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INTRODUCTION

Five months before he died, Terry Pratchett wrote five letters, sealed them in envelopes and locked them in the safe in his office to be opened after his death. This was the one he addressed to me.

Wiltshire

4th October 2014

Dear Rob,

So. I have gone. There were days when I felt I had already gone and so all I wish for now is a cool, quiet room and some peace to gather my addled thoughts. I think I was good, although I could have been better, but Terry Pratchett is dead and there are no more words.

Look after Lyn, please. Have those fine pieces of jewellery cast to my design and give them with my love. Choose a gift every Christmas and birthday. Send flowers. Have a big dinner each year, more if necessary or if a celebration is required, and raise a brandy to my memory and to happy days.

Look after the business and it will look after you. For all you have done, for all of the little things and all of the

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much bigger things and for the burying of the bodies . . . I
thank you.

Learn to fly. Do it now.

And mind how you go.

Strive!

Terry

Just to be clear from the outset: there were no actual bodies in need of burying during my years of working with Terry Pratchett. Terry could get quite exasperated with people sometimes, and certainly did not (as people often found themselves saying about him) suffer fools gladly. But he never got *that* exasperated. So, for fans of exhumation and cold-case detective mysteries – the book you are holding is not that kind of book.

However, there is no question that a lot went on during Terry's life that I was in a unique position to witness and be involved with – 'all of the little things and all of the much bigger things', to quote Terry's letter – and the plan is that this will be very much *that* kind of book.

And just to be clear about something else, the pages that follow attempt to cover the whole of Terry's life-story, not just the part of Terry's life-story that I was around for. And they are certainly not an attempt to tell *my* life-story. But I probably do need to spend a little time here at the beginning to explain who I am, how I came to be in the room with Terry in the first place and how I come to be writing this biography of him.

So, by way of background: my name is Rob Wilkins and I was meant to be a lady from the village. At least, to the extent that he had a particular type of person in mind, those seemed to be the

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lines along which Terry was thinking when he decided it was time he got a personal assistant.

She would be someone who might respond to a card in the window of the village shop: someone, most likely retired, who was in a position to come in for a few days a week to help with the admin, do some filing, maybe turn her hand to a VAT return – perhaps, with a bit of luck, ensure there was milk in the office fridge for cups of tea so that Terry, who kept forgetting that detail, didn't have to get up from his desk and walk all the way back down to the house for it.

She would be someone (and this was important) who wasn't a big reader of Terry Pratchett's books, who might then have questions or, worse than that, suggestions. Or, worse than *that*, opinions. Because, without wishing to sound ungrateful, that could be distracting, which would defeat the point.

The fact that Terry was thinking about personal assistants at all . . . well, this, I think we can allege, was substantially Jilly Cooper's fault. These two stellar British authors, Jilly and Terry, had collided amid the canapés at a publishing event in London, as stellar authors sometimes will. And during the conversation Terry's ears had pricked up at Jilly's casual references to 'my PA' – a woman called, it seemed, Amanda, whom Jilly warmly described as 'heavenly' and 'wonderfully kind' and whom she unhesitatingly declared to be 'the best in the business'.

Now, Terry, who was largely indifferent to the world's trappings, nevertheless had, like most writers, a thin but steely competitive streak that ran through him like a piano string, and which could occasionally be plucked. This appears to have been one of those occasions. If the author of such bestselling works as *Riders*, *Rivals* and *Score!* was officially a novelist in need of personal assistance, then didn't it follow that Terry, who at this point had

sold around 50 million books in 29 languages, was in need of personal assistance too?*

Whatever, the hymning of Amanda reverberated with Terry, and continued to reverberate with him as, entirely unassisted personally, he drove himself back home to Wiltshire that night.

This was in the year 2000. Terry was 52. He was living in what he called a ‘Domesday Manorette’ outside Salisbury. He had spent a decade as Britain’s best-selling author, a title he had only recently conceded, with some reluctance, to a writer called J. K. Rowling. The Discworld series was now 25 novels long, on its way to the eventual total of 41, and he had written a string of books outside it, too, including an enormously successful strand of work for younger readers. A prodigious creator, who appeared never to have experienced so much as two minutes of writer’s block (and was accordingly rather contemptuous of that concept and those who complained of it), Terry was producing two books per year and occasionally finding room to squeeze in a third. The popularity of his work was immense, and its ubiquity was legendary: it was frequently said that no train anywhere in Britain was permitted to run until it was established that at least one passenger on board was reading a Terry Pratchett.†

Inevitably success at such dizzying levels brought with it burdens on Terry’s time over and above the pressure to deliver further novels. Principally there was the business that came with, as Terry

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 * At the time of writing, in 2021, that sales total is bobbing around 100 million books.

† It was also frequently said that Terry had the honour of being Britain’s most shoplifted author, an allegation made lightly on one occasion which then followed him around for ever. No reliable statistics are available in this area, but either way, Terry didn’t especially mind. By the time people were in a position to shoplift them, he felt he had been paid for the books already.

dryly put it, 'being a *nauthor*'. The business of being a *nauthor* was, as Terry would explain, different in important ways from the business of being a writer. Indeed, *nauthorship* essentially comprised the obligations that kept a writer from doing any writing: in Terry's case, the two long and phenomenally well-attended book-signing tours per year in Britain and the others abroad for which he would don his black fedora, black Levi's leather jacket and black Hugo Boss jeans ('taking the album on the road', as he referred to it), and the appearances, similarly clad, at packed-out talks and conventions and festivals, all of which occasions were at this point absorbing an increasing amount of his time and energy.

But the burden of being a *nauthor* necessarily followed Terry home to his desk, too. It followed him in the form of the post – whole sacks of it. Readers of Terry's books were not just remarkable for their numbers, they were remarkable for the strength and depth of their attachment to his work, and many of them felt drawn to write to him. And on top of that were the more formal requests, frequently for advice or money or, in the case of the really forward correspondents, advice *and* money. It had reached the stage where just reading and responding to that mail in the manner that Terry felt honour-bound to do would have been a full-time job on its own, leaving him no room in the working day to get on with anything else he might want to do, such as, for example, write a book. Or, in Terry's case, write several books at once. He liked to have two, or even three, on the go, and with the outlines of a fourth often beginning to take shape somewhere in the gloaming.

Then there was the constantly ringing office phone – people calling up on matters regarding those books, those tours, those festivals, or for interviews or comment, or for contributions to what Terry referred to as the 'My Favourite Spoon' slots in the

newspaper supplements. And Terry, whose background was in journalism – first on papers, and then, from the other side of the barbed wire, as a press officer – was constitutionally incapable of leaving a ringing phone unanswered. Miss a phone call, miss the story. (Terry’s schooling on papers informed much of his approach to work, as we shall see.)

And on top of all *that* there was the merchandising. This was by now a significant sideline, yet Terry insisted on having the final sign-off on any licensed Discworld product, from figurines to candles, from tea towels to doorplates, from postcards to pendants. The way Terry saw it, these things were an extension of the world he had created in his books and he didn’t want anybody getting things wrong or taking unsanctioned liberties which caused that world to be misrepresented, thereby disappointing or, even worse, ripping off his readers. This was a noble position to take, especially when you learned how much money – ‘eye-wateringly large sums’ was Terry’s phrase for it – companies of various kinds were dangling in front of Terry to remove the Discworld franchise from his grip. But those high principles were bound to exact a heavy toll in terms of admin. As Terry said in an interview with the Science Fiction Book Club in 1996, ‘If your Mickey Mouse ears fall off, that nice Mr Disney is not unduly perturbed. If someone buys a Discworld T-shirt and the colours run in the wash, I am the person who gets the email.’*

So, what with one thing and another, Terry had reached that precarious point where the business of being Terry Pratchett was

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* Or as he put it in an interview with David Langford for *Ansible* in 1999: ‘When the tip drops off your *Star Wars* light-sabre, George Lucas never hears about it. But if a candle’s the wrong colour, it’s me that gets the bloody emails.’ Different franchise, same point, albeit with additional swearing

threatening to prevent him from doing the thing that had made him Terry Pratchett in the first place. Meanwhile, what had started out as, literally, a cottage industry – with Terry in the side-room he had turned into a study at his and Lyn’s small house in Somerset, determinedly tapping 400 words into an Amstrad CPC 464 in the evenings after work – had grown beyond anything its founder had dared anticipate to become a multi-million-pound international business. And yet a multi-million-pound international business in which the slightly haphazard spirit of the cottage industry was still a dominant strain.

