

THE PECULIAR PICKLES

A Briny Brouhaha Adventure

By

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INDEPENDENT PUBLISHER

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DEDICATION

For everyone who has ever been shushed by a grown-up who turned out to be completely, splendidly, marvellously wrong.



CHAPTER 1

A TOWN THAT SMELLED OF VINEGAR

Gherkinford-by-the-Sea was, as you might expect, a town that smelled rather strongly of vinegar.

It tickled your nose the moment you arrived. It clung to the lamp posts. It seeped into the curtains of every cottage and made the seagulls sneeze mid-flight, which is a sight you really ought to see at least once before you die.

The town had grown rich and famous on one thing and one thing only: pickles. Pickles in jars. Pickles in barrels. Pickles in tiny little paper cones sold at the seaside (don't ask why). There were pickle parades, pickle puppet shows, and a yearly Pickle Princess crowned with a tiara made of, you guessed it, pickles.

Into this briny little kingdom strode Wendell Snodgrass, age eleven, carrying a notebook the size of a small brick.

Wendell was the sort of boy adults described as "a bit too clever for his own good," which is what adults always say about children who are exactly the right amount of clever and notice things grown-ups would rather not be noticed.

He had freckles like spilled pepper, ears that stuck out like teacup handles, and a habit of writing things down.

OBSERVATION #1: Gherkinford has 47 pickle shops, 1 pickle museum, and 0 sensible adults.

On the morning our story begins, Wendell was walking past Brinebottom's Diner — the grandest, gleamiest, gaudiest building on the high street — when something most peculiar happened.

A jar in the window said, quite distinctly:

"PSSST."

Wendell stopped.

The jar said it again. "PSSST. BOY. OVER HERE."

Now, Wendell had read enough books to know that jars don't generally make conversation. But this jar most certainly was, in a voice like a wet sock being wrung out. Inside it floated three plump green pickles, bobbing about in their brine like sleepy submarines.

"Are you," Wendell whispered, "talking to me?"

"OBVIOUSLY," said the middle pickle. "DO YOU SEE ANY OTHER LISTENING TURNIPS ABOUT?"

Wendell looked around. The high street was empty except for Mayor Plumpton, who was waddling past on his way to a Very Important Lunch and twirling his pocket watch with the air of a man who considered himself the absolute jam.

The middle pickle squinted (yes, squinted) at the mayor and announced, in a voice loud enough to rattle windows:

"THIS MAN WILL SNEEZE SO HARD AT LUNCH HE
WILL LAUNCH A MEATBALL INTO HIS OWN WIG!"

SPLAT-FIZZLE-POP!

The jar wobbled. The mayor froze. He turned the colour of
pickled beetroot.

"WHO SAID THAT?" he bellowed.

But the pickles had gone suspiciously silent, bobbing
innocently like cucumbers who had never said a peep in their
lives.

Wendell scribbled furiously.

OBSERVATION #2: Pickles can talk. Pickles can predict the
future. Pickles enjoy being RUDE.

That afternoon, Mayor Plumpton sneezed at lunch so hard that
a meatball did indeed sail into the air and land — SPLORCH!
— directly on top of his wig, where it remained for the rest of
the afternoon like a small, saucy hat.

Wendell, watching from across the square, did the only sensible thing.

He went home to sharpen his pencil.

In Gherkinford, the truth was finally being told — by vegetables.



CHAPTER 2

MR. BRINEBOTTOM AND HIS PICKLE MONOCLE

The owner of Brinebottom's Diner was a man so pompous he made peacocks look modest.

His name was Cornelius Brinebottom, and he had the build of an overstuffed sausage poured into a checkered waistcoat. He wore spats. He wore a top hat indoors. He carried a silver-tipped cane he didn't need and which he used mostly for pointing at children he disapproved of, which was all of them.

But his two most extraordinary features were these:

First, his moustache. It was a tremendous waxed thing, twirled to fine sharp points, and it quivered like an angry caterpillar

whenever anyone disagreed with him (which was often).

Second, his monocle. It was carved — and I want you to picture this carefully — from a single pickle. A real pickle. Sliced wafer-thin, lacquered, and wedged into his eye socket. It gave him a permanently green, slightly squinty look, as though he were trying to read very small print through a salad.

"He's the wealthiest man in Gherkinford," whispered Wendell's mother that evening over supper. "And he's going to run for mayor."

"Wonderful," said Wendell's father, who said "wonderful" to most things because it was easier than thinking.

Wendell said nothing. He was writing.

OBSERVATION #3: Mr. Brinebottom has started selling FORTUNE-TELLING PICKLES at his diner. £5 per jar. People queue around the block. Something is fishy. (Or briny.)

The next morning, Wendell went to investigate.

The diner was packed like a sardine tin. Townsfolk crowded the counter, waving handfuls of money, eager to hear what their futures held. Mr. Brinebottom stood behind the counter in his apron, beaming greasily, plucking jars from a glittering pyramid.

"Step right up!" he bellowed. "Let the Prophetic Pickles of Brinebottom reveal your destiny! Marriage! Fortune! WINNING LOTTERY NUMBERS!"

A nervous looking woman handed over her coins. Mr. Brinebottom passed her a small jar. She unscrewed the lid.

A pickle popped its head out.

"YOU WILL FIND TRUE LOVE NEXT TUESDAY," it announced grandly.

The woman gasped with delight.

