

First among Sequels

Jasper Fforde

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Extract

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'I kicked the door open, dislodging the Danverclone, who seemed to hang in the air for a moment before a large wave caught her and she was left behind the rapidly moving taxi.'

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A Hodder & Stoughton Book

I

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The year is 2002. It is fourteen years since Thursday almost pegged out at the 1988 Croquet SuperHoop, and life is beginning to get back to normal . . .

I

Breakfast

‘The Swindon I knew in 2002 had a lot going for it. A busy financial centre coupled with excellent infrastructure and surrounded by green and peaceful countryside had made the city about as popular a place as you might find anywhere in the nation. We had our own 40,000-seater croquet stadium, the newly finished Cathedral of St Zvlkx, a concert hall, two local TV networks and the only radio station in England dedicated solely to mariachi music. Our central position in southern England also made us the hub for hi-speed overland travel from the newly appointed Clary-LaMarr travelport. It was little wonder that we called Swindon “The Jewel on the M4”.’

The dangerously high level of the Stupidity Surplus was once again the lead story in *The Owl* that morning. The reason for the crisis was clear: Prime Minister Redmond Van de Poste and his ruling Commonsense Party had been discharging their duties with a reckless degree of responsibility that bordered on inspired sagacity. Instead of drifting from one crisis to the next and appeasing the nation with a steady stream of knee-jerk legislation and headline-grabbing but arguably pointless initiatives, they had been resolutely building a raft of considered long-term plans that concentrated on unity, fairness and tolerance. It was a state of affairs deplored by Mr Alfredo Traficcone, leader of the opposition ‘Prevailing Wind’ party, who wanted to lead the nation back on to the safer grounds of uninformed stupidity.

‘How could they let it get this bad?’ asked Landen as he walked into the kitchen, having just dispatched our daughters off to school.

They walked themselves, naturally; Tuesday was thirteen and took great pride in looking after Jenny, who was now ten.

‘Sorry?’ I said, my mind full of other matters, foremost among them the worrying possibility that Pickwick’s plumage might *never* grow back, and that she would have to spend the rest of her life looking like a Tesco’s oven-ready chicken.

‘The Stupidity Surplus,’ repeated Landen as he sat down at the kitchen table. ‘I’m all for responsible government, but storing it up like this is bound to cause problems sooner or later – even by acting sensibly, the government has shown itself to be a bunch of idiots.’

‘There are a lot of idiots in this country,’ I replied absently, ‘and they deserve representation as much as the next man.’

But he was right. Unlike previous governments, which had skillfully managed to eke out our collective stupidity all year round, the current administration had decided to store it all up and then blow it on something *unbelievably* dopey, arguing that one major balls-up every ten years or so was less damaging than a weekly helping of mild political asininity. The problem was, the surplus had reached absurdly high levels where it had even surpassed the ‘monumentally dumb’ mark. Only a blunder of staggering proportions would remove the surplus, and the nature of this mind-numbing act of idiocy was a matter of considerable media speculation.

‘It says here,’ he said, getting into full rant mode by adjusting his spectacles and tapping at the newspaper with his index finger, ‘that even the government is having to admit that the Stupidity Surplus is a far, far bigger problem than they had first imagined.’

I held the striped dodo-cosy I was knitting for Pickwick against her pink and blotchy body to check the size and she puffed herself up to look more alluring, but to no avail. She then made an indignant plocking noise which was the only sound she ever uttered.

‘Do you think I should knit her a party one as well? Y’know, black, off the shoulder and with sparkly bits in it?’

‘But,’ Landen went on in a lather of outrage, ‘the prime minister has poured scorn on Traficcone’s suggestion to offload our unwanted stupidity on Third World nations, who would be only too happy to have it in exchange for several sacks of cash and a Mercedes or two.’

‘He’s right,’ I replied with a sigh, ‘Idiocy Offsets are bullshit; stupidity is our own problem and has to be dealt with on an individual “stupidity footprint” basis – and landfill *certainly* doesn’t work.’

I was thinking of the debacle in Cornwall, where 40,000 tons of half-wittedness was buried in the sixties, only for it to percolate to the surface two decades later, when the residents started to do inexplicably dumb things, such as using an electric hand whisk in the bath, and parting their hair in the centre.

‘What if,’ Landen continued thoughtfully, ‘the thirty million or so inhabitants of the British Archipelago were to all simultaneously fall for one of those e-mail “tell us all your bank details” phishing scams or – I don’t know – fall down a manhole or something?’

