There was a stick man drawn on the corner of the walls when he entered the room. When he half blinked, he thought he saw the figure move. But it must have been an illusion. He was used to illusions.

It’s the kind of thing you come to expect when you surround yourself with moonwraths and nightmice.

Night-mice are a lot like nightmares. Except with whiskers.

The night-mice would come out at night – obviously. But sometimes they’d stay out until morning. You’d know if they stayed out too long because there’d be a pile of grated cheese where once a night-mouse was.

Sometimes he would have nightmares about the night-mice

When that happened, he’d go to the cave. He thought he was the only one who knew about the cave. In fact, it was a well known spot for teenagers, Tinder hook ups and common dogging. But you missed all that when you go in the day. Places are always different during the day.

The night mice didn’t go into the cave. Not because of the dogging. Night mice are notoriously promiscuous. The night mice didn’t go in because the smell of Sad Boy was too much for their sensitive snouts. So he was alone.

WAYS TO TELL A REGULAR MOUSE FROM A NIGHT-MOUSE.

1. NIGHT MICE COME IN THE NIGHT.
2. NIGHT MICE LIVE OFF FRIGHT LIKE PLANTS LIVE OFF LIGHT
3. THEY GLOW IN THE DARK IF YOU SAY THE WRITE SPELLS.
4. IF YOU SAY THE WRONG SPELLS, IT CAN BE FATAL. FOR YOU AND THE MOUSE.

He used to think the night mice were a dream. But when he started feeling them nibbling his toes, he knew there was no way that could be faked.

You doing alright?

Yeah.

It’s just you stink.

You smell too.

You stink of Sad though.

You can smell sad off people. It radiates off of them in waves. Sickly golden waves. Sometimes people say “you’re glowing!”. What they mean is “you stink of sad”.

Sad people and the moon are linked.

Like happy people and the sun are linked. Mr Happy is generally just a big sun.

Mr Sad would be a big moon. But there isn’t a market for children’s books about a Mr Sad.

It goes beyond language. Can’t really be spoken about. Can’t really be understood. You know it when you see it – like when you’re shopping for the right thing to wear to a special event “I’ll know it when I see it”. Sad people know sad when they see it.

But they’re too busy being sad to do anything about it.

Someone once tried to write it down. What different types of sad should be called. They tried to create a whole new language. They got quite far. They even wrote some of it down. They made pamphlets and distributed the town square. Someone liked the idea and took it with them when they returned to their home in a far off country. But despite the early success at writing down what sad was – it never took off. The marks on the wall remained where they were. Until they started moving and took the form of mice.

His name was Cavalier King Charles Spaniel. Don’t ask.

Alright fine, his mum was a fan of the dugs, so she named her first born after one of the dugs. Cavalier King Charles Spaniel.

The dug was called Graham. Cavalier would rather have been called Graham than Cavalier King Charles Spaniel. Graham thought his name was “Who wants a biscuit” and didn’t really care.

The moustache grew him not the other way round. Would grow back in a day if he didn’t shave. It was pointless to battle it. So Cavalier left it as it was. At least it was some semblance of a personality and stopped people asking about his weird name.

That moustache would follow him to his grave. And keep on living without him.

So that was Cavalier King Charles Spanial. He was haunted by night mice. Would find solace in caves. He’s talk to the moon. It never talked back. It wouldn’t have surprised him if it did. And he was sad.

He read the Fairy Stories. Books about supermarkets, chartered accountants and benefits fraud. He dreamed he was a Reality TV star. All he had in his world was princesses, magical frogs and night mice. He could do without night mice.

He dreamed of deadlines. He dreamed of council taxes. He dreamed of calling out the plumbers. He dreamed of strip clubs. He dreamed of bookies. He dreamed of school runs. He dreamed of tea breaks. He dreamed of advertising breaks. He dreamed of broken bones. What he’d do to have broken bones one day!

But these were all the things of Fairy Stories. They didn’t reflect his actuality of magicians, mountains that moved when they wanted. Night mice.

He wished he were on Job Seeker’s Allowance. That sounded exciting. Job Seekers.

JOOOOOOOB SEEEEEEKERS!

It was like a quest. Like a quest that is funded by the – LOCAL CITY COUNCIL. How glamorous. Cavalier kept his fairytales under a rock in the cave. The night mice had started to nibble the corners. He threatened to say the Wrong Spells to them. They never believed they would.

His best friend was a lion. Don’t look shocked. That is weird for me and you – but pretty regular for people who lived where Cavalier and Lion lived.

Lion wasn’t sad. Sometimes he’d try to cheer up Cavalier. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes the Lion had to go home before Cavalier’s sad swamped him. But that was rare. Like the stake he liked to eat.