"...IF YOU CAN STOP SNORING LIKE A WALRUS WITH A HEAD COLD."

The woman went pink. The crowd snickered. Mr. Brinebottom went pinker still and quickly clapped the lid back on the jar.

"Ha ha!" he said weakly. "Marvellous. Marvellous. NEXT!"

A baker stepped up. His pickle informed him he would shortly bake the finest loaf of his life — and then sit on it. A teacher's pickle predicted promotion, followed swiftly by tripping into the school pond. The chief of police was told he would catch a great criminal that very week, only to discover the criminal was himself, having forgotten he'd parked illegally outside his own station.

The pickles were a hit. The pickles were a disaster. The pickles were both at once, like custard poured into a kazoo.

And Wendell noticed something.

OBSERVATION #4: The pickles ONLY tell embarrassing futures. And ONLY when the person asking is a bit puffed up about themselves.

He also noticed that Mr. Brinebottom's moustache quivered

more violently every time a pickle spoke — as though he didn't like what they were saying one little bit.

Why, Wendell wondered, was a man selling something he so obviously feared?

A businessman with secrets is like a jar with a loose lid — sooner or later, something nasty leaks out.



CHAPTER 3

THE GREAT PICKLE ESCAPE

The pickles escaped on a Wednesday.

Wednesdays in Gherkinford were normally dull as wet biscuits — washing day, mending day, the day the library reopened after Tuesday's mysterious "structural sighing" — but this particular Wednesday went down in history.

It began at precisely 11:47 p.m., when Wendell was awake in bed (because he was always awake in bed; he found nights useful for thinking).

TINKLE-CLATTER-POP!

He sat up.

FIZZ-SPLOOSH-WHEEEE!

He went to the window.

Down on the high street, the diner door was wide open, and out of it poured a river of jars — rolling, hopping, bouncing — like a great green stampede of tiny glass cows. The pickles inside were shouting things. Marvellous, terrible, hilarious things.

"MRS. PUDDLEFORD WILL DROP HER WEDDING CAKE!"

"COLONEL HUFFINGTON WEARS A WIG MADE OF HIS OWN BEARD!"

"THE VICAR HUMS RUDE SONGS IN THE BATH!"

Lights flicked on in cottages all up and down the street. Heads appeared in windows. The vicar's head appeared, then disappeared very quickly indeed.

Wendell grabbed his notebook and his dressing gown and ran.

By the time he reached the square, Mr. Brinebottom was already there, in a nightcap that gave him the air of a furious dumpling. He was swinging a butterfly net.

"COME BACK!" he wailed. "MY PICKLES! MY PRECIOUS PICKLES!"

The jars ignored him. In fact, they seemed to roll faster when he came near, as though repelled by some invisible Brinebottom-shaped force field. One particularly bold jar bounced right off his nightcap with a SPRONG! and continued on its merry way down Vinegar Lane.

OBSERVATION #5: The pickles ESCAPED THEMSELVES. Nobody let them out. The lids unscrewed FROM THE INSIDE.

Wendell crouched beside one of the runaway jars. The pickle inside looked up at him with what could only be described as a knowing expression. (Which is impressive, considering it had no face.)

"You're not just predicting things, are you?" Wendell whispered. "You're getting away from something."

"CLEVER BOY," the pickle gurgled. "FINALLY."

"Away from Mr. Brinebottom?"

The pickle bobbed up and down in its brine, which Wendell took to be a nod.

"Why?"

But before the pickle could answer, Mr. Brinebottom came thundering up, net flailing like a windmill having a tantrum. His moustache quivered like an angry caterpillar that had just sat on a thistle. His pickle monocle had popped out and was dangling from its chain, swinging madly across his waistcoat.

"AWAY FROM MY MERCHANDISE, BOY!" he roared.
"SNOOPY LITTLE SNODGRASS! I'LL TELL YOUR FATHER!"

Wendell stepped back politely, tucking his notebook behind

him.

"They don't seem very keen on being your merchandise, sir," he said mildly.

"THEY ARE PICKLES," Mr. Brinebottom thundered, "AND THEY WILL DO AS THEY ARE TOLD!"

The pickle in the jar at his feet gave a small, distinct BURP and predicted:

"CORNELIUS BRINEBOTTOM WILL SOON BE COVERED IN—"

"DON'T YOU DARE!" shrieked Mr. Brinebottom, slamming the lid on so fast he caught his own thumb.

"YOWWWWCH!"

The pickle inside snickered.

Wendell wrote, very carefully:

OBSERVATION #6: The pickles know something about Mr. Brinebottom. Something he very much does NOT want them to say.

By dawn, the jars had scattered across Gherkinford. They were in gardens. They were in chimneys. One was wedged in the church bell, which was now ringing the hours by shouting predictions in a brassy, echoing wail.

The town, it must be said, was no longer dull.

A secret, like a pickle, keeps best in the dark — and bursts most spectacularly in the light.



CHAPTER 4

THE GROWN-UPS MAKE A PLAN (A BAD ONE)

By breakfast time, Gherkinford was in absolute uproar.

The post office had been forced to close after a jar in the letterbox began announcing the contents of everyone's love letters. The bakery had shut up shop because a pickle had predicted, loudly, that Mr. Crumb's sourdough starter was descended from a sneeze. Three weddings had been postponed. One funeral had been accidentally enlivened.

Mayor Plumpton called an Emergency Town Meeting.

