

EVERYTHING STARTS SOMEWHERE, ALTHOUGH many physicists disagree.

But people have always been dimly aware of the problem with the start of things. They wonder aloud how the snowplough driver gets to work, or how the makers of dictionaries look up the spelling of the words. Yet there is the constant desire to find some point in the twisting, knotting, ravelling nets of space-time on which a metaphorical finger can be put to indicate that here, *here*, is the point where it all began . . .

Something began when the Guild of Assassins enrolled Mister Teatime, who saw things differently from other people, and one of the ways that he saw things differently from other people was in seeing other people as things (later, Lord Downey of the Guild said, ‘We took pity on him because he’d lost both parents at an early age. I think that, on reflection, we should have wondered a bit more about that.’)

But it was much earlier even than that when most

people forgot that the very oldest stories are, sooner or later, about blood. Later on they took the blood out to make the stories more acceptable to children, or at least to the people who had to read them to children rather than the children themselves (who, on the whole, are quite keen on blood provided it's being shed by the deserving*), and then wondered where the stories went.

And earlier still when something in the darkness of the deepest caves and gloomiest forests thought: what *are* they, these creatures? I will observe them . . .

And much, much earlier than that, when the Disc-world was formed, drifting onwards through space atop four elephants on the shell of the giant turtle, Great A'Tuin.

Possibly, as it moves, it gets tangled like a blind man in a cobwebbed house in those highly specialized little space-time strands that try to breed in every history they encounter, stretching them and breaking them and tugging them into new shapes.

Or possibly not, of course. The philosopher Didactylos has summed up an alternative hypothesis as 'Things just happen. What the hell.'

The senior wizards of Unseen University stood and looked at the door.

There was no doubt that whoever had shut it

*That is to say, those who deserve to shed blood. Or possibly not. You never quite know with some kids.

wanted it to stay shut. Dozens of nails secured it to the door frame. Planks had been nailed right across. And finally it had, up until this morning, been hidden by a bookcase that had been put in front of it.

‘And there’s the sign, Ridcully,’ said the Dean. ‘You *have* read it, I assume. You know? The sign which says “Do not, under any circumstances, open this door”?’

‘Of course I’ve read it,’ said Ridcully. ‘Why d’yer think I want it opened?’

‘Er . . . why?’ said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

‘To see why they wanted it shut, of course.’*

He gestured to Modo, the University’s gardener and odd-job dwarf, who was standing by with a crow-bar.

‘Go to it, lad.’

The gardener saluted. ‘Right you are, sir.’

Against a background of splintering timber, Ridcully went on: ‘It says on the plans that this was a bathroom. There’s nothing frightening about a bathroom, for gods’ sake. I *want* a bathroom. I’m fed up with sluicing down with you fellows. It’s unhygienic. You can catch stuff. My father told me that. Where you get lots of people bathing together, the Verruca Gnome is running around with his little sack.’

‘Is that like the Tooth Fairy?’ said the Dean sarcastically.

*This exchange contains almost all you need to know about human civilization. At least, those bits of it that are now under the sea, fenced off or still smoking.

‘I’m in charge here and I want a bathroom of my own,’ said Ridcully firmly. ‘And that’s all there is to it, all right? I want a bathroom in time for Hogswatch-night, understand?’

And that’s a problem with beginnings, of course. Sometimes, when you’re dealing with occult realms that have quite a different attitude to time, you get the effect a little way before the cause.

From somewhere on the edge of hearing came a *glingleglinglegling* noise, like little silver bells.

At about the same time as the Archchancellor was laying down the law, Susan Sto-Helit was sitting up in bed, reading by candlelight.

Frost patterns curled across the windows.

She enjoyed these early evenings. Once she had put the children to bed she was more or less left to herself. Mrs Gaiter was pathetically scared of giving her any instructions even though she paid Susan’s wages.

Not that the wages were important, of course. What was important was that she was being her Own Person and holding down a Real Job. And being a governess *was* a real job. The only tricky bit had been the embarrassment when her employer found out that she was a duchess, because in Mrs Gaiter’s book, which was a rather short book with big handwriting, the upper crust wasn’t supposed to work. It was supposed to loaf around. It was all Susan could do to stop her curtseying when they met.

