

# THE SHOP BEFORE LIFE

NEIL HUGHES



A SAMPLE FROM

THE  
SHOP  
BEFORE  
LIFE

NEIL HUGHES

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The Shop Before Life  
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[www.tomhumberstone.com](http://www.tomhumberstone.com)  
Book design by Sienna Tristen  
[www.siennatristen.com](http://www.siennatristen.com)

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*For everyone still choosing who to become.*





TO FULLY UNDERSTAND Faythe's story—or, truly, anybody's—you must first understand the entire history of the universe. Luckily, provided you're willing to skip a detail or two, that won't take long.

Before anything, there was nothing. But now, there's plenty of stuff. Bacteria. Geese. Tables. More kinds of cheese than anybody could count. Trees. Cathedrals. Even *goats*.

Some consider it strange that each of these 'goats' appears with an individual personality. Why do those in charge consider *that* necessary? Surely nobody would object if all goats were exactly the same.

Perhaps Management simply appreciate the personal touch. After all, they don't reserve this luxury solely for goats. Virtually anything more complex than a worm comes with unique personal characteristics.

In *most* cases, it is unclear how this individuality comes about. How does, say, any given potato know to be one shape and not another? Frustratingly, no matter how forcefully they are begged or threatened, no potato has ever answered even this simplest of questions.

Fortunately there is one species that is simpler than potatoes: humans.

This unusual bunch spend most of their time on Earth, but new humans don't simply appear there out of nowhere. That would be *ridiculous*. Instead, they appear out of nowhere in the prelife. From there, they travel to Earth as quickly as they can, pausing at the very end to visit the Shop Before Life, the magical emporium where they choose who they will become.

It's a shame that no other species handles their affairs in such a straightforward and easily understandable manner. Certainly, whatever the goats are doing, it doesn't involve the Shop. In fact, during the entire history of the universe, only one goat has ever been seen in the Shop Before Life—and the Security officer involved was fired shortly afterwards.



Faythe was mostly unaware of all this. She knew about the Shop, of course. Everyone did. But it had been decades since she'd given the place much of a thought. And she knew nothing at all about goats.

Her prelife had been derailed long ago by a particularly vicious case of curiosity. Most people rush to Earth, but she had succumbed to the opposite impulse and simply stayed put. Time was plentiful, so why hurry? The Shop Before Life would always be there, and Earth always beyond it.

And so, centuries ago, she had abandoned the well-worn Road to the Shop, diverted by nothing more than the intriguing sight of a tall tree atop a faraway hill. From this peak, she had been drawn into a valley filled with interesting-looking plants, after which she'd followed a deep blue stream up another hill, and from there she'd seen a towering rock jutting high above a plain, far beyond the Beginning of the Road.

That rock—*the* Rock—turned out to contain deep caves, and, even more thrillingly, a small community of others who'd also been distracted from the natural human impulse to migrate towards the Shop. She had been welcomed with open arms and so she'd stayed . . . just for a short while.

An instant later, two centuries had passed, and the instinctive itch saying 'go to Earth' was barely even a memory.



IT WAS SEVENTY-FOUR THOUSAND and twenty-one days since Faythe had first awoken at the Beginning. A day of no significance whatsoever.

Then again, no day had been significant for a long, long time. She hadn't even noticed the passing of her two hundredth pre-birthday until weeks afterwards—which was, honestly, a mercy. Some decades ago her friends had discovered the Earth tradition of blowing out one candle for each year of existence, and ever since, pre-birthdays had become a devastating test of endurance.

On this particular unremarkable day, she was atop the towering Rock which had been her home for almost her whole existence.

She sat cross-legged in the sunshine, enjoying the heat of the rough stone on her legs, and concentrated as she piled stones into a pleasing shape. This was partly what passed for fun after two centuries living inside a hollowed-out rock in the middle of nowhere, but mostly she was waiting for an opportunity to try one of her *ideas*.

Just as she was about to give up on making these particular stones into a perfect pyramid, a flicker of motion from below drew her attention. She peered over the smooth edge of the Rock with a thrill of anticipation as she saw what she'd been waiting for. Jahu was approaching his customary sunbathing spot.

She held her breath and ducked as her friend paused to peer around suspiciously. It was fine, though—he didn't even attempt to look up.

She'd been counting on this neglect of the third dimension ever since she'd heard that on Earth people consider it plausible for someone to be surprised by a stationary banana skin on a floor.

