

# The Muselings

(The first chapters)

Ed Wicke

**For the real Rachel, Robert and Alice.**

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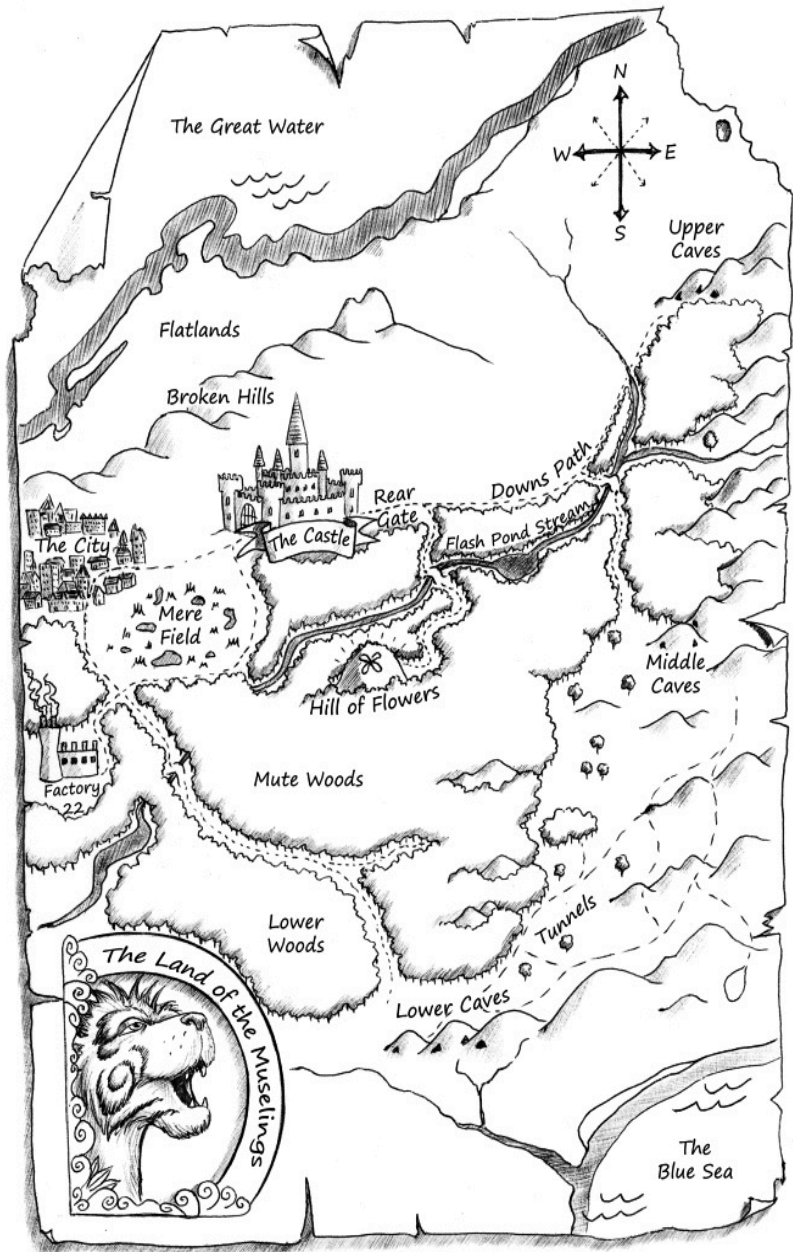
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The Great Water



Upper Caves

Flatlands

Broken Hills



The City

Mere Field



The Castle

Rear Gate

Downs Path

Flash Pond Stream

Hill of Flowers

Middle Caves



Factory 22

Mute Woods

Lower Woods

Tunnels

Lower Caves



The Land of the Muselings

The Blue Sea

# *1 Beware the Dog*

*Friday afternoon*

Summer was a season of crackling blue skies that shimmered in the sun and then burst into noisy thunderstorms just as the heat was heaviest. It was a summer when each day made you long for ice cream, when huge watermelons were sold at the greengrocers, when grandmothers sipped iced drinks and said it had never been so hot as this, not even that July before the War when they cooked minnows on the pavements.



Three hot, scruffy children were wandering through Flashetts, seeking in that small wood beside the River Test some relief from the cruel sun and the flies. There was a local song about flies - about the blue

biters and green stingers, black buzzers and nasty yellow ringers - and they were repeating it now as they stamped and splashed in the shallow river, fiercely waving sticks in front of them.

Rachel knew it best, having lived longest in the village, so she sang each line for the others to repeat.