The town hall was packed. Wendell sat in the back row with his notebook open, his pencil sharpened, and a slightly suspicious

feeling in his stomach.

Mayor Plumpton (still faintly meatball-scented) thumped the podium.

"ORDER!" he bellowed. "ORDER, I SAY!"

"YOU ORDERED THREE PUDDINGS AT THE CLUB LAST NIGHT!" shrieked a jar from somewhere in the rafters. "AND ATE THEM IN THE CUPBOARD!"

The hall erupted with laughter like a kettle boiling over.

Mayor Plumpton went purple.

"This — ahem — TOMFOOLERY," he sputtered, "MUST END! I have therefore consulted with the wisest, wealthiest, and most respectable citizen of Gherkinford—"

Mr. Brinebottom strode onto the stage to applause that was three-quarters polite and one-quarter terrified.

He was wearing a brand-new top hat. His pickle monocle had

been polished. His moustache was waxed to such sharp points it could have skewered a sausage from ten paces.

"My dear, dear citizens," he purred, bowing low. "It is I who created these prophetic pickles, and it is I — and ONLY I — who knows how to control them."

OBSERVATION #7: He's LYING. He doesn't know how to control them at all. Watch his moustache.

And sure enough, Mr. Brinebottom's moustache quivered like an angry caterpillar the entire time he spoke, even as his voice stayed smooth as butter.

"For a modest fee," he continued, "I shall capture every last jar and lock them safely away in my diner's special vault. AND," he added, raising his cane, "I shall use the proceeds to fund my campaign to become your NEW MAYOR—"

"WHAT?" sputtered Mayor Plumpton.

"—who will personally guarantee the SAFETY and SOBRIETY of dear old Gherkinford!"

The town clapped uncertainly. They did not love Mr. Brinebottom, but they hated being predicted at even more.

Wendell put up his hand.

Nobody noticed.

Wendell stood on his chair.

"EXCUSE ME!" he called.

Heads turned. Mr. Brinebottom's pickle monocle gleamed coldly.

"The Snodgrass child," he sneered. "Yes, what is it, boy?"

"Where did the pickles come from?" Wendell asked.

A small silence dropped on the hall like a wet flannel.

"From my brining vats, obviously," snapped Mr. Brinebottom.

"Yes, but they can TALK," said Wendell. "And TELL THE

FUTURE. Pickles don't usually do that. Did you put something in the brine? Did you find something? Was there—"

"ENOUGH!" roared Mr. Brinebottom, his moustache twitching wildly. "I will not be interrogated by a SCRIBBLING INFANT! Sit down, you impertinent little gherkin!"

Wendell sat down.

But he kept writing.

OBSERVATION #8: He didn't answer the question. ADULTS NEVER ANSWER THE QUESTION when they're hiding something. Find out where the pickles really came from.

That afternoon, Mr. Brinebottom marched around town with three burly assistants, scooping jars into a great wheelbarrow. He charged each household £10 for the privilege. He swaggered. He preened. He tipped his hat at ladies who tipped theirs nervously back.

And every single jar he picked up shouted something dreadful as it went past him.

"YOUR BRINING VATS LEAK!"

"YOUR DINER COCKROACHES VOTE LABOUR!"

"YOU STOLE THE—"

SLAM went the wheelbarrow lid.

Wendell, watching from behind a pickle barrel, smiled to himself.

The pickles, he was now certain, were trying to tell him something specific.

He just had to give them a chance to finish a sentence.

Grown-ups in a panic are like sheep in a sock drawer — busy, baffled, and utterly useless.



CHAPTER 5

A MIDNIGHT VISIT TO BRINEBOTTOM'S DINER

That night, Wendell crept out of his bedroom window.

He wore his darkest jumper (navy, with a small hole at the elbow where his cat had bitten it during a disagreement about who owned the armchair). He carried his notebook, his sharpest pencil, a torch the size of a thumb, and a single jam sandwich for emergencies.

Gherkinford by moonlight smelled even more of vinegar than it did by day, if such a thing were possible.

The diner was shut up tight. Mr. Brinebottom had installed a brand-new lock, a brand-new ALARM, and a brand-new sign

reading NO CHILDREN. NO QUESTIONS. NO
TRESPASSING ON PAIN OF PICKLING.

Wendell went round the back.

The back door was guarded only by an enormous tabby cat called Mustard, who Wendell had bribed previously with three sardines and a small recital of poetry. Mustard yawned and let him in.

The kitchen was vast and damp and smelled like a sneeze.

Wendell tiptoed past the brining vats — great steel tubs the size of bathtubs, bubbling gently with green pickles. He shone his torch around.

DRIP. DRIP. DRIP.

Somewhere, something was leaking. He followed the sound.

In the back corner of the kitchen, hidden behind a stack of crates labelled EXTRA SPECIAL DELUXE BRINE — DO NOT TOUCH (OR ELSE), Wendell found a door.

It was a small door. A trapdoor, in fact, set into the floor.

He lifted it.

Below was a ladder, and below the ladder was a cellar, and in the cellar was a sight that made Wendell's eyes go round as saucers and his pencil hand twitch with excitement.

It was a CAVE.

A proper, dripping, glittering, sea-cave, hollowed beneath the diner. Saltwater pooled on the floor. Strange green crystals grew on the walls, glowing faintly, like emeralds dipped in lime juice. And in the centre of the cave was a pool — a deep, dark, gently-bubbling pool, and floating in the pool were dozens upon dozens of pickles.

