

# THIS TOWN

Malcolm McKay

We Want Democracy! VC



Original, fresh, funny  
and inventive...highly  
recommended.

Juliet Stevenson

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Original, fresh, funny  
and inventive kids



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I read' Thistown to two of my children. All three of us were gripped by it. Malcolm McKay creates a compelling new world of the familiar and the strange, and weaves a spell for the reader that makes it an addictive read "Original, fresh, funny and inventive...highly recommended"

Juliet Stevenson.

## **CHILDREN'S REVIEWS FOR THISTOWN**

Wonderful. Each chapter left you in suspense. One of the reasons why it is so magnificent is that it has a completely different storyline. There was no part I didn't like. Each character has his own specific personality.....

FINN B. 10.

What I particularly enjoyed about THISTOWN was the emphasis on true friendship. The book teaches many morals, standing up for what you believe in, and the importance of loyalty and perseverance and ultimately that those in the wrong will be the ones to fail.

MOLLY PECK, 12.

I really like the book. I think it is great for people of my age. It is fun to read and also exciting. The part I like most is the end where they end up going to the cornfields....

LEAH BROWN, 13.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading THISTOWN as it is very different from anything I have read before. It was like THISTOWN had some kind of gravitational pull because i could not put it down. I was on tenterhooks all through and my heart was racing when Alice jumped in the sun cone. The ending was very surprising...

DANIELLE WOODFORD, 12.

I read it in a day. Nothing could tear me away from this book. Never have I seen dictatorship portrayed as clearly as in Thistown.

REBECCA BOWEN, 13,

**A BASELINE PAPERBACK**



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# THISTOWN

Malcolm McKay

*For Alice*



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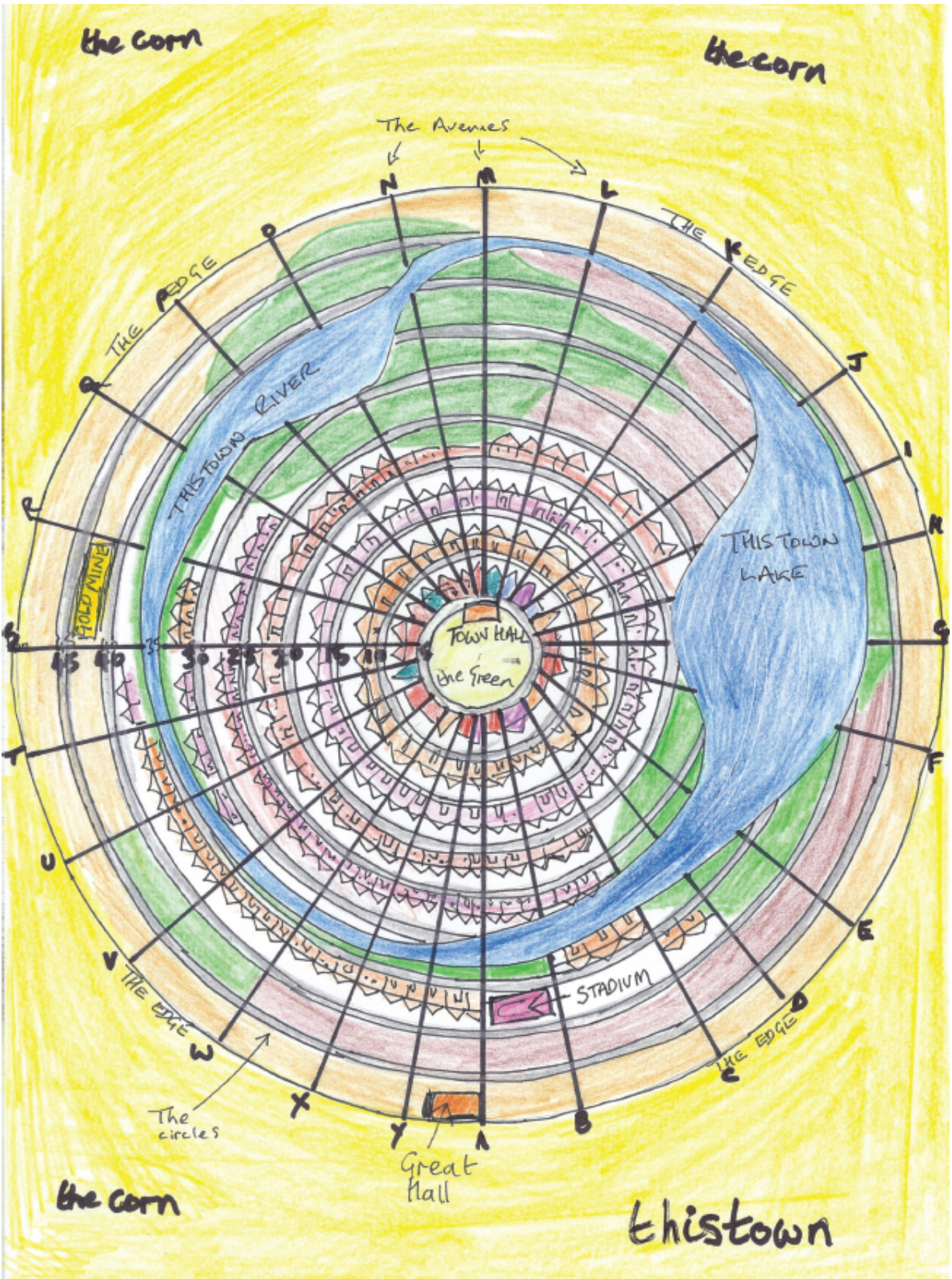
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## **Malcolm McKay**