For example, Terry was, in those days, in the habit of writing onto floppy disks and, at the end of the working day, before walking from his office back down to the house for supper, ejecting those disks from his computer and slipping them into the top pocket of his shirt for safekeeping. But, in the way of these things, that shirt might then end up in the laundry basket. And then from the laundry basket it might reasonably make its way to the washing machine. Accordingly it had been by no means unknown for £1 million-worth of novel-in-progress to pass precariously through a 60-degree hot wash and full spin cycle.

Then there was the time a royalty cheque for just south of a quarter of a million pounds arrived in the post, got put down somewhere and somehow vanished into thin air before it could be banked. But we’ll get to the full story of that one in due course.

For now, let’s just say it was clear to Terry what he needed. He needed a lady from the village.

Instead he got me. I wasn’t from the village (I was living about 70 miles from Salisbury in Cheltenham at the time), and I didn’t identify as a lady. Nor had I ever filled out a VAT return; it hadn’t come up at all in my earlier roles. Nor was I retired: I was 29. What’s more, on top of these other key disqualifiers – and potentially the

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biggest red flag of them all – I was definitely a reader of Terry Pratchett. An avid one, in fact – one whose appearances in the queue at Pratchett book signings since 1993 (WH Smith, Oxford, for *Johnny and the Dead*) had been so conspicuously consistent that he had on his shelves a copy of the 1997 novel *Jingo* signed to ‘one of the sad gang’.

I had also come to be working on what we might call the outer inner-edges of the Pratchett operation. I had met Colin Smythe, who was Terry’s agent and the man on whom Terry had first thrust an unpublished typescript back in 1968 in search of a response. (Colin’s response had been to publish it, which was not a decision he had ever had cause to regret.) Because my background was in tech, Colin had asked me, in 1998, to come and work for him as technical director at Colin Smythe Publishing, where it was chiefly my task to digitize the hitherto defiantly analogue business that Colin had been running from his house in Gerrards Cross.

In this role, I found myself sometimes answering the phone to Colin’s most successful client. And when Terry acquired his first CD-burner and was struggling to get it to function, the operation’s chief, and indeed sole, tech guy was dispatched to Salisbury for the day on secondment.

I parked, walked down the slope to the house and found a note stuck to the kitchen door. ‘Rob: in Chapel.’ I followed the helpful hand-drawn map, tapped at the door, and for the first time was admitted to the inner sanctum, the epicentre of Discworld on Roundworld: a purpose-built writing room with a big stone-mullioned window, a huge wood-burning stove, a long wall of bookshelves and a powerful smell of beeswax polish, where, at a large, leather-topped desk and just about visible beyond a mountain of books, magazines, pieces of paper and general *stuff*, sat the author.

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I was twenty years younger than Terry. I was also, on account of my love for the Discworld novels, in awe of him, which I realized that he quite liked. But it emerged that we had some common ground. We had both, during our teenage years, known the joy of motor scooters; and we had both known the great good fortune of having fathers who were happy to spend their evenings and weekends teaching us how to fix up those motor scooters. We had both cultivated an interest in hobby electronics – had read the same magazines, bought the same components from the same mail order companies, embarked on the same home-build projects.

‘Ah,’ said Terry. ‘So you know the unique pain of splashing hot solder on nylon socks.’

I did.

Furthermore, we were both people whose first instinct, upon taking delivery of any new piece of electronic hardware, was to sweep aside the instruction manual, unopened, rip off the side-panel, peer into the innards of the machine and see what modifications we could perform which the manufacturer would probably rather we didn’t. At some point in the eighties we had both taught our early Sinclair ZX81 computers to talk – albeit that Terry had taught his to say good morning to him and report the overnight high and low temperatures in his greenhouse, whereas I had taught mine to say rude words for the amusement of my friends. Still, it was a bond. It certainly impressed Terry that I knew what a General Instrument SPO256 integrated circuit was.* And it impressed him equally that I could easily and swiftly sort out his new CD-burner. I now rejoiced under the Terry-given nickname of Captain

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* Essentially, the guts of a rudimentary speech synthesizer. But I probably don’t need to tell you that.

Capacitor – the first of a succession of names that Terry would find for me. Other secondments to Wiltshire for similar tech-based missions followed. In December 2000, when Terry heard that I was finishing at Colin Smythe Publishing, he rang me and asked if I would consider coming to work for him as his PA.

I thought it might be fun for a little while, not least given my love for Terry’s books. At the same time, it wasn’t my idea of a job for the long-term. I figured it was something I might do for a year, and then eventually be able to tell my grandchildren about it. ‘You know that Terry Pratchett? Well . . .’

I was still working for him a decade and a half later in 2015 when he died, and I’m still working for him now.

The job turned out to be engaging in ways I hadn’t thought about. I had not, for instance, envisaged being in any way witness to Terry’s creative process, even as his PA. I thought the actual writing of the books would take place privately and silently behind a closed door while I sat elsewhere and attended to other things: the post, the VAT, the milk. And, indeed, I did attend to those things. But that was not exclusively how Terry saw my role, a fact which became apparent one day when, at the end of a morning’s writing, he stood up from the screen and put on his jacket.

‘I’ve got to pop out,’ he said. ‘Tidy that up for me, would you?’

A Terry Pratchett first draft, I now discovered as I nervously slid into Terry’s seat, was a highly eccentric document, featuring randomly shifting font sizes and even randomly shifting font *colours*. But imagine the thrill of this task for someone who had drummed his fingers between publication dates waiting for new words from Terry Pratchett. I had devoured Terry’s writing and to be in the room, and even at the keyboard, where those novels were taking shape, and not just standardizing their fonts but, in due course, reading them back to the author so he could reappraise

them, talking about them with him, and eventually taking them down as dictation as they flowed from his brain (a tactic it had suited Terry to adopt even before the last years when he lost the ability to operate a keyboard) . . . well, this was a rare privilege.

As for Terry, I think he very quickly became comfortable with the idea of himself as a person who had ‘staff’, although he never would have admitted it. One day, he was on the phone to a newspaper – not a ‘My Favourite Spoon’ piece this time, but that close relative of the ‘Favourite Spoon’ genre, a ‘Q & A’ interview. At one point, he lowered the receiver to his collar bone and called across the office.

‘Rob, what’s my biggest indulgence?’

I had about a second to think about it before Terry cut me off.

‘Never mind. It’s you.’

In my first tentative weeks in the job, Jilly Cooper and her ‘best PA in the business’ were held over my head on a fairly frequent basis. There were several threats (rhetorical, I’m sure – or were they?) to send me to Gloucestershire for a week of schooling at the hands of Jilly and Amanda. I was also fired many times over, although one quickly learned that Terry, being a writer, had an experimental interest in saying things to see what they sounded like, and that if you adopted an experimental approach yourself, and simply turned up the next day, it would normally turn out that you hadn’t been fired at all.

In his foreword to *A Slip of the Keyboard*^{*}, Neil Gaiman arguably changed the shape of Pratchett studies for ever by definitively taking issue with the public perception of Terry as a ‘jolly old elf’ – mostly, perhaps, a misunderstanding arising from the beard

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* Terry’s collected non-fiction, published in 2014.

and Terry's general stature. (He was five foot eight on a good day.) This well-meaning sentimentalization of Terry, Neil pointed out, overlooked, among many other things, the anger in him. 'The anger is always there,' Neil wrote, 'an engine that drives.'

