





A Rainy Day

It was a terrifically dull morning and I was perusing a tome from my uncle's library.

This is the first sentence of a book I was thinking about reading. It was Friday after school and I was at home poking around in my Uncle Vesuvio's study. He had thousands of books in there, all neatly arranged, more even than the school library and better too, with better titles also. The school library has lots of books on sport, for example, to get boys reading who normally don't, which is a massive waste of time in my opinion.

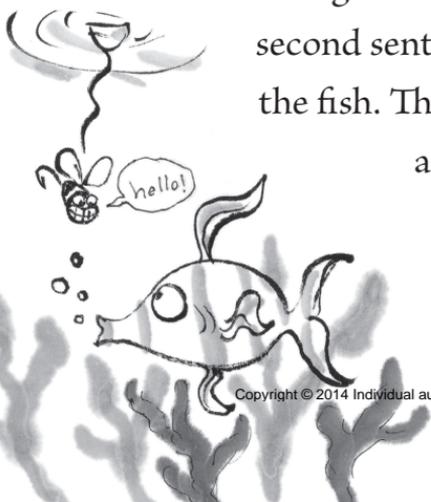
This is because boys who are interested in sport prefer to do it instead of reading about it, while boys who aren't interested in sport don't like either. Therefore it is a double whammy, which means lose–lose, and the reason why I was in my uncle's study and perusing, which means reading bits out of, his books now.

My uncle, Lord Witherington Weatherby Willoughby, was a collector of fine volumes and valuable treatises pertaining to ancient matters.

This was the second sentence of the book, and excessively vital for luring the reader into reading the rest. My own uncle says that a good first sentence is like a fly dropped on the water to get the fish's attention. A good

second sentence is the hook that snags the fish. The rest of the book is the angler reeling the reader in.

These are metaphors,
or mind pictures,



for explaining ideas – something my uncle is incredibly good at. I perused further.

What ancient matters this tome of my exalted relation would thus pertain to would thereof be demonstrated shortly and I prepared to roll my eyeballs over the coming paragraph.

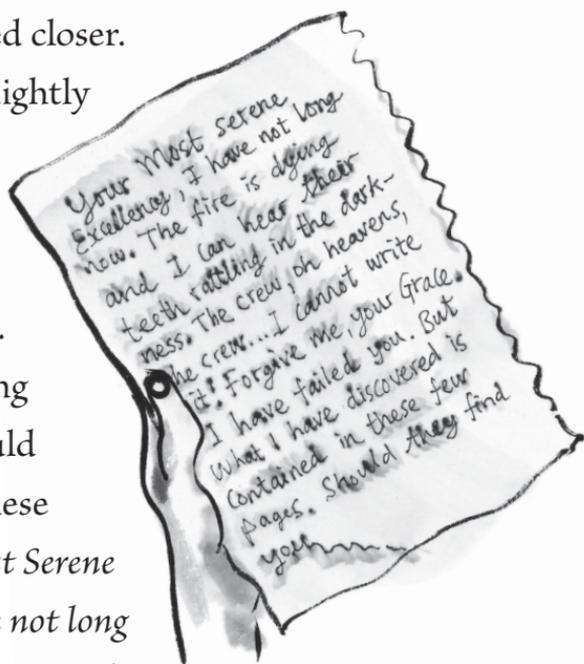
I emitted a massive yawn and put the book back. I would rather read three books on sport than *that*. I pulled out another volume and looked at it. GREAT GOLF GAMES



OF THE 1920s
WITH PUTTING
ILLUSTRATIONS.
Well maybe not.

I returned the book to the shelf, and as I did, a page fell out of its middle. I bent down to pick it up. Drawings of golf courses, I thought, glancing down at the flimsy paper. What a massively dull and rainy day it was turning out to be.