Malcolm McKay has been writing novels and for the theatre and television for over thirty years. His work for young people includes: *The Amazing Adventures of Spaceman Jack Fitton* which toured schools for many years.

More recently, he has been writer/director of many successful television films including the awardwinning *A Wanted Man* trilogy, *Redemption* and an adaptation of Emile Zola's *La Bête Humaine*. He has also adapted the BBC serial *Gormenghast* and wrote the police series *NCS Manhunt*.

He has three novels published, *The Lack Brothers* (Transworld), *Breaking Up* (Pegasus) and *The Path* (Baseline).



## A TOWN IN CIRCLES

Somewhere beyond the rain, the wind and the stars, and as far from Earth as it 's possible to be, there was a town so old that no-one can remember how or when it began. It was called Thistown, the town where time stood still. There are some who believe that it was the very first town ever. But whenever it started, there is one thing for certain, it hadn't changed at all since that time. It seemed to every Thistonian that their town had always been exactly as it was; the same houses, the same avenues, the same Green, and the same Town hall, all stretching back in time forever. And of course all the same people too, the twenty-three thousand Thistonians, who knew each other for as long as memory can be.

Thistown was called Thistown because no-one had ever been outside it, pointed back and said, 'That town.' It is very important to remember that. No-one had ever left Thistown. *No-one, ever.* They'd never left because the town was surrounded by the cornfields that stretched as far as the eye could see, and if you went into them you disappeared. Or bits of you would disappear, and you ended up like Ron Rasper from Avenue A who put one foot into the corn and spent the rest of his days stomping around on an iron leg. So if there was a world on the other side of the corn the Thistonians didn't know about it, and couldn't even imagine it. The corn made sure they stayed where they were.

Thistown was built in circles. The inner circle was called the Green and on it were hundreds of oak trees with dark broad trunks and great blue-black swarms of bluebirds fluttering around them. They were friendly birds, but lately

they'd begun to peck and shriek. It's because of what Belle fell over and made Thistown change forever.

The rest of the town was like a giant catherine wheel with each circle being surrounded by another circle. Around the Green was the First Circle. All along this were the stores, the police station, the stables, and on the top end, the Town Hall, all facing onto the Green. Outside the First Circle came, logically enough, the second circle, and along this were the workshops and factories of Workshop Way, with great dray donkeys dragging heavy loads from one huge building to the next. Outside Workshop Way were forty-eight other circles, each bigger than the last. A long way out from the Green, between Circles Thirty-five and Forty-five there were mainly fields of cereals and vegetables, or woods, or pretty orchards. And here were also the ancient silver and gold mines which were boarded up now as everyone already had all the jewellery they needed. The last, or outermost circle of all was the Fiftieth, also know as the Edge which is where the town stopped and the cornfields began.

Running from the Green in the middle of Thistown to the Edge on the outside were twenty-five Avenues. They ran straight like the spokes of a wheel and each was named after a letter, from A to Y. So apart from a few pokey alleys and crooked lanes, it was very easy to get around Thistown. All you said was something like Avenue X on the Twenty-second Circle and everyone knew immediately where you were.

Alice Bright came out of her house on on the Seventh Circle, turned left on Avenue W and walked towards the Town Hall on the Green. Like everyone else Alice had been the same age for as long as anyone could remember. No-one had ever grown older and no-one had ever been younger in Thistown. (And nobody had ever died either. In fact the very words die, or dead, were unknown at this time

in Thistown - although this happy state wasn't to last for much longer.)

