

Snybone

Troy Westen

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To Edda, Aico, and Yara.

And to Bernie, who listened to all my ramblings
seemingly forever, and never once grumbled.

All the could haves, would haves
and should haves, don't make a did it!

“STORIES OF THE IMAGINATION TEND TO
UPSET THOSE WITHOUT ONE!”

Terry Pratchett – 1948-2015

“IT’S EVERYTHING YOU DO
AND NOTHING THAT YOU DID”

Troy Westen – 1977

Down at the edge of the Silverwoods, so called because of the richness and abundance of the mostly silver birch trees, a small but dense tongue of mist that seemed to have crept out of nowhere had been loitering by the grass-covered bank. It suddenly took shape and hovered above the bend in the river Snayke, and as it bubbled and grew, it seemed to slither over the surface. The slow-moving river Snayke slid mostly unseen, like a pea soup boa constrictor beneath the low-hanging branches, followed just as slowly by the growing, writhing mist. As it crept on, the mist became colder and denser, inevitably coming into contact with water lilies, reeds, and the leaves of branches that were trailing in the water.

These would struggle for a short while before giving up and hanging limp and still. For a moment, there was a swirl of motion from the thicker part of the mist as if something had disturbed it before it was lost under the dense leafy canopy above; puzzled birds stopped their singing. On the hills and in the surrounding meadows, the animals, sensing something strange, sought shelter. Cattle, sheep, and horses stopped their grazing and looked all around. They were nervous, fidgety, ears back, heads up, eyes wide.

Something troubling was in the air!

A short distance from the Snayke at Gabriel Douglas Smee's farm, it was hay-making time, mercilessly hot, and always extremely busy. Smee and a small army of young co-workers were now sitting around on freshly cut bales of hay, all wearing damp t-shirts from sweating. It had been a long, hard, hot, itchy day!

Every year during school holidays, the young friends

came to help get the hay cut, baled, and loaded onto trailers.

Hard work indeed, but they enjoyed every moment of it. Farmer Smee's son Norton, better known as Pongo, always invited his band of good friends: Tuff, Mallow, Figgy, Berry, Wooley, Booster, and Punch, who now sat wiping their dripping brows, plucking bits of straw and hay from everywhere, and scratching arms and legs that were now itching furiously whilst listening to Farmer Smee, pointing his huge, ever smoke-belching pipe and telling them what a bunch of wusses they were.

'Cor, look at all o' yez, like a bunch o' wiltin' tulips, not a decent muscle atween yers an' we've only done one field, not as fast as last year I reckons, you's all gerrin' a bit soft, sheesh, just look at ye all, puffin' an' a pantin' over a centsy bitsy dribble o' sweat. Ha, wait till we really start work, tsk tsk, I dunno.'

'Who, us?' protested Mallow.

'I said who, he said you, I said me, he said aye, I said oh,' laughed Smee, holding his sides. 'Now tha's a bit of Zumerzet yer'l not understand.'

'Actually, Farmer Smee, our brains are more developed than muscles,' grinned Mallow.

'Oh, is that right? Then answer this,' said Smee solemnly. 'If it took a man a week to walk a fortnight, how many apples in a bag of pears?'

'Charge!' yelled Pongo, and the grinning friends all leapt up and took their revenge by piling onto the giant farmer and tickling him unmercifully.

'Here, where's me pipe?' he laughed, sniffing the air. He gave a grunt of puzzlement and looked down at the wisp of smoke curling out of his boot with his eyes bulging ever larger until he suddenly jerked bolt upright and gave a mighty roar, throwing his huge arms wide, tossing the youngsters into the air to land yards away, giggling and gasping. Smee then began scrabbling frantically at his boot, finally yanking it off together with a smouldering sock and his red-hot pipe. The youngsters all lay laughing hysterically,

covered in hay as the farmer carried on whooping and dancing around on one leg.

