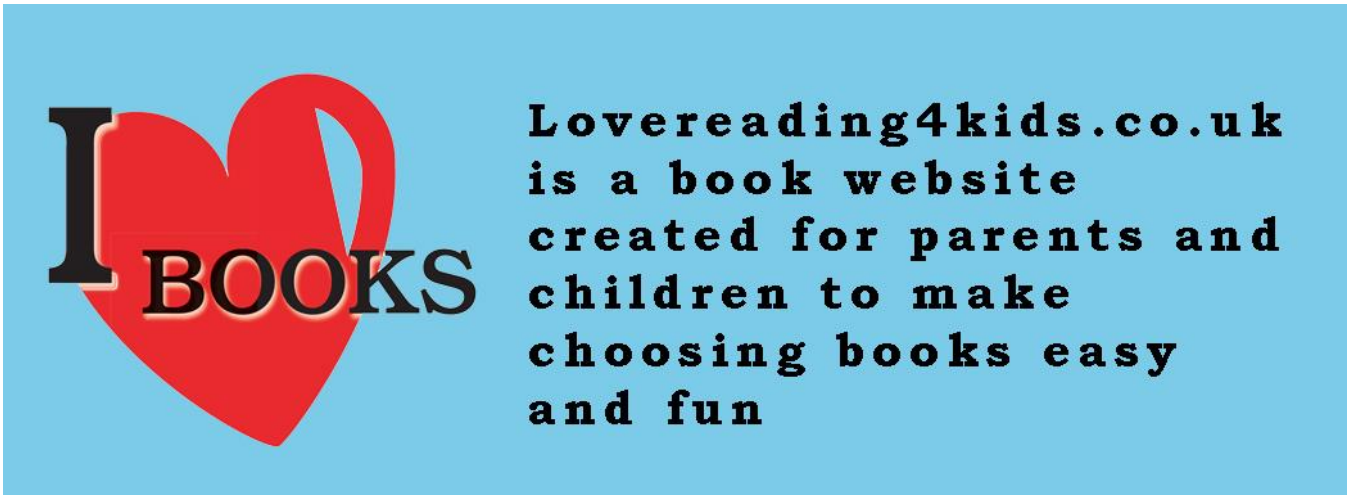

Opening extract from

Dragon's Green

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1

Mrs Beathag Hide was exactly the kind of teacher who gives children nightmares. She was tall and thin and her extraordinarily long fingers were like sharp twigs on a poisonous tree. She wore black polo necks that made her head look like a planet being slowly ejected from a hostile universe, and heavy tweed suits in strange, otherworldly pinks and reds that made her face look as pale as a cold moon. It was impossible to tell how long her hair was, because she wore it in a tight bun. But it was the colour of three – maybe even four – black holes mixed together. Her perfume smelled of the kind of flowers you never see in normal life, flowers that are very, very dark blue and only grow on the peaks of remote mountains, perhaps in the same bleak wilderness as the tree whose twigs her fingers so resembled.

Or, at least, that was how Maximilian Underwood saw her, on this pinkish, dead-leafy autumnal Monday towards the end of October.

Just her voice was enough to make some of the more fragile children cry, sometimes only from thinking about it, late at night or alone on a creaky school bus in the rain. Mrs Beathag Hide was so frightening that she was usually only allowed to teach in the Upper School. Everything she most enjoyed seemed to involve untimely and violent death. She particularly loved the story from Greek mythology about Cronus eating his own babies. Maximilian's class had done a project on the story just the week before last, with all the unfortunate infants made from papier-mâché.

Mrs Beathag Hide was actually filling in for Miss Dora Wright, the real teacher, who had disappeared after winning a short-story competition. Some people said Miss Wright had run away to the south to become a professional writer. Other people said she'd been kidnapped because of something to do with her story. This was unlikely to be true, as her story was set in a castle in a completely different world from this one. In any case, she was gone, and now her tall, frightening replacement was calling the register.

And Euphemia Truelove, known as Effie, was absent.

'Euphemia Truelove,' Mrs Beathag Hide said, for the third time. 'Away again?'

Most of this class, the top set for English in the first form of the Tusitala School for the Gifted, Troubled and Strange (the school, with its twisted grey spires, leaky roofs, and long, noble history, wasn't really called that, but, for various reasons, that was how it had come to be known), had realised that it was best not to say anything at all to Mrs Beathag Hide, because anything

you said was likely to be wrong. The way to get through her classes was to sit very still and silent and sort of pray she didn't notice you. It was a bit like being a mouse in a room with a cat.