‘They tried the mass “walking-into-lamp-post” experiment in France to try and alleviate *La Dette Idiote*,’ I pointed out, ‘but the seriousness under which the plan was undertaken made it de facto sensible, and all that was damaged was the proud Gallic forehead.’

Landen took a sip of coffee, unfolded the paper and scanned the rest of the front page before remarking absently:

‘I took up your idea and sent my publisher a few outlines for self-help books last week.’

‘Who do they think you should be helping?’

‘Well . . . *me* . . . and them, I suppose – isn’t that how it’s meant to work? It looks really easy. How about this for a title: *Men Are from Earth, Women Are from Earth – Just Deal with It*.’

He looked at me and smiled, and I smiled back. I didn’t just love him because he had a nice knee, was tall and made me laugh, but because we were two parts of one whole, and neither of us

could imagine life without the other. I wish I had a better way to describe it, but I'm not a poet. Privately he was a husband and father to our three mostly wonderful kids, but professionally he was a writer. Unfortunately, despite winning the 1988 Armitage Shanks fiction award for *Bad Sofa*, a string of flops had left the relationship with his publisher a bit strained. So strained, in fact, that he was reduced to penning point-of-sale non-fiction classics such as: *The Little Book of Cute Pets that You Really Like to Hug* and *The Darnedest Things Kids Say*. When he wasn't working on these he was looking after our children and attempting to rekindle his career with a seriously good blockbuster – his Magnum Opus. It wasn't easy, but it was what he loved and I loved *him*, so we lived off my salary, which was about the size of Pickwick's brain – not that big, and unlikely to become so.

'This is for you,' said Landen, pushing a small parcel wrapped in pink paper across the table.

'Sweetheart,' I said, *really* annoyed and *really* pleased all at the same time, 'I don't do birthdays.'

'I know,' he said without looking up, 'so you'll just have to humour me.'

I unwrapped the package to find a small silver locket and chain. I'm not a jewellery person but I am a *Landen* person, so held my hair out of the way while he fitted the clasp, then thanked him and gave him a kiss, which he returned. And then, since he knew all about my abhorrence of birthdays, he dropped the matter entirely.

'Is Friday up?'

'At this hour?'

Friday, it should be noted, was the eldest of our three children and the only boy. He was now sixteen and instead of gearing himself up for a successful career with the Time Industry's elite operatives known as the ChronoGuard, he was instead a tedious teenage cliché – grunting, sighing at any request no matter how small and staying

in bed until past midday, then mooching around the house in a state of semi-consciousness that would do credit to a career zombie. We might not have known he was living with us if it wasn't for the grubby cereal bowls that mysteriously appeared in the vague vicinity of the sink, a muffled heavy-metal beat from his bedroom that Landen was convinced kept the slugs from the garden, and a succession of equally languid no-hopers who called at the door to mumble: 'Is Friday at home?', something that I couldn't resist answering with: 'It's a matter of some conjecture.'

'When does he go back to school?' asked Landen, who did most of the day-to-day kid work but, like many men, had trouble remembering specific dates.

'Next Monday,' I replied, having gone to retrieve the mail that had just fallen through the door. 'Exclusion from school was better than he deserved – it's a good job the cops didn't get involved.'

'All he did was throw Barney Plotz's cap in a muddy puddle,' said Landen reflectively, 'and then stomp on it.'

'Yes, but Barney Plotz was *wearing* it at the time,' I pointed out, thinking privately that the entire Plotz family stomped on in a muddy puddle might be a very good idea indeed. 'Friday shouldn't have done what he did. Violence never solved anything.'

Landen raised an eyebrow and looked at me.

'Okay, *sometimes* it solves things – but not for him, at least not yet.'

'I wonder,' mused Landen, 'if we could get the nation's teenagers to go on a serious binge of alcohol-inspired dopiness to use up the excess stupidity?'

'It's a surplus of stupidity we have, not stereotypical dreariness,' I replied, picking up an envelope at random and staring at the postmark. I still received at least half a dozen fan letters every day, even though the march of time had thankfully reduced my celebrity to what the Entertainments Facilitation Department termed 'Z-4',

which is the kind who appear in ‘Whatever happened to . . . ?’ articles and only ever get column inches if arrested, divorced, in rehab or, if the editor’s luck is really in, all three at the same time – and with some tenuous connection to Miss Corby Starlet, or whoever else happens to be the *célébrité du jour*.