Apparently satisfied, Jahu lay down and closed his eyes. She grinned. It was time for today's experiment in creative annoyance.

Moving quietly, she released a rock onto the steep slope beneath her. In accordance with the ancient principles of gravity, it dropped *exactly* like a stone, tumbling down a narrow gap and out of view.

Perfect.

She counted. *One two thr- CUCLRNCH*. The sound of a falling rock hitting a sturdy homemade seesaw was one of her favourites.

Her eyes darted back and forth, scanning the space between Jahu and the Rock. If the seesaw worked as expected then . . . there!

A tiny cluster of blurs whizzed towards her unsuspecting friend from the base of cliff, below the overhang. Quickly, she whistled for his attention, and—yes!—he sat up to wave, just in time for the battalion of flying eggs to smash into his happy, smiling face.

Furious cursing mingled with her gleeful laughter, loudly filling the space between the Rock and the nearby woods.

Today's prank had definitely been a success.



“You are the *worst* person.” Jahu was wearing a fresh shirt and a furious expression as Faythe entered the cave system beneath the Rock.

After thousands of years of human occupation, the Rock was surprisingly spacious and comfortable, at least by rock standards. A long, straight shaft in the ceiling brought evening sunlight into the cosy living room, where it illuminated both the hand-made furniture and Jahu's righteous indignation for her to enjoy.

“You've always been the worst,” he continued. “One day Management will hear about you, and you'll suffer some sort of eternal punishment. And you know what? You'll deserve it!”

This was too much. She cackled, which only irritated him further.

The final remaining occupant of the Rock, Tapak, didn't look up. He was at the far end of the room, chopping vegetables and dumping them into a pot. Nearby, the fire crackled and belched smoke up a narrow chimney.

"Eternal punishment!" She made a mock-terrified face as she pulled up a chair next to Jahu. "Management famously hate eggs, pranks and fun, don't they?"

He narrowed his eyes. "It's not the prank, it's the cruelty. I was sure I was safe this time."

"That's right," she said, with pride. "I waited for *ages*." She nudged him under the table. "You have to admit it was funny though."

"No."

Tapak coughed from across the room. "In fairness to Faythe, it's definitely funny." He returned his attention to the vegetables.

Jahu gave the back of Tapak's head a long look, and then sighed. "This is why we have no other friends."

She stuck out her tongue. "Lucky for me you'd never be so immature."

This post-prank teasing was always her favourite part. No doubt he would already be planning tomorrow's revenge, just as she was planning for the day after.

"Well, lucky for me I don't need to be so immature." Jahu leaned back and slid his feet up onto the table. It didn't look very comfortable, but he grinned nevertheless. "The universe is going to punish you for me. Isn't that right, Tapak?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? Management themselves said so, did they?"

"Even better." He rocked his chair back on two legs. "The storyteller told tales of all of our futures. And yours is . . ." He let out a slow whistle.

Faythe's mouth dropped open. "Uh . . . a storyteller? When? Don't lie to me!"

"Do I ever lie? He came last night, while you were clunking around above. We shouted for you but you never heard."

"I did hear," she said, through gritted teeth. She'd spent the previous evening experimenting with her seesaw. "I thought you just wanted me to clean up in here."

"That's *exactly* what we wanted," said Tapak, still not looking up from

his work. “But we also thought you’d want to meet the storyteller.”

“Of course I’d want to! I can’t believe you didn’t physically come get me.”

She aimed a swipe across the table at Jahu’s feet. He scrambled to get out of the way, narrowly avoiding tipping his chair backwards.

“You missed!” he gloated. “Just like last night!”

“But what did I miss?” She glared at Jahu. *No*. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of asking again. “Tapak?!”

The rhythmic chopping noise halted for a moment. “Do you have to drag me into it? It was just the usual stories.”

“Pleeease! It’ll annoy Jahu . . .”

Tapak sighed. “Fine. It was mostly tales of the Shop. He told the one about the Shopkeeper and the magic cat.”

Faythe cursed. She loved that story.

“And he told us all the news from Ostholme—they’ve voted to expand again, in case you care.”

“I think you’re forgetting the best bit . . .” prompted Jahu, his eyes glinting.

“And then he told all of our futures.”

Her mouth dropped open. “What? No! What did he say?!”

Jahu rocked his chair again with a satisfied grin. “He said you’d have to wait to find out. Or be very nice to me.”

