching off into a decent-sized kitchen. It might have been anybody’s respectable parlour if not for the all-encompassing mishmash of decor. People from my father’s editorial company would have called it “charmingly eccentric.” I would have called it something different.

There were, of course, the trademark tribal masks hung up on the walls. A couple of voodoo dolls, crossed swords, half a suit of Aztec armour. Usual stuff. Then there were the more obscure items. The jade Cambodian shrine in the corner of the room where a multi-armed woman balanced on one leg. The tiki torch chandelier. The custom loveseat made of woven palm fronds, and the one-ton black obsidian tortoise that made up our coffee table. (A story for another day.)

I did my best to get comfortable on one of the palm-frond couches. There was a newspaper on the tortoise that Tim had finished with. I tore off the corner of the page that had snot on it and contemplated it. Normally, I avoided newspapers like the plague. The chances of finding one of my father’s publications headlining the front page was high.

But I was bored, and I reasoned with myself that we’d been gone for three weeks, and it was probably out of circulation by now.

Doing what we do is kind of like going to space— or what I’d imagine going to space is like. You’re gone for weeks, months at a time, usually in various rural, disconnected places, like Northern Patagonia or Kentucky. During that time, there is no contact with the outside world. When you come back, it’s almost like people are speaking a different language. The clothes are different. The gadgets are new. People start

greeting you in the streets with weird phrases like “Gravy Fool” and “Dabba Zoot.” So it’s nice to catch up, even when I know it won’t make much of a difference.

Tentatively, I unfolded it and was rewarded with a tide of meaningless gossip and popular culture that I drank in word by word.

**Reclusive Inventor Sebastian Shaw Drops
Infuriatingly Vague Hints about House Party
By Morry Oseman**

Didn’t get an invite? Neither did we. Neither did anyone for that matter, save, from what our sources can gather, eight people. Although to be fair, my own mother doesn’t invite me to Christmas. We’re in a bit of a tiff about it you see. I always wanted to be a journalist; she’d always fancied a dentist for a son. Last Christmas I received a package of what may or may not have been a real human skull. The molars were startling. She thought it was medical grade--anyways enough about me.

Sebastian Shaw, currently thought to be at least number 8 in the *Time’s* most influential people and definitely number 2 in the lesser known *3 C’s Weekly*, *Clockwork*, *Celibacy*, and *Sinister Clandestinities*, has sent out eight invitations to his closest chums in a distinctly Wonka-esque manner. It is speculated to be some kind of rebound party in the wake of his falling out with renowned mentor, Bellamy Dumont, who is now at large for grand larceny. However, rumours abound about a potential new Auto that will be introduced at the event. A singing armoire perhaps? A judgmental mirror? As of yet, the guests remain surprisingly tightlipped. Fashion icon Evangeline Grey declined to comment as did the notorious Quislings.

Even cornering devilishly handsome opera singer Billius Brum for breakfast resulted in being turned

away, saying he'd drunk it already. Of course, we don't know where the manor is anyways, so storming the gates with all the duress of the pitchforked hoi polloi is out of the question. I trudged back to my office dejectedly to report on what little I had. After all, this wouldn't be the gossip column if there were any substantial news to report. In an effort to fill more space, my week has been rather depressing. In fact--

Ding!

The curtains rasped as they slid apart. My father emerged, swinging his torso and launching into the short callisthenics routine he did at half-hour intervals that made everybody think someone was making popcorn.

Since he hadn't made his presence known for the last six minutes, Tim sniffled and craned his neck toward the kitchen.

"I'm parched." There was no answer. "I said, *I'm parched.*"

Nothing.

He slumped back against the couch, blinking at us all through his enormous glasses.

"How am I ever going to get over this flu if I don't get my lemon and water? I bet it's West Nile Virus."

We'd just come back from Mongolia.

My mother didn't look up from her book. "It will get here when it gets here. David, do you want tea?"