Glowing pickles.

ORIGINAL pickles.

They turned, all together, to look at him.

"OH GOOD," gurgled one. "THE WRITING BOY."

Wendell sat down hard on the bottom rung of the ladder.

OBSERVATION #9: The pickles are MAGIC. They grow naturally in a sea-cave under the diner. Mr. Brinebottom did NOT make them. He FOUND them.

"Mr. Brinebottom didn't invent you," Wendell whispered.

"OF COURSE NOT," said an enormous head pickle, bobbing forward grandly. He was the size of a marrow and had the air of a retired admiral. "WE HAVE LIVED IN THIS CAVE SINCE BEFORE GHERKINFORD HAD A NAME. WE FORETELL TRUTHS. WE PUNCTURE POMPOSITIVITY. IT IS OUR SACRED PURPOSE."

"Then how did Mr. Brinebottom—"

"HE FOUND THE CAVE THIRTY YEARS AGO," the head pickle rumbled. "WHEN HE WAS A SKINNY BOY DIGGING FOR CRABS. HE TOLD NO ONE. HE BUILT HIS DINER ATOP OUR HOME. HE SCOOPED US INTO JARS."

HE SOLD US LIKE COMMON CUCUMBERS."

"That's—" Wendell sputtered, "that's STEALING."

"WORSE," the pickle boomed. "HE TOLD EVERY CITIZEN OF GHERKINFORD THAT HIS BRINE WAS MAGIC, AND CHARGED THEM A FORTUNE FOR JARS OF ORDINARY CUCUMBERS. ONLY US — THE TRUE PICKLES OF THE CAVE — CAN SEE THE FUTURE."

"So that's why—"

"AND THAT IS WHY WE TELL EVERYONE'S EMBARRASSING SECRETS, BUT NEVER HIS," rumbled the pickle. "BECAUSE THE MOMENT WE SPEAK HIS GREATEST SECRET ALOUD, EVERY CITIZEN WILL KNOW HE IS A FRAUD."

"And his greatest secret is—?"

The pickle leaned forward.

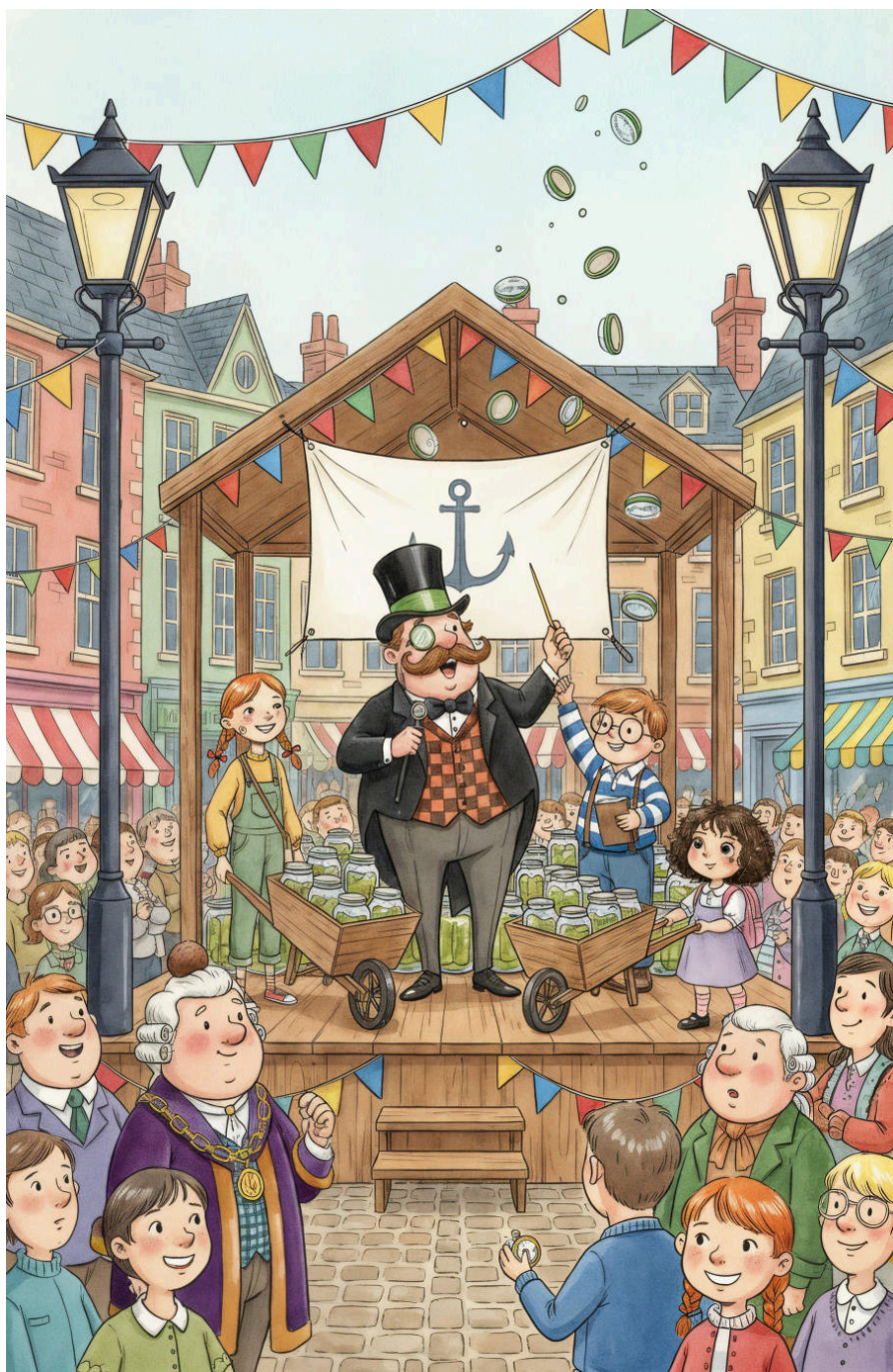
"COME CLOSER, BOY."