Then I looked closer.
The page, only slightly wider than my hand, had been torn from an old notebook. In spidery writing on one side I could just make out these words: *Your Most Serene Excellency, I have not long now. The fire is dying and I can hear their teeth rattling in the darkness. The crew, oh heavens, the crew... I cannot write it! Forgive me your Grace. I have failed you. But what I have discovered is contained in these few pages. Should they find you...*

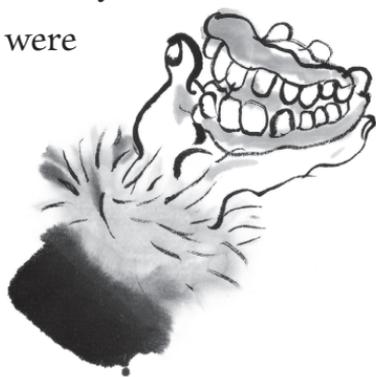


As you can see, the “you” ended in a squiggle, as if the writer’s hand had slipped. I enjoy scribing myself, as a hobby, and like clean copy – which means no squiggles.



I wondered what had happened to make this writer's hand slip. I flipped the page over and studied the other side. There was a drawing of something on it, though not a golf course. It had been done with the same scratchy pen, like a nib that you dip into ink. I knew about this because of my scribal inks collection, which is quite large, though I mostly do my schoolwork on a laptop now. But in ancient times, everybody wrote with these pens. Everybody who could write, I mean. In ye olden times not everybody *could* write – or read, for that matter.

I examined the page again. The paper was excessively old and wrinkly and I wondered whose teeth were rattling in the darkness. The only person I knew whose teeth rattled was excessively old and wrinkly also,



but her teeth rattled because they were false and she enjoyed the sound. Then I wondered where the other “few pages” were and spent the remains of the day in the library looking for them. Sadly, although I found a great many other interesting books, the torn-out pages I was seeking stayed sought. But by then the rain had stopped and the day was nearly over and had turned out pretty interesting

after all.
So that
was good.



Here is a list of the top five interesting books I found in my uncle's study that day:



1. LOST WORLDS AND THEIR SUSPECTED LOCATIONS, WITH MAPS AND SHIPPING TIMETABLES. As this tome was printed

in 1782, which is pretty pre-histrionic, I suspected they weren't that lost any more.

2. YOUR HOME IS YOUR CASTLE, WITH

PRACTICAL ILLUSTRATIONS

FOR BUILDING A MOAT,

INSTALLING ARROW

SLITS AND CONVERTING

YOUR FRONT DOOR TO

A DRAWBRIDGE. I admire

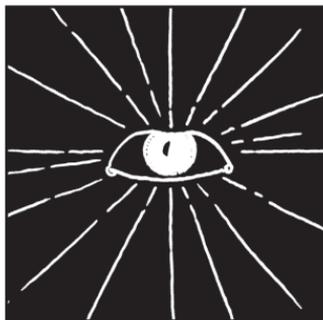
drawbridges and

considered proposing to

my Uncle Vesuvio that we build one.



3. WINNING THROUGH HYPNOSIS: SEVEN STEPS TOWARDS BENDING YOUR OPPONENT TO YOUR WILL. This is maybe a bit too much like cheating, but it might be useful if your opponent is cheating.



4. SERIOUSLY TOP SECRETS. This book was printed in invisible ink and you had to iron each page to make the writing visible.

5. 100 AMAZING CHOCOLATE RECIPES. I decided to make recipe number 17 for tea.