The fan mail was mostly from diehard fans who didn’t care I was Z-4, bless them. They usually asked obscure questions about my many adventures that were now in print, or something about how crap the movie was, or why I’d given up professional croquet. But for the most part it was from fans of *Jane Eyre* who wanted to know how Mrs Fairfax could have been a ninja assassin, whether I *had* to shoot Bertha Rochester and if it was true I had slept with Edward Rochester – three of the more persistent and untrue rumours surrounding the factually dubious first novel of my adventures, *The Eyre Affair*.

‘What’s it about?’ Landen grinned. ‘Someone wanting to know whether Lola Vavoom will play you in the next Thursday film?’

‘There won’t be one. Not after the disaster of the first. No, it’s from the World Croquet Federation. They want me to present a video entitled *The Fifty Greatest Croquet Sporting Moments*.’

‘Is your Superhoop fifty-yard peg-out in the top ten?’

I scanned the list.

‘They have me at twenty-six.’

‘Tell them bollocks.’

‘They’ll pay me five hundred guineas.’

‘Cancel the bollocks thing – tell them you’ll be honoured and overjoyed.’

‘It’s a sell-out. I don’t do sell-outs. Not for *that* price, anyway.’

I opened a small parcel that contained a copy of the third book in my series: *The Well of Lost Plots*. I showed it to Landen, who pulled a face.

‘Are they still selling?’

‘Unfortunately.’

‘Am I in that one?’

‘No, sweetheart – you’re only in number five.’

I looked at the covering letter.

‘They want me to sign it.’

I had a stack of standard letters in the office that explained why I *wouldn’t* sign it – the first four Thursday Next books were about as true to real life as a donkey is to a turnip, and my signature somehow gave a credibility that I didn’t want to encourage. The only book I *would* sign was the fifth in the series, *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*, which unlike the first four had my seal of approval. The Thursday Next in *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco* was much more of a caring and diplomatic heroine – unlike the Thursday in the previous four, who blasted away at everything in sight, drank, swore, slept around and generally kicked butt all over the BookWorld. I wanted the series to be a thought-provoking romp around literature; books for people who like stories or stories for people who like books. It wasn’t to be. The first four in the series had been less light-hearted chroniclings of my adventures and more ‘Dirty Harry meets Fanny Hill’, but with a good deal more sex and violence. The publishers not only managed to be factually inaccurate but dangerously slanderous as well. By the time I had regained control of the series for *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*, the damage to my reputation had been done.

‘Oh-ho!’ said Landen, reading a letter. ‘A rejection from my publishers. They didn’t think *Fatal Parachuting Mistakes and How to Avoid Making Them Again* was what they had in mind for self-help.’

‘I guess their target audience doesn’t include dead people.’

‘You could be right.’

I opened another letter.

‘Hang on,’ I said, scanning the lines thoughtfully, ‘the Swindon Dodo Fanciers’ Society are offering us thirty grand for Pickers.’

I looked across at Pickwick, who had started to do that ‘almost falling over’ thing she does when she goes to sleep standing up. I had built her myself when home-cloning kits were all the rage. At almost twenty-nine and with the serial number D-009 she was the oldest Dodo in existence. Because she was an early version 1.2 she didn’t have any wings as the sequence wasn’t complete at that time, but then she didn’t have built-in cell redundancy either. It was likely she’d outlive . . . well, everything. In any event, her value had grown considerably as interest in the seventies home-cloning unextincting revolution had suddenly become fashionable. A 1978 V1.5.6 mammoth recently changed hands for sixty thousand, Great Auks in any condition could be worth up to five grand each and if you had a pre-1972 trilobite of any order you could pretty much name your price.

‘Thirty grand?’ echoed Landen. ‘Do they know she’s a bit challenged in the brain and plumage department?’

‘I honestly don’t think they care. It would pay off the mortgage.’

Pickwick was suddenly wide awake, and looked at us with the dodo equivalent of a raised eyebrow, which is indistinguishable from the dodo equivalent of sniffing a raw onion.

‘. . . and buy one of those new diesel-molasses hybrid cars.’

‘Or a holiday.’

‘We could send Friday off to the Swindon Home for Dreary Teenagers,’ added Landen.

‘And Jenny could have a new piano.’

It was too much for Pickwick, who fainted dead away in the centre of the table.

