



Also by Thiago de Moraes

Old Gods New Tricks

Let Sleeping Gods Lie

Myth Atlas

History Atlas

Discovery Atlas

Mighty Myths and How to Survive Them

A Mummy Ate My Homework!

A Gladiator Stole My Lunchbox!

For younger readers

The Night Bear (with Ana de Moraes)

The Zoomers' Handbook (with Ana de Moraes)



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MORAES**



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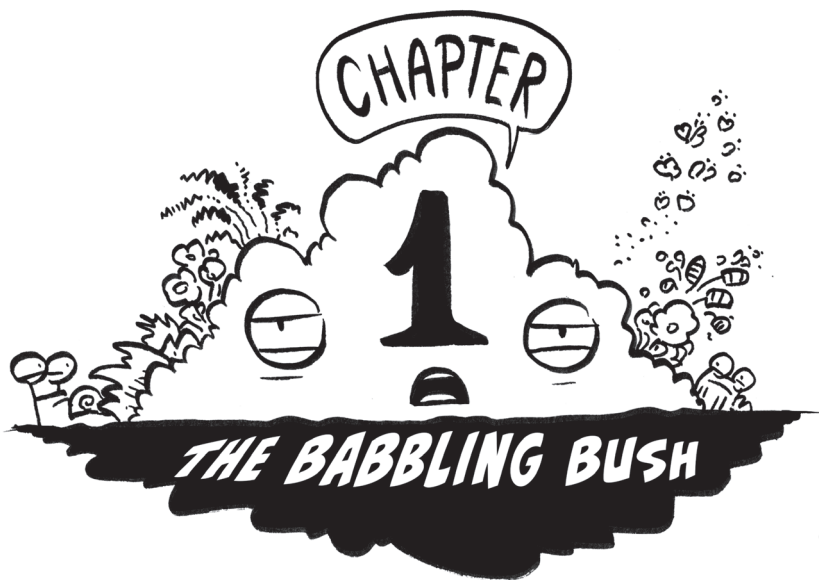


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*To Ana, Tom and Billie
and with enormous thanks to Liz and Meggie,
who were very serious about making me
write something that is not serious at all*



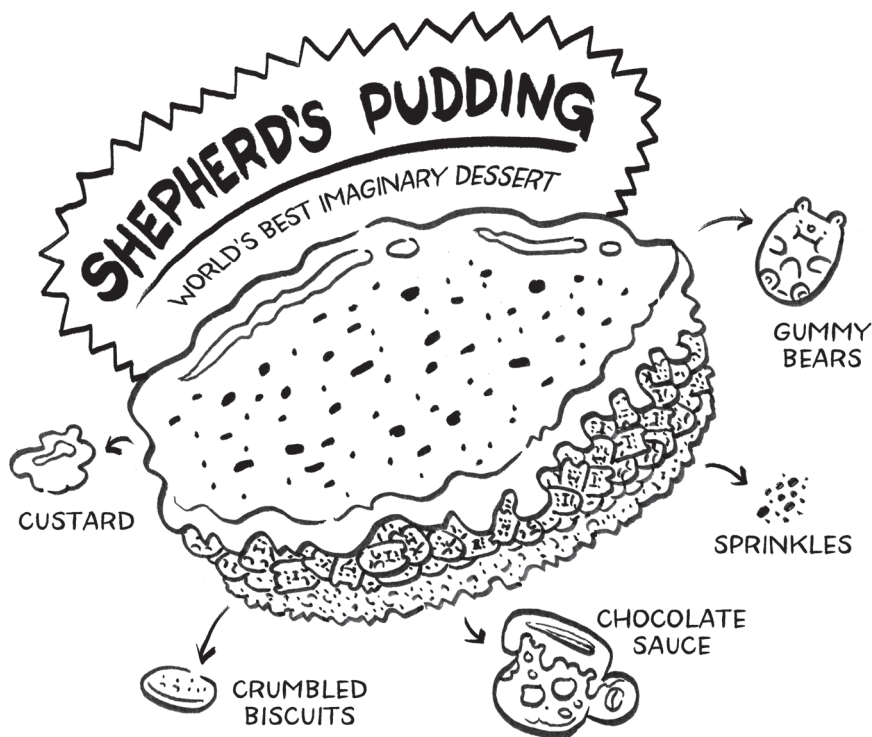
CHAPTER 1 THE BABBLING BUSH

Olly Morris wasn't looking forward to the end of the summer holidays.