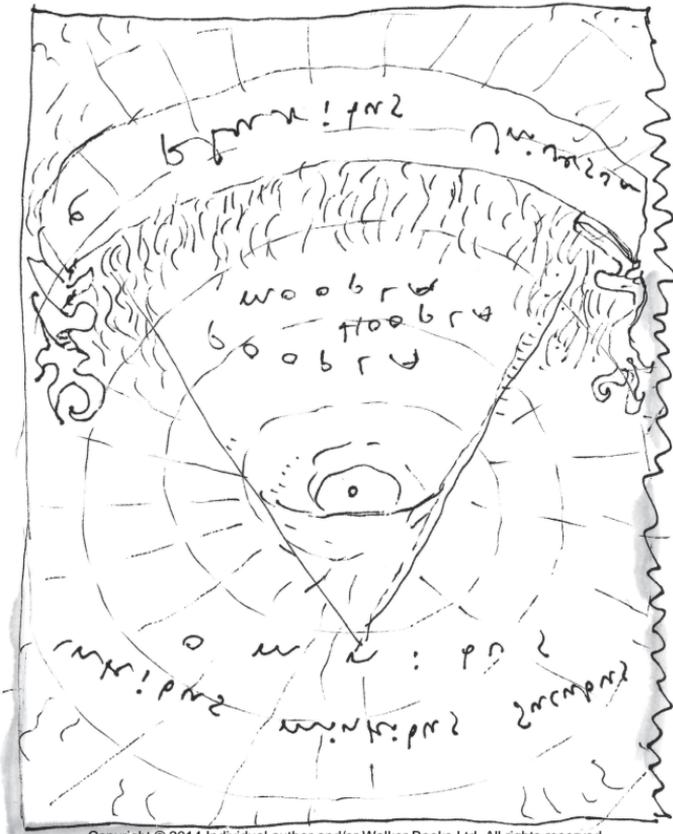
Tea

This is me in the kitchen, making Amazing Chocolate Recipe number 17. It is called Chocolate Chicken Supreme. The recipe is: *Melt some chocolate. Draw the outline of a chicken onto a cold plate. Carefully pour chocolate into the outline. Let it cool. Eat.*



I ate.

While I was eating I studied the mysterious page again. The drawing was covered in funny writing, which I couldn't read. At least I thought it was writing. If you look at the picture of the drawing you will see what I mean. The truth is, I didn't know which way was up, or down, or even sideways.



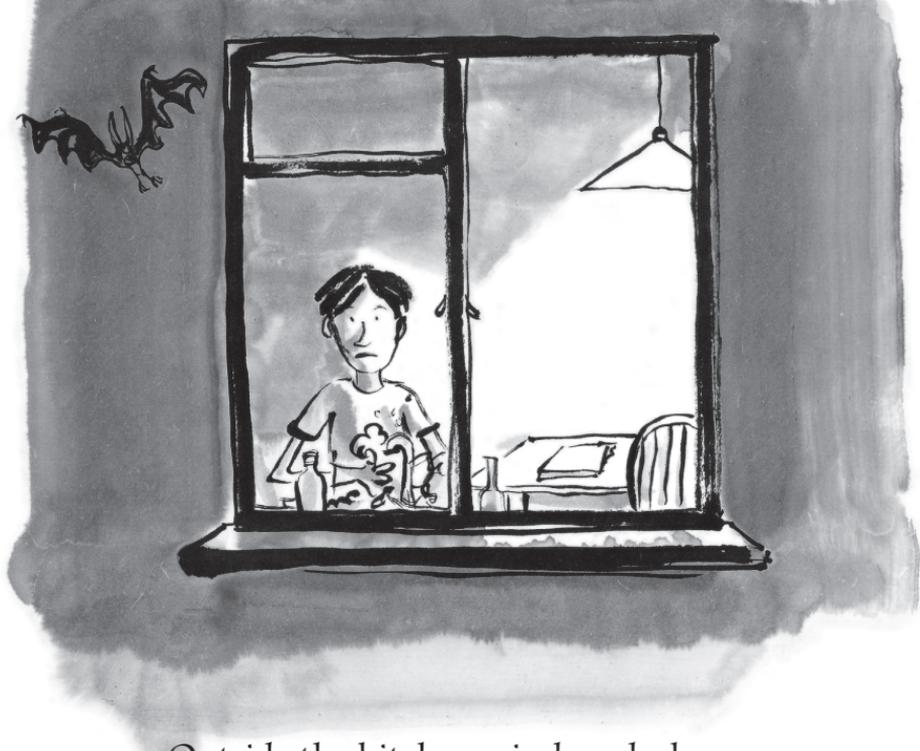
My mobile rang and it was my Uncle Vesuvio. He told me to get my own tea as he would be home later than anticipated. I told him I already had.