‘Ello ello,’ panted Smee, searching around for his battered misshapen old hat and spitting out bits of debris. ‘That sounds like the missus, and love of me life; mind you, if she gets upset, she can be a proper little wasps’ nest, aye. She’s not called Nettle for nothing... Not like her mother,’ he whispered conspiratorially. ‘Oh no, now that lady had a tongue that could clip a hedge.’ They all turned giggling to watch as Mrs Smee came chugging over the field on an enormous tractor towards them. As they both came racing over the bumpy ground, the group could only scratch their heads in wonder because she never seemed to have her hands on the steering wheel. She was always fiddling around either with something in a bag, or tying her headscarf, or pulling up her wellies. As it weaved its way between bales and around the dips in the ground, truly the tractor seemed to have a mind of its own!

Finally, with a wheeze and a loud belch, the mighty Massey Ferguson machine shuddered to a halt, the engine ticking furiously as it cooled, and off stepped Mrs Smee. Reaching up, she hefted a huge hamper onto her shoulder and wandered over to the hot and tired workers. Setting it on the ground, she opened it up and lifted out canisters of ice-cold sweet apple cider, large home-made chunks of bread, great wodges of cheese, and some of the largest pickled onions they had ever seen. ‘Well, come on, you all look tuckered out, so why not tuck in?’ she chirped in her usual happy manner.

Mrs Annette Smee (known all her life as Nettle) was a large woman, but not fat, with broad shoulders and big hands, and a constant smile. Apart from being an amazing cook, she could drive and mend absolutely anything mechanical. ‘We, as kids, learned it all from us dad, you know,’ she had explained to them once. ‘He had a wooden leg, see, right up to here, got it caught in a threshin’ machine, he did, an’ it chopped it right off, snick snack, just

like that,' she added with a double click of her fingers. 'When he got back home from the hospital and all that rehabilitatin', there were lots of people interested in buyin' us out cos it were a good farm, see, but instead of sellin' the farm what we all loved, he decided to teach all us kids everything he knew, and in the end, we all became good at summat. 'I always liked the machines, and it sounds a bit daft, I know, but I'll tell you, the machines liked me. Now we're teachin' our kids the same way, ain't that so, Pongo dear?' she cooed affectionately, ruffling the boy's hair.

'What is Pongo good at, Mrs Smee?' asked one of the group.

'Apart from conkers an' fartin', you mean?' roared Farmer Gabriel, throwing his head back and letting out a braying laugh that would catch the local pheasants, rooks, and wood pigeons by surprise, sending them flapping and squawking into the air in a panic.

Farmer Gabriel Smee, known locally as J.C.B. (Just Chucking Bales), born in Somerset, was a huge man, all muscle and hard as an oak. He worked at a steady pace, never slowing down nor speeding up, and never stopped! He had a large nose that always seemed to leak, and under it an unruly bushy grey moustache that everyone swore harboured all sorts of wildlife. Two apple-red cheeks with in between a permanent, cheerful smile, full of mischief. On the end of his tree trunk arms, he also had two of the biggest hands anyone had ever seen; they were truly enormous, the size of bulldozer blades.

He would easily grab a bale of hay in each fist, take an enormous swing, and then hurl them up to the top of the trailer, where quite often they would go sailing right over, to land with a dusty 'thwump' on the other side.

'Do I smell summat burnin'?' Mrs Smee asked, handing out the food. When the chuckling youngsters gleefully explained what had happened, she shook her head and gave the red-faced farmer one of those 'oh you ridiculous child' looks. 'Will you ever grow up, Smee?' she

sighed. As the hard-working crew relaxed and ate, and drank the wonderfully refreshing, cooling cider, the mischievous Smee would lean his furnace-hot pipe surreptitiously against someone's foot or hand until, with a shriek, his victim would leap up, blowing wildly on the reddening scorched area, much to Farmer Smee's delight.