Well, I came to know that anger in all its 57 varieties, as we'll see. But I also came to know (as Neil had come to know, too) how generous Terry could be, how spectacularly funny he was and what brilliant company. During an average working week in the Chapel, a vast amount of writing would get done, yet somehow, while the work was percolating in Terry's mind, there also seemed to be plenty of time for activities that could only be filed under A for 'Arsing Around'. There were, for example, the days spent devising ever more intricate and unnecessary ways to automate the office. There were the hours passed feeding the tortoises, or up at the local garden centre. There were the times we took lunch down to the shepherd's hut that Terry had restored by the river, and then carried on working out there for the rest of the afternoon.* There were the evenings we sat up in the copper-roofed observatory Terry had built in the grounds, having a beer and looking at the stars, prior, very often, to heading back across the grass to the Chapel and knocking off the day's last words.

The early weeks passed and the threats to pack me off to Jilly Cooper for disciplining gradually subsided. Indeed, I can remember the last time the subject came up. Following some sin of omission on my part, the details of which I can no longer remember, talk had again surfaced of a period of detainment at Jilly's

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* An authentic shepherd's hut, I should add: this was long before David Cameron, the former Tory Prime Minister, ruined for ever the image of hut-based literary endeavour.

pleasure. After a couple of days spent working hard to redeem myself, and rather needily seeking reassurance that things were now straight between us, I wondered aloud whether I should be getting ready to leave for Gloucestershire.

Terry didn't raise his eyes from the screen in front of him. 'You don't need to go there now,' he said casually. 'She has the *second* best PA in the business.'

Once I had earned Terry's trust, the hours for which I seemed to be needed started to expand. The call might come in the evenings or at weekends: 'Do you fancy coming up and doing a little light work?' I joined him on the road and ended up being alongside him wherever it was that work took him. The relationship deepened and broadened and soon it clearly wasn't just work but also a friendship.

After Terry was diagnosed with Posterior Cortical Atrophy, a rare form of Alzheimer's Disease, in 2007, at the cruelly early age of 59, the job of being his PA necessarily expanded again. As illness un sentimentally eroded Terry's ability to cope from day to day, he became a person in need of assistance in ways that neither of us could have prophesied. I began to accompany him during public appearances, reading for him when he no longer could, helping him through interviews on stage as 'keeper of the anecdote'. We became, of necessity, a sort of double act. Starsky and Hutch? Laurel and Hardy? You be the judge. But if the point of the job had always been to clear the space around Terry to enable him to do the thing that made him Terry Pratchett, then now, with the clock running, it became only more urgently so.

There were, inevitably, grim and testing times in those years, and it was sometimes hard to revisit them for this book. I spent a lot of that period, I retrospectively realize, in denial about the full gravity of what was unfolding, which seemed to me the easiest

(and most English) way to deal with it. Yet Terry, of course, was doing exactly the opposite, reacting to the news of his imminent demise with bravery, with unsparing thought, with a determination to confront his condition head on in public, with a bold mission to force the topic of assisted dying into the national conversation, and most of all (being Terry) with work – with three television documentaries and seven more bestsellers.

And, of course, he met it with humour – and humour of an abidingly Terry kind. Late on, Terry said to me, ‘It appears we now share a brain.’ I was very flattered.

But, of course, with Terry, there was nearly always the delayed depth-charge.

‘And if you put the two of us together,’ he went on, ‘you might make one half-decent human being.’

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Terry often talked about ‘doing’ his autobiography. In the years before he was ill, he talked about it almost exclusively to dismiss the idea. What could possibly be interesting for a reader, he would argue, in the tale of a bloke who got up, had breakfast, wrote some words, had lunch, wrote some more words, had supper, watched a film or some television with his wife and went to bed (possibly having sat up a little longer to write a few more words)?

He didn’t seem persuaded that there was anything in the story of the journey that took a kid from a council house in Beaconsfield to a knighthood and a mansion near Salisbury by the sheer power of his imagination alone; or in the tale of how a boy with, as Terry put it, ‘a mouthful of speech impediments’ became one of his generation’s most popular communicators; or how someone who left school with five O levels could also go on to be

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someone with an honorary professorship at Trinity College Dublin, and so many honorary doctorates that he began to lose count.

And besides, there were always other things waiting to be written – bigger stories in which far more outlandish and arresting things were free to happen.

Earlier in 2007, Jacqueline Wilson, a writer whom Terry greatly admired, had published a memoir, *Jacky Daydream*, which was the story of her childhood, a choice that intrigued Terry. Jacqueline was 62 at that point, a couple of years older than Terry. Why now, he had asked her, and why just that section of her life? Jacqueline replied, with tongue in cheek, ‘Because everyone who could check the facts is now dead.’ After this, Terry, too, briefly drew the conclusion that he could only really comfortably write his memoir when everybody who appeared in it was no longer alive enough to object. Which was, of course, another way of punting the project so far into the long grass that we could no longer see it.

But now that Terry’s memory itself was under an explicit threat, the prospect of a memoir felt different. Even in the car driving back together from Addenbrooke’s hospital in Cambridge that awful December afternoon when the devastating diagnosis had been given to him, Terry started talking about his autobiography – about how he needed to get going on it, and how the clock was running.

Yet we had no clear idea how long we had. One year? Two years? How should we apportion that time? What should he concentrate on? We had more time than we knew, in fact; it would be seven years before Terry’s last day at work in the Chapel. Yet, when it came down to it, the priority was always the novels – first *Nation*, which was the book Terry was working on at the time of the diagnosis, and then *Unseen Academicals*, *I Shall Wear Midnight*,

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Snuff, Dodger, Raising Steam, The Shepherd's Crown . . . All through this period he was chasing to get those stories down.

However, there would be days, when the mood was right, when Terry would tell me to close the file from whichever novel we were working on and open the memoir file, and he would do an afternoon on the autobiography, him dictating, me typing. He began, conventionally, with memories of his childhood and worked forwards, and sometimes it came easily and sometimes it didn't. At the point at which we ran out of time, we had reached 1979, with Terry putting on a suit (a rare event in his life) to go for an interview in Bristol with the Central Electricity Board, south-west division. The file had grown to just over 24,000 words, rough-hewn, disjointed, awaiting the essential polish that Terry would never be in a position to give them. He was intending to call the book *A Life with Footnotes*.*

It goes without saying that those words were an invaluable source for the chapters ahead, and you will find them liberally quoted from. Of course, it's a pertinent question: was the Terry of 2014 an entirely reliable documenter of his own life? Perhaps not. But was the Terry of any age? For a person who was bracingly committed to honesty and openness in his everyday dealings, Terry was also a great believer in not letting the truth stand in the way of a good story, and especially a good *funny* story. We may detect in this instinct the influence of his mother who, Terry said, 'was inclined to polish up a fact to make it shine brighter'. But Terry also imputed a way with the story-polish to his grandfather on his father's side. And one of his uncles seems to have conjured an entire *Boy's Own* story of unflagging Second World War

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* Terry loved a footnote.

derring-do from a campaign actually spent boxing up fruit in Kent. Terry admired him hugely for that.

And when you think about it, story-polishing, genetic or otherwise, was Terry's whole business. Indeed, his three chosen professions – first journalism, then public relations, then written fiction – were all vocations in which the truth was, shall we say, up for negotiation at the very least. Certainly for Terry there was a kind of story that fell into the category 'too good to check'. And it was always possible, of course, that the story that was 'too good to check' might, in the broader scheme of things, cut through to a greater truth about life than the less good, checked story.

Still, this approach to anecdotes presents something of a challenge to the biographer, who has a certain formal duty to hold the claims that things happened against the evidence that they actually did so. And, complicating things still further, sometimes the mere fact of whether or not something actually happened proved to be less interesting, from my point of view, than the fact that Terry claimed it did. Suffice it to say that in any contentious areas in the pages that follow, I have done my best to uphold the establishable truth, while at the same time endeavouring not to come over as a killjoy and (more importantly) while trying not to crush the indisputable entertainment value of a well-polished fact.*

The plainest – and saddest – truth of all, of course, is that his autobiography has to take its place on the long list of books by Terry Pratchett that a merciless degenerative brain disorder harshly denied us the opportunity to read. That was the loss for which those of us who loved Terry ended up grieving, on top of

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* Footnotes will be our friend in this area – somewhere to position corrections and alternative readings without completely knocking the shine off the original story.

our grief at the loss of Terry himself, and there is simply no mending either of those gaps. But here, offered with all humility, is my portrait of him, drawing on my own memories, on the memories of Lyn and Rhianna, on the memories of Dave Busby and Colin Smythe and of so many others who knew him so well, and on Terry's own memories in so far as he wrote them down or made them known to us.