A flicker made her turn her head.

The candle flame was streaming out horizontally, as though in a howling wind.

She looked up. The curtains billowed away from the window, which—

—flung itself open with a clatter.

But there was no wind.

At least, no wind in this world.

Images formed in her mind. A red ball . . . The sharp smell of snow . . . And then they were gone, and instead there were . . .

‘Teeth?’ said Susan, aloud. ‘Teeth, *again?*’

She blinked. When she opened her eyes the window was, as she knew it would be, firmly shut. The curtain hung demurely. The candle flame was innocently upright. Oh, no, not again. Not after all this time. Everything had been going so well—

‘Thusan?’

She looked around. Her door had been pushed open and a small figure stood there, barefoot in a nightdress.

She sighed. ‘Yes, Twyla?’

‘I’m afraid of the monster in the cellar, Thusan. It’s going to eat me up.’

Susan shut her book firmly and raised a warning finger.

‘What have I told you about trying to sound ingratiatingly cute, Twyla?’ she said.

The little girl said, ‘You said I mustn’t. You said that exaggerated lisp is a hanging offence and I only do it to get attention.’

‘Good. Do you know what monster it is this time?’

‘It’s the big hairy one wif—’

Susan raised the finger. ‘Uh?’ she warned.

‘—*with* eight arms,’ Twyla corrected herself.

‘What, again? Oh, all right.’

She got out of bed and put on her dressing gown, trying to stay quite calm while the child watched her. *So they were coming back.* Oh, not the monster in the cellar. That was all in a day’s work. But it looked as if she was going to start remembering the future again.

She shook her head. However far you ran away, you always caught yourself up.

But *monsters* were easy, at least. She’d learned how to deal with monsters. She picked up the poker from the nursery fender and went down the back stairs, with Twyla following her.

The Gaiters were having a dinner party. Muffled voices came from the direction of the dining room.

Then, as she crept past, a door opened and yellow light spilled out and a voice said, ‘Ye gawds, there’s a gel in a nightshirt out here with a *poker!*’

She saw figures silhouetted in the light and made out the worried face of Mrs Gaiter.

‘Susan? Er . . . what are you doing?’

Susan looked at the poker and then back at the woman. ‘Twyla said she’s afraid of a monster in the cellar, Mrs Gaiter.’

‘And yer going to attack it with a poker, eh?’ said one of the guests. There was a strong atmosphere of brandy and cigars.

‘Yes,’ said Susan simply.

'Susan's our governess,' said Mrs Gaiter. 'Er . . . I told you about her.'

There was a change in the expression on the faces peering out from the dining room. It became a sort of amused respect.

'She beats up monsters with a poker?' said someone.

'Actually, that's a very clever idea,' said someone else. 'Little gel gets it into her head there's a monster in the cellar, you go in with the poker and make a few bashing noises while the child listens, and then everything's all right. Good thinkin', that girl. Ver' sensible. Ver' modern.'

'Is that what you're doing, Susan?' said Mrs Gaiter anxiously.

'Yes, Mrs Gaiter,' said Susan obediently.

'This I've got to watch, by Io! It's not every day you see monsters beaten up by a gel,' said the man behind her. There was a swish of silk and a cloud of cigar smoke as the diners poured out into the hall.

Susan sighed again and went down the cellar stairs, while Twyla sat demurely at the top, hugging her knees.

A door opened and shut.

There was a short period of silence and then a terrifying scream. One woman fainted and a man dropped his cigar.

'You don't have to worry, everything will be all right,' said Twyla calmly. 'She always wins. Everything will be all right.'

There were thuds and clangs, and then a whirring noise, and finally a sort of bubbling.

Susan pushed open the door. The poker was bent at right angles. There was nervous applause.

'Ver' well done,' said a guest. 'Ver' persykological. Clever idea, that, bendin' the poker. And I expect you're not afraid any more, eh, little girl?'