Alice was twelve years old, had always been twelve and always would be. She was a tall, thin girl who walked with her feet stuck out. She had a round, smiley face, with bright red lips, short blond straight hair, and sparkling blue eyes. You never knew quite where you were with Alice, one minute she was up and laughing and joking with her eyes sparkling and the next minute she was down and scowling and fed up with everybody. Her name should have been Alice Updown.

As she walked down Avenue W she looked back at her tiny house. Everyone had a house of their own, consisting of a bedroom, a kitchen, a living room and a bathroom, which suited everybody fine because nobody lived with anybody else and so they only needed one of everything. And that's what Alice had, which was just fine for her too, thank you.

She sang to herself as she walked along Avenue W towards the Town Hall. She was going to take her place on the Town Assembly. She'd been elected to sit on it only two months before and was still very proud of herself. (Although sometimes a bit unsure of herself too.) Little did she know that her happiness wasn't even going to last until the end of the day.

She was expecting to meet her best friend, Sam. He'd also just been elected to the Assembly and usually walked this way from his house on Avenue R on the Fifth Circle. Today he was a bit late so she sat on a wall, and as she waited she looked away from the Green all the way back along Avenue W to the cornfields on the the Edge. Like everyone else she often wondered about the waving, bright yellow corn. No-one knew how the corn made you disappear, or made bits of you disappear. It was frightening and had always been a mystery. It was, of course, absolutely



forbidden to everybody. There were huge signs all round the Edge, reading:

**“BEWARE HUNGRY CORN”**

**“FORBIDDEN ON PAIN OF IMMEDIATE  
DISAPPEARANCE”**

**“PUT IN A TOE, LOSE A TOE”**

**“NO-ONE HAS EVER RETURNED FROM THE CORN”**

“Alice! Hurry up, we’ll be late.” It was Sam striding along the Fifth Circle wearing a huge brown coat. He walked straight past her without stopping.

“You telling me?” said Alice leaping off the wall, “I’ve been waiting for *you!*”

But Sam was already five yards ahead of her. Samson Stead, or Steady Sam, or Big Sam - take your pick - was taller than everybody else who was twelve and had always been twelve etc. In fact some parts of him were so big, his legs for example, that it was never entirely clear if he had full control of all the bits, and so he tended to occasionally fall over his knees or crack his ankles together. Clumsy Sam might have been the best name for him. His hair stuck up around his head and he wore thick round glasses which made his eyes seem as big as the rest of his body. The main point to remember about Sam is that he was sensible. In fact Sensible Sam would have been the best name of all. You could always rely on old Sam.

He turned back as Alice caught him up, “There’s an investigation,” he said.

“What?” Alice tried to keep up.

“In the Assembly. Something’s happened.”

“What’s happened?”

“It’s important.”

“What is?”

“Belle fell over.”

“What’s so important about that?” Alice was having to run to keep up with him. “She’s always falling over.”

“Not over something like this.”

“Something like what?”

“Keep up, Alice.”

“I’m trying, Sam. Can you slow down?”

“Nope. We’ll be late.”

“What did she fall over?” It was no good, Sam was striding away on his huge legs. “Sam!”

She hurried after him. As they passed the Third Circle, she looked over at their old school standing crumbling and empty and just for a second felt nostalgic.

“You remember?”

“Yes, Alice I remember.”

“Oh, I forgot, you remember everything, don’t you, big brain?”

“I remember the school because you talk about it every time we go past it.”

“Well I liked it.”

“We haven’t been for over a hundred and fifty years.”

It was true and also true that Alice could hardly remember going anyway. She could vaguely recollect lessons, but slowly they’d all stopped attending, and their teachers hadn’t minded at all. Everyone agreed that they all knew everything they needed to know, so what was the point of going to school forever?

“I still miss it though,” she said. “We used to see everybody every day.”

“There’s Fortuna,” said Sam.

By this time they’d come to the Green and coming through the Oaks was Fortuna Mink, the third and last young person who’d been elected to the Assembly. She had a pale yellow skin, a triangular shaped face, and black almond eyes that were as dark as her thick hair which was cut in a

square fringe across her forehead. She was dressed in her usual black with a red string bow in her hair. She looked like a cat and mostly sounded like one too with a kind of high, light voice which sometimes got lost in the wind.

If Alice was honest with herself she would have to admit she didn't like Fortuna too much - she was just too smooth and let's face it, cat like. She would have also liked to talk to Sam about it, but Sam as usual didn't make any judgement on people. (Too sensible for that) If you'd asked him what he thought about Fortuna, he'd have said, "Well, she's ah? She's Fortuna." Thank you, Sam, thought Alice, do you ever notice anything?

"Hi, Sam," said Fortuna, "Alice." Her silky, low voice made it sound like Alice.