And I will try to imagine that the Terry who is at my shoulder as I set down my contribution to this tale isn't always saying, 'Rubbish! It was nothing like that at all!' and is at least sometimes saying, 'Hmm. Well, I suppose it was a *bit* like that . . .'

PART ONE

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I

DANGEROUS SLATES, A CLOTHED MOLE AND THE ESCAPE FROM ENFORCED GOATHOOD

It was never just imagining things. Sometimes, Terry said, the products of his childhood mind were so vivid to him, so entirely real, that they were closer to hallucinations than imaginings, as solidly located in the space in front of his eyes as his parents were, or his house, or the village he first lived in.

Like the time when, tramping through the disused chalk pit near home, he saw the skeletons of fish swimming in the ground below his feet – presumably a connection in his mind with the micro-fossils which he'd recently learned about at school or, more likely, read about in a library book, yet somehow now reanimated and actually squirming and darting around underneath him in the chalk dust.

Or like that time, aged five, when he was taken to see Father Christmas at Gamages department store in London, and wandered dreamily away from his mother, only to be found by her later riding the escalators and voyaging solo through the festive decorations

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with head upturned in a state of rapt awe, entirely oblivious to the panic he had caused.

Seeing Father Christmas that day had been important and memorable, too, of course, although Terry confessed that he hadn't actually had the courage to meet the great man's gaze, because, as Terry related it, 'you cannot look on the face of a god'. But the flight to the North Pole aboard the wooden aeroplane, the painted clouds on canvas cranking squeakily past the plane's windows, the team of elves in the reception party – that had all burned itself into Terry's imagination, too. It's just that it hadn't burned itself as strongly as the glittering universe under one roof which was the department store itself, dressed for Christmas.*

And what about the train that had brought them to the city that day? Those trains seemed friendly enough when you were inside them, and riding in them, but from outside, on the platform, their roar, their thunder, their billowing blackened steam, the way they seemed to try to suck you up behind them as they smashed through the station at speed . . . those things were clearly alive and altogether demonstrably *demons*, weren't they? The five-year-old Terry thought so.

He wasn't being entirely metaphorical, many years later, when he described himself in interviews as 'hallucinating gently for a living'. He seems to have discovered very quickly that there were things within things, worlds within worlds, wholly visible, practically

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* Gamage's in High Holborn, which closed in 1972, clearly pulled all the stops out for a fifties Christmas – 'LAUGHS, SCREAMS and THRILLS all day long,' as the flyers said, referring not just to the plane-borne grotto experience, but also to the 800-foot model railway installed for the season and featuring a minutely rendered day/night scenario. They also had a very good hardware department, apparently, though Terry never mentioned that.

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tangible, and certainly available for story-telling, if you could only be allowed a bit of space and time to see them.

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Home, at first, was the small, undistinguished and, indeed, easily driven-through hamlet of Forty Green, which sat in a hollow near the Chiltern Hills in Buckinghamshire – ‘a sort of Lark Rise to Beaconsfield’s Candleford’, as Terry described it in the notes he made towards his autobiography, ‘not so much a place as an area in the fields and forests containing about 36 people and one telephone box’.*

And also, we should note, containing a village shop, a pub – the Royal Standard of England – and, for at least a short while, according to Terry’s recollections, a sweet shop. ‘I know there was a sweet shop,’ Terry insisted, ‘because I bought aniseed balls there, and black jacks and sherbet fountains and pink shrimps for prices as low as a farthing. Heaven knows how the place survived at all.’

Indeed, there seem to have been scarcely enough children around Forty Green to keep a sweet shop in business, even in the short term; Terry recalled a gang of about half a dozen residents his own age or thereabouts, during his shorts-wearing years, forming ‘a sort of ever-changing cloud of kids, arguing, exploring, fighting’, stomping about in the chalk pits, the woods and the fields, and generally thumbing their noses in advance at later anxieties surrounding children and safe play. ‘We fell out of trees,’ Terry wrote, ‘climbed them again and fell out more interestingly this time.’

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* Unless indicated otherwise, the quotations from Terry in these pages are from his unfinished autobiography.

Forty Green was so small and tight a community that if one mother called her child in for tea, everybody seemed to run home. And, far more significantly than children, that population of 36 contained, in Terry's recollection, 'elderly and leathery professional gardeners with flat caps and pipes, who every morning sedately pedalled their black sit-up-and-beg bicycles to the more prosperous village of Knotty Green, a mile or so away' and then, in the evening, 'pedalled just as sedately back, quite often with something strapped onto the handlebars, such as a bundle of cabbage seedlings.'

It was a slow, quiet and essentially countrified place, then. And it was here that the Pratchetts lived in a small, rented cottage, where the facilities were so basic that Terry always struggled to talk about it without sounding as though he was auditioning for a part in the Four Yorkshiremen sketch.* ('*Corridor? I used to dream of living in a corridor. That would have been a palace to us . . .*' etc.)

There was, for instance, no running water chez Pratchett: each morning Terry's father dragged a hose to a standpipe on the property next door and drew off water into a metal drum in the scullery for extraction throughout the day. There was, by extension, no flushing loo, either; there was a 'little room' in a lean-to out the back of the house, bombarded with disinfectant by Terry's mother and containing an Elsan chemical lavatory which needed to be up-ended periodically in a freshly dug hole in the garden.

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* Which is often casually referred to as 'Monty Python's Four Yorkshiremen sketch', and, indeed, the Python team did perform a version of it in live shows, but the sketch was originally written and performed by John Cleese, Tim Brooke-Taylor, Graham Chapman and Marty Feldman for the 1967 television revue series *At Last the 1948 Show*.

(This was officially the worst domestic chore of the week, although apparently the tomatoes greatly benefited.)

A tin bath hung from a hook on the outside wall of the 'little room' and would be hauled inside on bath night. Gas for the cooker came off a visiting lorry in giant replacement Calor canisters which had to be rolled into the living room, and the radio (no television for the Pratchetts at this point) was powered by a loaned-out rechargeable battery the size and weight of a house-brick, lugged to and from the branch of Radio Rentals in Beaconsfield every month on a home-made metal trolley. If you wanted to listen to *Down Your Way* and *Family Favourites* in those days, which the Pratchetts clearly did, you had to put the effort in. And although there was a scullery, which sounds faintly grand, there was no kitchen attached to it, which made that room, as Terry put it, a bit like 'a cart with no horse'. That cramped, dark and slightly damp space did the work of both utility room and kitchen.

Still, say whatever else you like about it (and the spirit of the Four Yorkshiremen can't help but loom again here), the house at least offered a roof over the Pratchetts' heads – and British roofs in general had taken a bit of a pounding during the period between 1939 and 1945, so this was not to be sneered at. True, that roof was not entirely stable and shed its tiles under the lightest encouragement from the wind, creating a kind of sniper's alley effect for people leaving or approaching the house. 'If you heard the sliding of a slate,' Terry wrote, 'you didn't attempt to run, you just pressed yourself against the wall and watched the errant tile fly out of the eaves and smash into sharp little fragments a short way in front of you. It wasn't even noteworthy; it was just something you did automatically.'

Factor in the continuing rationing of food (butter, meat, cheese, tea, jam), the long strings of washing hung out to dry on

Thursdays and the complete absence of teenagers, who hadn't been invented yet, and Forty Green would have supplied a fairly textbook model of semi-rural, working-class British austerity in the immediate post-war years. And it was into these modest, and in certain aspects clearly downright dangerous, circumstances that David and Eileen Pratchett introduced their new-born son, Terence David John, delivered at the Minellen Nursing Home, Beaconsfield, on 28 April 1948. ('I was a Taurean but slightly cuspal,' Terry observed of his birth-date, 'which I believe is why I can never get trousers that fit me.')