'Well, that'll teach yer to lean against me pipe, wunnit?' he would hoot. 'Now it's my turn to laugh, hee hee, tuck well in, me ha ha hearties, you've earned it, I'm telling thee, my lovely missus ere, she can be a bit peppery at times, but she's the best darn cook in this ere valley.'

'This is all good wholesome hearty fare my lovely wife has made; get this lot down ye and it'll make ye as strong as me. Why, it'll put hairs on yer chest, it will, er, well half of yer anyway.' He would then give his wife a playful dig in the ribs with his elbow, exchanging a wink, and they would both fall about laughing, snorting, and hooting.

With tears streaming down his face, he would then produce a large, well-used handkerchief from one of his cavernous pockets and proceed to wipe his eyes and blow his nose at the same time, making a noise not too far removed from an approaching steam train, all very much to the youngsters' amusement. Suddenly, and to everyone's surprise, a very chilly ice-cold sort of breeze swept over them and was gone!

'Stonkers,' said Pongo, 'I just got a goosebump, in the middle of summer!'

'Yeah, even my goosebumps got goosebumps just then,' laughed Mallow, but almost immediately it was baking hot again, and the friends went back to eating, drinking, and talking.

They paused in their eating and looked up when Farmer Smee, one cheek bulging with bread and cheese, stopped teasing and stood up.

Mrs Smee also got up, and the two of them just stood there silently staring in the direction of the river, holding hands, something the youngsters had never seen before.

The friends all looked questioningly at Pongo, who was raising his eyebrows and shrugging his shoulders.

The Smees stood for a full minute before turning back round and sitting down to carry on the merrymaking. 'Is there anything wrong, Dad?' asked Pongo, crunching on a pickled onion.

'Eh, no, prob'ly not, Son,' said Farmer Smee, 'or there will be if I don't bag that last pickled onion.'

The noise of chatter carried on, but Tuff noticed that they weren't quite as jolly as a couple of minutes ago, and so even though there were jokes and laughter, it wasn't quite the same; imagine at Christmas time, the tree full of little fairy lights, one had just gone out, a little something was missing!

Stories and jokes and a good amount of ribbing were still heartily thrown around, though, but all too soon the sun began to inch towards the horizon, and the startling blue sky began to turn shades of heart-breaking pinks. It was time to call it a day and head for home!

With hearty thanks and goodbyes, and promises of returning when needed, Pongo's tired but chatty friends made their way slowly across the field of stubble.

As they approached the bend at the edge of the woods, they turned to wave one last time before racing each other over the ancient wooden bridge, the river quietly meandering underneath. A short walk along a track brought them to the Tailpike, a tall, slightly leaning, weather-beaten stone post with the rusting remnants of the old fire beacon on top, an ancient reminder of Britain's early warning system against raiding Vikings, Saxons and the like many hundreds of years before. Local folklore suggested that it had connections to April Fool's Day, which lasts until 12 noon; after that, it becomes Tailpike Day.

A little further on, they either jumped, rolled, or slid down a grassy knoll to where a small waterfall dribbled its contents gently over the lip and down into a stony crack in the ground called the Dunderhole. Mostly, it would only make a slight 'gurgly' whispering, but in times of heavy rainfall, it would be a thunderous echoing roar depending on the volume of water.

Here, the track divided into three: one going to the right towards the Silverwoods where their friend Mrs Gant lived, one to the left leading to the small town of Tollit, and one zigzagging up the steep hill before them. The friends chatted for a while before parting to go their different ways home amid waving and shouts of 'goodnight, see you tomorrow'.

Dean (Tuff) Tuffley, a broad-shouldered, self-assured son of a policeman and a secretary, lived a mile outside the village of Snayke. He was a good scholar who excelled at sports, which unfortunately gave him a tendency to show off a bit, especially with the girls, giving them the idea that he was fearless. He was, however, super adventurous and a nature lover. The Tuffley family lived in Quercus Lodge,

once an old gatehouse which was situated at the top of the hill that Tuff was now slowly climbing.