'Buzz off, buzzers!' she sang.

'Buzz off, buzzers!' the other two echoed. She was ten, and the leader. Robert - eight - and Alice - six - were more than happy to chase along behind her.

They were all orphans and lived in the crumbling orphanage close by the Rectory. Of course, no one called it an 'orphanage'. It was known as the Children's Home, or just the Home. The orphans called it the Black Hole, which might lead you to think they didn't like it. In fact, they were quite pleased with it most days, just as their friends at school were



mostly pleased with *their* homes.

Like many Overton children, they spoke a mixture of rural Hampshire and London Cockney. They often lost an “h” from the front of words and usually lost any “t”s in the middle. They also had the habit of stretching some vowels. A sentence such as “Have you got a better chair?” might end up as something like “Ave you go’ a be’er chay-ah?” I can’t put all this in writing whenever they speak: you’ll have to imagine it most of the time.

‘Fly off, fliers!’ Rachel called out.

‘Fly off -’ began Alice and Robert.

But then the dog started to bark. Alice (who was hot, and cross with the midges) shouted, ‘*Mad dog!*’ and began to run, as did the others.

At first it was only a game. They chased each other through muddy paths, squelching joyfully, and dodged hot and breathless through the dangling brambles. Alice was soon well behind them; she had a twisted foot and could never keep up. To bring



them back, she shouted, 'Mad dog ahead!'

They turned off the path, away from the depths of the woods and onto a westbound track that led through oak and ash and tangled hazel towards a flint and stone church that sat quietly - as it had done for a thousand years - on the other side of the winding road that climbed slowly to Watership Down.

They walked again, wiping the sweat from their eyes. They felt dreadfully hot as they came to the great oak. It stood near the road, in sight of the ancient, sprawling churchyard opposite, toothed with old gravestones.

Gasping at the heavy air, they checked the ground for ants and then sat with their backs to the tree's huge, gnarled trunk. They watched a few cars move wearily up the hill towards the grass-green South Downs that shimmered in the hot distance.

After a few minutes they heard the dog again. It must be a large animal: the barking was deep and it crashed heavily through the undergrowth that half-circled the tree. Although the beast was hidden behind bushes and ferns, it was soon near enough for

them to hear its panting.

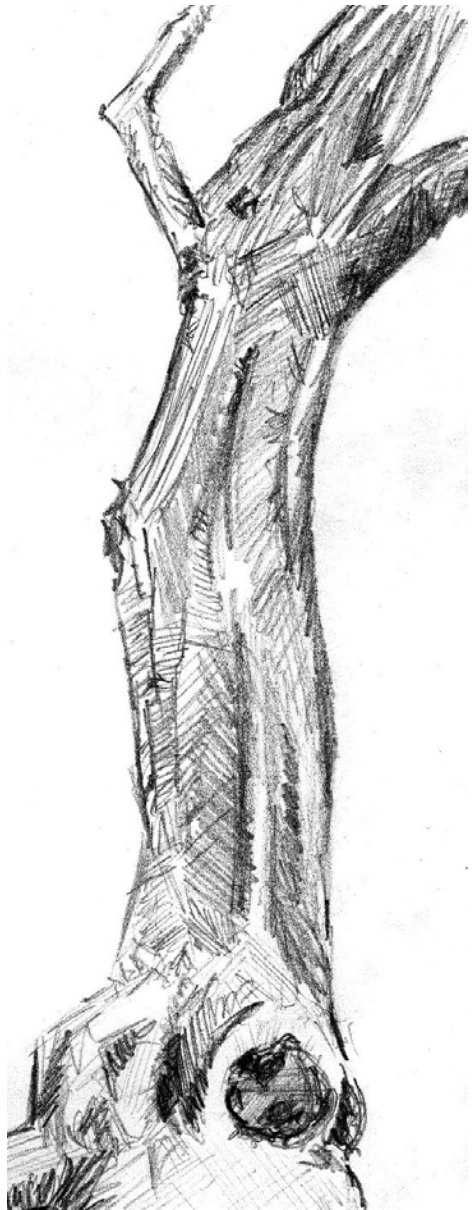
Robert had been carelessly feeling the wrinkled trunk of the old tree. Now he cried out:

'Look - one of those hedgehog things!'

'So what?' Rachel snapped. She was anxious about the dog. There were loud crackings as the beast leapt through the thick brush nearby: closer yet. Alice gripped Rachel's hand.

Silence fell for a few seconds; then they could hear heavy breathing, quite close now. The woods seemed to be watching them.