Even the more 'troubled' members of the first form, who had ended up in the top set through cheating, hidden genius or just by accident, knew to keep it buttoned in Mrs Beathag Hide's class. They just hit each other extra hard during break time to make up for it. The more 'strange' children found their own ways to cope. Raven Wilde, whose mother was a famous writer, was at that moment trying to cast the invisibility spell she had read about in a book she'd found in her attic. So far it had only worked on her pencil. Another girl, Alexa Bottle, known as Lexy, whose father was a yoga teacher, had simply put herself into a very deep meditation. Everyone was very still and everyone was very silent.

But Maximilian Underwood hadn't, as they say, got the memo.

'It's her grandfather, Miss,' he said. 'He's ill in hospital.'

'And?' said Mrs Beathag Hide, her eyes piercing into Maximilian like rays designed to kill small defenceless creatures, creatures rather like poor Maximilian, whose school life was a constant living hell because of his name, his glasses, his new (perfectly ironed) regulation uniform, and his deep, undying interest in theories about the worldquake that had happened five years before.

'We don't have sick grandparents in this class,' said Mrs Beathag Hide, witheringly. 'We don't have dying relatives, abusive parents, pets that eat homework, school uniforms that shrink in

the wash, lost packed lunches, allergies, ADHD, depression, drugs, alcohol, bullies, broken-down technology of any sort . . . I do not care, in fact *could not care less,* how impoverished and pathetic are your unimportant childhoods.'

She raised her voice from what had become a dark whisper to a roar. 'WHATEVER OUR AFFLICTIONS WE DO OUR WORK QUIETLY AND DO NOT MAKE EXCUSES.'

The class – even Wolf Reed, who was a full-back and not afraid of anything – quivered.

'What do we do?' she demanded.

'We do our work quietly and do not make excuses,' the class said in unison, in a kind of chant.

'And how good is our work?'

'Our work is excellent.'

'And when do we arrive for our English lesson?'

'On time,' chanted the class, almost beginning to relax.

'NO! WHEN DO WE ARRIVE FOR OUR ENGLISH LESSON?'

'Five minutes early?' they chanted this time. And if you think it's not possible to chant a question mark, all I can say is that they did a very good job of trying.

'Good. And what happens if we falter?'

'We must be stronger.'

'And what happens to the weak?'

'They are punished.'

'How?'

'They go down to Set Two.'

'And what does it mean to go down to Set Two?'

'Failure.'

'And what is worse than failure?'

Here the class paused. For the last week they had been learning all about failure and going down a set and never complaining and never explaining and how to draw on deep, hidden reserves of inner strength – which was a bit frightening but actually quite useful for some of the more troubled children – and not just being on time but always five minutes early. This is, of course, impossible if you are let out of double maths five minutes late, or if you have just had double P.E. and Wolf and his friends from the Under 13 rugby team have hidden your pants in an old water pipe.

'Death?' someone ventured.

'WRONG ANSWER.'

Everyone fell silent. A fly buzzed around the room and landed on Lexy's desk, and then crawled onto her hand. In Mrs Beathag Hide's class you prayed for flies not to land on you, for shafts of sunlight not to temporarily brighten your desk, for – horrors – your new pager not to beep with a message from your mother about your packed lunch or your lift home. You prayed for it to be someone else's desk; someone else's pager. Anyone else. Just not you.

'You, girl,' said Mrs Beathag Hide. 'Well?'

Lexy, like most people who have just come out of a deep meditation, could only blink and stare. She realised she had been asked a question by this incredibly tall person and . . .

She had no idea of the answer, or even, really, the question. Had she been asked what she was doing, perhaps? She blinked

again and said the first thing – the only thing – that came into her mind.

'Nothing, Miss.'

'EXCELLENT. That's right. NOTHING is worse than failure. Go to the top of the class.'

And so for the rest of the lesson, Lexy, who ideally just wanted to be left alone, had to wear a gold star pinned to her green school jumper to show she was Top of the Class, and poor Maximilian, who couldn't even remember exactly what he'd done wrong, had to sit in the corner wearing a dunce's hat that smelled of mould and dead mice because it was a real, antique dunce's hat from the days when teachers were allowed to make you sit in the corner wearing a dunce's hat.

