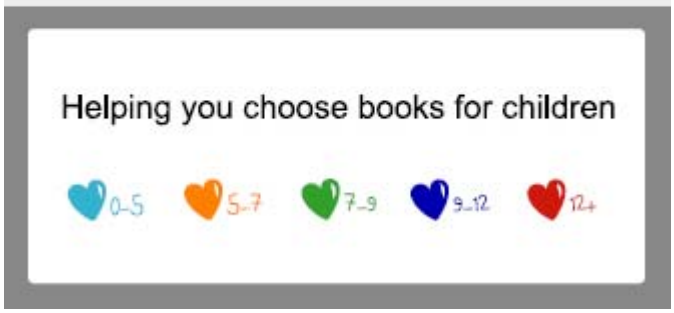
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opening extract from

The Awful Tale of Agatha Bilke

written by

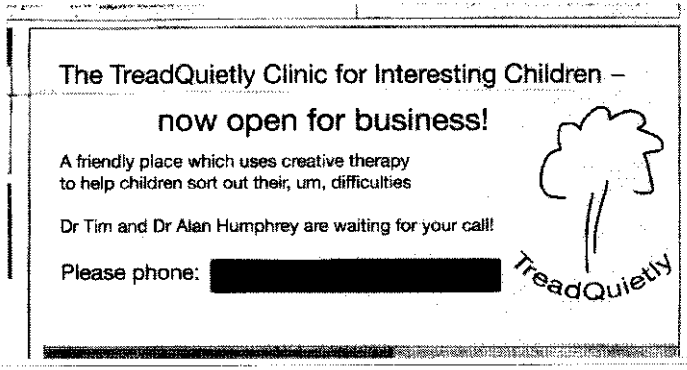
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PROLOGUE

Where do you go if you're feeling a bit peaky? The doctor's surgery, and then to the shop to get loads of chocolate. If something more serious happens – perhaps your leg falls off – you might end up in the hospital. But for those of you who have a rather active imagination – a phobia or just a "strange feeling" – you may need to seek more specific help.

This is a story about an awful girl called Agatha Bilke. She found herself in the TreadQuietly Clinic with a group of other children who had problems which were nowhere near as terrible as hers (as far as the future of humanity was concerned), but who were making life difficult all the

same. However, little did Agatha realise that when she met Paul Dorey, she would find someone who was, eventually, prepared to fight to keep everyone nice and alive, thank you. Indeed, to fight for the future of humanity.

Almost.

1. AGATHA

Agatha Bilke was a problem child. She liked setting fire to things.

She had faded blonde hair, which was turning a mousy brown colour. It curled at the tips, as if trying to get away from her. Twelve-year-old Agatha was slim and always covered in crumbs or mud; she often wore very large shoes so she could kick people in the shins when she felt like it.

Children are not always known for their good behaviour. Reports of youngsters creating havoc are common and unsurprising. They cover themselves with soot in clean homes or pour viscous liquids onto family pets and then blame someone else. Such activity is greeted with sighs

of despair by adults, while the merriment had by the perpetrator has no parallel. There's something really rather warm and appealing about creating chaos, especially if you can get away with it.

But how do we compare the charming, wanton destruction wreaked by a young child with the evil deeds of Agatha Bilke? (And oh, they were evil.) Agatha was long past the age where she could pass off her hobby as "not knowing any better" – for she did know better. And this did not dampen (no pun intended) her delight in seeing solid objects melt under the power of a raging fire. There is nothing more bewitching than looking into the chuckling heart of a flame...

The first time Agatha set fire to something was at a large family gathering, the eve of her elder sister's wedding. Margaret Bilke was a sturdy girl, built like a horse who's watched a lot of wrestling videos. She might have been mistaken for one (a horse not a wrestling video) had she not been an exceedingly good tap-dancer.