'No,' said Twyla.

'Ver' persykological.'

'Susan says don't get afraid, get angry,' said Twyla.

'Er, thank you, Susan,' said Mrs Gaiter, now a trembling bouquet of nerves. 'And, er, now, Sir Geoffrey, if you'd all like to come back into the parlour – I mean, the drawing room—'

The party went back up the hall. The last thing Susan heard before the door shut was 'Dashed convincin', the way she bent the poker like that—'

She waited.

'Have they all gone, Twyla?'

'Yes, Susan.'

'Good.' Susan went back into the cellar and emerged towing something large and hairy with eight legs. She managed to haul it up the steps and down the other passage to the back yard, where she kicked it out. It would evaporate before dawn.

'That's what *we* do to monsters,' she said.

Twyla watched carefully.

'And now it's bed for you, my girl,' said Susan, picking her up.

'C'n I have the poker in my room for the night?'

'All right.'

'It only kills monsters, doesn't it . . . ?' the child said sleepily, as Susan carried her upstairs.

'That's right,' Susan said. 'All kinds.'

She put the girl to bed next to her brother and leaned the poker against the toy cupboard.

The poker was made of some cheap metal with a brass knob on the end. She would, Susan reflected, give quite a lot to be able to use it on the children's previous governess.

'G'night.'

'Goodnight.'

She went back to her own small bedroom and got back into bed, watching the curtains suspiciously.

It would be nice to think she'd imagined it. It would also be *stupid* to think that, too. But she'd been nearly normal for two years now, making her own way in the real world, never remembering the future at all . . .

Perhaps she *had* just dreamed things (but even dreams could be real . . .).

She tried to ignore the long thread of wax that suggested the candle had, just for a few seconds, streamed in the wind.

As Susan sought sleep, Lord Downey sat in his study catching up on the paperwork.

Lord Downey was an assassin. Or, rather, an Assassin. The capital letter was important. It separated those curs who went around murdering people for money from the gentlemen who were occasionally consulted by other gentlemen who wished to have

removed, for a consideration, any inconvenient razor-blades from the candyfloss of life.

The members of the Guild of Assassins considered themselves cultured men who enjoyed good music and food and literature. And they knew the value of human life. To a penny, in many cases.

Lord Downey's study was oak-panelled and well carpeted. The furniture was very old and quite worn, but the wear was the wear that comes only when very good furniture is carefully used over several centuries. It was *matured* furniture.

A log fire burned in the grate. In front of it a couple of dogs were sleeping in the tangled way of large hairy dogs everywhere.

Apart from the occasional doggy snore or the crackle of a shifting log, there were no other sounds but the scratching of Lord Downey's pen and the ticking of the longcase clock by the door . . . small, private noises which only served to define the silence.

At least, this was the case until someone cleared their throat.

The sound suggested very clearly that the purpose of the exercise was not to erase the presence of a troublesome bit of biscuit, but merely to indicate in the politest possible way the presence of the throat.

Downey stopped writing but did not raise his head.

Then, after what appeared to be some consideration, he said in a businesslike voice, 'The doors are locked. The windows are barred. The dogs do not appear to have woken up. The squeaky floorboards

haven't. Other little arrangements which I will not specify seem to have been bypassed. That severely limits the possibilities. I really doubt that you are a ghost and gods generally do not announce themselves so politely. You could, of course, be Death, but I don't believe he bothers with such niceties and, besides, I am feeling quite well. Hmm.'

Something hovered in the air in front of his desk.

'My teeth are in fine condition so you are unlikely to be the Tooth Fairy. I've always found that a stiff brandy before bedtime quite does away with the need for the Sandman. And, since I can carry a tune quite well, I suspect I'm not likely to attract the attention of Old Man Trouble. Hmm.'

The figure drifted a little nearer.

'I suppose a gnome could get through a mouse-hole, but I have traps down,' Downey went on. 'Bogeymen can walk through walls but would be very loath to reveal themselves. Really, you have me at a loss. Hmm?'

And then he looked up.

A grey robe hung in the air. It appeared to be occupied, in that it had a shape, although the occupant was not visible.