My father harrumphed as he joined us on the couch. "I just don't understand people's insistence on gadgets and things that do everything for them. All it achieves is you getting to sit down as it takes twice as long to get a lukewarm--might I add unnecessary--cup of tea."

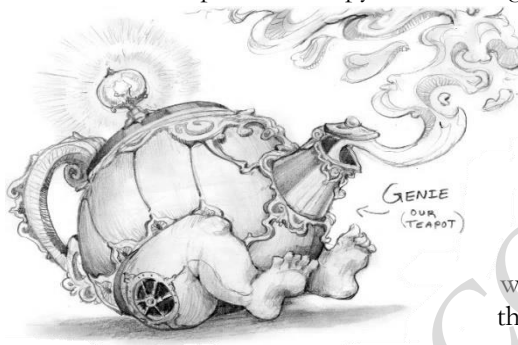
Everyone rolled their eyes.

"I just think that it's these new Autos, or whatever, that are making kids like yourselves lazy. Why do you think people read our newspapers, eh Wendell?"

"Please don't include me in this."

He leaned forward. “I’m serious. They want to get a taste of the spice of life because they’re too busy rotting on the couch waiting for a potato with legs to make their tea for them— ah speak of the devil!”

The teapot arrived with a sloshing shuffle. It was a normal teapot by all accounts with your average fine porcelain and blue painted flowers. The only thing was that it glowed and had legs. It wobbled side to side on a pair of stumpy cherubic legs, making its slow way



from the kitchen to the sitting room. It was doing its best to hop the countertop and cross the rug but had gone a bit bandy-legged with the effort and drips of water were slopping onto the carpet. When it

arrived at the base of the coffee table, there was a pause. My father huffed again and crossed his arms. Eventually, it managed to hop the small stairway of books we’d created a while ago for that very purpose. There was a small round of polite clapping as it went round to all our waiting teacups and poured what remaining water there was.

Then, Genie (that was its name) settled down in the middle of the table, plopping down with both legs splayed out, awaiting further orders.

“Half,” said Tim, eyeing his own saucer. “Well, that’s better than last time I suppose.” He sipped it. His eye twitched. “Sugar. I said *sugar.*”

Neither of us could really say anything about the performance of Genie because it’d been a gift from Marcus, editor-in-chief of *Globetrotters Monthly*. We’d even been advised to make use of it as much as possible because of the advertising opportunities that came with endorsing Autos. To be honest, I didn’t much like them. They gave me the creeps.

My father rose and gave his cup a disparaging look and stood up again.

“Well, nothing like a salty cup of earl grey to end the break. Newspapers don’t write themselves, do they?”

He stopped on his way to the nook. “That reminds me. Wendell, I had a bone to pick with you.” He flashed me a smile. “It’s not a big deal. I was just looking through your notes and they were thorough and well diagrammed as always, but I thought they were a tad—how shall I say—morose this time around.”

“Morose.”

“Yes, because you frequently used words like, miserable, wet, cold, soaking, leeches, venereal disease, and such like.” He rubbed his chin in a scholarly sort of way. “What I would recommend is learning to rephrase. For example, instead of cold, you could say ‘refreshingly crisp. Awakens the senses.’ See what I did there?”

“I...”

“And changing the words changes the way you feel about a certain event. You were there during that Monk retreat, weren’t you?” He frowned. “Yes, you were definitely there because I remember you screaming when that monk blew all the sand in your face. To be fair, he did warn you about standing too close to the mandalas. But the eye infection was worth a thousand granules of wisdom! See? Another smashing example! You really ought to write this down.”

“But you’re the one who does that. The rephrasing.”

He pointed at me. “And *your* notes are the blueprint. The very *backbone* of all my articles. That affects the writing you know. So I want you to keep that in mind for our next trip, okay? Good lad!”

The curtains snapped shut.

And snapped open again.