Norton Smee, son of Farmer and Mrs Smee, was a good scholar with a deep love and knowledge of nature. Not at all keen on sports, although he had held the title of village conker champion for the last two years, he was podgy without being really fat and was nevertheless game for anything. He always had pockets full of 'stuff'. His nickname was Pongo because of his flatulence and his tendency to fart what he called 'mellow smellows'. His favourite word was 'stonkers'.

Mallow Iris Waverly, eldest daughter of Bart and Helen, who both worked at the general hospital. Mallow is a tall, athletic girl, does a lot of running and hockey, and is interested in rock climbing. Slightly attracted to Tuff, but equally repelled by his showing off. Very allergic to dogs. Her best friend is Figgy and lives in Snayke. She is nicknamed Boz because of her leadership qualities in sports.

Chelby Bassett, her father is a pilot in the R.A.F, and her mother owns the village hairdressing salon. She is a good scholar who wants to be a beautician. Loves loves anything to do with nature and is the current school and county trampoline champion. She tends to be a bit tomboyish, a little intolerant, but good fun. She lives in the nearby village of Tollit. Her nickname is Wooley because of the thick, colourful woolly jumpers her grandmother knits and makes her wear.

Lennon (Berry) Torberry is athletic and a good climber of trees. He is reliable, friendly, and adventurous, always volunteering first for anything, especially if it sounds exciting or dangerous. He lives with his uncle and aunt, who run the chemist shop in Tollit.

Ebony Holdstock is the least adventurous of them all and would rather follow than lead. She is a good artist, tells great jokes, and has a brilliant memory. Her father is a carpenter, and her mother is the florist in Snayke. She is

nicknamed Figgy because she was always so conscious of her figure.

Taylor Robbins' parents are the landlords of the local pub in Snayke, called the Dontfall Inn. His great loves are biking and reading. He is talkative and energetic, very interested in anything to do with astronomy and space travel. His nickname is Booster because of his love for the huge booster rockets that sent people into space.

Lastly, Leo Coburn's mother runs the laundry and dry-cleaning shop in Tollit, and his father owns a taxi business. He is a good but rather dreamy scholar who spends a lot of his time reading. He is happy enough but a bit of a doubting Thomas. He is nicknamed rather unfairly Punch, due to his quite pronounced Roman nose.

Tuff was about halfway up the steep zig-zagging climb to his house when he stopped. He did this firstly to take a breather, and secondly to take in the vast evening beauty of the valley and surrounding countryside that he always enjoyed. 'One can see for miles from up here, I'd never get tired of it,' he sighed, gazing happily around as the distant red sun sank lower. Standing there, breathing deeply and taking it all in, he gave an involuntary shiver. 'Hey, that's odd,' he said, 'you don't get chills in September, do you? That's the second time today!' Looking back down the hill at the wonderful spread of the Silverwoods and the winding river Snayke, he thought he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye alongside the Pike. 'Hello, what's that? I'm sure I saw something move down there,' he said. 'Wait a minute, yes, something is moving. It looks a bit like cotton wool, no wait, couldn't be smoke, could it?' As he stood completely puzzled, he shivered again. 'I dunno, I don't like the feel of this,' he murmured, and turning around, he quickly stomped a dozen more yards up the hill. Being naturally inquisitive, he stopped and turned to have another look; this time it was quite obvious what he saw: a wave of mist curling up and over the riverbank, licking greedily at the willows and reeds.

The Pike was completely enveloped. All too quickly, it reached the bottom of the hill, where it seemed to pause for a moment. As it churned and broiled about, Tuff almost swore he saw dark shapes shimmering in it; then rapidly, it began creeping up the hill. Wasting no time, Tuff gulped and fairly sprinted to the top, and then turned right to follow the animal track that ran for about 300 yards to his garden gate leading to Quercus Lodge at the end. On the left of the path was a long thick hedgerow where he used to play hide and seek among the young hazel, holly, and beech trees when he was a boy.