The prickly feeling crept over Downey that the occupant wasn't invisible, merely not, in any physical sense, there at all.

'Good evening,' he said.

The robe said, Good evening, Lord Downey.

His brain registered the words. His ears swore they hadn't heard them.

But you did not become head of the Assassins' Guild by taking fright easily. Besides, the thing wasn't frightening. It was, thought Downey, astonishingly dull. If monotonous drabness could take on a shape, this would be the shape it would choose.

'You appear to be a spectre,' he said.

Our nature is not a matter for discussion, arrived in his head. We offer you a commission.

'You wish someone inhumed?' said Downey.

Brought to an end.

Downey considered this. It was not as unusual as it appeared. There were precedents. Anyone could buy the services of the Guild. Several zombies had, in the past, employed the Guild to settle scores with their murderers. In fact the Guild, he liked to think, practised the ultimate democracy. You didn't need intelligence, social position, beauty or charm to hire it. You just needed money which, unlike the other stuff, was available to everyone. Except for the poor, of course, but there was no helping some people.

'Brought to an end . . .' That was an odd way of putting it.

'We can—' he began.

The payment will reflect the difficulty of the task.

'Our scale of fees—'

The payment will be three million dollars.

Downey sat back. That was four times higher than any fee yet earned by any member of the Guild, and *that* had been a special family rate, including overnight guests.

‘No questions asked, I assume?’ he said, buying time.

No questions answered.

‘But does the suggested fee represent the difficulty involved? The client is heavily guarded?’

Not guarded at all. But almost certainly impossible to delete with conventional weapons.

Downey nodded. This was not necessarily a big problem, he said to himself. The Guild had amassed quite a few unconventional weapons over the years. Delete? An unusual way of putting it . . .

‘We like to know for whom we are working,’ he said.

We are sure you do.

‘I mean that we need to know your name. Or names. In strict client confidentiality, of course. We have to write something down in our files.’

You may think of us as . . . the Auditors.

‘Really? What is it you audit?’

Everything.

‘I think we need to know something about you.’

We are the people with three million dollars.

Downey took the point, although he didn’t like it. Three million dollars could buy a lot of no questions.

‘Really?’ he said. ‘In the circumstances, since you are a new client, I think we would like payment in advance.’

As you wish. The gold is now in your vaults.

‘You mean that it will shortly be in our vaults,’ said Downey.

No. It has always been in your vaults. We know this because we have just put it there.

Downey watched the empty hood for a moment, and then without shifting his gaze he reached out and picked up the speaking tube.

‘Mr Winvoe?’ he said, after whistling into it. ‘Ah. Good. Tell me, how much do we have in our vaults at the moment? Oh, approximately. To the nearest million, say.’ He held the tube away from his ear for a moment, and then spoke into it again. ‘Well, be a good chap and check anyway, will you?’

He hung up the tube and placed his hands flat on the desk in front of him.

‘Can I offer you a drink while we wait?’ he said.

Yes. We believe so.

Downey stood up with some relief and walked over to his large drinks cabinet. His hand hovered over the Guild’s ancient and valuable tantalus, with its labelled decanters of Mur, Nig, Trop and Yksihw.*

‘And what would you like to drink?’ he said, wondering where the Auditor kept its mouth. His hand hovered for just a moment over the smallest decanter, marked Nosiop.

We do not drink.

‘But you did just say I could offer you a drink . . .’

*It’s a sad and terrible thing that high-born folk really have thought that the servants would be totally fooled if spirits were put into decanters that were cunningly labelled *backwards*. And also throughout history the more politically conscious butler has taken it on trust, and with rather more justification, that his employers will not notice if the whisky is topped up with eniru.

Indeed. We judge you fully capable of performing that action.

‘Ah.’ Downey’s hand hesitated over the whisky decanter, and then he thought better of it. At that point, the speaking tube whistled.