That's normal. Most kids, even the ones who *really* like school, don't like the end of their holidays. It's hard to say goodbye to mornings watching cartoons, late nights playing video games and all the time in between, filled with playgrounds, mates, crisps, ice creams, trading cards and, most probably, more video games.

Even harder is returning to the harsh reality of very early mornings (*sans* cartoons) stuffy uniforms, endless lessons, homework





chocolate sprinkles, accompanied by chocolate sauce; served on Wednesdays).

It can be universally agreed that creating an imaginary school, regardless of how delicious its puddings might be, is an extremely odd way for a young boy to spend his summer. But Olly had a good reason for doing it.

Oliver Louis Morris, aged eleven-and-quite-a-bit, had never been to school.

He had walked past plenty of schools and even been inside a few for parties and whatnot, but he had never, in

his whole life, been a pupil at one. He had never heard his name called from the register, never waited in line to go back to class, never been sent to the headteacher's office for drawing farting bums on his desk.*

Olly's parents were the reason he had never been to school.

They weren't enemies of education, overly afraid of bacteria or incredibly forgetful. They were *musicians*.

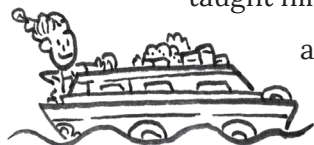
More than that, they were *travelling* musicians, who spent their lives going up and down the country in a big old canal boat, playing shows anywhere they could.

Some people like being *still*, they find their spot and stick to it like chewing gum on hair; others can't stop in one place. Martha and James Morris (for those were Olly's parents' names) were like that. They *loved* travelling. Nothing made them happier than being in a different place every day, playing their songs to a different crowd, closing the boat's curtains to a different view before bed at night.

It was a fun life, an *exciting* life, but it made it impossible for Olly to go to an ordinary school. That didn't

*A completely hypothetical misdemeanour, clearly not something anyone reading this book should ever consider doing.

mean he hadn't learned anything, though. Olly's parents taught him all he would have been studying at school, and much more.



By age seven, Olly already knew how to steer a boat, cook



his own dinner, sew, tap dance,



play several musical instruments



(the keytar was his favourite) and imitate the calls of dozens of birds.

Olly liked living on the boat and didn't mind being taught by his parents, but he did find life on the move hard. It's difficult to make friends when you don't stay more than a few days in a single place, and friends were what Olly wanted most. But, despite trying hard, Olly had made a grand total of zero friends in life so far. He had lots of *acquaintances*, kids he'd meet and play with for a bit at the park or the playground, but they never spent enough time together to become proper mates.



That's why Olly grew up wishing that his family would settle somewhere, so he could go to school and finally make some real buddies.

He always felt saddest at the start of a new school year. The kids he'd meet during the summer holidays would all go back to school, and between the hours of nine and three thirty the world became a strange place, populated only by tiny babies and really old people, two groups united by being mostly bald and having trouble with nappies.*

**This might be offensive to babies and very old people, but they're not likely to be reading this story. Please don't tell them about it; both can be vicious. Especially the babies.*

This year it was even worse. Olly was at the age where he should be going to secondary school. The other kids he had met during the summer seemed really excited about secondary school, and that made Olly sad. The idea that every other kid his own age was going off on some sort of big adventure whilst he kept on doing exactly what he had done all his life felt very unfair.

