

A shrill bell clanged as George entered the store, followed by a sharp click as the well-oiled timber door swung back into place. Stepping into the gloom, he hesitated and coughed. The air was musty with a stillness so thick you could slice it in two.

“Wow, this place is just like in the movies!” George gazed up at the domed ceiling and gloomy walls stashed top to bottom with ancient publications. A wooden ladder on wheels reached up high to the rest upon the narrowest, tallest shelf. At the far end of a long wooden counter sat an old-fashioned till beyond which a dark burgundy curtain swamped an arched entrance.

“Hello, anyone there?” he called out nervously.

A shuffling sounded from behind the curtain. At the same time the shadow of a shapeless ‘thing’ hastily flattened itself and scuttled across papered floorboards to hide under a cupboard. George felt the hairs on his neck prickle, his brow button wet, gasping as a bodiless voice rasped out as if disturbed from centuries of solitary silence.

“What do you want, child? I’ve got no time for favours or charity.”

The material twitched again and betwixt the red and meagre light emerged the hobbling outline of the owner himself. As he shambled closer, George found he couldn’t move, terrified yet fascinated. A densely woven cloak obliterated any clinical formation of human shape disguising a shrunken form bent double in a fantastical defiance of physics. A strained neck barely able to cope with his head, skewered out from under a hood, elaborating huge eyes. Claw-like hands grappled with a neck tie

that refused to stay knotted beneath an organised mess of ribboned veins. An ancient face, etched with a thousand furrows glared at George.

“Hi,” squeaked George. "I'm... I'm...looking for a book. It's called The Zobeasts and I just wondered if..."

The human creature shot out its head, blinking amphibian-like eyes in disbelief. Yet a look so wise and honest penetrated from two swirling black circles that George began to sway against his will.

“The Zobeasts, eh? Ha!” grunted the creature not smiling. “Well, well, well. And what, may I ask, would a clever-looking young boy want with such a book?”

“Clever? It’s because I, err...” stammered George. “I overheard someone talking about it at school and I have to do a half-term project and Mum thinks it's a good idea to write a book and I can't do it without The Zobeasts to help me as I can't write very well and I don't want anyone to think I'm bad at everything, even though I know I'm not. But I'd really like to be good at something and do better at school like Reuben and popular like Bruno and not to keep going red and worry about what everyone thinks of me, I guess.”

The room crashed to a halt as the truthful realisation of his deepest fears surfaced. His head was spinning as if pulled by an invisible magnet. He toed a dead beetle so he didn't have to make eye contact with his interrogator as his face crumpled with the exertion of not crying. Everything he'd wanted to tell his parents he'd told this sack man whose stretchy mouth was moving but George only heard waves of blood cours-

ing through his ears. A recollection of Moskie tucked into his neck that morning transported him back to the book shop and he realised he was still dying for a pee.

“... are loners and for that reason you and I are the same.”

The cumbrous shape inched round towards the front of the shop where scant daylight lit one side of his face. A scar that bore the word "Tort" was clumsily carved into his left cheek. Raised pink letters stuck out like a cartoon joke.