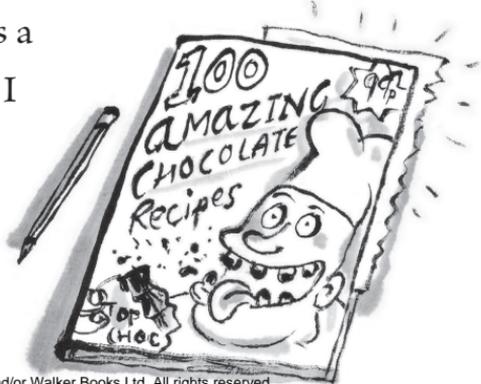
“Well done, Samuel,” he said, and hung up.

My uncle is a diplomat so it is second nature for him to be polite. It is also second nature for him to be delayed if there is a crisis somewhere. Which there generally is.

I finished my chocolate chicken and washed it down with an extra-chocolate milkshake. Then I committed the washing up. As I sudsed I went back to thinking about the page. Who was the Most Serene Excellency? I wondered. Whoever they were, they couldn't have been very serene after they read *that* note.



Outside the kitchen window darkness was incoming, but at least there were no teeth chattering. I decided I would show the page to my uncle in the morning to see what he made of it. Then I perused some more Amazing Chocolate recipes for a while before leaving the page in the book as a bookmark. After that I went to bed. That was Friday.



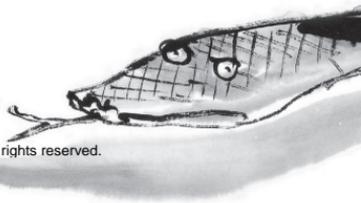
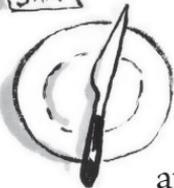
Saturday

Early Saturday morning
I woke to the sound of the
front door closing behind
my uncle as he left for
the office. He must have come
home late, while I was asleep.
“A diplomatic crisis is like a pot
burning,” he says, “and I am a fireman.”



I went downstairs and there was
a note on the table. *Dear Samuel, he had
scribed. I will be back late
tonight, tomorrow at the latest.*
Your uncle, V. I frowned slightly
at this, as the last time he had left a note
like that, the next time I had seen him was a
week later being crushed in the gizzards of a
giant boa constrictor*. But as tomorrow was
my birthday, I was assured that he would do
his best to be there. My birthday is always
important to my Uncle Vesuvio.

* See *Granny Samurai,
the Monkey King and I.*



Breakfast

I put some milk on to heat while I fetched the newspaper and simultaneously pondered which chocolate recipe to make for breakfast. Usually I do the easy crossword while my uncle reads the cartoons, which are always best on Saturdays. Then we swap and he does the hard one. We both have scribal natures but he is more advanced than me because he is older. Sometimes our neighbour Granny Samurai comes over to join us and does the Sudoku as well. This can be distracting, however, as she clacks her teeth loudly when she is concentrating – and even louder if you ask her politely to stop. Also, she is an impatient person, which is not good for doing Sudoku.



Here is a joke about teeth. It is from my favourite comic strip ever and is most revolting.

