The Wobbegong Language

Toletis had always been very advanced in languages. He enjoyed playing word games by comparing words that were almost the same, but had very different meanings: amused and bemused, bountiful and bounceable, bazaar and bizarre, dingy and dinghy. 'Imagine you said: what a bounceable vegetable patch my grandfather has. It would be an absolute load of codswallop, Tutan. And it's very easy to fall into that trap,' he taught his friend. He also liked to linger on the sounds in especially playful words, like she-nanigans, nincom-poop, repeti-ti-titive.

He loved reading encyclopaedias and dictionaries page by page, as if they were novels. What's more, one of his greatest pastimes was playfully building sentences that seemed to be totally fine, but were actually impossible and meaningless. He would then put his inventions to Tutan so that he could try to guess whether they were possible or not. 'It's not worth it anymore, it's already too soon,' was one of his favourite impossible sentences. And this one, 'It couldn't have happened, it's already late.' But the Wobbegong language that he'd learnt from his buxom Aunty Josefina was making his life tough.

This is the Wobbegong language. Its vocabulary is made up of 47 words. Some of them are words we all know, some exist only for Toletis and his Aunty Josefina:

Wobbegong. Bumblewee. Busybody. Brittlebit. Barbecue.
Bellboy.
Balderdash. Rubylocks. Bilibate. Batfish. Dodgy-bodger.
Bubblesome.
Discombobulate. Caboose. Bludger. Blubbery. Bullocking.
Thingamabobble. Booby. Babirusa. Bumboat. Squibble.
Nobble. Wibble. Bibble.
Collywobbler. Quibsnib. Gobbledygook. Blubby.
Underbelly. Smellybutton. Flabby. Feeble. Nibbly. Mamba.
Blubberbus. Blunderbuss. Bubblegum. Blobbytum.
Kebabble. Frobscottle. Flibbertigibbet. Bobbly. Babble. Belfry.
Bellicose and Bellington Woots.

'He made such a blubby mess, even the wobbegong got up and left. Look at that girl, she's a total collywobbler. What a bunch of bludgers, they live in a right old caboose. He's a dodgy-bodger. And what a squibbly bunch his kids are. He always wibbles when he nibbles, but at least while he's eating, he's not babbling so much piffle. Stop picking bobbles from your smellybutton, get in the shower and scrub your blobbytum. He seems like a bit of a bobbly bumboat to me. He's grumbling like a babirusa. I'm telling you, that man's got batfish in the belfry.'

That's how Aunty Josefina spoke, with her semi-invented vocabulary full of the letter "b" and, above all, with a bubbling, burbling sound. It was, without a doubt, not very grammatical, but it was fun and very expressive.

‘Don’t be a busybody, or a flibbertigibbet, or a discombobulater. You ought to be respectabable and honourabable,’ is what she used to say to Toletis. And, even though she never explained those words to him, he knew perfectly well, because of the way they sounded, what his Aunty was implying.
That way of speaking was contagious, and Toletis picked it up just like you pick up Scottish, Welsh or Irish accents if you hear them for long enough at a time. And he started to converse with his Aunty Josefina with her feeble billycans, barbecued beefcakes, rubylocks, frobscottles, and kebabbles.

So, the words, rather than being formed of syllables, were composed of syllabubbles.

Toletis found he was comfortable with that language, and he considered re-baptising himself as Bubba, Beda or Biscop after the Anglo-Saxon Kings of Lindsey, which chimed well with the musicality of his vocabulary. But in the end, he decided to keep the Egyptian nickname and leave Bubba-da-Biscop for special occasions, and only ever as a middle name.



The Sound of Silence Game

Clear August evenings when the mist stayed away, Toletis, Claudia and Tutankhamun were in the habit of climbing the bell tower to play a game where they had to find hidden sounds.

As the light dwindled, silence would spread across the town. If you focused and stayed very still, avoided making even the tiniest noise of swallowing, you'd start noticing the sounds of the countryside. They were so well intermingled that at first they gave the impression of silence.

Scanning the empty airwaves, the three children would put a soundtrack to the evening thicket by identifying the bumbling of the bees and other insects, the insistent song of the crickets, and the rustle of the poplar leaves in even the lightest of breezes. Often the extremely zealous chirping and twittering of the nightingales and robins, or the kwawaa brip-bip-bip of a quail, would take centre stage.

Tutan specialised in investigating the clinking of cowbells in the air, and Claudia was a master of warning about the inopportune arrival of mosquitos, not only from their buzzing but because she would also get covered in goose pimples.

And Toletis never missed a harrier: neither the jump-jets that sometimes scored the valley sky with a distant roar (Toletis thought every plane was a jump-jet, since how else could a plane take off inside a valley?), nor the rare hen harriers whose shrieks accompanied sweeping food passes and sky-dances.

A-A-A looked on perplexed.
'Yeah, right. You're all just pulling my leg. You can't hear all that.'
A 'sshhhh!' would hush him.

There was more. Everything reached the belfry: the crows cawing and the dogs barking and the calves softly mooing, the odd human voice chattering with the dairy cattle during milking, and the last orange-violet rays of the sun. Yes, the sun's rays, because Claudia was adamant that those final glimmers as each day closed sounded something like the finest violins. But Tutan and Toletis never managed to hear them, and they were convinced Claudia had just imagined the sound of violins. And it's best not to even mention what A-A-A thought!