Were teachers allowed to do this now? Probably not, but Mrs Beathag Hide's pupils were not exactly queuing up to be the one to report her. Maximilian, despite being one of the more 'gifted' children, was often Bottom of the Class, and now he was on the verge of being sent down to Set Two. The only person doing worse than Maximilian was Effie, and she wasn't even there.

2

Euphemia Truelove, whose full name was really Euphemia Sixten Bookend Truelove, but who was known as Effie, could hardly remember her mother. Aurelia Truelove had disappeared five years ago, when Effie was only six, on the night that everyone else remembered because of the worldquake.

In the country where Effie lived, most people had been asleep when the worldquake had struck, at three o'clock in the morning. But in other countries far away, schools had been evacuated and flights cancelled. The shaking had lasted for seven and a half minutes, which is quite a long time, given that normal earthquakes only last for a few seconds. Fish flew from the seas, trees were dislodged from the soil as easily as plants from little pots, and in several places it had rained frogs. Somehow, no one in the entire world had been killed.

Except for Effie's mother.

Maybe.

Had she been killed? Or had she simply run away for some

reason? No one knew. After the worldquake, most mobile phones stopped working and the internet broke down. For a few weeks everything was complete chaos. If Aurelia Truelove had wanted to send a message to her husband or daughter she would not have been able to. Or perhaps she had tried and the message had been lost. Technologically, the world seemed to have gone back to something like 1992. A whole online world was gone. It was soon replaced with flickering Bulletin Board Systems (accessed via dial-up modems from the olden days) while people tried to work out what to do. They thought that eventually things would go back to normal.

They never did.

After the worldquake, everything was different for Effie in other ways too. Because Effie now had no mother, and because of her father's latest promotion at the university – which meant he did even more work for even less money – there was no one to look after her, so she had started spending a lot of time with her grandfather Griffin Truelove.

Griffin Truelove was a very old man with a very long, white beard who lived in a jumble of rooms at the top of the Old Rectory in the most dark, grey and ancient part of the Old Town. Griffin had once been quite a cheerful soul who set fire to his beard so often he always kept a glass of water nearby to dip it in. But for the first few months she went there, he barely said anything to Effie. Well, that is, apart from 'Please don't touch anything,' and 'Be quiet, there's a good child.'

After school Effie would spend the long hours in his rooms examining – without touching – the contents of his strange old cabinets and cupboards while he smoked his pipe and wrote in a

large black hardback book and more or less ignored her. He wasn't ever horrible to her. He just seemed very far away, and busy with his black book and the old manuscript he seemed to need to consult every few minutes, which was written in a language Effie had never seen before. Before the worldquake, Effie and Aurelia had occasionally come here together and Grandfather Griffin's eyes had twinkled when he had spoken of his travels, or shown Aurelia some new object or book he had found. Now he rarely left his rooms at all. Effie thought her grandfather was probably very sad because of what had happened to his daughter. Effie was sad too.

Griffin Truelove's cabinets were filled with strange objects made of silk, glass and precious metals. There were two silver candlesticks studded with jewels next to a pile of delicate embroidered cloths with images of flowers, fruits and people in flowing robes. There were ornate oil-lamps, and carved black wooden boxes with little brass locks on them but no visible keys. There were globes, large and small, depicting worlds known and unknown. There were animal skulls, delicate knives and several misshapen wooden bowls with small spoons alongside them. One cupboard contained folded maps, thin white candles, thick cream paper and bottles of blue ink. Another had bags of dried roses and other flowers. A corner cabinet held jar after jar of seed heads, charcoal, red earth, pressed leaves, sealing wax, pieces of sea-glass, gold leaf, dried black twigs, cinnamon sticks, small pieces of amber, owl feathers and homemade botanical oils.

'Do you know how to do magic, Grandfather?' Effie had asked one day, about a year after the worldquake. It seemed the only reasonable explanation for all the unusual things he kept around

him. Effie knew all about magic because of Laurel Wilde's books, which were about a group of children at a magical school. All children – and even some adults – secretly wanted to go to this school and be taught how to do spells and become invisible.

'Everyone knows how to do magic,' had come her grandfather's mild reply.

Effie knew perfectly well (from reading her Laurel Wilde books) that only a few special people were born with the ability to do magic, so she suspected that her grandfather was making fun of her in some way. But on the other hand . . .

'Will you do some?' she had asked.

'No.'

'Will you teach me how to do it?'

'No.'

'Do you actually believe in magic?'

'It doesn't matter whether or not I believe in it.'