The baby was three days overdue and the product of a long and arduous labour which apparently capped a complicated pregnancy. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that, handed her offspring in the delivery room, Eileen welcomed Terry to the world with the words, 'About time,' and later claimed to have resolved right there never to put herself through anything like *that* again.* It was a promise to herself that she kept. Terry shared the family home with, at various times, an almost entirely brainless spaniel, a tortoise named Pheidippides, after the original marathon runner, and a budgerigar called Chhota, but no further small Pratchetts joined them.

'Shortly after that,' wrote Terry, of the initial moments after his protracted birth, 'I was introduced to my father, although I have no recollection of that first meeting.' In due course, in more

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* Terry lived in mortal fear of being late for things. It was something he simply couldn't tolerate – in himself far more than in others. Left to his own devices, he would get to an airport so far in advance of his scheduled flight that he would technically be on time for the previous one. Would it be fanciful to link this anxiety to the lateness of his original arrival, and the family legend which that lateness grew into? Possibly, but Terry certainly did so.

convenient circumstances for both of them, Terry would learn more about his dad, including the important detail that he worked as a mechanic at the Old Town Garage in Beaconsfield. David Pratchett was small, slim, completely bald, wore a thin moustache and was ‘a genius with a busted car’, according to his son. The Second World War had very recently provided him with the opportunity to hone his mechanical skills in the RAF. David had been posted to India and, at least as he recounted it to Terry, seemed to have enjoyed a relatively un-harrowing war, appreciating the warm sun, casually collecting good names for budgerigars* and impressively rising to challenges such as fixing the wing commander’s car in the middle of nowhere by rewinding the starter motor by hand. He then brought his talents back to Beaconsfield, where they seem to have gone down well.

‘I swear, if there is such a thing as the horse whisperer,’ Terry wrote, ‘then my father was the man that listened to cars. He would put one end of a large spanner against the side of his face and let the other end touch the engine block and the metal beast would open its soul. Owners of quite posh cars, with good English marques such as Bentley and Jaguar, took their cars to the Old Town Garage so that he could listen to them intently.’ In a time when money was short, it was a useful reputation to have. Terry recalled his father coming home in the evenings and standing with his oily and greasy arms in a bowl of soapy water, recounting to Eileen the tips for good service he had been slipped by wealthy patrons.

David could also bring a near-scrapper back from the dead, so, unusually for families in their position, the Pratchetts always had

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* As well as being a decent approximation of the noise budgies make, ‘Chhota’ is a Hindi word meaning ‘little’.

a car to travel in, including at one time ‘a rather spiffy streamlined Rover P4 – the poor man’s Rolls-Royce’, complete with cigarette lighter and leather upholstery. David sold it on to a collector in the end, and, for all its spiffiness, Terry wasn’t entirely sad to see it go. ‘I was always sliding around on the back seat and on long journeys to the seaside the interior stank like a dead cow.’

Terry’s other abiding memory from those long summer drives to (invariably) the Cornish coast: the passage of the car through ‘clouds of smoke and flashes of flame’ as it threaded its way through the August stubble-burning.

Terry’s mother, Eileen Pratchett, née Kearns, was of Irish descent and had been raised in London’s East End. She was employed as a secretary by Easton and Roll, a Beaconsfield department store, and was a highly efficient accountant who, according to Terry, could tot up a stack of numbers upside down more quickly than most people could do it the right way up. Her character in these days was lively, a touch mischievous; she loved dancing and socializing and drinking and was a raconteur. Late in her life, when a stroke deprived her of the power of speech, Dave Busby, Terry’s close friend who knew Eileen and David well, observed that ‘it was as if a malicious god had taken from her what was most precious to her’.

But she was also a formidable and dominant wife and mother and very emphatically the head of the household. David, on to whom she seemingly fastened at the age of seventeen, was entirely under her thumb, cheerfully admitted as much and appeared entirely content to be so. Terry, meanwhile, as an only child often does, would come to know both the blessings and the drawbacks of having his mother’s undivided attention, and the pressure of being the sole repository of her post-war hopes and ambitions.

‘Both my parents were hoping for a better world,’ wrote Terry.

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‘My mother, though, most definitely considered that you progress in *this* one, and although I did not know it at the time, I suspect that the vehicle for her progress was me. The space race was a little way off, but already she was preparing to sling me into a higher orbit – by my ears if necessary.’

The first evidence of those wider ambitions perhaps came when, at the age of three, Terry was deposited at a rather superior nursery school in one of the leafier parts of Beaconsfield. Run by two elderly and genteel ladies, it struck Terry, when he came to recall it, as some sort of throwback to the old Dame Schools of the 1930s – a place chiefly designed to equip the better class of child with social accomplishments and, above all, with manners. Given the age of Terry’s group, this was to a great extent a basic matter of teaching the children to put up their hands when they needed the loo, but also on the toddler curriculum apparently was calisthenics and (Terry shivered to recall this) folk dancing.

And then there was flower-sniffing, to which Terry, for one, seems to have responded with enthusiasm.

‘One day one of the ladies brought in from her garden some magnificent roses and gave each of us one to sniff deeply while reciting:

*I wonder, I wonder, if anyone knows,
Who lives in the heart of this velvety rose.
Is it a pixie or is it an elf?
Or is it the queen of the fairies herself?*

I have no idea what she was on, but I was off my face with the scent of roses. Heaven knows what it did to me, but I have one or two clues.’

Who knows how things might have panned out if Terry’s

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education had continued in this rarefied line. That it did not is perhaps botany's loss, and maybe folk dancing's. But Terry soon reached the age of four and was automatically wrenched from that perfumed sitting room and lobbed into the more conventional state-funded environment of Holtspur Primary School, a mile and a half's walk away from home, in Cherry Tree Road, on the western edge of Beaconsfield.

He arrived a day late. His parents had booked the family's summer holiday in Cornwall and were not inclined to cut it short for something as unimportant as their child's first day in a new academic institution. Terry later claimed that this casual decision put him out of step with his peers from day one – which was day two, of course, in everybody else's case. What it certainly did was ruin his options when it came to coat pegs. Every child's peg in Terry's infant class had a picture above it, for ease of recognition. Instead of being on a level playing field to lay claim to the cowboy hat or the elephant or the tank, he was left with the only peg remaining, which sat witheringly beneath a lame drawing of a pair of cherries.* 'I could have been a contender . . .' Terry wrote ruefully.

Even once settled under the evidently kindly care of Mrs Smith, his infant-class teacher, Terry struggled with school. Nothing came easily. He would start out writing with his left hand and, halfway down the page, switch to his right.† He was, at

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* And here, surely, one might find a firmer psychological source for Terry's lateness phobia (should one be searching) than in his tardy appearance in the delivery room, even though he favoured the latter in his own analysis.

† This issue resolved itself in time and Terry became an entirely right-handed writer. However, even as an adult, if the cutlery was ever set the 'wrong' way round at the table, he would pick up the knife and fork without really noticing and plough on regardless.

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least at first, reluctant to read. He appeared to be more keen on finding ways to climb on his desk than to sit at it. He seemed overall to lack the ability to concentrate – or at any rate to concentrate on the things the teachers wanted him to concentrate on, and at the times in the day when the teachers wanted him to do so. ‘I could hang upside down in the hazelnut tree in our garden for hours at a time,’ Terry noted, with the slightly hurt tone of someone whose talents had not been given their due. But school was demanding more of him than an ability to hang upside down and he hadn’t yet quite worked out how to respond.

The point, though, about this particular child – ‘he of the scabby knees and the permanent sensation of low-level fear’, as Terry now painted himself – was that he was clearly bright. Indeed, in some respects he seemed ahead of the game. He obviously thought about things. Why, he asked his mother one day, was that legendary run made by Pheidippides known as a Marathon? Surely, on the principle that buses bore their destinations on their front plates, not their places of origin, it should technically have been known as an Athens. His mother didn’t really have an answer to that.

And he definitely knew stuff. It seems to have stung him early and hard that, when the class was asked where rain came from, and Terry immediately slung up his hand and answered, ‘The sea,’ this earned a burst of mocking laughter from his peers and a gentle correction from the teacher, who was looking for the answer ‘the clouds’. But Terry *knew* he was right. That was how precipitation worked. So what was this place in which people were rewarded for working out the answer the teacher wanted them to give, rather than the right answer?