She scowled. “Did he happen to predict you would suffer painful injuries in about thirty seconds?”

He laughed and let his front chair-legs crash to the ground so he could lean over the table. “Fine! I wanted to tell you anyway. Me and Tapak are going to have great lives on Earth!”

She looked at him sceptically. “*Earth?! For a moment I was scared I’d missed something good. Planning to go there, are you?”*

Jahu shrugged. “No. But it’s nice to know the universe has grand plans for when I do.” He gave her a sly smile. “But don’t you want to know your future?”

“Yes . . . but I don’t like that look you’re giving me. Is it bad?”

“Not bad, exactly. He said—what was it, Tapak?”

“The end of everything is within its beginning.” The sound of vegetables being scraped into a pot echoed off the rocky ceiling.

She frowned. “What does that mean?”

“No idea,” said Jahu. “That wasn’t the bit I meant. He said that you, Faythe . . .” He paused, relishing her impatience. “—yes, you . . . are going to experience trials.”

“Trials?!”

He wiggled his fingers and exaggerated his voice. “Threeeeeeee triiiiaals. And you will suffer in the process!”

“Suffer *greatly*,” added Tapak.

“Oh, come on.” She scowled. “How could he know that? He’s never even met me!”

“You shouldn’t question the man’s powers!” Jahu raised a finger in mock warning. “Maybe he stole a jar of SEES THE FUTURE from the Shop.”

“Not this again! That would never work as a trait. Management wouldn’t allow it.”

“How do you know? You’ve never even seen a trait in person.”

She rolled her eyes with a theatrical sigh. “Yes, yes, we *know*, someone once showed you a trait from the Shop Before Life. And it ‘glowed’. But it doesn’t make you an expert in how the traits work! And there’s no way that Management would let people mess with *time* when—”

“Anyway!” Tapak interjected before the old argument could build up momentum. “The story was about you facing all these trials. It was a good one—the world turned black and you raced around painting it full of colour again. Though the end was a bit disappointing. It turned out you had what you needed all along. Still, your future was way more interesting than ours. Mine is probably just endless lonely vegetables.” He waved the knife dramatically. “Like my present.”

That was clearly a hint to help, but she ignored it. “Hold on,” she said, frowning. “If I know I’ll experience great suffering, why would I go to Earth in the first place?”

“That’s the best bit!” Jahu thumped his palm on the table as he prepared to deliver the final twist. “Your terrible suffering—”

“*Great* suffering,” corrected Tapak.

“Yes, great suffering, whatever. It wasn’t on Earth—it happens here, in the prelife!”

Faythe snorted. “Hilarious,” she said drily.

Nevertheless, her scalp prickled with discomfort and there was an odd, anxious twisting in her chest. She squashed the feelings down. It wasn't as if she *actually* believed travelling storytellers could tell the future. They just wanted to entertain their audience and earn a good meal. But still . . .

"I'm serious," said Jahu, rocking his chair again. "That's what he said."

"Well." She stood and moved past the table. "The universe needn't bother punishing me further. I'm already suffering living with *you*." She jabbed Jahu playfully on the back of the head, and ducked out of the way as he leapt out of his seat. The pair began chasing each other around the table.

"Let's start your first Trial of Suffering now!" yelled Jahu.

Tapak rolled his eyes. "Food's nearly ready," he announced, resignedly. He watched them run around for a moment. "With no thanks to you two idiots. Fetch some plates, you fools!"

It was an ordinary evening in the Rock.



That night was a long one. After dinner Faythe felt oddly unsettled. Her mind was buzzing uncomfortably, but not in a way she could express. She quickly made excuses and retired to her bedroom.

But after hours of restless failure to sleep, she gave up. She picked up her blanket and slipped out through the living room and along the wide passage leading outside.

It was a warm night and the sky glittered with stars. She climbed the winding path to the top of the Rock and gazed out towards the horizon. If nothing else, she would punish her brain for the unscheduled insomnia by forcing it to think. She strongly suspected human brains hated thinking—why else would they avoid it at all costs?

She and Jahu had spent many hours up here, often arguing about whether it was possible they could see the faint glow of the Beginning of the Road. He claimed that it was too far away for anybody to see, and, more importantly, that there were actual physical hills in the way. Her counterpoint was that it *wasn't* too far, and that he wasn't trying hard

enough if he let a few mere hills stop him. Neither of them particularly cared who was actually right, but it was fun to debate.