All of this was on Olly's mind as he plodded past an empty playground. He was walking by the canal towards his family's boat, thinking about the gross injustices of life, when something caught his eye. A bunch of fluffy

white clouds was moving across the sky. That wasn't odd, moving across the sky is something clouds regularly do. What was odd is that they were all moving in different directions, as clouds most definitely *don't*. Some clouds went up, others down, left or right, as if being pushed around by an invisible hand. Eventually, they slowed down and settled into a pattern. *More than a pattern*, thought Oly. The clouds had turned into letters up in the sky. They spelled:





That wasn't possible, Olly thought. He must be seeing things. He blinked a few times, looked down and up again and . . . the letters were still there. He shook his head, rubbed his eyes and had another look, but nothing had changed. There was still a great big 'OLLY' plastered across the summer sky.

That's it, he thought. I've gone mad. Insane. Loco. Cuckoo. Bananas.



Olly looked at the ground, hoping that the clouds would disappear if he ignored them long enough. He sped up towards his family's houseboat, eager to get away from the baffling writing in the sky. As Olly speed-walked along the banks of the canal, he heard a loud

PSSSST!

from behind him.

He looked round, but the path was completely empty. Turning back towards the boat, Olly began walking even faster than before. Another

PSSSST!

sounded again, louder. Olly spun on his heels and looked at the place where the noise had come from. There was nothing there besides a small round bush.

'Hey!' said the bush.

Olly stared at the bundle of leaves. First the clouds, now a talking bush. What was going on?

'Sorry, I can't stay to chat,' Olly told the bush. Then he turned round and ran away yelling:



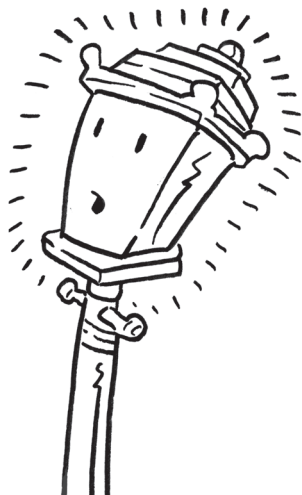


CHAPTER

2

BLAMING THE MESSENGER

As he ran to his family's boat, it seemed to Olly that the whole world had come to life and was trying to speak to him. A huge oak tree smiled and attempted a wave, a puddle said 'hello', a lamppost tried a polite 'hi' and a rubbish bin joined in with a 'wotcha'. By the time Olly reached the boat, he was convinced that he was having a serious psychotic episode (something he had heard about on a TV show once, and sounded like the sort of thing that would make a person believe that bins are attempting polite conversation).



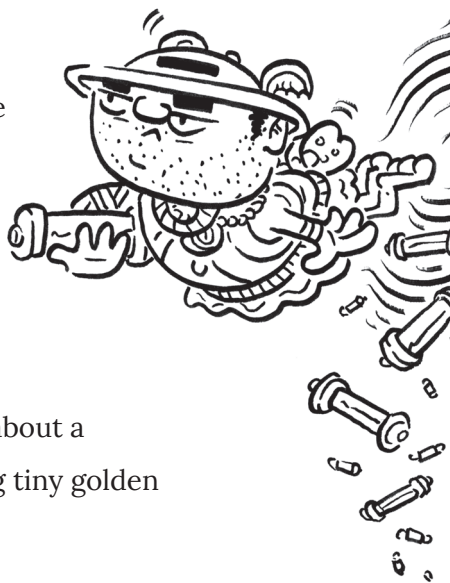
He ran into the boat, tripped over the small dining table and fell head first onto the kitchen rug. As he struggled to get up from the floor, Olly began to tell his parents what had happened.

‘Mum! Dad!’ he yelled. ‘Something’s happening! Something weird! A bush hissed at me, then a puddle tried to say “hello”! There was a lamppost and a bin, too!’

‘I believe you might be trying to describe my attempts to contact you,’ said a voice.

The voice worried Olly. It wasn’t his mum’s voice, or his father’s voice, but it was definitely coming from *inside* the boat. Olly turned round and looked up, very slowly, hoping that he wouldn’t come face to face with a talking umbrella or a chatty coat rack.