‘Yes, Mr Winvoe? Really? Indeed? I myself have frequently found loose change under sofa cushions, it’s amazing how it mou . . . No, no, I wasn’t being . . . Yes, I *did* have some reason to . . . No, no blame attaches to you in any . . . No, I could hardly see how it . . . Yes, go and have a rest, what a good idea. Thank you.’

He hung up the tube again. The cowl hadn’t moved.

‘We will need to know where, when and, of course, *who*,’ he said, after a moment.

The cowl nodded. The location is not on any map. We would like the task to be completed within the week. This is essential. As for the who . . .

A drawing appeared on Downey’s desk and in his head arrived the words: Let us call him the Fat Man.

‘Is this a joke?’ said Downey.

We do not joke.

No, you don’t, do you, Downey thought. He drummed his fingers.

‘There are many who would say this . . . person does not exist,’ he said.

He must exist. How else could you so readily recognize his picture? And many are in correspondence with him.

‘Well, yes, of course, in a *sense* he exists . . .’

In a sense everything exists. It is cessation of existence that concerns us here.

‘Finding him would be a little difficult.’

You will find persons on any street who can tell you his approximate address.

‘Yes, of course,’ said Downey, wondering why anyone would call them ‘persons’. It was an odd usage. ‘But, as you say, I doubt that they could give a map reference. And even then, *how* could the . . . the Fat Man *be* inhumed? A glass of poisoned sherry, perhaps?’

The cowl had no face to crack a smile.

You misunderstand the nature of employment, it said in Downey’s head.

He bridled at this. Assassins were never *employed*. They were engaged or retained or commissioned, but never *employed*. Only servants were employed.

‘What is it that I misunderstand, exactly?’ he said.

We pay. You find the ways and means.

The cowl began to fade.

‘How can I contact you?’ said Downey.

We will contact *you*. We know where you are. We know where everyone is.

The figure vanished. At the same moment the door was flung open to reveal the distraught figure of Mr Winvoe, the Guild Treasurer.

‘Excuse me, my lord, but I really had to come up!’ He flung some discs on the desk. ‘Look at them!’

Downey carefully picked up a golden circle. It looked like a small coin, but—

‘No denomination!’ said Winvoe. ‘No heads, no

tails, no milling! It's just a blank disc! They're all just blank discs!

Downey opened his mouth to say, 'Valueless?' He realized that he was half hoping that this was the case. If they, whoever *they* were, had paid in worthless metal then there wasn't even the glimmering of a contract. But he could see this wasn't the case. Assassins learned to recognize money early in their careers.

'Blank discs,' he said, 'of pure gold.'

Winvoe nodded mutely.

'That,' said Downey, 'will do nicely.'

'It *must* be magical!' said Winvoe. 'And we *never* accept magical money!'

Downey bounced the coin on the desk a couple of times. It made a satisfyingly rich thinking noise. It *wasn't* magical. Magical money would look real, because its whole purpose was to deceive. But this didn't need to ape something as human and adulterated as mere currency. This is gold, it told his fingers. Take it or leave it.

Downey sat and thought, while Winvoe stood and worried.

'We'll take it,' he said.

'But—'

'Thank you, Mr Winvoe. That is my decision,' said Downey. He stared into space for a while, and then smiled. 'Is Mister Teatime still in the building?'

Winvoe stood back. 'I thought the council had agreed to dismiss him,' he said stiffly. 'After that business with—'

'Mister Teatime does not see the world in quite the

same way as other people,' said Downey, picking up the picture from his desk and looking at it thoughtfully.

'Well, indeed, I think *that* is certainly true.'

'Please send him up.'

The Guild attracted all sorts of people, Downey reflected. He found himself wondering how it had come to attract Winvoe, for one thing. It was hard to imagine him stabbing anyone in the heart in case he got blood on the victim's wallet. Whereas Mister Teatime . . .

The problem was that the Guild took young boys and gave them a splendid education and incidentally taught them how to kill, cleanly and dispassionately, for money and for the good of society, or at least that part of society that had money, and what other kind of society was there?

But very occasionally you found you'd got someone like Mister Teatime, to whom the money was merely a distraction. Mister Teatime had a truly brilliant mind, but it was brilliant like a fractured mirror, all marvellous facets and rainbows but, ultimately, also something that was broken.