His face peaked out. “Oh! And could you boys do me a favour and sort through the rest of those letters? We need to separate the fan mail from the real requests. We don’t want to repeat that hostage incident now, do we? Cheers!”

Snap.

Click Clack. Whirr. Ding!

It was a silent battle of the wills after that. My brother and I made no attempt to, except for the occasional glances at each other over the pile of mail to make sure the other wasn't moving.

Eventually, though, I got bored and conceded. I knelt in front of the letters. There were quite a lot of them—at least forty—and each with varying levels of postage, smell, and organic life. The first bunch was a hefty wad of letters, more like a tax folio tied with twine. The envelopes were covered in stamps. I didn't need to squint to read the handwriting. I recognized it well enough. Dark, in tiny, blocky handwriting. I read it aloud.

“TO MY TIMMY TUM TUM. EVERY DAY THAT THE SUN SHINES UPON THE EMPTINESS WHERE YOU COULD STAND BEFORE ME IS ANOTHER DAY IT BURNS A HOLE IN MY HEART. WITH ALL OF THE LOVE IN THE WORLD, MELATI.”

A bony hand shot out of nowhere and snatched it up (not without some difficulty as the thing must have weighed at least two kilos).

“Reading other people's letters is a crime you know,” said Tim who was bright red in the face.

“That was just the address line.”

“I don't ask you why nobody likes you enough to send letters.”

Ouch. I went back to sifting.

There were all sorts of fan letters proclaiming my dad was the new Indiana Jones. (These were mostly from older women.) There were also letters asking if he might like to go fishing and share a lager over a campfire sometime. (Older men.) And finally, a few letters asking if he might donate a few chest hairs to science. (Female *and* male historians.) I skipped over these as quickly as I could to find the real requests. Those are the letters we get to determine the places to write about next. My father focuses primarily on small Bed and Breakfasts in remote locations. It's a pretty good setup for both parties. My father gets the experience for his paper and the small businesses get huge exposure. Hence the pile.

Then there were the requests from Inuit villages, the Galapagos, places from all over the world begging our family to come visit.

Hello— a noticeably cleaner envelope slipped out as I was trying to decide between spending a winter running from bison in the Appalachians or running from moose in Alaska. The return address was *Globetrotters*. The seal had been cracked. I slid the card from inside.

David!

Hope you're well and that you've got some sea salt in those pepper curls. I've got some good news. People have been clamouring, absolutely clamouring, for another piece. The demand is up and so are our ratings and it's all thanks to you, old pal! Which—I'm sure you know by the mountains of letters that have been bogging up our mailboxes and yours. Anyways, we at the office have been thinking that it is time to ramp up our output. Take advantage of the avalanche in a figure of speech. So what do you say to increasing the articles to, say, three per month? I'm sure that would be no trouble at all to our resident adventurer and as always, half expenses paid!

Give my best to the family and I hope you're all enjoying Genie! Our sponsors have been gently suggesting you take her with you next time to show how durable she is. I was thinking you might be motivated to include a little section about her. Something like, "Your very own Genie is so travel-ready she can make the perfect cup in your home, and in the Andes! It's almost like magic! Get your AutoMatic Teapot today!"

Cheers!

**Editor in Chief,
Marcus Chevral**

I experienced a peculiar sensation then. A sort of out-of-body experience as I slowly slid the clean white card into its clean white, editorial envelope. The walls were doing funny things. They seemed to

be moving away from me, and yet the things on them were moving toward me. Notably, the framed papers.

Click Clack. Whirr. Ding!

Headlines jumped out at me one by one.

Bewitched in Baghdad

Sunny Days in Senegal

Eating, Praying, and Loving in Laos

Click Clack. Whirr. Ding!

I saw myself in each one. A face reflected at ten. Fourteen. Sixteen. Sunburnt. Miserable. In each, I could only recall being recruited into a cult in Baghdad—the unrelenting rain in Senegal—and nearly being eaten by water snakes in Laos.