‘Doesn’t have much of a sense of humour, does she?’ said Landen with a smile, returning to his paper.

‘Not really,’ I replied, tearing up the letter from the Swindon Dodo Fanciers’ Society, ‘but you know, for a bird of Incalculably Little Brain, I’m sure she understands almost everything we say.’

Landen looked at Pickwick, who had recovered and was staring

suspiciously at her left foot, wondering whether it had *always* been there, and if not, what it might be doing creeping up on her.

‘It’s not likely.’

‘How’s the book going?’ I asked, returning to my knitting.

‘The self-help stuff?’

‘The Magnum Opus.’

Landen looked thoughtful for a moment and then said:

‘More Opus than Magnum. I’m trying to figure out whether the lack of progress is writer’s block, procrastination, idleness or just plain incompetence.’

‘Well now,’ I said, feigning seriousness, ‘with such an excellent choice, it’s hard to put my finger on it – have you considered that it might be a mixture of all four?’

‘By Gad!’ he said, slapping his palm on his forehead. ‘You could be right!’

‘Seriously, though?’

He shrugged.

‘It’s so-so. Although the story is toodling along there’s no real bite to it – I really need to inject a new plot twist or character.’

‘Which book are you working on?’

‘*Bananas for Edward.*’

‘You’ll think of something, sweetheart – you usually do.’

I dropped a stitch on my knitting, rehooked it, checked the wall clock and then said:

‘Mum texted me earlier.’

‘Has she got the hang of it yet?’

‘She said: “L&Ks4DnRNXT-SNDY??”’

‘Hmm,’ said Landen, ‘one of the most coherent yet. That’s probably code for “I’ve forgotten how to text”. Why does she even bother to try and use new technology at her age?’

‘You know what she’s like. I’ll nip over and see what she wants on my way to work.’

‘Don’t forget about Friday and the ChronoGuard *If you’ve got time for us we’ve got time for you* careers presentation this evening.’

‘How could I forget?’ I replied, having cajoled Friday about this for weeks.

‘He’s behind with his homework,’ added Landen, ‘and since you’re at least six times more scary than I am, would you do phase one of the teenager waking procedure? Sometimes I think he’s actually glued to the bed.’

‘Considering his current level of personal hygiene,’ I mused, ‘you’re probably right.’

‘If he doesn’t get up,’ added Landen with a smile, ‘you could always threaten him with a bar of soap and some shampoo.’

‘And traumatised the poor lad? Shame on *you*, Mr Parke-Laine.’

Landen laughed and I went up to Friday’s room.

I knocked on his door, received no reply and opened it to a fetid smell of old socks and unwashed adolescence. Carefully bottled and distilled, it would do sterling work as a shark repellent, but I didn’t say so. Teenage sons react badly to sarcasm. The room was liberally covered with posters of Jimi Hendrix, Che Guevara and Wayne Skunk, lead guitar and vocals of Strontium Goat. The floor was covered with discarded clothes, deadline-expired schoolwork and side plates with hardened toast crusts on them. I *think* the room was once carpeted, but I couldn’t be sure any more.

‘Hiya, Friday,’ I said to an inert object wrapped up in a duvet. I sat on the bed and prodded a small patch of skin I could see.

‘Grunt,’ came a voice from somewhere deep within the bedclothes.

‘Your father tells me that you’re behind with your homework.’

‘Grunt.’

‘Well, *yes*, you might be excluded for two weeks, but you still need to do your coursework.’

‘Grunt.’

‘The time? It’s nine right now and I need you to be sitting up with your eyes open before I leave the room.’

There was another grunt and a fart. I sighed, prodded him again and eventually something with unwashed dark hair sat up and stared at me with heavy lids.

‘Grunt,’ it said, ‘grunt-grunt.’

I thought of making some sarcastic remark about how it helps to open your mouth when talking, but didn’t, as I desperately needed his compliance, and although I couldn’t actually speak teenage mumblegrunt, I could certainly understand it.

‘How’s the music going?’ I asked, as there is a certain degree of consciousness that you have to bring teenagers towards before leaving them to get up on their own. Fall even a few degrees below the critical threshold and they would go back to sleep for eight hours – sometimes more.

‘Mumble,’ he said slowly, ‘I’ve grunt-mumble formed a band grunty-mutter.’

‘A band? What’s it called?’