The headmaster at Holtspur was a man named Henry William Tame. With thick-rimmed glasses, a moustache and carefully

lacquered hair, H. W. Tame was a big presence in his own school – the writer and the producer of the annual school pantomime in which he himself liked to take a role, frequently as a giant. He gave that school 31 years of his career. He was also a revolutionary figure, in some ways, and greatly to be admired. Tame was a significant advocate for the then controversial idea that sex education should be given in schools, and specifically to children in their last year at primary school.*

Unfortunately, where he earned the unending contempt of the Pratchetts was, not in his pioneering attitude to sex education, but in his decision to sort the pupils in his school into two streams – those who were deemed to be on track to pass the eleven-plus examination in their final year and take places at the area’s better secondary schools, and those who were not. On the one side of the divide were the sheep, as Terry saw it, and on the other the goats. According to Terry, this separation of the Holtspur flock happened when the children were just six. And to his, and more particularly Eileen’s dismay, Terry found himself herded in with the goats. Interpreted as evidence of Tame’s ‘vicious dislike’ of him, this premature assessment of Terry’s likely ability was, I don’t think it’s any exaggeration to say, the source of a whole lifetime of bitter resentment. It seemed to confirm Terry’s worst suspicions that school was not about encouraging you to become something so much as it was about keeping you where you were, holding you in your allotted place – a suspicion shared, with

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* In the 1960s, Tame wrote two key tuitional texts in this area, *Time to Grow Up* and *Peter and Pamela Grow Up*. Sample sentence from the latter: ‘If the boy is healthy and takes part in games and other forms of rigorous exercise the sperms will be reabsorbed into the body and the wet dreams will not be very frequent.’ Perhaps nothing ages quite so fast as radical sexual education advice.

reason, by Terry's father, who had turned up for his own eleven-plus exam, back in the day, and found himself confronted by questions on subjects that his teachers had quite simply never taught him.

Asked, in 2011, to contribute a few words for the school's sixtieth anniversary celebrations, Terry gamely obliged but chose not to gild it too thickly. 'In all truth, I cannot say that my memories of Holtspur School were of the warmest,' he wrote. He then equally gamely took the blame upon himself: 'but possibly that was entirely because I was an absolutely quintessential example of a twit and dreamer.' I don't think he believed for one moment that the fault was truly his, though. It was a lifelong position of Terry's that schools would be far better places if they took special care to look out for and nurture the twits and the dreamers.

With her son relegated to the B-group, Eileen stepped up. If the school had a low-grade mould prepared for her only offspring, then she was going to ensure that he overflowed it. That mile and a half walk to school in the morning became an additional tuition period, an opportunity to impart what she knew and push Terry in a way the school had obviously decided not to.

'She dispensed learning as if it had a sell-by date,' wrote Terry. 'She told me about kings and knights and Robin Hood and camels. She told me that monks live in monasteries and that monkeys live in trees, and that it was important not to get that the wrong way round. She told me that America was so far away it would cost a thousand pounds to get there. She also sang songs and passed on the stories told to her by her Irish grandfather, which included the revelation that bees were really fairies, an observation which I considered erroneous. Would I have even known what the word meant at the time? With my mum you never knew.'

More firmly, to encourage him in his reading, Eileen proposed

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an arrangement whereby she paid him a penny for a page well read. Terry, who knew that pennies could be traded for Black Jacks, responded to the challenge. ‘I wasn’t dumb,’ he said. ‘I could drone my way through a text with enough accuracy to keep my head above the water. But I had no great enthusiasm for reading. I got along. Surely that was enough. Mum thought otherwise.’

As the eleven-plus exam neared, Eileen started putting past papers in front of Terry at home in the evenings. And when she saw him struggling with them, she paid for him to go every week to the house of a retired teacher for extra tuition. Terry wouldn’t fail, whatever the system had decreed. Eileen wasn’t going to let him.

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Contrary, perhaps, to modern perception, Britain after the war was not a particularly church-going place. In 1948, just 15 per cent of respondents told Gallup that they had been to a church service the previous Sunday. Only one in ten participants in a Mass Observation survey conducted in London at about the same time indicated that they attended church ‘fairly regularly’, and an Archbishops’ Committee reported that ‘90 per cent of our people seldom or never go to church’.* David and Eileen Pratchett, then, would have been firmly among the majority in having decided that institutionalized religion was largely irrelevant to their lives. Consequently Terry was able to say of his parents, in his inaugural professorial lecture at Trinity College Dublin in 2010: ‘They raised

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* Sources: *Religion in Great Britain, 1939–99: A Compendium of Gallup Poll Data* by Clive D. Field; and that superb history book *Austerity Britain, 1945–51* by David Kynaston.

me with kindness and, where appropriate, a side order of brief and effective sternness and – may they be for ever blessed for this final consideration – without any religious upbringing whatsoever.’

Eileen had grown up a Catholic but, by the time Terry was born, had long since stopped practising as one, and her decision to marry an Anglican in an Anglican church evidently divorced her from a large swathe of her family. On account of the shockwaves emanating ever afterwards from this rift, there were a number of aunts and uncles on the Kearns side whom Terry simply never knew. Christianity does not seem to have featured very much as a topic for discussion at home. Aged six, Terry happened innocently on the sole relic of Eileen’s Catholicism – a small, cheaply produced wooden crucifix on the dressing table in his parents’ bedroom – and he gathered it up and carried it to her with the immortal line, ‘Mum! I’ve found a stick with an acrobat on it.’

Even then, Eileen’s corrective explanation was apparently so circumspect that Terry barely gave this strangely suspended and wounded figure in his loincloth another thought. However, that crucifix was to find an unobtrusive but safe spot in every house in which Eileen lived, including the room in the care home in Salisbury where she spent her final days. After she died Terry and I went through everything looking for it and he was filled with despair when it didn’t show up. When I eventually found it, tucked away behind some other ornaments, Terry’s relief was palpable. The little crucifix went back to the Chapel with him and he had it in his hand when he was dictating some lines about this time in his life.

‘I do not know what solace she found in the tiny, stricken face,’ Terry said, ‘but now I see the face of a humble carpenter who was moved to tell people to be kind to one another – the golden rule of so many wise men – and for his pains was tortured to death by

a tyrant at the behest of zealots. Perhaps the message may be to ignore tyrants and tumble zealots.'

Similarly, the message of Christ, Terry liked to point out, was not really so far from the message of Bill and Ted in *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*: be excellent to each other. And, the way Terry saw it, why would anybody want to pick an argument with that fine message?

However, there was definitely no church-going for Terry and neither did the family seem all that impressed with their local clergyman, the Reverend Oscar Muspratt, the Anglican vicar of Holy Trinity church in Penn. Tall, thin and forever known to Terry, through a childhood misunderstanding, as the Reverend Muskrat, the Revd Muspratt seems to have riled David and Eileen right away through his habit of addressing his parishioners – 'or certainly the working class ones', Terry darkly suggested – by their surnames alone.

The vicar further lost the support of the family during a tea-time drop-in on their home one day by referring to the small ornamental brass statue of the Buddha which squatted in the sitting room (it had been brought back from India by Terry's father) as 'a pagan idol'. Apparently this slur caused Eileen to show the Revd Muspratt the door directly – to 'put him out on the pavement', even, in the most vivid versions of this tale. With what exact levels of violence the vicar was ejected, we will now never know, but certainly no further tea-dates followed. When Terry's father returned from work that evening and the details of this encounter were relayed to him, he promptly branded the vicar 'a sanctimonious old fart'. 'I had never heard the word "sanctimonious" before,' Terry said, 'and saved it for future use.'