She stretched and yawned. Being tired but unable to sleep was so unfair. She had often wondered why Management allowed it. Or why you could be thirsty while also needing the bathroom. The prelife was full of such mysteries, but presumably Management knew what they were doing.

There was no mystery about what was keeping her up, however. Missing the storyteller had been needling at her since dinner. It had been such a long time since any visitors had passed by and even longer since she'd seen a proper storyteller. She would have loved to have heard all their futures.

She became aware of a pain in her leg, and shifted awkwardly as she sought a comfortable position on the stone. Thinking of the future always made her uneasy. She preferred to give it as little attention as possible, but the nonsensical prophecy of 'trials' was an uncomfortable reminder that she *had* a future, whether it truly contained terrible—no, great—suffering, or not.

She sighed, trying to dislodge a tightness in her chest. Perhaps she wasn't destined to spend eternity finding creative ways to splatter loved ones with eggs?

Aimlessly, she threw a stone off the top of the Rock. She waited, but the sound of the landing was drowned out by the wind.

An unfamiliar feeling settled over her, not one she could name. Her shoulders were tense, and her foot jiggled of its own accord. In the back of her mind, a quiet voice piped up. *What if the storyteller is right about the future?*

She frowned. Only Management knew the future.

*I mean, he ISN'T right, obviously,* continued the voice. *But what if great suffering IS awaiting here in the prelife?*

She chewed the idea over. There was a simple answer: if she knew staying would cause misery, then obviously she would accelerate her plans to go to Earth.

*Wait . . . accelerate?! What plans?*

She suddenly felt defensive against her own thoughts—always an unsettling sensation. Her plans had always involved Earth, hadn't they? Just . . . not yet.

*Why not yet?*

This thought echoed into an abrupt silence in her mind. The wind picked up further, and she hugged her knees. That uncomfortable, nameless feeling scratched at her once more, a restless, agitating sensation which made her want to get up and move and . . .

In an instant, it dawned on her what she was feeling. What she'd been feeling all night. And perhaps for even longer than that.

Faythe was *bored*.



Boredom is dangerous to humans. It makes them *do* things.

Perhaps that had been Management's intention, but—as with all higher beings—it's impossible to be certain.

Some of their design choices were certainly strange. Humans could have been devised to be rational, to calmly weigh up pros and cons and to sensibly calculate the best option in every situation. But there must have been a rushed design meeting, or tight production deadline, because humans *actually* operate via an unholy mix of borderline irrationality and random impulse.

Once boredom is added to this mix, humans are not immune to recklessness. They're very, very mune to it.



A crack appeared in Faythe's centuries-old repression of her hunger to live, and, quite accidentally, she came to a decision.

A new life on Earth beckoned. A *first* life, even.

As she considered the possibility of leaving, it seemed as if the future physically morphed before her eyes, the comforting certainty of constant routine transforming into a vast swell of endless potential.

Suddenly overwhelmed, she summoned all her powers of emotional

control and ran down the path in a blind panic. When she reached the bottom of the Rock, she kept charging onwards, up and over the small wooded hill where Tapak liked to take his walks.

A few minutes later, she leaned against a tree, gasping for breath. Now that the nervous adrenaline had burned off she felt a little silly. She took a slow, deep breath. It wasn't as if she had to go to Earth just because the idea had suddenly appeared in her head. She should sleep. This itch would be gone by morning.

But just as she turned back towards the Rock, a muffled shout drifted between the trees.

She frowned. The others would never be awake at this hour, never mind alert enough to be shouting. Curiosity engaged, she made her way towards the noise, carefully picking her way over criss-crossing roots in the bright starlight. High above, the sky was developing the faintest hint of deep blue, suggesting the sun was considering showing up to work today—but not quite yet.

Soon, the sound resolved into two unfamiliar voices.

“—complete waste of time! And I'll tell him it's your fault.”

Two strange men were facing one another in a clearing. She couldn't make out their faces in the dim, greyish light under the trees. The speaker—the shorter one—had a nasally voice, a drawl of vowels punctuated by unclear consonants. The man was waving his arms forcefully as he yelled.

She couldn't believe her luck. Strangers were exciting, but getting to eavesdrop on a public argument was a real treat.

The taller man appeared unmoved by the apparent threat. “Pah! What will you tell him, exactly? He won't care.”

“Nonsense! Why send us out at all, if he doesn't care?”