A branch moved in



the scrub; something dark was pushing into the grass. Robert and Alice shouted at the same time. Alice cried something about a wolf; Robert about a door. Then suddenly there was a howling and leaping, and the three of them cowered against the tree. Something fell or broke or burst at their backs; and as darkness rose up before them, a darkness opened behind them as well.

Alice shouted once more - something about mother - and then they were all falling helplessly into blackness.

The barking died away in hollow bursts. There was silence, and a sudden warmth. Then nothing.



## *2 Creatures*



*Friday afternoon, Overton time*

Rachel awoke and found that opening her eyes made no difference to the darkness around her. 'Are you all right?' she asked softly.

'Yes.' The others spoke together.

Then Alice alone: 'There's something wrong with my foot. I can't move it.'

'I think I'm sittin' on it.' Robert shifted to one side. There seemed to be a wall to his left - a wall that

curved inwards. 'Where are we?'

'Aren't we in the tree?' asked Rachel. 'I thought we fell inside it. You shouted something about a door.'

Then I sort of fainted. It all seems like a dream now.'

'Didn't dream the dog,' Alice added in a low voice.

Rachel said, 'I was dreaming just now - before I woke. The same dream I had at home, I think. With the creatures and the castle and the horrible flying things. Then... no, it's gone now. I can't remember.'

Alice asked, 'Rob - was there a hedgehog creature?'

'Yeah. And one of those bear things, too. Mixed in with the tree bark, clear as a drawing. The bear person was pointin' towards a round shape like a door knob. I was pushin' that when you two knocked me over. Then we fell down.'

He peered at them through the dark. He couldn't see more than a dim variation in the blackness, which must be Alice; Rachel was farther away and couldn't be seen at all. They were sitting on a cool, flat surface. He stretched out both arms. They met a rough, grainy, curved wall that smelled of wood.

'We fell *up*,' Alice corrected him.

'Don't be silly.'

She insisted, 'We did - I watched when we fell in.  
The door went down, so we went up.'

'You can't fall up.'

'Can.'

'Stupid!'

Alice began to cry. Robert felt to his left and put his arm around her. 'Sorry, Ali. I didn't mean it. Come on, don't cry. We'll be all right.'

He heard Rachel stand up, feeling along the inside of the trunk with one hand and waving the other above her head so she wouldn't bang it. There was nothing above.

'Let's be doing, then,' she said in her bravest voice. 'We'll get nowhere if we sit about on our bottoms. Be careful how you stand up. Let's hold hands. All right?'

It was better now - holding onto one another. Rachel said, 'We ought to pray, really. You're supposed to, when you're in trouble.'

Alice giggled. 'We're in sight of the church, anyway!'

Rachel said, 'We would be, if we could see anything at all.... Look!'

Behind Rob, there was the thinnest of lines of light. It ran up from the floor and then across and down again, like the outline seen around the doorway into a lighted room. They pressed against the wall here, feeling for a handle, but the cool surface was quite smooth. They pushed hard against it until they were hot and the air was stuffy.

Rachel said, 'We're being stupid. The door opened *in* when we fell inside. So try to pull it, don't push!'

In vain they tried to force their fingernails into the cracks and pull the door towards them. Eventually, anger overtook them and they simply kicked at the trunk until their feet hurt.

Then Rachel shouted at it in exasperation, 'Open, you stupid thing!'

And it did, noiselessly.

A full light smote their eyes. It was so bright that they had to peer through grimy fingers until they could see clearly. Anxiously - and curiously - they stepped out of the tree trunk and gazed about them.

They were not in the back of Flashetts.

And yet it was not altogether different. To their left

was a track like the one they had walked along just minutes before; it passed up and over a rounded, wooded hill that gave way to grass higher up. About them were brambles and ferns and low shrubs mixed with ordinary trees; the hillside they stood upon looked much as they remembered it, though the church had disappeared along with the graveyard and the tarmac road. On the ground were woodland flowers such as you might find at home....

No, perhaps not. All the colours were odd - they were too vivid, for a start. Or was it just the sunlight? It wasn't any warmer here but the air was clearer, as if it had been cleaned of all the dirt and smoke of humanity.

Then they saw the birds - heavens! What bright feathers! Each one might be a kingfisher or a parrot! Birds sang in the bushes and from the trees: and in this place you would swear that the songs had words, and the music a meaning. The children gaped at all this and turned slowly from one side to another, staring at this strange country.

Behind them, the door quietly shut itself.