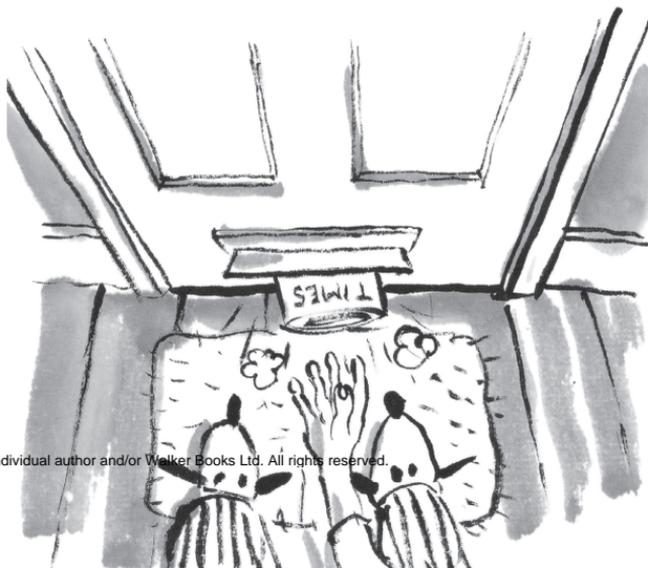
HORRID + UGG

by Jo Zimmer



I was looking forward to this cartoon now as I bent down to extract the newspaper from my letter box. Then the newspaper was extracted from my hand instead. I frowned and opened the door.

The garden was empty. Surprise!



A Horrid Ambush

Actually it wasn't really that surprising. I surmised swiftly that a certain somebody had grown impatient waiting for her Sudoku and had taken the newspaper into her own hands. With one hundred per cent precision I knew who that somebody was. Granny Samurai! I leant over the railing between our houses and rang her doorbell. She didn't answer. Oh come on, Granny, I thought, and



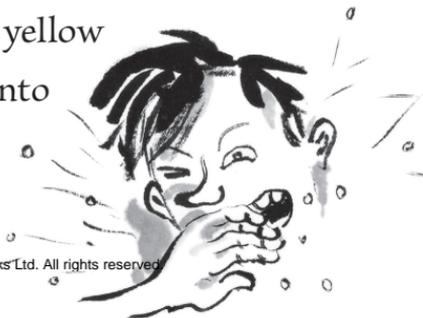


reached up to bang on her door with the heavy iron knocker.

“AHHH!” it shouted in a loud electronic voice when I lifted the ring.
“Leggo by dose!”

Ha ha, hilarious, I thought, and knocked loudly while the stupid thing’s eyes flashed bright red and purple. That is just the kind of thing Granny Samurai finds excessively amusing. But there was still no answer. I frowned in ponderment. Then something pinged me hard on the back of my neck. I looked around and caught a glimpse of someone small and vile watching me through the bushes near the front gate. The gate itself was ajar and half my newspaper fluttered beneath it.

“Hey!” I said, as a prelivery to uttering something else, then a hail of yellow and orange pellets peppered into my mouth and stopped me.



“Ack ack ack,” I coughed, and spat a yellow pellet out into my hand. It was a small, hard, plastic ball – sort of like a Tic Tac, only much less delicious.

A second blast flew at me like tracer bullets. Near the gate the someone small and vile had mutated into two someones small and vile. From the street outside, two small ugly boys were firing at me with their toy guns. Meanwhile, just inside my gate a small ugly dog was panting horribly and doing an unspeakably large something right on top of what was left of my newspaper.