To his relief, both the umbrella and the coat rack were completely silent. On a slightly more worrying note, his parents weren’t there, and a complete stranger stood by the kitchen door. Well . . . not exactly stood. He was floating, about a metre up from the floor, beating tiny golden



wings and holding a large scroll.

‘Who . . .?’ Olly tried to say, but couldn’t go on.

I am Dehegelio,* Swift of Wing,
Bearer of Prophecies, Messenger
to the Mighty Gods, and I am here
to deliver this message unto you.

*Pronounced Dee
- Aitch - El - Eee -
Oh, of course.



‘Er . . .’ Olly tried again, but found that there were still no words in his brain that could be transmitted to his mouth.

‘Aha,’ the god said. ‘I can see you are rendered speechless by my awesome majesty, as is only right. I’m sure the news I bring will awaken you from your rather dense silence.’ He unrolled the big scroll, revealing a message written in golden letters:



The School of Gods

No.1 Cloudspire, The Toplands, The Pear

DEAR MORRIS FAMILY,

YOU ARE DELIGHTED TO BE INFORMED THAT YOUR CHILD -
ØLIVER LOUIS MORRIS - HAS BEEN ACCEPTED FOR A PLACE
IN THE SCHOOL OF GODS.

THE NEW TERM STARTS TOMORROW, WHEN ØLIVER
WILL BE EXPECTED AT SCHOOL TO MEET HIS FELLOW
STUDENTS AND TEACHERS. FULL BOARDING, LEARNING
MATERIALS, MEALS, UNIFORM AND TRANSPORT WILL
BE PROVIDED.

AS YOU UNDOUBTEDLY KNOW, OUR ESTABLISHMENT
IS HIGHLY SOUGHT-AFTER AND THE WAITING LIST
NUMBERS IN THE HIGH THOUSANDS. WITH THIS IN
MIND, WE REQUIRE YOU TO CONFIRM YOUR CHILD'S
REGISTRATION AT OUR EARLIEST CONVENIENCE.
WHICH IS FIVE MINUTES FROM NOW.

I HOPE ØLIVER ENJOYS HIS ACADEMIC CAREER AT OUR
TIME-HONOURED INSTITUTION. WE LOOK FORWARD TO
SEEING HIM DEVELOP INTO A HAPPY, CONFIDENT
YOUNG GOD, OR DIE HORRIBLY IN THE PROCESS.
ADEQUATE REGARDS,



BLUST, KING OF GODS, LORD OF WIND AND THUNDER, HEADMASTER

Olly couldn't believe it, this was what he had been hoping for all summer. 'School!' he said. 'Teachers . . . friends . . . *uniform!* It sounds amazing!'

'Great, that's that settled,' said Dehegelio. 'Grab your stuff, kid. I'll wait by the door.'

'Wait!' said Olly. He was excited but wasn't completely dim, and knew the whole situation was beyond weird. 'This is crazy. None of it makes sense. There's no place called "the Pear" or a god called "Blust". Little flying men don't exist . . . it must be some sort of computer-generated hologram; a silly prank like in those YouTube videos I like watching.'

*An odd choice. Noses are hard and as likely to cause discomfort to the pocker as to the pokie. When it comes to poking, bellies are much better than noses.



Dehegelio flew forward and poked Olly hard on the nose.*

'Ouch!' Olly squealed.

'That's for calling me silly, you ignorant buffoon.'

'OK, you're real all right,' said Olly, rubbing his nose. 'And don't call me a buffoon!'

'Fine,' said the god. 'You're not a buffoon, you're a clumping idiot. Now, I'm afraid we must be going. The scroll said five minutes and you have already spent three



on your feeble protestations. A whole three minutes which have felt like an eternity in the presence of your wit.'

'B-but . . .' stuttered Olly. 'I don't understand. Can you explain?'