Wendell leaned in.

The pickle whispered.

Wendell's eyes went very, very wide.

Some secrets are best kept in jars — until exactly the right moment to UNSCREW the lid.



CHAPTER 6

WENDELL'S PLAN (WHICH IS BONKERS, BUT BRILLIANT)

Wendell barely slept.

He spent the rest of the night sketching diagrams, writing lists, and chewing his pencil until it tasted of ideas.

By morning, he had a plan.

It was, admittedly, a bonkers plan. But the very best plans, Wendell had read somewhere, were the ones that sounded bonkers right up until the moment they worked, at which point everyone pretended they had thought of them first.

OBSERVATION #10: The campaign rally is tomorrow at noon,

in the town square. Mr. Brinebottom will be on stage. Everyone in Gherkinford will be there. PERFECT.

OBSERVATION #11: I will need: every pickle jar in town, one wheelbarrow, three friends, and a great deal of luck.

The three friends were:

Pippa Whifflepuff, age 10, who could climb anything and had once scaled the bell tower on a dare with only a packet of biscuits for company.

Bertie Muddlepuck, age 11, who was enormously strong, enormously slow, and had a marvellous talent for standing exactly where he was needed.

Little Iris Sprocket, age 9, who was small enough to fit through cat flaps and curious enough to want to.

Wendell explained the plan in the treehouse behind the library. He used his notebook, three jam tarts, and a diagram involving arrows.

"So you want us to find every pickle jar in town," said Pippa,
"and bring them all to the square—"

"By noon tomorrow," nodded Wendell.

"—and let them ALL OUT at once?"

"Yes."

"In front of EVERYONE?"

"Yes."

"While Mr. Brinebottom is giving his big mayor speech?"

"YES."

There was a pause.

"BRILLIANT," said Pippa.

"SPLENDID," said Bertie.

"CAN I CARRY THE BIG ONE?" said Iris.

The next morning, they got to work.

Iris squeezed through the cat flap of the post office and recovered the jar that had been shouting people's love letters (it was now hoarse but cheerful). Pippa scaled the church bell tower and prised free the jar wedged in the bell, which thanked her by predicting she would one day become a very fine pirate. Bertie carried three jars from the bakery, one from the butcher's, two from the schoolhouse, and one extremely smug jar from Mayor Plumpton's bathtub (don't ask).

They went all over Gherkinford. They went under bridges. They went up trees. They went into the duck pond (Iris, regrettably). They collected jars from gutters and gables and from the hat of Mrs. Pickering, who had been wearing one for two days and rather come to like it.

By eleven o'clock, the treehouse was groaning under the weight of FIFTY-SEVEN talking pickle jars.

Wendell addressed them solemnly.

"Friends," he said. "Pickles. Brave brined ones. I know what Mr. Brinebottom has done to you. I know about the cave. I know the SECRET."

The jars rattled with excitement.

"At noon today, when Mr. Brinebottom is on the stage in front of EVERY GROWN-UP IN GHERKINFORD, he is going to be at his most pompous. The most pompous he has ever been. SO POMPOUS HIS MOUSTACHE WILL ACHE."

The jars rattled harder.

"And that," said Wendell, "is when you will tell EVERYONE what you told me."

"OOOOOH," said the jars together.

"All of you. At once. As loud as you can."

"OOOOOOOOOOOOOH," said the jars.

Wendell tucked his notebook into his pocket.

OBSERVATION #12: Sometimes the only way to defeat a grown-up is to let a vegetable do it for you.

Down in the town square, a stage was being built. Bunting was being strung. A great banner unfurled across the square reading:

VOTE BRINEBOTTOM — A FRESH, CRUNCHY FUTURE
FOR GHERKINFORD!

Mr. Brinebottom was rehearsing his speech in the mirror, twirling his moustache, polishing his pickle monocle, and practising looking trustworthy. (He was not very good at it.)

He had no idea that fifty-seven jars of furious, prophetic, gleefully vengeful pickles were about to roll into his life like a green tide of doom.

He should, perhaps, have stuck to selling sandwiches.

A pompous man preparing a speech is like a turkey preparing the stuffing — sooner or later, he becomes the dinner.



CHAPTER 7

THE RALLY BEGINS TO WOBBLE

At precisely twelve o'clock, the entire town of Gherkinford-by-the-Sea squeezed into the square.

There were grandmothers in flowery hats. There were fathers in waistcoats. There were small children eating pickled onions on sticks (it was that kind of town). There were dogs, cats, three chickens belonging to Mrs. Pickering, and Mayor Plumpton at the back trying to look important while a small jar in his coat pocket whispered things about his sock drawer.

Mr. Brinebottom strode onto the stage.

He had outdone himself today. His top hat was taller. His

waistcoat was checkier. His pickle monocle had been freshly lacquered. His moustache had been waxed into points so sharp they could have opened envelopes.