He took a deep breath and rubbed his face. He knew he wouldn’t get rid of me until he’d answered at least three questions. He looked at me with his bright intelligent eyes and sniffed before announcing in a rebellious tone:

‘It’s called the Gobshites.’

‘You can’t call it that!’

Friday shrugged.

‘All right,’ he grumbled in a slovenly manner, ‘we’ll go back to the original name.’

‘Which is?’

‘The Wankers.’

‘Actually, I think Gobshites is a terrific name for a band. Pithy and degenerate all at the same time. Now listen, I know you’re not keen on this whole “Career in the Time Industry” stuff, but you

did promise. I'll expect you to be all bright eyed, alert and bushy tailed, washed, showered, scrubbed and all homework finished by the time I get back.'

I stared at the picture of slovenly teenagerhood in front of me. I'd have settled for 'awake and/or coherent' – but I always aim high.

'Alrightmum,' he said in a long slur.

As soon as I had closed the door behind me I heard him flop back. It didn't matter. He was awake and his father could do the rest.

'I expect he's raring to go?' suggested Landen when I came downstairs. 'Had to lock him in his room to curb his enthusiasm?'

'Champing at the bit,' I replied wearily. 'We'd get a more dynamic response from a vapid slug on tranquillisers.'

'I wasn't so dreary when I was a kid,' said Landen thoughtfully, handing me my tea. 'I wonder where he gets it from?'

'Modern living, but don't worry. He's only sixteen – he'll snap out of it.'

'I hope so.'

And that was the problem. This wasn't just the usual worries of concerned parents with grunty and unintelligible teenagers; he *had* to snap out of it. I'd met the future Friday several times in the past and he'd risen to the lofty heights of ChronoGuard Director General with absolute power over the Standard History Eventline; a job of awesome responsibilities. He was instrumental in saving my life, his own and the planet from destruction no less than seven hundred and fifty-six times. By his fortieth birthday he would be known as 'Apocalypse Next'. But that hadn't happened yet. And with Friday's chief interest in life at present being Strontium Goat, sleeping, Che Guevara, Hendrix and more sleeping, we were beginning to wonder how it ever would.

Landen looked at his watch.

‘Isn’t it time you were off to work, Wifey-darling? The good folk of Swindon would be utterly lost and confused without you to take the burden of floor covering decision-making from them.’

He was right. I was already ten minutes late, and kissed him several times, just in case something unexpected occurred that might separate us for longer than planned. By ‘unexpected’ I was thinking of the time he was eradicated for two years by the Goliath Corporation. Although the vast multinational were back in business after many years in the financial and political doldrums, they had not yet attempted any of the monkey business that had marked out our relationship in the past. I hoped they’d learned their lesson, but I’d never quite freed myself of the idea that a further fracas with them might be just around the corner, so always made quite sure that I’d told Landen everything I needed to tell him.

‘Busy day ahead?’ he asked as he saw me to the garden gate.

‘A large carpet to fit for a new company in the financial centre – bespoke executive pile, plus the usual quotes. I think Spike and I have a stair carpet to do in an old Tudor house with uneven treads, so one of those nightmare jobs.’

He paused and sucked his lower lip for a moment.

‘Good, so . . . no . . . no . . . *SpecOps* stuff or anything?’

‘Sweetheart!’ I said, giving him a hug. ‘That’s all past history. I do carpets these days – it’s a lot less stressful, believe me. Why?’

‘No reason – it’s just that what with Diatrymas being seen as far north as Salisbury, people are saying that the old *SpecOps* personnel might be recalled into service.’

‘Six-foot-tall carnivorous birds from the late Palaeocene would be SO-13 business if they were real, which I doubt,’ I pointed out. ‘I was SO-27. The Literary Detectives. When copies of *Tristram Shandy* are threatening old ladies in dark alleys I just *might* be asked for my opinion. Besides, no one’s reading books much any more so I’m fairly redundant.’

‘That’s true,’ said Landen. ‘Perhaps being an author isn’t such a great move after all.’

‘Then write your Magnum Opus for *me*,’ I told him tenderly. ‘I’ll be your audience, wife, fan club, sex kitten and critic all rolled into one. It’s me picking up Tuesday from school, right?’

‘Right.’

‘And you’ll pick up Jenny?’

‘I won’t forget. What shall I do if Pickwick starts shivering in that hopelessly pathetic way that she does?’

‘Pop her in the airing cupboard – I’ll try and get her cosy finished at work.’

‘Not *so* busy, then?’

I kissed him again, and departed.