Then they heard the voices, somewhere downhill to their right, coming from where the church would have been: high and low voices joined in song. Yet it was not like any song they had ever heard. Each voice seemed to be singing different words - words that the children couldn't quite understand - and the song blended the words together into clear, soft, beautiful music. It was as if people were singing a discussion.

Without thinking about the danger, the children walked - then ran - to find the source of the music. They didn't consider whether the singers might be savage and cruel. Somehow the music itself reassured them.

They came to the side of a narrow clay road that cut through this open woodland and stopped, their hearts pounding. On the other side, in a circle, were a dozen creatures. Each faced inwards, almost touching its neighbours. None was clothed; all were covered in fur - black, brown, grey or a coppery red. Most of them were roughly Rachel's height on their two stubby legs, but you could see that they would be equally at home on all fours.

In our world you would call them animals, until you saw their faces. Each furry face held eyes bright and intelligent; each mouth was open in conversation or song. A smile was to be seen here or there, and a twinkle gleamed in the occasional eye.

The faces varied greatly. Some made you think of bears; others cats; others weasels; others wolves, or some creature not yet created in our world. Yet all had the look of beasts that were wild and free and totally, awesomely cool. Their fur was generally short and was marked with patterns: spirals, stars, swirling waves and strange, angular shapes that hinted at letters, numbers or musical notes.

‘It’s them!’ Robert breathed. His eyes were large. He turned to Rachel. ‘It’s -’

But a sudden noise from the road scattered their thoughts. A trumpet sounded. Horses were galloping. A voice shouted, something about a Queen. As the children turned this way, then that, they half glimpsed the creatures vanishing quietly into the woods beyond. Only Alice saw one of them turn before going and raise a hand - or paw - to the children as they stood startled by the road.

### *3 The Queen*

*Friday afternoon*

A gong clanged.  
Down the red clay road, raising a fine dust, came a procession. The children stood and watched, frozen by uncertainty. Their first impulse had been to run after the creatures: but those had fled too quickly for the children to follow. Then they had nearly turned back to the woods on their side of the road, but by now they had been seen. They waited, wide-eyed and worried.

A horse passed without checking its stride; the creature upon it, monkey-like, paid them no heed





except to smile grimly at them. Next, two crocodile-creatures slithered - faster than you would think possible - along the smooth track, snapping at the air with their huge jaws. These eyed the children angrily and one nipped at Rachel as they passed, making her leap back in surprise. After them came a parade of men who proudly stared before them, marching to time and swinging their arms precisely.

Lastly came the Queen, sitting in an open carriage drawn by two horses. The carriage gleamed with gold, silver and bright jewels. She in her turn glittered and sparkled and flashed with every quiver of the vehicle.

The children gaped at her. She seemed a fiery gem that flamed in the sun and made all the woods look pale and dark in comparison. She shone with wealth, from the diamonds in her crown to the hem of her red dress crusted with rubies, emeralds, turquoises and a host of other jewels the children didn't know the names of.

With the raising of a bejewelled right hand, she caused the whole procession to stop. She looked

down at the children with an indulgent smile. At once they felt more at ease, for to the eye she was as human as they. She was also terribly beautiful, with brown hair falling softly to her waist and bright blue eyes set in a young face. She studied their grubby, ordinary faces for a long time, her smile continuing.

When at last she spoke, her voice made them stand up straighter. It was friendly and unhurried, but also powerful and rather grand, like a kindly lioness purring: like something that *could* eat you, but has decided not to... yet.

She purred in a grand, cultured English accent that had just a hint of something foreign, with every 's' nearly a 'z': 'I am *so* pleased you have come! Now let me see: you will be Rachel, will you not? And Robert, of course - and Alice? You are very welcome!' She gestured to each in turn, and they nodded wonderingly as she told them their names.

She continued: 'And I expect you are hot, thirsty and a little hungry? Come with me, and my wonderful kitchens will provide a feast fit for princes and princesses.'

The way she said 'kitchens' was so delicious that the

children instinctively moved towards the coach - except for Robert, who said, 'What?' as he often did, being a little deaf (and *very* deaf when he didn't want to hear).

'How do the kittens do that?' he asked. 'Do they catch the food? Or do they carry it on their backs? Or do they -'

'Not kittens! *Kitchens!*' The royal smile did not disappear, but it was a little thinner now.

'Thank you,' said Rachel. 'We would be pleased to come.' She would have dropped a curtsy, but no one had taught her such things. So instead she gave a little nod of the head, then frowned at Robert and aimed a kick at his ankle as he passed her. He *was* a pain at times.