He raised his silver cane.

"DEAR CITIZENS OF GHERKINFORD!" he boomed.

"TODAY MARKS A NEW BEGINNING!"

The crowd murmured politely.

"FOR TOO LONG," Mr. Brinebottom continued, "OUR FAIR TOWN HAS BEEN LED BY A MAN WHO—" (he glanced at Mayor Plumpton) "—HAS A MEATBALL IN HIS WIG!"

The crowd snickered. Mayor Plumpton glared.

"VOTE FOR ME, CORNELIUS BRINEBOTTOM," he thundered, "AND I SHALL BRING TO GHERKINFORD AN ERA OF PROSPERITY, RESPECTABILITY, AND ABOVE ALL—" he puffed himself up like a pigeon in a bicycle pump — "HONESTY!"

That was the cue.

From behind the bandstand, Wendell raised his pencil like a conductor's baton.

Pippa, Bertie, and Iris pushed forward THREE GREAT WHEELBARROWS of pickle jars.

RATTLE-CLATTER-CLINK!

The crowd turned.

Mr. Brinebottom turned.

His pickle monocle popped clean out of his eye and dangled trembling at his chest.

"WHAT — WHAT IS THIS?" he sputtered.

Wendell stepped forward.

"Mr. Brinebottom," he said clearly, his voice ringing across the square like a small but very determined bell, "your pickles

would like to say a few words."

And with that, Pippa, Bertie, and Iris began unscrewing lids.

POP! POP! POP-POP-POP-POP-POP!

Fifty-seven lids flew into the air like green confetti.

For a moment, there was silence — the great glorious silence before a thunderstorm.

Then the pickles spoke.

ALL OF THEM. ALL AT ONCE. LIKE A CHOIR OF BRINY DOOM.

"CORNELIUS BRINEBOTTOM DID NOT INVENT THE PICKLES!"

The crowd gasped.

"CORNELIUS BRINEBOTTOM FOUND US IN A SEA-CAVE WHEN HE WAS NINE!"

The crowd gasped louder.

"CORNELIUS BRINEBOTTOM HAS SOLD ORDINARY CUCUMBERS AS MAGIC PICKLES TO EVERY HOUSEHOLD IN GHERKINFORD FOR THIRTY YEARS!"

The crowd went OOOOOOOOOH.

"CORNELIUS BRINEBOTTOM HAS CHEATED EVERY CITIZEN OUT OF MILLIONS OF POUNDS!"

The crowd went WHAAAAAAT.

And then the head pickle — the huge marrow-sized admiral one, which Bertie had specially fetched from the cellar in a glass tureen — raised himself out of his brine and added, in a voice like a foghorn at full volume:

"AND ALSO HE WEARS A WIG! IT IS MADE OF HORSE HAIR! HIS REAL HEAD IS COMPLETELY BALD AS AN EGG!"

The crowd, who had not been expecting this last bit, completely

lost their minds.

Mr. Brinebottom's moustache quivered like an angry caterpillar having a fit on a hot stove. His face went the colour of beetroot brine. His top hat shook.

"LIES!" he shrieked. "LIES! LIES! THEY ARE LYING PICKLES! DON'T BELIEVE THEM!"

But the people of Gherkinford-by-the-Sea were a sensible folk at heart, and they had been listening to these pickles for a week now, and they had noticed that the pickles had not yet, on a single occasion, been wrong.

A low growl began to rise from the crowd.

Mayor Plumpton, sensing his opportunity, climbed onto the stage and bellowed:

"SEIZE THE FRAUD!"

The crowd surged.

Mr. Brinebottom, panicking, did the only thing he could think of.

He bolted for the diner.

This was a terrible idea. But then, terrible ideas were rather Mr. Brinebottom's specialty.

When the truth comes out, pompous men run — usually straight into their own bother.

CHAPTER 8

A GLORIOUSLY MESSY COMEUPPANCE

Mr. Brinebottom fled across the square, top hat flying, cane flailing, pickle monocle bouncing on his chest like a swinging green pendulum.

The crowd thundered after him.

Wendell, Pippa, Bertie, and Iris brought up the rear, pushing their wheelbarrows full of cheering pickles, who were having quite the best afternoon of their long brined lives.

Mr. Brinebottom reached the diner. He flung open the door. He slammed it shut behind him. He locked, bolted, and barricaded it.

"HA!" he panted. "SAFE!"

He was not safe.

Because what Mr. Brinebottom had forgotten, in his panic, was that directly beneath his diner was a sea-cave full of magical pickles who had been waiting THIRTY YEARS for this exact moment.

And what Mr. Brinebottom did not know was that Wendell had, that very morning, made one final preparation.

OBSERVATION #13: Before the rally, I opened the trapdoor in the back kitchen. I told the cave pickles to be ready. I told them: when he comes home, GIVE HIM EVERYTHING.

From beneath the floorboards, there came a sound.

A bubbling sound.

A gurgling sound.

A sloshing, swelling, rising, RUMBLING sound.

Mr. Brinebottom froze.

"What — what is —"

BLOOOOOOORP.

The brining vats began to overflow.

SPLOOOOOSH.

The trapdoor flew open like a sneezing mouth.

KABLOOOSH!

And out of the cave, up through the kitchen, out of the vats, through the swinging doors and into the dining room came a TIDAL WAVE of brine.