She ducked behind a tree as the taller man glanced around the clearing. “You don't get politics,” he replied, sounding bored. “Look, I've noted your opinion. Now can you help me find that cursed Road?”

“What does politics have to do with anything?”

“Come on! It's all politics. You'd think after all this time you'd get that.” He sighed. “Listen, both of us know precisely how important this is, so can we work together and get it done, already?”

“Exactly! We have to do it *right*,” said the shorter man, pleadingly. “Otherwise, any old—”

She leaned around the tree to get a better view, but as she shifted her weight, she tripped and stumbled into the clearing. The pair whirled around to face her.

“Oh, hello!” she said, thinking hurriedly. “I was just, um . . . not eavesdropping.”

Her brain had no muscles, but it still managed to cringe.

The men exchanged glances. Now that she was closer, she could see that they appeared unlike anybody she’d ever met. She squinted in the subdued light, staring at the patches in their hair where the colour was all washed-out—almost grey, even—and at the curious wrinkles around their eyes and across their foreheads. *How did they get those?*

She decided to keep talking before they picked holes in her expertly crafted cover story. “I’m from nearby!” she said, with all the cheeriness she could force. “Anyway . . . did I hear you say you were looking for the Road?”

They could hardly be blamed for getting lost. The nearest part of the Road was barely more than an overgrown path, and, anyway, every single road in the prelife was called “The Road”. The residents of the prelife either didn’t care enough to change this, or had forgotten they were allowed to.

The tall stranger eyed her curiously. “So you *were* eavesdropping?”

Admittedly, that cover story hadn’t been her finest work. “Only a bit,” she admitted.

“Very well. And you live nearby?”

The shorter man clicked his tongue in frustration. “Now who’s wasting our time?” he said.

“I’m just doing due diligence.”

The shorter man rolled his eyes. “Seriously? On her? She’s already lied to us once!”

“Better a bad liar than a good one,” replied the taller man, winking at her.

Faythe laughed politely, suppressing her usual quip about lies being more fun versions of the truth, at least until she had more of an idea what was going on.

“I disagree.” The shorter man huffed.

“Well, do you have a better idea? It’s your fault we’re in the middle of nowhere, remember.”

“Not that again! Look, I was saying we need to do this right, and—”

“I’m saying that when Management provide us with a perfect opportunity, it ought to be explored!”

“Oh, a perfect opportunity is, what, a girl who *exists in a clearing*, is it? Our standards fell faster than I expected.”

The tall man smiled at her. “Please, forgive my colleague’s rudeness. It’s been a long trip.”

She had no clue what to make of any of this, but it was all so interesting that any rudeness was quite irrelevant. In place of the restless boredom of earlier, she was filled with energy. Questions tumbled through her mind faster than she could grasp onto them. “A long trip from where?” she asked. “And a perfect opportunity for *what?*”

The tall man opened his arms wide, and answered neither question. “My name is Aaron, and this is Gabriel.” His teeth sparkled brightly, even in the early morning twilight. “We’re looking for someone.”

Disappointment flooded through her. “Oh. I don’t know many people. I probably can’t help you.”

“No, no,” Aaron waved his hands dismissively. “We’re not looking for anyone specific—”

Behind him, Gabriel coughed.

“Well, okay, we are, but not *specifically* specific, as it were.”

Gabriel’s cough became a sigh, and then an interruption. “What my extremely intelligent partner is attempting to say is that we need a person with certain qualities. I think we’re unlikely to succeed here, so if you could point us towards the Road, then—”

Aaron stepped forward and put a friendly hand on her shoulder. “Isn’t Gabriel funny? I do enjoy his hilarious cynicism. But *enough*,” he said, shooting his partner an intense look. “Let’s have a chat. I have a good feeling about you, er . . . ?”

“Faythe.”

“Faythe! How perfect. Tell me, where exactly are you from?”

“I lived—” she caught her incorrect use of the past tense with surprise, and corrected it immediately “—I *live* in the Rock. It’s a big, um, rock. Where I live.”

Aaron nodded. His expression was disconcertingly sincere. “And how long have you lived there?”

It felt oddly embarrassing to admit it. “About two hundred years.”

Aaron shot a told-you-so look at Gabriel, who looked up with sudden interest.

“Two hundred, you say?” said Gabriel.

“Yes?”

Aaron’s grin—impossibly—got wider still. “What did I tell you! Management always provide. We’re searching for someone who will stick around, and you”—he jabbed a victorious finger towards her—“are showing the kind of dedication to the prelife we need. What did you do with that time, precisely?”