Sam smiled. For some reason when Fortuna spoke everybody listened and seemed to appreciate her, which was probably another reason that Alice didn't like her too much.

"At least there's something worth talking about on the Assembly today," Fortuna said, making assembly sound like assembly.

"What's worth talking about?" Alice was still hoping to find out what was going on.

"The Sleeping Man, Alice"

"What Sleeping Man?"

But Fortuna had already followed Sam up the great steps (which he took two at a time) and through the huge wooden doors into the Town Hall, leaving Alice following behind and beginning to feel depressed. Why wouldn't anyone talk to her? And what could be so important, or even interesting, about a sleeping man? Everyone slept didn't they?

## THE SLEEPING SUBSTANCE

The nurse at the Hospital was called Dorothy Pine. She was a large, bustling, woman with a big chest who was always hot and red in the face. She was the one who had bandaged Belle Fellow's hand after she had fallen over in Duster Alley. Belle probably knew more about Thistown than anyone else because she spent every second walking or running round it and poking her nose into everything. That day she had been her usual stringy, ten year old self, (always been ten.... etc), who generally fell over anything that was in her way. Her real name was Fiona but for a long time - about sixty years or so - she had been nicknamed Dumbelina because she was so clumsy, and as more years had gone by, this had been shortened to Belle. She usually fell over something, or knocked into it, or dropped something else on average three or four times a week. She didn't seem to mind at all. "That's what I am," she said, "Belle Fellows Over. And that's what you're going to have to put up with. Because I'm not going to change, am I?" She didn't seem to mind the blood either, or even occasional broken bones.

Nurse Pine was on the witness bench. She had better things to do than put bandages on Belle (again) and had been impatient with her. That's what she told the Assembly. Alice, Sam, Fortuna and the other seven Assembly members sat on big, worn, red chairs with the stuffing hanging out of them, around a huge old, scratched, wooden table.

Above them Arthur Pen, editor of the Opinion Newspaper leaned forward over the wooden rail in the public gallery to hear better. Ted Thrust, the editor of the Clarion, the town's other newspaper, was sitting next to him. Obviously their reports wouldn't agree, because they never agreed on

anything - what's the point of having two newspapers that said the same thing? But that didn't mean they didn't get on. Pen liked Thrust's big walrus moustache, and Thrust liked Pen's bald head and ring of white hair. As Nurse Pine was speaking, Thrust gave Pen a mint from a packet. That was the last thing Ted Thrust ever gave Arthur Pen out of friendship.

"I didn't think about it." said Nurse Pine. "It was just Belle falling over like usual. She's always doing it, ain't she?" She pursed her lips in disapproval. "It was only when I was filling out the report that I asked her, what did you trip over then? For official reasons, see? It's the Hospital Accident Report Form. We have to know."

Percy Pike, the Head of the Assembly, was a thin, awkward man with long thin lips, and a nose like a pointed fish's mouth that stuck out from the middle of his face. He was impatient and pretty snappy. He leant forward and said, "So woman, what *did* Belle fall over in Duster Alley?"

"I'll tell you," said the Nurse with her big chest heaving. "I wrote it in red ink in my Report." She paused for a second to keep everyone waiting a bit longer, then she said, "As far as I know, she fell over a sleeping man."

The members looked at each other across the table. They already knew this much and having a nap was hardly something that needed to be investigated by the Town Assembly, was it? There had to be more to it than that. And there was.

"So?" asked Pike impatiently.

"I told the doctor," said Nurse Pine as if it was the only thing an intelligent nurse could have done.

"Which doctor?" asked Alice, being mischievous. She well knew that Nurse Pine couldn't have been entirely sure which doctor she'd told it to, as the two doctors were identical twins. They lived in two small identical houses next door to one another on Avenue A. They had identical furniture and

identical clothes. It was sometimes said that they couldn't tell themselves apart. Like most people in Thistown their original names had been forgotten and they'd been called Stitch and Slice for as long as anyone could remember. Or was it Slice and Stitch? It didn't matter. If you called one, the other would come anyway.

"I don't know which one," said Pine. "All I know is, he was talking to Sergeant Willis at the Hospital door, because Flouncy, that is, the Sergeant, had come in to write an accident report."

"Please will you get on with it." Pike was getting impatient. He had an idea to go fishing up on the Thistown river.

"He said he'd check on on the sleeping man on his way home." The Nurse gave Pike a hurt look.

"Then let's call Sergeant Willis!" said Pike impatiently, wanting to get this ridiculous woman off the witness bench as quickly as possible.