'I wasn't planning to,' said Dehegelio. 'The letter was simple enough, even a dim mortal like you should have understood it. But delivering messages is my job, after all, so I'll do it. Listen, it's not complicated. You have been invited to the most exclusive, most magnificent school in the whole universe. The School of Gods.'

'School of Gods?!' said Olly. 'I've never heard of it.'

'That's because you're not a god.'

Duh,' said Dehegelio.

'They clearly don't teach manners over there,' Olly said.

'There's a minute left,' said the god.



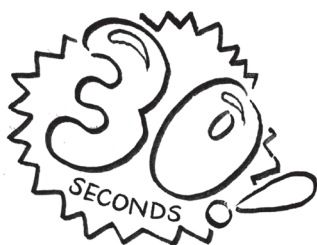
'I can't just follow a grumpy fairy-man to live in some sort of made-up school inside a fruit,' said Olly. 'I need to ask my mum and dad first!'

'Look,' said Dehegelio with a shrug. 'It's a great place. You'll be well looked after, write to your parents every



week and come home for the holidays.' He clapped both hands and a tiny golden bell appeared. 'If, for some bizarre reason, you ever decide to drop out and return to your grubby mortal dwellings, just ring this bell three times and you'll appear back in this boat, immediately.'

'Got it,' said Olly, 'but I still need to ask my parents!'



'Thirty seconds,' whispered the god.

'Can I call them?'

'Fifteen seconds.'

Olly was desperate to go to school. Any school. He also knew that following bad-tempered floaty men (or any strangers, for that matter)



anywhere was an awful idea, *especially* without asking his mum and dad first. Sometimes people make bad decisions, and sometimes bad decisions are made for them. What happened next was probably a little bit of both.

'Maybe I could text them on the way . . .' Olly muttered to himself.

"Maybe" is good enough for me,' said Dehegelio, tired of waiting for an answer. 'Let's go, boy!' The god flew towards Olly, scooped him up into the air and they both disappeared with a 'pop', leaving the scroll and a colourful cloud of shiny dust all over the kitchen.





One moment Olly and Dehegelio were in the canal boat's tiny kitchen, a moment later they appeared inside a lavish carriage full of silk pillows and soft blankets. Looking through the windows, all Olly could see was a dark sky speckled with stars. He poked his head out, and was astonished to notice that the carriage wasn't a carriage at all. It was a huge marrow, green and yellow stripes running all over its sides. A pair of enormous shrews was pulling it across the sky.

Olly put his head back inside the carriage. 'Er . . .' he said, 'are we flying inside a big vegetable that's tied to some shrews?'

'Correct,' said Dehegelio, taking a bread roll from a bowl in the centre of the carriage. 'This god only travels in style.'

'Hi there,' said a voice to Olly's left. He turned and saw a girl his own age, sitting on the couch next to him. Olly had been so astonished by the curious transport that he hadn't noticed her, or the boy sulking quietly by her side.



'Don't apologize,' said the girl. 'This is quite a lot to take in, right?'

‘I suppose that after talking bins and little butterfly people, a flying marrow shouldn’t feel like a total surprise,’ said Olly.

‘Bins? I had a bale of hay. My name is Gertrude Ploughman, by the way,’ said the girl. ‘Gert to my friends.’

‘I’m Olly,’ said Olly.

‘Nice to meet you, Olly,’ said Gert. She pointed to the grumpy boy. ‘This bundle of joy next to me is Enrico. We’ve known each other for a whole ten minutes and that’s how long it took me to learn his name. Not the chattiest. Or the friendliest.’



‘Sheesh . . .’ said Gert. ‘See what I mean?’

‘You might want to get acquainted with your fellow mortals, Enrico,’ said Dehegelio. ‘As the only ümons in

the School of Gods, I imagine you three will be spending a lot of time together. Why don't you introduce yourself properly?

'They should know who I am, anyway,' huffed the boy. 'Everyone knows the heir to the Sackville-Smith dog food fortune.'

'I don't,' said Olly.

'Neither do I,' said Gert.