Her eyes darted around while she thought. “I played with friends. Explored, a little. Some art, sometimes.” She tensed uncomfortably. These men appeared well-travelled, and she’d basically only ever lived in a cave. “I suppose I haven’t done much,” she admitted.

He clapped. “That’s wonderful, really wonderful.”

“I have been considering going to Earth,” she said, hoping that sounded impressive.

“Earth!” He laughed. “I think we can do better than that.”

She frowned. “Better . . . how?”

But no answer came. The wind picked up, rippling the grass around their ankles.

Aaron nodded smugly to his partner. “I think we may have found who we’re looking for.”

Gabriel rubbed his chin as he studied her. “Let’s see about that. Tell us more about ‘considering’ going to Earth.”

She bristled irritably. “I just decided to go tonight.”

Aaron smiled. “Sounds like you’re not particularly committed to the idea?”

She shook her head uncertainly.

Gabriel pulled a faintly disgusted expression. “So you just suddenly felt like being born as a *baby*, did you?”

He might be very irritating, but she didn’t blame him for this disgust. Apparently people didn’t just appear on Earth, nice and cleanly, like they did in the prelife. It was customary to emerge in a smaller form, or something. She even had the vague sense other people were involved. Probably wasn’t a big deal, though.

“Maybe being born is the price you pay for an interesting existence,” she said.

“And that’s what you want? An interesting existence?”

“Yes! Doesn’t everyone?”

Gabriel turned to his partner with a smug smirk. “You see? It’s no good. She’s seeking adventure.”

She frowned. She still had no idea what this was about, but she refused to be sneered at. “Maybe not adventure, exactly. I just needed some change.”

Aaron’s toothy grin returned in full force. “Precisely! The right amount of change. Not enough to rock the boat, but sufficient to change course.”

She knew exactly nothing about boats. “That’s right,” she said, nodding wisely. “I change the direction of boats, but I don’t rock them.”

He clapped. “Perfect.”

“Perfect for *what*?”

The tall man’s teeth dazzled further. “We work for the Shop Before Life.” He left a suitably dramatic pause. “Or, rather, we represent their Management.”

Her eyes widened twice—first at the mention of the Shop, and then nearly falling out of her head altogether at his second statement. “You’re *Management*!?” Tingles of excitement shot through her whole body. Management were in charge of life, death, creation *and* a highly successful retail enterprise. “What are they like? Do they know everyone, like the stories say? Are they watching us right now?”

“Oh, we’d love to answer all your questions,” said Aaron, “but I’m afraid we don’t have much time. We’re searching for a new Apprentice to work at the Shop Before Life. If that’s not you, we need to move on quickly.”

Her eyes had already run out of room to widen into so her jaw dropped open instead. “Why does the Shopkeeper need an Apprentice?”

Gabriel gave a snort so disparaging that she winced. “You think she runs the entire Shop Before Life? Alone?”

That did sound silly, but she’d never questioned it until now. “I, uh, always thought the Shopkeeper, um . . .” She trailed off, unsure how to finish.

“That was an excellent question, Faythe,” said Aaron, perhaps too kindly. “Along with the Children, the Shopkeeper often has an Apprentice to assist her. And I’m hoping we’ve found a new candidate.”

*Children!* Wasn't that the smaller form people used on Earth until they became normal-sized? "The Shopkeeper has children?!"

"Never mind that," snapped Gabriel. "We truly don't have time to educate you about everything in the whole prelife. My partner might have given the mistaken impression that this search for an Apprentice is trivial, but we require dedication, loyalty, willingness to listen, and more. The new Apprentice can't just be anyone. They must be *perfect*. And—"

"So." Aaron's interruption made Gabriel's eyes bulge with fury. "Does any of this sound like anybody you know?"

She had to admit it did sound like her. She was dedicated and loyal. Mostly. But . . . "I'm not sure about 'perfect'", she said, biting her lip.

"And that's what makes you perfect!" said Aaron, punching the air triumphantly. "A perfect candidate would be aware of her own flaws. Of course, in an ideal world you'd already have experience running a magical shop, but since that would disqualify everybody except the Shopkeeper herself, we'll let that one go, shall we?"

Her mind was reeling. *Apprentice at the Shop Before Life!* Was this really happening? And, more importantly, did she want it? "If I applied for this job—" she said, to Aaron's visible delight, "—which I'm not saying I'm going to, you understand? *If I did*, then I'd get to learn all about how the Shop works?"