My reflection looked down as I did at the book in my hands. Slanting shorthand filled the pages of the leather-bound journal. In it were all of my father’s adventures told from the point of view of a shadow. Me.

Click Clack. Whirr. Ding!

Hadn’t I been doing my job? Uncomplaining as I was dragged back and forth and around the globe like a needle across an old record. Writing everything down for him after he’d been diagnosed with carpal tunnel.

Click Clack whirr. Click Clack whirr.

“What are you doing?” Tim was looking up at me. “Are you having a stroke?”

I realised I was standing, a little slack jawed.

Ding!

I ignored him and made my way to the shrouded nook.

Ding Ding Ding!

I pushed aside the curtains.

Ding!

“Oh!” My father turned in surprise. “Hello Wendell—”

I held up the letter. “Did you know about this?”

His brows furrowed. “Yes,” he said slowly. “It’s a letter from Marcus. You know, I’d appreciate if you didn’t read my correspondence—”

“So we were just going to wake up and find ourselves on a plane to some tropical hellhole next week? No, you’d have to break the news sometime.”

“Wendell,” he wasn’t listening to me—he was busy fiddling with the thousand-letter mechanism on the typewriter. “Can we discuss this some other time? I really must get this article out.”

I leaned over and wrestled the ink cartridge out of the Toshiba. It took about five solid minutes and navigating what seemed to be several miniature ceremonial booby traps, but I got there in the end. I stood up, panting with ink-stained hands, holding his gaze.

His hands lifted from the keyboard and settled slowly in his lap.

“That’s what this is about? That you don’t get the month?” His puzzled expression changed to one of disbelief. “I would’ve thought you’d be glad. We get to get back out there sooner.”

I stared at him uncomprehendingly. “Every two weeks? Do you think I want to do this every *two weeks*? I’m sorry but can you count to me how many times we’ve almost died— for what? A good article?”

“Wendell,” he spluttered, “that was never— you know perfectly well I had it all under contro—”

“It’s one thing after another,” I gripped my notebook and spoke louder. I was surprising myself. It was like, once the gates had opened, everything came flooding out, and putting it back in was like trying to shovel water through a sieve.

“You know I still have nightmares about being chased by rhinos. Every time the sprinkler goes off, I have a near heart attack because I think it’s one of those deadly spitting Komodo dragons of Gili Motang come back to get me. Sorry Dad, but I’m sick of it. I hate it. I won’t do it anymore. I won’t go. Find someone else to take notes for you. Make Tim do it for Christ’s sake!”

“Ah, weak fingers,” said Tim from the couch. “I’m ill. Bad penmanship. Malnourished.”

“I was giving my sons experiences,” he said firmly.

“Which is all well and good but what about the people who are reading it? The people who think that we spend our lives going on grand adventures and having a great time because you only include the good stuff? You don’t listen to me. You just, you just take my notes for the summary and rewrite everything in there to your liking and you never ask what I think, and you never give me any credit!”

I stood there for a moment, searching for more words but I seemed to have run out completely.

Anything else? My family’s gaze seemed to ask.

“Er...That’s it.” I sat down, my face hot. The silence made the staring worse. Like it was a tangible thing.

“Ah...erm,” my father thumbed with the mail. “I didn’t know you felt that way.” He walked over to me and clapped a hand on my shoulder.

“But you’re my right-hand man! There’s always the scribe behind the adventurer. It’s one of the most important roles, the documentarian. They tell the story for all the world to see. I want you to know you’re very appreciated, Wendell.”

I looked at him. He wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at the journal in my hands. The bristles of his salt and pepper beard twitched towards it.

“The thing is,” I said. “I don’t think I am.”

I walked away, leaving his arm hanging in midair. On the floor was one cup of tea that had been miraculously filled to the top. I sat down, picked it up and unfolded the gossip column rather matter-of-factly.

“I’m staying here.”