Mister Teatime enjoyed himself too much. And other people, also.

Downey had privately decided that some time soon Mister Teatime was going to meet with an accident. Like many people with no actual morals, Lord Downey *did* have standards, and Teatime repelled him. Assassination was a careful game, usually played against people who knew the rules themselves or at least could afford the services of those who did.

There was considerable satisfaction in a clean kill. What there wasn't supposed to be was pleasure in a messy one. That sort of thing led to talk.

On the other hand, Teatime's corkscrew of a mind was exactly the tool to deal with something like this. And if he didn't . . . well, that was hardly Downey's fault, was it?

He turned his attention to the paperwork for a while. It was amazing how the stuff mounted up. But you had to deal with it. It wasn't as though they were murderers, after all . . .

There was a knock at the door. He pushed the paperwork aside and sat back.

'Come in, Mister Teatime,' he said. It never hurt to put the other fellow slightly in awe of you.

In fact the door was opened by one of the Guild's servants, carefully balancing a tea tray.

'Ah, Carter,' said Lord Downey, recovering magnificently. 'Just put it on the table over there, will you?'

'Yes, sir,' said Carter. He turned and nodded. 'Sorry, sir, I will go and fetch another cup directly, sir.'

'What?'

'For your visitor, sir.'

'What visitor? Oh, when Mister Teati—'

He stopped. He turned.

There was a young man sitting on the hearthrug, playing with the dogs.

'*Mister Teatime!*'

'It's pronounced Teh-ah-tim-eh, sir,' said Teatime,

with just a hint of reproach. ‘Everyone gets it wrong, sir.’

‘How did you do *that*?’

‘Pretty well, sir. I got mildly scorched on the last few feet, of course.’

There were some lumps of soot on the hearthrug. Downey realized he’d heard them fall, but that hadn’t been particularly extraordinary. No one could get down the chimney. There was a heavy grid firmly in place near the top of the flue.

‘But there’s a blocked-in fireplace behind the old library,’ said Teatime, apparently reading his thoughts. ‘The flues connect, under the bars. It was really a stroll, sir.’

‘Really . . . ?’

‘Oh, yes, sir.’

Downey nodded. The tendency of old buildings to be honeycombed with sealed chimney flues was a fact you learned early in your career. And then, he told himself, you forgot. It always paid to put the other fellow in awe of you, too. He had forgotten they taught *that*, too.

‘The dogs seem to like you,’ he said.

‘I get on well with animals, sir.’

Teatime’s face was young and open and friendly. Or, at least, it smiled all the time. But the effect was spoiled for most people by the fact that it had only one eye. Some unexplained accident had taken the other one, and the missing orb had been replaced by a ball of glass. The result was disconcerting. But what bothered Lord Downey far more was the man’s other

eye, the one that might loosely be called normal. He'd never seen such a small and sharp pupil. Teatime looked at the world through a pinhole.

He found he'd retreated behind his desk again. There was that about Teatime. You always felt happier if you had something between you and him.

'You like animals, do you?' he said. 'I have a report here that says you nailed Sir George's dog to the ceiling.'

'Couldn't have it barking while I was working, sir.'

'Some people would have drugged it.'

'Oh.' Teatime looked despondent for a moment, but then he brightened. 'But I definitely fulfilled the contract, sir. There can be no doubt about that, sir. I checked Sir George's breathing with a mirror as instructed. It's in my report.'

'Yes, indeed.' Apparently the man's head had been several feet from his body at that point. It was a terrible thought that Teatime might see nothing incongruous about this.

'And . . . the servants . . . ?' he said.

'Couldn't have them bursting in, sir.'

Downey nodded, half hypnotized by the glassy stare and the pinhole eyeball. No, you couldn't have them bursting in. And an Assassin might well face serious professional opposition, possibly even by people trained by the same teachers. But an old man and a maidservant who'd merely had the misfortune to be in the house at the time . . .

There was no actual *rule*, Downey had to admit. It was just that, over the years, the Guild had developed