He nodded. "Naturally. Comprehensive training will be provided."

"And you'd have to learn quickly," warned Gabriel. "All human life depends on the successful running of the Shop."

Aaron bobbed his head. "You'll have many duties. Everything from assisting customers with their choices to restocking the traits."

*The traits!* She'd always been fascinated by them. What could be more magical than jars of pure human characteristics? The chance to work with them, to learn about them, to understand them . . . it was irresistible.

Gabriel took a deep breath. "And more duties would be revealed in due course. In the meantime, everybody's life would literally depend on your work." He looked at Aaron. "Which is why we need to ensure we don't rush this decision."

"It's fine," his partner said. "Remember who's in charge here. And I'm certainly impressed by Faythe's eagerness to learn. I believe she's an excellent choice."

Gabriel looked extremely unhappy, but he stayed quiet.

She bit her lip. Already she knew she couldn't turn this chance down. "And I can always go to Earth afterwards, right?" she asked.

For the first time, Aaron hesitated. "Management require a certain amount of loyalty from Apprentices, so your contract will ensure you remain in place for a minimum period."

"Which is . . . ?"

"A thousand years."

Her stomach churned. A thousand years was a long time. But then, two centuries had passed at the Rock without any effort at all. And she'd still get to go to Earth eventually.

Gabriel wagged a finger at her. "Let me warn you. This is an immense privilege. The Shopkeeper understands the sacrifice required for this job, and she expects the same from her Apprentices. And Management will expect even more, as your contract progresses."

Aaron gave him a be-quiet look, but this seemed fair.

Only a few hours ago, this would have been a harder decision. She loved her prelife. But after mentally uprooting herself once, it seemed much easier to replant herself again. Particularly if that meant living in the most important place in the universe, and delving into all of its mysteries.

"I want to apply for the job," she said.

"You've got it," said Aaron immediately.

"Wait, what?" It couldn't be that easy. She looked from one man to the other. "Isn't there an application, or interview, or something?"

Gabriel glared at his partner, mouthing words she didn't catch.

Aaron shook his head. "You just passed your interview. As *Senior Talent Executive*, I have the authority to appoint new Apprentices on behalf of Management as soon as I deem them worthy. And I could tell immediately that you were the person for the job. Our conversation only confirmed your qualities."

"Really?" She couldn't help prodding further. "Your partner doesn't seem so sure."

Aaron didn't give Gabriel a chance to speak. "We are great judges of character."

"And wise," added Gabriel, sourly. "For example, we would never make hasty decisions we may come to regret."

Meanwhile, Aaron was already crouching to pull paperwork from a document case. “Never mind that old grouch. I always know when we’re doing the will of Management. Now, sign your name here, please.”

She bent down to sign, using his case as a makeshift writing surface as Aaron produced paper after paper.

“Sign here, and here, and here. Now, please take this letter, which explains that you’ve been hired on behalf of Management as the Apprentice at the Shop Before Life for a period not less than a thousand years. Please remember that Management reserve the right to terminate or amend your contract for any reason—”

“Do *I* have that right?”

Too late, she realised hasty decisions worked two ways.

Aaron gave her a pitying look, one appropriate for those who haven’t yet discovered the fundamental unfairness of the universe in general, and of contracts in particular. “No. But that’s the deal. Luckily, Management are extremely fair.”

Gabriel stifled a laugh.

She took the letter, frowning.

“Very good,” said Aaron, who was zipping up his document case with solemn formality. “It’s been a pleasure. You are expected at the Shop immediately.”

He held out his hand and she shook it, dazed. “Immediately? I need to get my stuff . . . and say goodbye to my friends.”

The pair exchanged glances once more.

“I warned you . . .” said Gabriel, softly.

“Sssh,” hissed Aaron. He turned to her. “One more thing: there’s a ‘secrecy’ clause in your contract. So you mustn’t mention your new role to anybody until you’ve reported to the Shop. Once you’re there, you won’t hear from us.”

“At least, not for a while,” Gabriel interjected.

“Exactly, yes, we’ll be in touch eventually. But in the meantime, your training will be provided by the Shopkeeper. Show her the letter.”

Faythe reeled at this onslaught of information. “What?! A secrecy clause? Can I see it?”

Aaron held the document case away from her. “The secrecy clause is also a secret, of course,” he said.