Margaret was to marry a simple man who went by the name of Steve, but she was happy. Agatha, on the other hand, thought the match was preposterous: Steve had no interest in dancing. He could not even do robotics. He didn't share her sister's love of pickled onion and

marmalade sandwiches, and he was rubbish at Playstation.

Agatha knew that extreme situations required extreme measures. She bundled up her sister's white wedding dress, train, veil, shoes and stockings which had been neatly arranged on the spare-room bed and crept out to the near-by allotments.

She went to her dad's shed, which was filled with pots and shovels, put the bundle inside and struck a match. She watched the shed and its contents go up (quicker than she imagined). It looked triumphant. The flames were deep red in parts, but white or blue in other places, where they were hottest. They fizzed sometimes, like happy friends on a great day out. She had to stand back from the blaze: the heat was incredible.

"That heat is more than incredible," said a voice from behind her. "It is impossible. And I hope it doesn't ruin my potatoes. I've had such a lot of problems already."

Agatha turned to see the worried face of a woman, aged about 70 (although everyone old looks about 70). She was holding out her hand, trying to give Agatha something.

"Go on, take it."

Agatha reached out and a small, gnarled, green potato was placed in her hand. The woman was right – there were a lot of problems with her potatoes.



She was holding out her hand, trying to give Agatha something

"I just can't get them to look right. This one is perfectly edible, but who would want to eat it?"

Agatha agreed; it didn't look very nice. But neither did the fire. Why was the old woman unconcerned by the boisterous flames? Agatha was annoyed that she was not remotely appalled by her behaviour, or frightened for her life.

"When I was growing my leeks, they came out all bendy..." It was clear that this lady was not aware of anything else going on around her. She was as engrossed in her allotment as Agatha was in her desire to ruin her sister's big day.

Any normal child would realise that setting fire to things (including sheds) is very silly, that it causes more harm than is entirely necessary and it doesn't impress old ladies who have difficult vegetable crops. But Agatha realised no such thing. She was so furious that her new friend did not notice what was going on that she set fire to the woman's runner beans. Now, this *did* get the OAP's attention.

"What are you doing to my runners?" she cried, a small bird flying out of her hair. "They were perfect!" she continued. "Oh you awful child!" She jumped up and down and more things fell out of her hair, including a biscuit she'd forgotten to have with a cup of tea.

At this moment a man, who had just arrived to check his cauliflowers, noticed the blaze.

"Did you do this yourself?" he asked Agatha. "You are an awful child!"

Agatha thought she might deny it, but then reasoned that it was much more honest to say nothing at all.

The man quelled the flames with a bucket of water and called the police and fire services, who arrived in a reasonably good amount of time to make sure every bit of the fire was out.

They, too, called her an awful child and rang her parents.

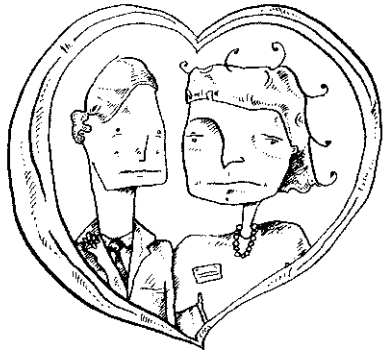
To say that the Bilkes were upset would be very silly. They were devastated. As for her sister, and her intended groom, they were distraught but held the ceremony anyway. Margaret wore an evening dress she'd once worn for a business conference which, she noticed after she'd married the boring Steve, still had a badge that read: "Margaret Bilke, Customer Relations."



Far from Agatha recognising how deeply dreadful and thoroughly wicked her behaviour had been, she simply resolved to be more successful next time and create a bigger blaze. Life was dull without

distractions. Her sister would not have found her wedding quite so memorable if Agatha had been a good little girl. The family would just have to get used to the forces of nature; they might even expect it in the future. They could buy some flame-proof cardies and fit metal doors to the house.

Thus disaster struck again, because disaster likes company.



Her sister would not have found her wedding quite so memorable if Agatha had been a good little girl