As he puffed along steadily, all was quiet, until he thought he heard the sound of dogs snuffing. He turned around and saw with alarm that the mist had swiftly and silently crept all the way up the hill and was now not all that far behind. With his mouth open in wonder, he watched as the mist enveloped everything in its path. Something about it made the hairs on his neck stand up.

‘That’s no ordinary mist,’ he thought, ‘it seems to be, I dunno, organised somehow.’ Suddenly, a dog’s head emerged through the swirling grey; it drooled as it snuffed the air, its red eyes darting about, searching.

As the huge beast pulled itself almost free of the mist, it was quickly followed by another, and what appeared to be a man figure in a long dark coat and lopsided stovepipe hat with a feather sticking out of it. Tuff stood transfixed as the trio faded in and out of the mist; then they stopped and slowly looked around. Suddenly, a third, even larger animal appeared, shook its head, and then looked straight at Tuff!

The thing heaved itself half out of the mist and gave a strange howl, sounding as if it were in a tunnel. Then all four creatures headed straight for the shocked Tuff; there was no sound now except the occasional snuffing of the dogs.

‘Ooh heck, they’ve seen me, and I don’t like the look of this,’ said Tuff with a sharp intake of breath, and so,

shaking himself out of the trance, he galvanised his legs into action. Sprinting along the track was always tricky because, of course, it was a hillside, which meant that one foot was always lower than the other, making running lopsided. His boots either knocked against or slid upon the dozens of exposed roots that were all over the place as he laboured on. Panting heavily and with the stitch beginning to grip his sides, he slowed and dared to take a look back over his shoulder; he saw the dogs sniffing the air, heads twisting this way and that, listening.

‘Ye Gods, I do believe they’re tracking me,’ he gulped, and began running awkwardly on, and as he did so, he could hear the cracking of twigs behind, the sound of the dogs coming in rasping gasps as they gradually closed the gap!

Tuff called on all his school running team experience and strength as he hurried on, but to his annoyance, he felt himself inevitably slowing down; a long day working in the baking heat was now taking its toll. He wasn’t all that far from his gate, but he knew the dogs would certainly be upon him before he reached it.

The evening light was darkened by the ever-growing and gaining mist, and in the gathering gloom, he almost went tumbling after catching his foot in a trailing bramble that ripped into his sock and ankle.

Cursing, he hobbled on, the muscles in his legs burning. Then, almost on the point of giving up, he saw the old hazel tree with its twisting, gnarled roots sticking up and out. Too tired to run any further, he stopped, looked back, and then for some reason stepped quickly up onto the thick old roots, flattening himself against the trunk, not at all sure what he was doing or what he was going to do next.

In no time at all, the grey chill of the mist was in and around everything; all sound was eliminated except the heavy breathing and drumming feet of the dogs that then stopped, to be replaced by them ‘snuff, snuff, snuffing’ the ground and the air. They were very close now.

‘Oh, crikey, they’re here, and these are no ordinary

dogs. Now what if I make a hell-for-leather dash for the gate?’ he thought as he saw the large head of the lead dog stop and sniff in his direction. He was just about to step off the roots and make that last desperate dash for the gate when a branch suddenly folded itself around his waist, pinning his arms as well, and held him tight. Completely taken by surprise and now truly scared, he was about to scream in alarm when another branch snaked up and folded itself neatly around the bottom half of his face, filling his mouth with hazel leaves and shutting off any sound he was going to make.