A shame it ended that way, perhaps. Instinctively suspicious of institutional authority, Terry and his parents appear to have

somewhat underestimated the Revd Oscar Muspratt. At any rate, Terry's future newspaper, the *Bucks Free Press*, found enough extraordinary in this man's life to run a three-part tribute to him in 1988 in its series 'Interesting Vicars of Penn'. As an army chaplain in wartime, the Revd Muspratt saw action at El Alamein and the siege of Malta and in Normandy on D-Day; he was invited to Washington in 1962 to lead a service of Anglican prayers during the Cuban Missile Crisis; and officiated at the necessarily secret burial of the spy Donald Maclean in 1983. All in all he sounds like exactly the kind of vicar that Terry would have been interested in chatting to. Alas, though, he called David Pratchett 'Pratchett' instead of 'Dave' and (allegedly) was culturally insensitive about their Buddha ornament, so it wasn't to be.

In 1957, when Terry was nine, the family left the rented cottage and moved a mile south, to 25 Upper Riding in Holtspur – one from the end of a nine-house strip of new-build terraced council houses on the western edge of Beaconsfield, a short walk from Terry's primary school. In a significant upgrade, the Pratchetts now had access to the luxuries of running water (cold *and* hot), a real kitchen rather than a scullery, a roof with firmly attached tiles and (greatest blessing of them all) a bathroom with a flushing lavatory.

Being on the edge of the development, the new house also enjoyed unbroken views of the adjacent countryside. Indeed, Terry could look out from the kitchen window and retrace in its entirety his former walk to school and take in a view beyond that as far into the distance as Penn. Also included within this panorama was the rectory of the maligned Revd Muspratt, which was apt to catch the light on a bright day, opening up a running joke for Terry's father who would always remark, in a suitably baleful tone: 'The sun is shining on the righteous.' Terry sensed his parents were initially a

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little sad to leave their old house, killer slates and all, and make the move. ‘But after a couple of baths they were less so.’ This would be the house he lived in until he got married.

By this time, Terry’s interests had begun to expand beyond hanging from trees. If school struggled to engage him, things outside school most certainly did not. On one occasion his father invited Terry to join him in making a crystal radio set – a battery-free wireless that he could listen to in his bedroom. Together they scoured dusty boxes in the garden shed for an old set of headphones and the wherewithal to construct an aerial. ‘That evening,’ Terry remarked, ‘I became a nerd without knowing it.’

The commercial coil on that first crystal set bore the legend, ‘What are the wild waves saying?’ Terry, who could never part with a piece of hardware, still had it in his possession, packed away in a box, at the end of his life. Given that the radio signal that swung first into clarity would tend to be the BBC Third Programme, with its earnest roster of serious talks and highbrow classical music, the wild waves were normally filled with the sound of Dr Leon Roth lecturing on ‘Myth, Science and Religion’, or Alfred Brendel playing Busoni. But Terry sat and listened, enthralled, in any case, because soundwaves borne from the world directly into your bedroom without batteries were a form of magic however you cut it. At mealtimes, his parents would get used to having to go to his bedroom to pull him out from under his headphones.

Under his father’s influence, he would eventually begin to gravitate towards the pages of *Practical Wireless* – ‘Practically Wireless’, as they renamed it – the monthly bible (price, 1s 3d) for disciples seeking life-changing enlightenment, via carefully wrought wiring diagrams, regarding the construction of, say, an anti-interference aerial or a shipping and medium wave band receiver.

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He would learn too the careful husbandry of precious components on a limited budget. Terry could recall going with his father to the television repair shop in Beaconsfield, handing his coppers across the counter and proudly leaving the premises with one solitary transistor the size of a thumbnail in a paper bag. Further along the line, he also bought a transistor socket so that he could more easily transport that precious, solitary transistor between different projects without damaging its tiny, fragile legs. And he would learn that electricity could be fun, not least if you knew how to jury-rig the shed door handle to a magneto to give your father an electric shock. Once the feeling had returned to his fingers, his father was apparently proud of him for that.

Meanwhile there was space. This was a very good time to be interested in the night sky – the mid to late 1950s – with America and the Soviet Union ramping up their competing exploratory plans, and the news full of talk of rockets of imponderable power and satellites and the prospect (how soon?) of manned spaceflight. Terry, certainly, was enthralled, and notably aided and abetted in his enthrallment by the Brooke Bond tea company.

In 1956, when Terry was eight, members of the wider family and all other acquaintances found themselves being urged to speed up their tea consumption, if they didn't mind, so that Terry could complete his collection of the Brooke Bond tea cards series 'Out Into Space'. The album for the cards (sixpence) had a blue cover which bore the impressive label, 'A series of 50 picture cards on astronomy approved by A. Hunter PhD, Secretary of the Royal Astronomical Society'. Terry marvelled at the coloured drawings of the planets, drank in the information on the backs of the cards, collected them all. It awoke in him an enthusiasm for astronomy that never abated.

Many years later, his original collection having long since

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disappeared, Terry conceived a sudden desire to own that Brooke Bond album again, just to see whether it retained any of its magic. Work in the Chapel paused while we fired up eBay.

It turned out that the series had been issued twice, in 1956 and in 1958. The 1956 edition was rarer and had the words ‘Issued with Brooke Bond Choicest and “Edglets” Teas’ on the reverse of each card, rather than, as in 1958, ‘Issued in packets of Brooke Bond “Choicest”, “PG Tips” and “Edglets” teas’. To the purist, such distinctions matter. The more coveted 1956 version which Terry would have originally owned was available for £300, the 1958 version for £60 – and I know which one the avid collector in *me* would have gone for, in Terry’s position. But Terry, who was no fool with his money even when he could afford to be, bought the £60 one. And fair enough: it did the trick. When the package arrived in the post, he unwrapped it gently and tentatively turned its pages. The image on card number nine in the series, ‘Planets & Their Moons’, which was the first he had laid eyes on as a child, now once again exerted its own particular gravitational pull and seemed to cause the years to melt away. ‘Like that bloke Proust,’ Terry suggested, in mid-reverie. ‘He eats a biscuit and goes back in time.’ Indeed.*

Witnessing the emergence of this new interest and keen, as ever, to encourage anything that might pave the way to a future of pioneering, impressive and potentially even world-changing employment, Terry’s mother took him to see the light show at the London Planetarium, beneath its famous pale green dome on the Marylebone Road. They must have been there not long after it

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* A madeleine cake was Marcel Proust’s sensory portal, in fact, which Terry, of course, knew perfectly well, but it’s funnier if you say biscuit, and you sound a bit less pretentious.

first opened for business in March 1958 and the trip handed Terry another overwhelming and formative experience of utter absorption. More than fifty years later he could still recall the ‘velvet hush as the light streamed and the projector growled into life and the heavens opened on earth’. Afterwards his mother asked him if he would like to step next door and tour the famous waxworks at Madame Tussaud’s – practically a rite of passage for most children in the second half of the twentieth century. But Terry said he would much rather go back around and watch the Planetarium light show all over again, so they did that instead.

With the help of Brooke Bond tea’s marketing department and the special effects team at the Planetarium, Terry quickly found himself in a position of precocious expertise on matters astronomical. Indeed, while still very much a tyke in shorts, one morning, over breakfast, he spotted an error in the description of the planet Mars on the back of a packet of Kellogg’s Corn Flakes and (either egged on by his mother or entirely off his own precocious bat, it’s not clear which) duly wrote to the manufacturers to point out their mistake.

Alas, the mistake was, in fact, Terry’s: the mass of Mars was exactly as Kellogg’s had printed it. Even so, he got a nice reply from Kellogg’s and, better still, several complimentary boxes of Corn Flakes – thereby earning the admiration of his father, whose own effort to snag free product Terry had just comprehensively outclassed. David Pratchett once wrote to a razor blade company to inform them that he had managed to make one of their blades last an entire year, a glowing testimonial he felt quietly confident would yield dividends. A few days later, a disappointingly small envelope arrived, containing a solitary new blade and a note to the effect that the company were delighted to hear about the durability of their product, ‘and please find herewith another year’s supply’.

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In the spirit of yet further encouragement, his parents bought Terry a telescope. It was not a particularly good one; through its foggy gaze, Jupiter was ‘a wobbly ball of rainbows’. But what was your imagination for if not to provide for exactly this kind of shortfall? Terry stood in the dark in a garden on the edge of Beaconsfield and learned to navigate his way around the moon.