“It wouldn’t be much good otherwise.” Gabriel suddenly seemed to be enjoying himself.

“And Management will know if you break any of these terms,” warned Aaron. “So . . . promise us.”

She rubbed her forehead. “Okay,” she said, finally. What choice did she have?

Gabriel offered his own stiff handshake. “Best of luck,” he said. “We’ll all need it.”

Quickly, the pair strode away, leaving Faythe stunned and alone. As soon as they were a short distance away they launched into a heated conversation, involving much gesticulating.

Sunlight was starting to creep over the horizon, and the birds were greeting it with their unchanging daily enthusiasm.

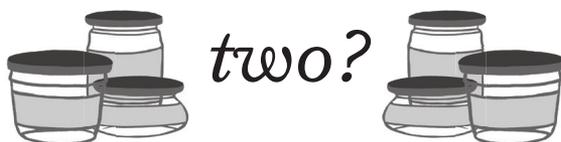
She looked down at the still-drying ink on the letter which named her “Apprentice at the Shop Before Life”. That had all happened extremely fast. But perhaps that was normal? She’d never been hired at a magical shop before.

Excitement coiled in her chest and immediately tightened around her heart. It would be hard to leave without explaining everything that had just happened to her friends.

But then, it would be hard to leave at all.

As she walked back to the Rock, she suddenly laughed giddily at the thought of Jahu’s face when he showed up at the Shop and she was the one serving him.

This might be her best prank yet.



. . . there's a whole world of ancient secrets, powerful forces, and magical jars of human personality awaiting Faythe in the prelife, but I'm afraid that's the end of this sample.

The adventure awaits...  
in paperback, hardback and Kindle,  
from most bookshops,  
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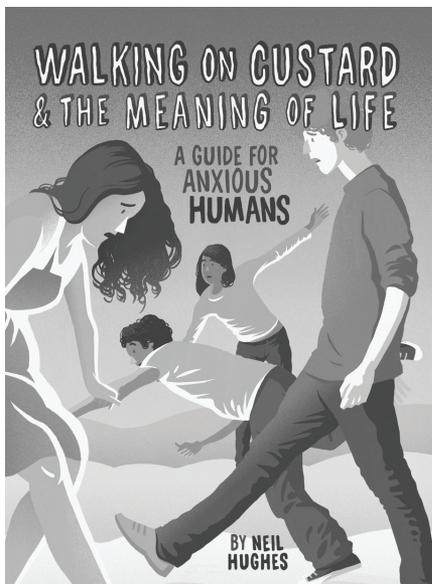
## Walking on Custard & the Meaning of Life: A Guide for Anxious Humans

Neil Hughes lived with anxiety for years. And now he's written a book about it. Unfortunately, his Inner Critic isn't best pleased with this decision.

This rollercoaster ride of hilarious real-life stories, inventive fantasy fiction, and badly-drawn graphs has helped many people to be less anxious and more happy.

Part-self-help, part-autobiography, part-fantasy-fiction, this unique and useful book also features the very first appearance of the Shop Before Life.

From practical advice for emotional management to laugh-out-loud stories, *Walking on Custard & the Meaning of Life* has something for everybody.



*"A brave book and a noble one because, really, what better thing can a person do with their own suffering than to use it to try and help others. It's on my read-this-again shelf."*  
Nathan Filer, author of *The Shock of the Fall*

*"A humor-filled and useful guide for anxiety . . . disarmingly relatable."*  
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*"Must read for anyone suffering from anxiety—minor or major, it doesn't matter. It's helpful, funny, and insightful."*  
Tragically Dull Adventures of an Almost Librarian

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to receive irregular stories, thoughts  
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Or contact: [neil@walkingoncustard.com](mailto:neil@walkingoncustard.com)

(Neil likes it when people say hello.)  
(He reads every email, and replies to as many  
as possible.)





AUTHOR PHOTOGRAPHY: SAMMI SPARKE PHOTOGRAPHY

Neil Hughes finds it difficult to describe himself, especially in the third person. He's spent time as a comedian, writer, computer programmer, travelling speaker, physicist and mental health campaigner, and now he's generally pretty tired and trying not to worry too much about everything.

After many years living all over the place, he has returned to the north-west of England where—between answering questions about mental health & custard and attending pub quizzes—he does various other things that help people to be happy. He wishes there was a way to say this without sounding so painfully cheesy.