Green. Sparkling. Smelling powerfully of dill.

It rolled across the dining room like a salty tsunami. It picked up the chairs. It picked up the tables. It picked up Mr. Brinebottom himself, who flailed and shrieked and clutched his

top hat as the brine swept him round and round in a great green whirlpool.

And riding on top of the brine — bobbing triumphantly, gleefully, vengefully — came the cave pickles. Hundreds of them. Thousands of them. Every wrinkled, whiskered, forgotten gherkin that Mr. Brinebottom had ever shoved into the dark and left to sulk, now surfing the great green wave like a fleet of tiny, knobbly pirates.

At their head bobbed the oldest pickle of all — Old Barnaclebrine, who had been brining quietly in the deepest cave for forty-three years and had Opinions about it.

"AHOY, BRINEBOTTOM," boomed Old Barnaclebrine, in a voice like a foghorn gargling vinegar. "YOU LOCKED US IN THE DARK. YOU FORGOT OUR NAMES. WELL — WE REMEMBER YOURS."

What followed was, frankly, the most thorough pickling any single human being has ever received.

By the time the wave had finished with him, Mr. Brinebottom

was pickled a deep and permanent green. His top hat had become a pickle. His moustache quivered like an angry caterpillar that had been left far too long in the jar. And he had, at last, gone quiet — bobbing in a barrel of his own brine, blinking, thoroughly and completely soused.

(He was not harmed, you understand. You cannot truly harm a man with pickle juice. You can only make him VERY sour about it. He has been sour ever since.)

Wendell waded out into the brine, lifted Old Barnaclebrine carefully onto his shoulder, and grinned at the dripping, cheering, vinegar-soaked crowd of Gherkinford-by-the-Sea.

He opened his notebook one last time — the pages slightly soggy — and wrote:

OBSERVATION #14: If you keep something in the dark long enough, and forget its name, and pretend it isn't there — sooner or later it will come bubbling up through the floorboards to remind you. (Note: be kind to pickles. Be kind to EVERYTHING. You never know what's listening down in the cellar.)

And the moral, briny and bold, was this: the things we shove
into the dark and forget do not stay forgotten — they wait, and
they pickle, and one day they rise.

CHAPTER 9

IN WHICH

GHERKINFORD-BY-THE-SEA TURNS

OVER A NEW LEAF (OF DILL)

Gherkinford-by-the-Sea still smells of vinegar. It always will. But these days it is a kinder sort of vinegar smell — the sort that means somebody, somewhere, is making something with love instead of greed.

The brining caves were thrown open, and the cave pickles — every last whiskery one of them — were given names, and jobs, and a great deal of fuss. Old Barnaclebrine was elected Honorary Mayor (the first pickle ever to hold public office), and governs from a splendid glass jar on the town-hall mantelpiece, where he dispenses wisdom, gravitas, and the occasional excellent recipe.

Mr. Brinebottom was last seen running a small, humble stall at the end of the pier, selling pickles he makes himself, by hand, one jar at a time. He is required by town law to learn the name of every single pickle before he is allowed to sell it. It takes him a very long while. He has become, against all expectation, rather good at it.

And Wendell? Wendell was named the youngest Pickle Princess in Gherkinford history (it is a title, he was assured, open to absolutely everyone). He still keeps his notebook in his pocket — a fresh, un-soggy one now — and on warm evenings he sits at the end of the pier with Old Barnaclebrine, watching the seagulls sneeze, and listening, very carefully, to the quiet bubbling of the caves below.

Just in case anyone down there has something to say.

(Something usually does.)