And then suddenly in Terry’s world there was this book with a badger in it, and a water rat, and a toad that could drive cars.

‘If there was any sense of theatre in the universe,’ Terry wrote, ‘at that moment there should have been an audible *ping!*, quite possibly played on a harp.’

This was all along, for Terry, the pivotal point, the coin-drop moment, the minute at which the scales fall away, the machinery clicks into gear and his life sets off at speed in a wholly new direction. He was with his mother and father, visiting a family friend in London, Donald Gibbons. And Terry at least entertained the possibility later that his mother might have had a word with Donald in advance – that this whole thing might have been a set-up from the beginning, another of Eileen’s galvanizing ploys. It didn’t matter. The effect was the same. Before Terry and his parents left that day, Donald Gibbons went to the bookshelf, took down Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* and handed it to him.

Up to this point, as we have seen, reading had been something that Terry was reluctant to involve himself in without naked bribery on his mother’s part. Maybe his resistance had been quietly dissolving. He had certainly picked up a few comics of his own volition, and was introduced to Superman by one of them, which led to a period of going about the place with a red towel knotted

around his neck to form the all-important superhero cape. And he had quite enjoyed it at school when his teacher read the class Eve Garnett's 1930s working-class classic *The Family from One End Street*. There was plenty to recognize there.

But this? This was something on another plane altogether.

'There was a mole,' wrote Terry, 'but this one was spring cleaning! Moles and rats and toads all walking around like human beings, with clothes on? This was El Dorado – even though I didn't yet know what El Dorado was.* As the latest of my father's cars drove me home again along the Western Avenue, I read; I read by the light of the street lights, which were never designed to illuminate the literary epiphany of a small boy on a back seat, which is why my eyesight was a bit wobbly by the time we crunched along the flint lane to home.

'If there had been a watcher, they would have seen, in the south-facing bedroom, a very faint light go on. It was faint because it was under the bedclothes.'

Terry finished the book the next day. And that was it. He was reading, for free. Reading, for pleasure. 'It got inside your head in a strange way; after a while, without you noticing. After all, how big was the toad? Ones at the bottom of our garden you could hold in your hand; this toad, *while still being a toad*, could drive a car! Nobody in the book expressed any amazement about the fact. So, to enjoy it, you had to pretend the world was slightly different. That was good enough for me.'

The Wind in the Willows set him going. And, as we shall see, the transformation was nothing less than startling. Having been mostly

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* Not the doomed British soap opera (1992–93); the South American legend pertaining to the discovery of a city of gold.

reluctant to read anything, Terry would now apply himself to the project of reading *absolutely everything*.

Moreover, in other news, confounding the doomy predictions of H. W. Tame and entirely vindicating the active work behind the scenes of Eileen Pratchett, Terry had passed his eleven-plus – the only pupil, allegedly, in the class of goats to do so. When we next see him he will be wearing a pair of long trousers. And, of course, reading.

2

BORROWED BOOKS, MIDDLE EARTH IN A DAY AND NEWS OF BOB MONKHOUSE

It's the spring of 2017 and Terry's daughter Rhianna and I have been invited to attend the unveiling of a plaque which Beaconsfield town council has commissioned to mark Terry's connection with Beaconsfield Library – a lovely idea and an entirely fitting tribute because, as we shall shortly see, if you were going to pick one building in Terry's home town that would help to explain him, then Beaconsfield Library would be the place.

On the way there in the car, though, the pair of us are feeling more than a little apprehensive. This is the first time we have accepted an invitation to do anything publicly 'in Terry's name' since the memorial event at the Barbican in 2016 and neither of us quite knows how we are going to feel about it or quite what our roles should be. During that time, in the still raw absence of her father, Rhianna has come under a lot of pressure to become what the pair of us have started referring to as 'an emergency pop-up Pratchett', and it has seemed only fair to protect her from that.

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And what, to use the business jargon, are the ‘public-facing aspects’ of my own role now that Terry is gone? At this point, I am still only beginning to work that out.

It also happens to be the week of the second anniversary of Terry’s death, a thought which is inevitably subduing us both. And going back to Beaconsfield Library is causing memories to resurface of the two other, wildly contrasting occasions that brought me there, when Terry was alive.

There was that time in March 2004, when Terry pitched up to give a talk and a reading. Any event involving librarians was all right by Terry, and an event involving librarians on his old home turf was doubly so. He enthusiastically spent an hour and a half working behind the front desk, checking out people’s library books – so enthusiastically, in fact, that they practically had to prise the rubber stamp from his grip at the end of the stint. He then spent another chunk of time signing copies of his own books for anyone who had brought one along – and signing anything else for that matter, in keeping with Terry’s long-standing and firmly adhered to philosophy on these occasions, which was, essentially: ‘If it belongs to you and you want me to write on it, I will.’ He was on top form that day, in the phase when he was going everywhere at 100mph and I, normally carrying the bags, would be struggling to keep up with him in the street and breaking into a run sometimes over the final yards. As his assistant, I thought I should be the first of us through the door wherever we were going, but it was often a fight.

And then, starkly different, there was the visit we made on a sweltering day in the summer of 2013. Beaconsfield-based librarians meant no less to Terry than they had always done, but that day, before we set out from the Chapel to attend what was

going to be a fund-raiser for the library, Terry had been really struggling. It was getting on for six years at this point since the PCA diagnosis, years in which, by and large, through a combination of Terry's extraordinary determination and the development of an elaborate system of work-arounds, he had been able to forge onwards – to carry on as normal for the most part, and then, on those occasions when carrying on as normal simply wasn't an option, at least to give the impression of carrying on as normal.

But it was getting harder. Terry had started experiencing bouts – debilitating and frightening – in which the external world suddenly became almost entirely overwhelming. His visual and spatial awareness would desert him and he would be unable to negotiate a path through the disorientating messages that his brain was sending him. And in the face of those bouts, even a determination as steely as Terry's was starting to find that there were limits.

Not long before this, Terry had cancelled an appointment to go to Windsor Castle to present some Duke of Edinburgh gold awards – a signal moment, as it felt to me. It was something that he had been 100 per cent looking forward to – which I cannot pretend was always the case, even at the best of times, with the commitments that took Terry away from his desk and didn't involve librarians. 'We should put something in the diary every week that we can cancel,' Terry used to say, brightly. 'It's like gaining a free day.' And it was true: if an appointment got knocked out for whatever reason, unexpected hours would suddenly open up for writing and recreation in the Chapel, and what was almost a holiday atmosphere would prevail. Going to Windsor Castle to present the Duke of Edinburgh awards, however, definitely had

not fallen into the category of ‘something in the diary we can cancel’.*

Yet that morning the car and driver stood waiting on the drive . . . and carried on waiting. Terry couldn’t make it out of the house. He stayed at home with Lyn. I called and sent his apologies. He took the rest of that day off and all of the following day. That was unheard of. And then he rallied again. But I realized with a sinking heart that there would always be a question mark now over everything that we arranged. Nothing in the diary could be written in ink any more.

Soon after that episode, on the morning of the Beaconsfield Library talk, Terry was again having trouble. I couldn’t really see how there was any way that we would be able to go – the lure of Beaconsfield and its librarians notwithstanding. Yet somehow he got out of the Chapel and into the car. I’m still not sure how. He slept a lot on the way, while I sat there and worried about how he might be when we arrived. I need not have done. By the time he got out of the car and into the library, warmly greeting people along the way, he seemed to have the world under control again. I sat alongside him in front of the audience in my latter-day role as ‘keeper of the anecdote’, ready to try and plug the gaps if the conversation faltered. But the conversation didn’t falter. There was laughter, which was guaranteed in any audience with Terry Pratchett. Speaking about the importance of a library in a child’s

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* Terry greatly approved of the Duke of Edinburgh awards, with their encouragement to young people to get outdoors, roam in the wild, pitch tents, get rained on, and generally try things beyond the normal classroom curriculum. He considered them, as he once put it, ‘a fundamental part of the “Make a Human Being” kit’. True, he was not a noticeably keen camper himself, but anything that promised to loosen the grip of school on young people’s minds seemed to be fine by Terry.