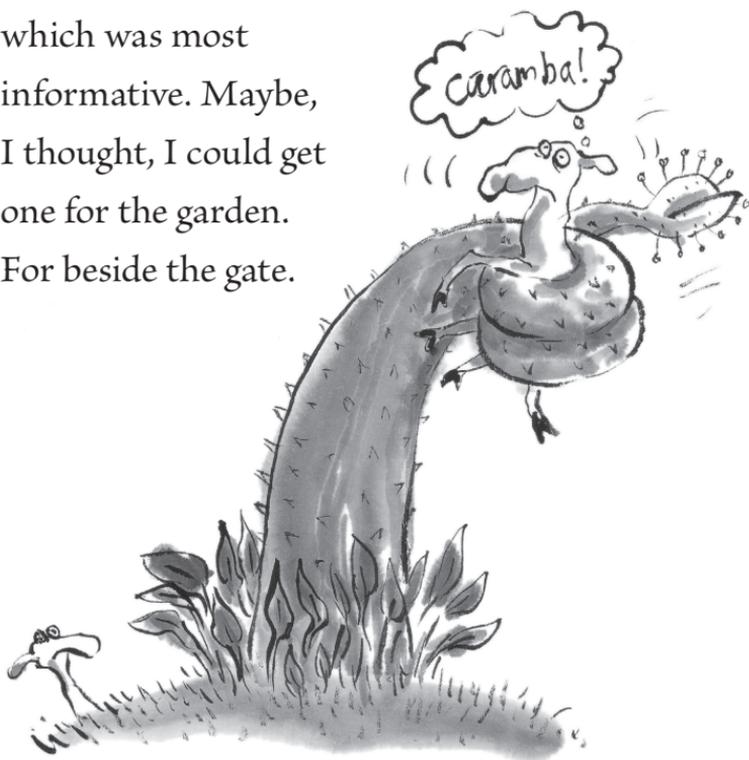


The unspeakable something was nearly as big as he was and part of my brain wondered how this could be possible. Another part, however, was causing me to boil over and advance sternly towards the invaders, ready to repel. But as I strode forth, a third part was going, *sniff sniff*, and I suddenly realized I wasn't the only thing boiling over.

"The milk!" I shouted in alarm and turned and ran back into the house. There in the kitchen the milk had risen at top speed to the rim of the saucepan and beyond. Now it was burning vigorously on the stove and ponging up the place most awfully. By the time I had cleaned it up, and the garden too, and rescued what bits of newspaper I could, the evil twins had vanished and my breakfast was completely and entirely ruined.



I spent the rest of the morning failing to do the hard crossword, which was the only part of the rescued newspaper that didn't smell. Then I tried to scribe a bit in my diary, but couldn't. Finally I just gave up and watched TV instead. On the nature channel there was a programme about giant Amazonian meat-eating plants, which was most informative. Maybe, I thought, I could get one for the garden. For beside the gate.

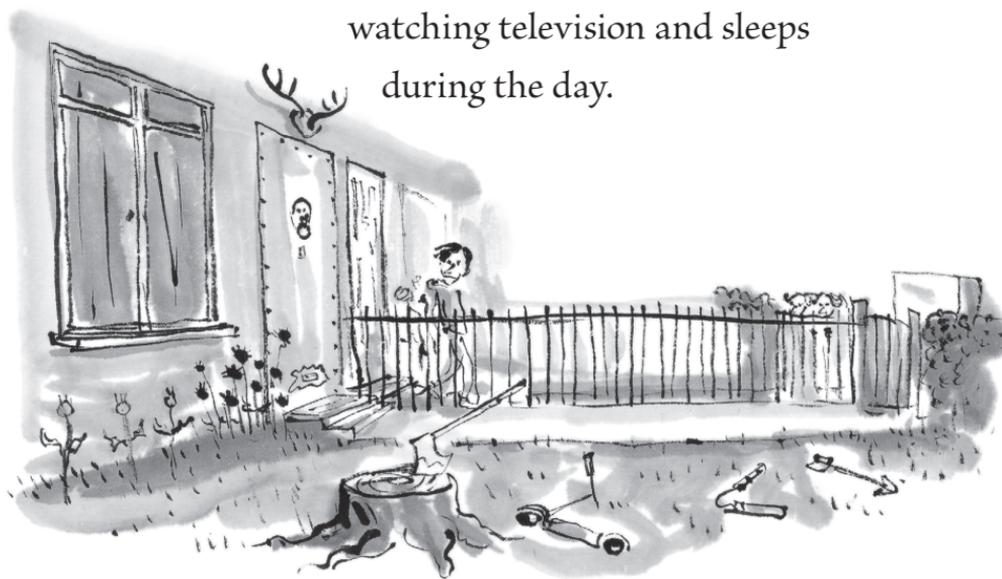


Shop 'Til You Drop

In the afternoon I went shopping. As it was my birthday the following day I intended to buy the ingredients for my best cake ever – or at least up until now. Recipe number 12 from 100 AMAZING CHOCOLATE RECIPES sounded excessively delicious to me. It was called Molten Volcano Chocolate Fudge Surprise.