But Nurse Pine didn't get up, she merely moved sideways and was immediately replaced in the centre of the bench by the huge form of Detective Sergeant Flouncy Willis of the Thistown police in his grey and crumpled suit. He was a nice man with a fat face that flopped and folded when he spoke. He was usually very eager to please and he tried to look as efficient as possible as he snapped open the hard cover of his official Thistown police notebook.

He said "At four o'clock yesterday I was in the vicinity of the First Circle Hospital and I was approached by Nurse Pine who asked if I would investigate a sleeping substance in Duster Alley. I agreed to do so and went to Duster Alley where I came immediately upon the subject....."

"Subject? What subject?" asked Croker. He was one of the oldest (and deafest) on the Town Assembly and a little slow on the uptake.

“The subject, being the sleeping man,” said Willis, clutching his notebook. “I leaned down and I touched him on the shoulder, like this.” He stuck a finger in the air and demonstrated how he had prodded. “There was no response to this, so I shook his shoulder and said....” He opened his notebook again to check the exact wording, “I said, ‘Wake up you fellow, this is no place to be lying asleep.’” Willis snapped his notebook shut with a flourish and flopped his big face around a nervous grin.

There was a silence in the hall. Everybody was expecting Willis to say something else. He didn’t.

“Then what happened?” asked Sam peering through his glasses. Like Alice, he too, was beginning to wonder what this was all about.

“He wouldn’t wake up. Or couldn’t,” said Willis, beginning to sound a bit less sure of himself. Then he told them that he’d immediately run back to the Hospital and fetched Doctors Stitch and Slice. The three of them with Nurse Pine puffing behind had ran back up Duster Alley. The sleeping substance was exactly where he’d been left. He hadn’t moved an inch. Stitch or Slice, put a stethoscope to the Sleeping Man’s chest and heard nothing. Slice or Stitch held his wrist for a pulse and could feel nothing. Nurse Pine put a thermometer in his mouth and couldn’t read it because she had forgotten her glasses. Sergeant Willis wrote it all down in his notebook. Then they stood back and looked down on the man.

“I suggested we take him immediately back to the Hospital, sir.” said Willis to Pike. “And so we procured a cart from Workshop Way and went back with him the way we came.”

## THE NO-LIFE MAN

Alice leaning forward across the table. She'd perked up and now she wanted to know more.

"Why don't we ask the doctors what they did?" asked Sam.

Willis shuffled sideways towards Nurse Pine as the twin doctors crammed themselves onto the other end of the bench. They wore identical dark green suits. If you glanced quickly you would have sworn you were seeing double.

"We tried to wake him up," said Stitch.

"Did you succeed?" Fortuna asked.

"No,"

"You couldn't wake him up at all?" asked Sam looking puzzled.

"We tried everything," said Slice.

"Everything we knew," said Stitch.

"And everything I knew too," said Nurse Pine as if she knew more than either of them.

"Was there any breathing?" asked Sam.

"No." The twin doctors said it together.

"Did his chest move up and down?" added Pike.

"No."

There was a silence in the huge room.

Finally Sam said what everyone else was thinking, "Well, if he's not moving, if he's not even breathing, that can only mean one thing."

"What thing?" asked Fortuna looking straight at him as if she was daring him to say it.

"No breath, means no life," said Sam simply and shrugged his shoulders.



“No Life? How can someone have no life?” Pike laughed uneasily showing his brown teeth.

Alice was beginning to wonder too. She gave a puzzled look to Sam. Everyone had life, didn't they? She knew that for certain. They'd all been there forever in Thistown. How could someone suddenly have no life? What was going on?

“You mean that he's a No-Life Man?” asked Fortuna.

“A what?” asked Pike. This was already all getting beyond him.

“A No-Life Man.” Fortuna said it again. “That's what it is, isn't it?”

This sounded as strange to them as anything ever had. If you'd have said, trees with their roots in the air, or sky falling on your head, or birds that flew in the ground, it would have seemed equally bizarre. A No-Life Man? Nobody had ever heard of such a thing.

“That's impossible,” said Alice finally, “How can you have no life?” She looked at Sam. He raised his eyebrows.

“Well, who is he?” said Pike hoping for something he could understand.

“Did you recognise him?” Sam asked.

“We've never seen him before,” said Willis.

“That's doubly impossible!” shouted Pike, “There are twenty-three thousand, four hundred and six people in Thistown, they're all on the town register and everybody knows everybody else! When Jonny Ridgewood fell over and knocked himself out on the ridge, three people had reported him missing before he even woke up! We know everyone in Thistown and where they live!”

“We obviously don't.” purred Fortuna, “We don't know this No-Life man for a start, do we?”

“Well, where did he come from, then?” Pike wanted to know.