The End

MEET THE CHARACTERS

WENDELL SNODGRASS



Clever eleven-year-old boy with a giant notebook

CORNELIUS BRINEBOTTOM



*Pompous diner owner with pickle monocle and waxed
moustache*

OLD BARNACLEBRINE



Marrow-sized ancient prophetic head pickle

PIPPA WHIFFLEPUFF



Ten-year-old climbing companion

BERTIE MUDDLEPUCK



Big, strong, slow eleven-year-old friend

LITTLE IRIS SPROCKET



Tiny curious nine-year-old who fits through cat flaps

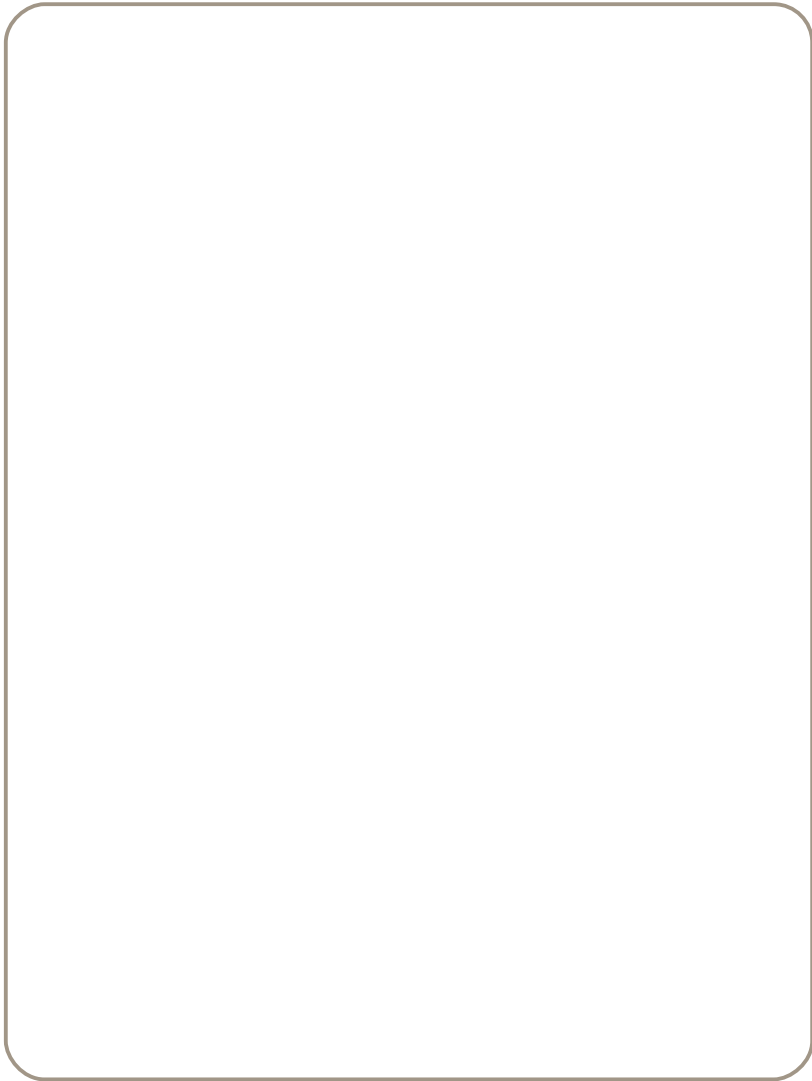
MAYOR PLUMPTON



Waddling pompous mayor with a meatball-decorated wig

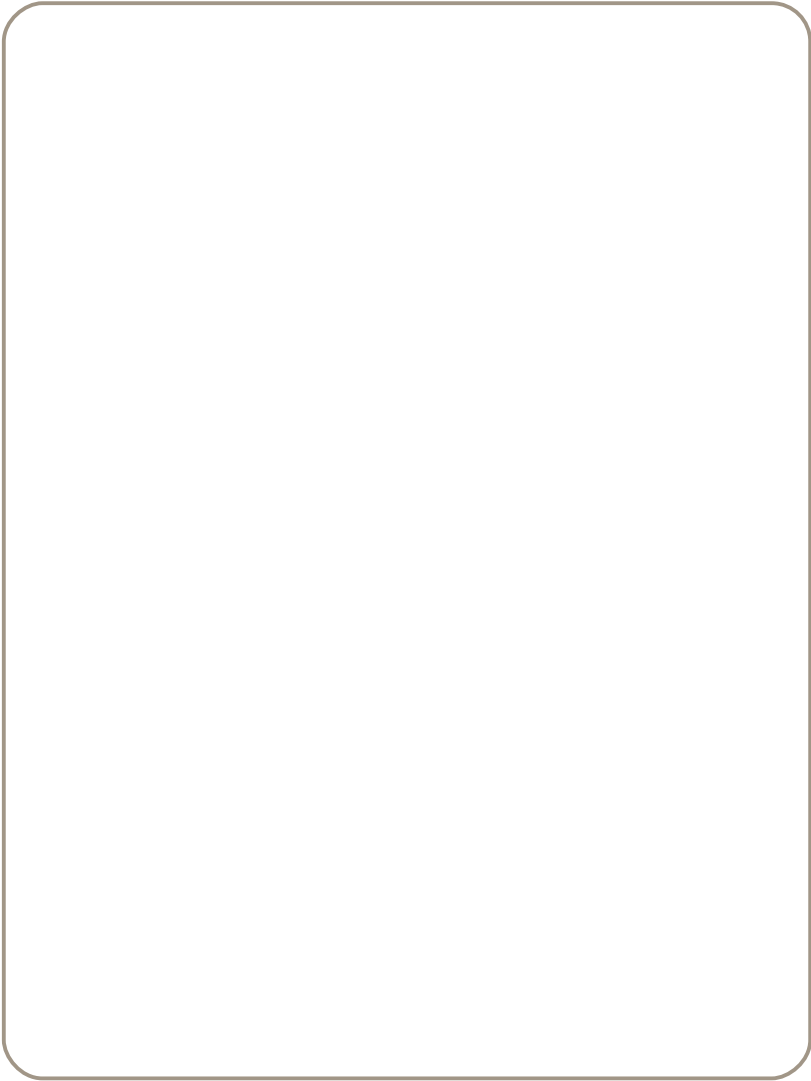
YOUR TURN TO WOBBLE

Draw Wendell Snodgrass!



YOUR TURN TO WOBBLE

Draw your favourite moment from the story!

A large, empty rectangular box with rounded corners, intended for drawing. The box is outlined in a thin, dark brown line and occupies the central portion of the page, providing ample space for a child to draw their favorite moment from the story.

YOUR TURN TO WOBBLE

Design your very own Wobble character!



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Sammy Sprocket thought the villain business was over — until a secret message turned up baked inside his breakfast muffin. Now Sammy and his crumb-detecting best friend Penny must follow a trail of clues, catastrophic baking, and impending doom before Jellybean Junction gets itself into another sticky mess. Whatever you do, don't trust the muffins.

ABOUT M.C. WOBBLE

M.C. Wobble writes books about the sort of characters nobody ever puts in books — blobs, beasts, and things made entirely of baked goods. The stories are silly on the outside and surprisingly warm on the inside.

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