'What do you mean, Grandfather?'

'Do hush, child. I must get on with my manuscript.'

'Can I go and look at your library?'

'No.'

And so Effie had gone back to peering into a glass cabinet that contained many tiny stone bottles stoppered with black corks, and several pens made out of feathers. Sometimes she went up the narrow staircase to the attic library and tried the door handle, but it was always locked. Through the blue glass in the door she could see tall shelves of old-looking books. Why wouldn't he let her go and look at them? Other adults were always going on about children needing to read, after all.

But adults only wanted children to read books they approved of. Effie's father, Orwell Bookend (whose last name was different from Effie's because Aurelia had insisted on remaining a Truelove and passing the name to her daughter), had banned Effie from reading Laurel Wilde books just before the sixth book in the series had come out. It was because he didn't want her to have anything to do with magic, he had said, which had been odd, given that he didn't believe in magic. And then one day, after he had drunk too much wine, Orwell had told Effie to keep away from magic because it was 'dangerous'. How could something not exist, and yet be dangerous? Effie didn't know. But however much she kept asking her grandfather about magic, he never gave in, and so Effie started asking him other things.

'Grandfather?' she said, one Wednesday afternoon just before she turned eleven. 'What language is that you're reading? I know you're doing some kind of translation, but where did the manuscript come from?'

'You know I'm doing a translation, do you?' He nodded, and almost smiled. 'Very good.'

'But what language is it?'

'Rosian.'

'Who speaks Rosian?'

'People a very, very long way away.'

'In a place where they do magic?'

'Oh, child. I keep telling you. Everyone does magic.'

'But how?'

He sighed. 'Have you ever woken up in the morning and sort of prayed, or hoped very hard, that it would not rain?'

'Yes.'

'Did it work?'

Effie thought about this. 'I don't know.'

'Well, did it rain?'

'No. At least, I don't think so.'

'Well, then you did magic. Bravo!'

This was certainly not how magic worked in Laurel Wilde books. In Laurel Wilde books you had to say a particular spell if you wanted to stop it raining. You had to buy this spell in a shop, and then get someone to teach it to you. And . . .

'What if it wasn't going to rain anyway?'

He sighed again. 'Euphemia. I promised your father . . .'

'Promised him what?'

Griffin took off his glasses. The thin antique silver frames sparkled as they caught the light. He rubbed his eyes and then gazed at Effie as if he had just drawn aside a curtain to reveal a sunny garden that he had never seen before.

'I promised your father I wouldn't teach you any magic. Particularly after what happened with your mother. And I also promised some other people that I would not do any magic for five years, and indeed I have not done any magic for five years. Although . . .' He looked at his watch. 'The five years is due to run out next Tuesday. Things should get more interesting then.' He chuckled, and lit his pipe.

'Are you joking, Grandfather?'

'Good heavens, child. No. Why would I do that?'

'So will you teach me magic, then? Real magic? Next Tuesday?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because I promised your father, and I do keep my promises. And besides that, there are some very influential people who frown on magic being taught to children – well, unless they do it themselves, that is. But I can teach you a language or two if you like. Some translation. You're probably old enough for that now. And perhaps it's time I showed you the library as well.'

Griffin Truelove's library was a square, high-ceilinged room with lots of polished dark wood. There was a small table with a green glass lamp that held a candle rather than a lightbulb. (Lots of people used candles to read by now that lightbulbs were so dim, and so expensive.) The room smelled faintly of leather, incense and candle-wax. The books were heavy, thick hardbacks bound in leather, velvet or a smooth cloth that came in different shades of red, purple and blue. Their pages were a creamy sort of colour, and when you opened them their printed letters were deep black and old-fashioned looking. The stories they told were of great adventures into unknown lands.

'There is only one rule, Euphemia, and I want you to promise me you will always follow it.'

Effie nodded.

'You must only read one book at a time, and you must always leave the book on the desk. It is very important that I know which book you are reading. Do you understand? And you must never remove any books from this library.'

'I promise,' said Effie. 'Are the books . . . Are they magic?'

Her grandfather had frowned.

'Child, all books are magic. Just think,' he said, 'about what

books make people do. People go to war on the basis of what they read in books. They believe in "facts" just because they are written down. They decide to adopt political systems, to travel to one place rather than another, to give up their job and go on a great adventure, to love or to hate. All books have tremendous power. And power is magic.'

'But are these books *really* magic . . .?'