Enrico glared at them and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

'Some *detail* might help,' said the god. He flicked his hand and three cards appeared in the air in front of Olly. They looked just like the PokeMaMonsta cards Olly liked collecting. But unlike the PokeMaMonsta cards, these didn't show colourful little creatures, but drawings of the three human kids. Olly leaned closer to read them.



OLLY MORRIS



SPECIES: HOOMAN
AGE: A BIT MORE THAN 11
HEIGHT: TALL FOR A SHORT PERSON
LIKES: VIDEO GAMES, MUSIC, SWEETS
DISLIKES: BEING ALONE, REPTILES,
CYCLISTS ON THE PAVEMENT
EDUCATION: HOME (WELL,
BOAT)-SCHOOLED
FAVOURITE SCHOOL SUBJECT: MUSIC
MOST SECRET DESIRE: GO TO SCHOOL,
MAKE FRIENDS

GERTRUDE PLOUGHMAN



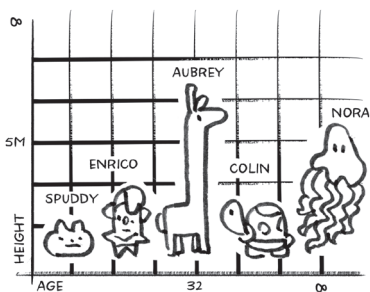
SPECIES: HEWMAN
AGE: ALMOST 12
HEIGHT: NOT MUCH
LIKES: FARMS, PIGS, HORSE-RIDING
DISLIKES: CITIES, HER LITTLE BROTHERS,
HAVING BATHS
EDUCATION: BURTON-ON-THE-WELD
AGRICULTURAL SCHOOL
FAVOURITE SCHOOL SUBJECT: ANIMAL
HUSBANDRY
MOST SECRET DESIRE: NOT HAVING TO
LOOK AFTER HER LITTLE BROTHERS, BE
TOP OF THE CLASS

ENRICO SACKVILLE-SMITH



SPECIES: YOU MAN
AGE: JUST TURNED 11
HEIGHT: LESS THAN WHAT HE'D WANT
LIKES: SILK CRAVATS, HAIR-GEL,
HAVING SERVANTS
DISLIKES: OTHER PEOPLE, MESSINESS,
DEALING WITH SERVANTS
EDUCATION: SPIFFINGTON COLLEGE
AND PRIVATE TUTORS
FAVOURITE SCHOOL SUBJECT:
ENTREPRENEURSHIP
MOST SECRET DESIRE: INHERIT HIS
MOTHER'S FORTUNE, RULE THE WORLD

‘Hey!’ said Enrico, snatching the cards from the air. ‘This stuff is private! And I *do not* wish I was taller. I’m the perfect height for my age.’



‘Sure you are,’ said Gert, then she turned to Dehegelio. ‘Also, it’s “human” with an “H” and a “U”’



‘Thank you, Miss Ploughman,’ said the god. ‘It is fascinating to learn how one spells in your charming little language. Now, back to the subject at hand. We’re close to the Pear . . .’

‘About that,’ said Olly. ‘What exactly is “the Pear”?’



'Everyone knows what the Pear is,' said Dehegelio.

'The only pears I know are fruits,' said Gert. 'They're fine, I suppose, but I'd much rather have some plums from the farm back home.'

'Nonsense!' exclaimed the god. 'Don't desecrate the glory of our world by comparing it to inferior fruit.'

'World?!' said all three kids together.

'Yes, world,' continued the god. 'I can see that the education on Earf . . . or whatever it is you people call your ghastly little realm, is severely lacking. Here, read the brochure and you'll understand better.'

Dehegelio gave Olly something that looked like those little booklets that they give for free in tourist information centres. Olly opened it and began to read.



The Pear



Much Better Than Where You Come From™

WELCOME, DEAR TRAVELLER, TO THE UNIVERSE'S CROWNING GLORY: OUR MAGNIFICENT WORLD, KNOWN THROUGH TIME AND SPACE AS **THE PEAR**.