Held securely in an iron grip, Tuff didn’t know what frightened him more: the dogs or the tree! He could only watch with wide eyes as the shadowy heads of the three dogs, now right in front of his legs and feet, stopped and snuffed all around, their red eyes flicking from place to place. Tuff, beginning to panic, desperately wanted to scream out loud as he breathed in the ‘dogness’ of them, the smell of sweat and old damp blankets. Just then, a slight breeze seemed to ruffle the leaves that surrounded him, and he distinctly heard the words, ‘Tuff be tough, Tuff be tough, are you tough enough, Tuff?’ Two of the dogs took one last sniff around and began to move on.

The third one, still snuffing at the roots under Tuff’s feet, stopped. He felt something warm and wet splash onto his jeans, dribbling endlessly into one of his boots before it too moved on.

As the greyness began to sort of sigh by, there was more movement, and with the mist writhing all about him, the man figure stepped into view. Dressed in black and grey, with his totally black eyes swivelling left and right, he shuffled on to where a wide-eyed Tuff was holding his breath but screaming his head off inside. As the figure slid to a halt almost right in front of him, the quaking Tuff noticed with a morbid fascination that what he thought was an oddly shaped hat was instead the person’s crooked-shaped head, and the feather was in fact a strange tuft of

hair standing up and out, like a bird's broken wing.

As Tuff's heart pounded, he thought, 'surely loud enough for the stranger to hear.' The weird fellow stopped, turned, and stared straight at him. From out of the man's mouth curled a thin black forked tongue that flickered left and right, tasting the air. The man then moved his face slowly forward until it was almost touching Tuff's. The strange hypnotic eyes seemed to be constantly pulsing large and small as they searched menacingly all over, and the man sniffed the air deeply.

Tuff thought the game was surely up as he stared horrified into the face that was full of unexplainable menace. When a drool of mist brushed his hand, it felt as though a lump of ice had touched it. The man looked all around one more time, took another deep sniff, then, hefting something on his back further up, he slowly moved on and began to disappear back into the mist. But not before Tuff noticed with throat-clenching horror what looked like two young children in their pyjamas strapped tightly to his back. Their eyes huge and terrified, and their mouths opening and closing as they seemingly screamed at him for help, but no sound coming out. Gradually, the evening swallowed them up!

Then just like that, as if nothing had happened at all, everything returned to normal and an owl screeched somewhere down in the valley. The mist, the dogs, and the oddly shaped man had obviously gone because little rustling sounds could now be heard in the undergrowth, and birds were settling down and chortling to themselves before sleep.

'Well now,' sighed Tuff, 'one problem gone anyway,' and turned his attention to the hazel branches holding him prisoner. To his utter amazement, he realised very quickly that he wasn't being held at all; only the bottom of his t-shirt was snagged. He pulled it angrily free and gave the tree trunk a hefty kick, then, not stopping to wonder how or why, he jumped from the twisted old roots and pelted

furiously towards his gate. Making doubly sure the gate was securely locked behind him, he galloped down the garden path and at last opened the door to the kitchen to be invaded by warmth and wonderful smells of cooking.

‘You’re late for dinner,’ scolded his mum, ‘dawdling as usual, I’ll bet. Sometimes I think your friends are more important to you than home, eh?’

‘Yes, Mum,’ sighed Tuff. ‘We were working at Farmer Smee’s and I had to run from some dogs, is all, and got all caught up in a hazel bush. Look,’ he said, showing her his torn t-shirt.

‘Mmm, no surprises there,’ mumbled his mum, busy now ladling something from a pan that smelled delicious.

‘Tomorrow I’ll go back and investigate that nut tree,’ he thought as he busied himself eating. ‘Rotten dog pissed on my shoe, Mum,’ said Tuff with his mouth full. His mum turned around and gave him a stony look.

‘It pee’d on your shoe, Mason Tuffley, pee’d,’ she said, waving the ladle at him.

‘But Dad says piss!’ argued Tuff.

‘Your father is an adult, end of. Anyway, it serves you right for playing with them,’ said Mum stiffly as she disappeared into the front room with a cup of tea.

‘Serves you right for playing with them,’ mimicked Tuff under his breath.