'They are all last editions,' said Griffin. 'Lots of people collect first editions of books, because they are very rare. Last editions are even rarer. When you are older you will find out why.' And then he refused to say any more.

The next few months went by a lot more quickly than the previous five years. Effie's grandfather started going out again, on what he called his 'adventures'. Sometimes she would arrive at his rooms after school to find him taking off his sturdy brown boots and putting away his battered leather bag and cloth money pouch. Once she saw him putting a strange-looking brown stick into a secret drawer of his big wooden desk, but when she asked him about it he told her to shoo and get on with her translation.

She'd quickly mastered most of Rosian and was now working on a different language called Old Bastard English. She dreamed of adventures – like the ones she now read about in the books in her grandfather's library – where she might have to ask someone in Rosian how much it would cost to stable her horse for the weekend, or, in Old Bastard English, what dangerous creatures were in the woods tonight. ('What wylde bestes haunten the forest this nyght?')

She also kept dreaming of magic, but she had yet to see any.

The next time she saw her grandfather put something in his secret drawer – this time a clear crystal – she asked him again.

'Are the things in that drawer magic, Grandfather?'

'Magic,' he said thoughtfully. 'Hmm. Yes, you do keep asking about magic, don't you? Well, magic is overrated, in my opinion. You must understand that you can't always – or even often – rely on magic, especially not in this world. Magic costs, and it's difficult. Remember this, Effie, it's important. If you want a plant to grow in this world, you put a seed in the earth and you water it and give it warmth and let the shoot see sunlight. You do not use magic, because to use magic to accomplish such a complicated task – the creation of life, no less – is not just wasteful, but unnecessary. Later in life I imagine you'll see some strange and wondrous things, things you probably can't even imagine now. But always remember that many things that happen in our everyday world – when a seed turns into a plant, for example – are stranger, and more complex, than the most difficult magic. You will use magic very rarely, which is why you need other skills first.'

'What other skills?'

'Your languages. And . . .' He thought for a few moments and dipped his beard in the glass of water, even though it was not on fire. He then wrung it out slowly. 'Perhaps it is time to start you on Magical Thinking. You need Magical Thinking before you can do magic. How old did you say you were now?'

'Eleven.'

'Good. We'll begin tomorrow.'

Effie's first Magical Thinking task had been impossible. Griffin had taken her to the entrance hall of his apartment and shown her three electric light switches.

'Each of these,' he said, 'operates a different light in the apartment. One operates the main light in the library, one operates the lamp by my armchair and one is the light in my wine cupboard. These are the lights I use most often, and the ones I always forget when I go out. Electricity is so expensive now, and of course there are hefty fines if there happens to be a greyout, so I had these switches put in, right by the door. You'll notice that you can't see from here which light is operated by what switch. Your task is to work out which switch operates each light. But here's the difficult bit. You can do what you like with the light switches out here, but you are only allowed to go and look at the lights once, and you are only allowed to have one switch on when you do. And you can only do this when you're sure you have the answer. You won't get a second chance.'

'So I can't try a switch, go and see what light it operates, then come back and try another one and memorise them?'

'No. That would be easy. When you give your answer you need to say how you came about it. It's the "how" bit that's most interesting anyway.'

'So it isn't just luck either.'

'No. You have to use Magical Thinking.'

'But how could I . . .?'

'If you get it right, there's a prize,' said Griffin.

'What's the prize?'

'Now, that would be telling.'

From then on, every time Effie went to the Old Rectory she stood by the light switches and tried to work out the puzzle. The answer failed her. Effie hated giving up on anything. She would ask her grandfather for hints, but he would never give her any. Instead, in between her translations, he got her to practise on other Magical Thinking problems. Some of them were a bit like jokes or riddles. 'For example,' said Griffin, a couple of weeks before Effie started at the Tusitala School, 'imagine a man throws a ball a short distance, and then the ball reverses direction and travels back to the man. The ball does not bounce off any wall or other object, nor is it attached to any string or material. Without magic, how does this occur?'

It took Effie the whole day, and in the end she had to give up.

'What's the answer, Grandfather?' she begged, just before she went home for the night.

'He threw it in the air, child.'

Effie laughed at this. Of course he did! How funny.

But her grandfather did not laugh. 'You must grasp this process before you can even attempt the very basics of magic,' he said. 'You have to learn how to think. And it seems now that we may not have much longer.'

'What do you mean? Why won't we have much longer?'

But he didn't reply.