'I'm going back to the farmhouse; I can't put up with you lot anymore … Saying that the sunset sounds like violins. I'm going to go home and put on some Beethoven. That sounds like violins, not this nonsense. Claudia, you've gone completely hurdy-gurdy … '
'I've gone hurdy-gurdy!' Claudia laughed. 'Did he just say I've gone hurdy-gurdy?!'
That night, the Sounds-of-Silence game ended in enormous guffaws.



Sunday Mornings

On those short Sunday mornings in January and February, when the hustle, bustle and excitement of Christmas had passed, Toletis was usually to be found in the kitchen, helping to prepare Sunday lunch.

The awful weather in his town kept him locked up at home and forced him to swap his plans for flans.

He didn't know how to make stews, and he wasn't particularly into gastronomy, but all week he'd dream of those wintery Sunday mornings he'd spend in the kitchen with his Mum. From the kitchen window, he could see the vegetable patch blanketed with the dull, muted sadness of winter. The plum trees had shrunk in the cold. There was the grey sky and the occasional sparrow. It was only a few degrees above zero thanks to a sun that wasn't the sun, but a heatless blob.

Very early on, his Mum would get the eggs and potatoes on the boil for the Olivier salad. The fresher the eggs, the more effort it took to peel them. The tiled walls would start to bead with sweat, and the kitchen would fill with the scent of parsley and garlic. Hunks of chicken would slowly brown in the casserole dish. Then the squid would get dressed in its coat of flour; and the tins of albacore, white asparagus, anchovies, and mussels would need opening: a job that Toletis was in charge of, as well as the fruit salad. He loved turning apples, bananas and pears into little chunks as his fingers got stickier.

Toletis wasn't bothered about learning the important cooking skills, like how to roast a chicken or how to prepare lobster bisque. He preferred to focus on the little side jobs, like chucking the olives into the salad or making fresh mayonnaise, because, in all honesty, what he really wanted was to spend the whole morning mixing up food with his Mum, feeling the spicy warmth in the preparations for the feast.

Of all the Sunday dishes, Toletis's favourite was, without a doubt, the croquettes: massive, filled with béchamel and speckled with pieces of cured ham, soft and cloudy on the inside, crunchy and toasted on the outside. Croquettes which, when bitten into, would leak a deliciously warm ooze that coated your teeth and palate.

He enjoyed getting involved with everything and constantly asking his Mum questions while the windowpanes steamed up with droplets of vapour and the sky filled with ever-denser grey clouds.

The spoon and knife on the right, the fork on the left. The glass out in front and to the right. Bread on the left. Set the plate first with a dish sitting on top of it. The napkin folded into a triangle. Toletis knew the routine well enough.

On normal Sundays, the checked tablecloth; on special occasions, the one with flowers and a lace border which, though uglier, seemed more important. The bottle of red wine and a jug of water. A few more pieces of bread in the wicker basket for whoever might need a top-up. And salt, in case anybody found something a bit bland, which Toletis's Dad often did.

Aunty Josefina and her husband would always come for lunch on Sundays. Those extra places at the table added to the typical midweek layout and also contributed to that special Sunday meal feeling. Toletis, who the rest of the week would lay the table somewhat apathetically and with no real care, would give it his all on the day of rest. It was part of his ritual, his peculiar ritual.



Eating Leaves

For as long as Toletis could remember, he'd been less interested in the gossip and hubbub of his small, sprawling town than in the hills and forests that surrounded it. The town itself had suffered quite a bit in the time he had known it. The trees had been stripped, little by little: first a fire, then a road, then the widening of the road, and then some logging to sell the lumber and raise money to fix the town hall, and then the plague that killed all the elms. In short, the verdant town nestled in the mountains where Toletis had been born had become somewhat gloomy and dreary, with hardly any nooks and crannies for playing hide-and-seek. That's why the apple tree plan came about.

Toletis would obviously have liked to have many kinds of trees in his town: birches, ashes, oaks, beeches, chestnuts, maples, willows, and lime trees. But planting apple trees was quite a bit simpler, because their fruits, and therefore their seeds, were in the children's lunchboxes every day. What's more, Toletis would get mixed up when it came to the other trees. He could tell an apple tree straight away, but was never sure about the rest.

Once, he tried to learn them all by heart – when he was five years old, more or less when people started calling him Toletis, and when there were still trees in his town – and he almost turned green. Ra taught him the names of the different trees, and so that he didn't forget them, he decided to try and remember the information by tasting the leaves. That week he ate a ton of leaves: black poplar, oak, beech, chestnut, and elm. Until he noticed that his tongue was turning green. Tutankhamun let him know that green marks were also appearing behind his ears. Toletis never knew whether Tutan was telling the truth or joking. But just in case, and before he ended up looking like a lettuce, he decided to stop eating leaves.

That incident and the steady disappearance of the trees meant that he never managed to learn their names. And Toletis couldn't get an idea of what each tree was really like from the photos in the encyclopaedias at home. There was nothing in the books about the sounds the different leaves made when the wind blew through them, the places where the trees themselves preferred to grow, and the birds that most liked to make their homes in them; all crucial points for really knowing the different trees, Toletis thought. His parents would exchange concerned glances when they saw their son frantically leafing through textbooks with a puzzled look on his face. Or he would mutter ferociously about the fact that he could never find any documentaries on TV about trees: they were almost always about bears, lions and elephants!