Personally I prefer cake mix to cake, but my uncle said that maybe we could do half and half this year as some people quite like to eat cake as opposed to drinking it. Him, for example. As I quite like my uncle also, I agreed that I would do some baking as well as mixing. Therefore it was a good omen to discover the Molten Volcano Chocolate Fudge Surprise recipe, which combined the best of both. You bake it, but when you cut into it, it erupts in molten chocolate fury. SURPRISE!

I wrote out my shopping list and exited the front door. The curtains in Granny Samurai's house were still drawn and I desisted from knocking in case she actually *was* sleeping. Sometimes she stays up all night watching television and sleeps during the day.



“Isn't that a massive waste of time?” I once asked politely.

“Not if you like television,” she replied. I was considering this when an unexpected unpleasantness occurred.

There Goes the Neighbourhood

My gate was blocked.

A huge cardboard
box had been
dumped right

outside it –
and in case

I might have
been able
to squeeze



past, another one had been placed in front
of that. Nice, I thought – and thanks! – and
wondered who had put it there. I soon found
out, as a hail of yellow and orange pellets
assailed me. It was the evil twins again.

“Gottim!” shouted one.

“No, I gottim!” shouted the other, and
then they started firing at each other instead.

At least it isn't personal, I thought, then
ducked as they turned and fired at me again.
Or maybe it was.

Behind them, a huge removal van was parked, and a man who looked like a grown-up version of his evil offspring spake into one of two mobile phones, completely ignoring what they were doing.

“You’re not listening,” he was saying.
“You’re not LISTENING.”

“Excuse me,” I uttered, but he wasn’t listening, either. “Excuse me,” I tried again.
“I can’t get out of my gate.”

“YOU’RE NOT LISTENING!”
the man screamed into his phone again,
then he broke off as the other one rang.
“WHAT?” he shouted. “NO! I’M BUSY!
GO AWAY!” He hung up and went back
to the first one. “YOU’RE STILL NOT
LISTENING!” he shouted.



I looked up and down the street. It was littered with hideous gold furniture and cardboard boxes everywhere, and the horrible dog from earlier was busily chewing a hole in one so that a blizzard of white Styrofoam packing beads was whirling around the street and making a giant mess. The twins, meanwhile, were now firing pellets at the movers whilst a thin woman shouted, “DON’T YOU DARE DROP THAT BOX!” and “OH, GOOD SHOT, JULIAN!” and “I DO THINK IT IS IMPORTANT THAT BOYS EXPRESS THEMSELVES, DON’T YOU?”



“Excuse me,” I shouted, and waved, trying to get her attention.



“OH LOOK, BOYS,” she screamed, “THERE’S A LOVELY LITTLE BOY OVER THERE FOR YOU TO PLAY WITH! HELLO, LITTLE BOY!” And she waved back.

The evil twins swivelled their evil eyes towards me again and I emitted defeat. For the second time that day.

Victory and Defeat

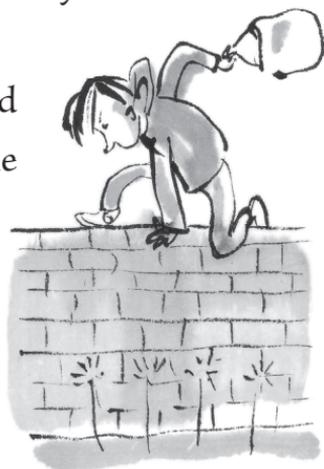
My uncle says that in life there is the Long Game and the Short Game. Sometimes you have to emit defeat in the short game so you can survive for the long game. Granny Samurai calls this Using Defeat.

“Use how?” I asked her once.

“Use dem to run away,” she snorted.

“Hee hee hee.” And she slapped her wooden leg in hilarity.

Hee hee hee, I thought irritably as I used mine to retreat back into the house, through the kitchen and over the wall into the back lane behind. If those people were moving in next door, this could turn out to be a very long game indeed.



Lists

This is my shopping list for the cake:

1 large jar of golden syrup
5 medium bars of dark chocolate
1 large bar of white chocolate
1 kilo of flour
6 eggs
1 kilo of sugar
vanilla essence