THE PEAR WAS CREATED IN TIME IMMEMORIAL BY ÖNTONTO, GODDESS OF PLENTY. SHE THOUGHT THE **IDEAL** WORLD SHOULD LOOK LIKE A TASTY FRUIT, SO FORMED IT INTO A PEAR.

THE PEAR'S MILLIONS OF INHABITANTS AGREE THAT IT **HAS** BEEN MADE IN THE MOST IDEAL SHAPE. THIS GAVE RISE TO THE EXPRESSION 'IT'S ALL GONE A BIT MELON-SHAPED', WHICH REFERS TO A SITUATION WHEN THINGS GO AWRY. LIKE THE UNGAINLY, ROUND MELON.

NATURAL PHILOSOPHERS POSIT THAT ABOVE THE PEAR RISES A STEM WHICH, ACROSS UNFATHOMABLE DISTANCES, CONNECTS TO A BRANCH FROM WHERE **OTHER** STEMS AND PEARS MIGHT HANG, EACH WITH THEIR OWN PEOPLES, LANDS AND CUSTOMS.

THE GODS, WHO CREATED THE WORLD AND LIVE AT ITS VERY TOP, KNOW THIS IS **NONSENSE**.

LIKE THEY SAY, IT'S PEARS ALL THE WAY **UP**.



THE PEAR

THE TOPLANDS

PALACE QUARTER

STICKY CAVES

THE STEM

THE CLOUD BARRIER

GOOGLY SEA

MOUNTAINS OF THE MERPEOPLE

THE MIDDLELANDS

ANNOYING ARCHIPELAGO

LIBRARY SHIP

THE RIDGE

PLATITUDEPUS LAKE

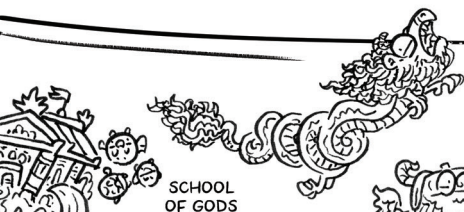
CYCLOTH SANCTUARY

THE BOTTOMLANDS

PARP PLAINS

THE BUTT





SCHOOL OF GODS



LAKE OF LURGY



AWFUL ORCHARD



MOBILE GNOME FACTORY



SHRUGGING ISLES



ADORABLE ARMOURDILLOS



MOLECANOES



CONK CASTLE



GAS PITS



THE PEAR IS DIVIDED INTO MANY DELIGHTFUL REGIONS.

AT THE VERY TIP ARE THE **TOPLANDS**, DIVINE REALMS FROM WHERE THE GODS RULE. AN IMPENETRABLE MASS OF CLOUD SEPARATES THEM FROM THE **MIDDLELANDS**, WHERE MORTALS DWELL. BELOW THE MIDDLELANDS, PAST THE RIDGES OF THE BULGE, SPREAD THE **BOTTOMLANDS**, SWARMING WITH ALL MANNER OF DANGEROUS BEASTS, LIKE THE DÉJÀ-VULTURE (YOU ALWAYS SEE IT TWICE) AND GARGANTUAN FIRE MOLES, WHO CREATE MOLECANOES WITH THEIR DIGGING. UNDERNEATH IT ALL IS **THE BUTT**, A DREARY LANDSCAPE OF NOXIOUS GASES WHERE THE UNDERWORLD SPRAWLS.

WAVE



‘What’s the use of this?’ asked Enrico, throwing the brochure on the floor. ‘There’s a bunch of idiotic names but it doesn’t explain *anything!*’

‘Yup,’ Gert joined in. ‘It’s a bit, er . . . *light* on detail.’

Olly was about to say that, as names for Southern regions go, ‘The Butt’ sounded a lot more fun than ‘Antarctica’, but Dehegelio spoke first.

‘I’m sure you’ll have plenty of time to catch up on your geography once school starts tomorrow. And talking of school—’ he said, twirling his hands with a flourish . . .