He never told Lion about his dreams of Job Seekers Allowance. Cavalier thought Lion wouldn’t really understand. Jokes on Cavalier though. Lion is sensitive too. Lion understand dreams and ambitions.

That’s how Lion talk. Lion always talk about himself in third person.

Don’t be shocked, Lion’s talk where Cavalier is from. Talking about yourself in the third person is always iffy though.

Lion thought he had a monobrow. He went to a magician to get it plucked. He would be back in a few days. But Cavalier didn’t know what to do with himself in the interim.

Cavalier had a straight back. Straightest of anyone else in Magic Land. This allowed him to see over tall grasses. Or when he went to the mouth of the cave to look for pirates.

There was a forest near Cavalier. Full of tall birch trees that extended up into the clouds. That isn’t hyperbole. They did. Have you clocked yet that this is a new land? Not all of the trees were rooted. Some flew above the ground. This was how the night mice managed to get up in your business so quickly.

Each tree would grow just one branch.

There was a bird house on the tallest of the trees. There was a small fire inside the birdhouse. But that’s okay because the bird was small and didn’t need a big fire. The bird built this house out of the bones of his mother and father. His nightlight was made of a glowing night mouse.

The smoke that came out of his house was because he was a huge pot head. Like, you could smell it off him when he flew around.

The bird fought constant battles with the night mice. The night mice might be good as the night manager.

The trees in Cavalier’s land reflected the glow of sadness. the SAME YELLOW GLOW. Some people might tell you that yellow is the colour of happiness – but that’s wrong. It’s the colour of bile. Of pus. Of sadness.

The trees were lined. Like you might find in the regular world. If you cut them open they would be ringed.

In Cavalier’s land though, the rings showed not the trees growth, but the strength of sadness felt that year in the atmosphere. Lately the rings were large. Because sadness was – you know – at large.

Cavalier would leave handprints wherever he went. A small way of proving that he was still rooted to the earth – unlike the trees that floated around him.

Lion was jelous. His paws didn’t look so cool when stamped on the wall as Cavalier’s hands did.

The trees waved in the wind.

I mean – they WAVED LIKE HANDS. In wind.

Sometimes Cavalier thought that the hands looked familiar – like he’d seem them before. But they were bark and wood. They were bark and would weren’t they?

A flesh tree?

Bones instead of branches?

Cavalier liked to be quiet. Cavalier liked to be noisy.

Cavalier came from a family of hunters. Cavalier did not like to hunt. But he did. Because it was expected of him. It’s fucked up what we do – just because it is expected of us. Cavalier wasn’t immune to this problem. In fact, he was lousy with it. He could’ve got a prescription if there was NHS where he lived. But NHS was only something in a dream – a fairy-tale land.

Not for him. Have you ever been told something is not for you.

Death also lived where Cavalier lived. He was just someone you’d always pass on the street. You must have that – people you regularly pass on the street. People from toddler group – or one night stands – or people you’ve wanked over but never been introduced to . Death was one of those to Cavalier.

Someone he’d walk past at least once a week. Someone he knew to smile too. Someone he was sure was on his mum’s Christmas card list. That was Cavalier’s relationship to Death.

Death lit his way with a lantern of glowing night mice. He knew the Right Spells to make them glow. He didn’t even think of them as the right spells.

The stick men in the cave followed Cavalier. He knew they were moving now. Because he saw them move. And once you’ve seen something with your own eyes, it is real.

When you touch something it moves from the realm of the imagined into the real. Looses its gloss but gains another sheen. Becomes a physical part of you. Changes your DNA.

Cavalier caught one of the stick figures and threw them into the fire in the cave. It burned up and it’s stick brothers and sisters screamed. BUT THEY DIDN’T ATTACH HIM. THEY JUST WATCHED – AS CAVALIER DID – THE STICK FIGURE FOLD AND BECOME ASH – LIKE SO MANY PILES OF GRATED CHEESE LIKE NIGHT MICE.

SCREAMED!

SCREAMED!

SCREAMED!

SCREAMED!

SCREAMED!

SCREAMED!

SCREAMED!

The fire was the gateway. CAVALIERS EYES WERE HOT COALS. He cast his book into the fire. The book wouldn’t make him a better hunter. So why not burn it.? The eyes in the fire looked back on him as it ate up the pages of his book. Cavalier wished he didn’t live in a world where the fires looked back on you when you do something that reaches so far into your soul – like burning a book. Fuck fires, thought Cavalier. Fuck you, said the fire – who could read minds as well as consume paper.

Cavalier stuck his hand into the fire – it glowed red as he flailed and tried to reclaim some of the burning pages of his dreams. He would be scarred for life. Like he wasn’t scarred for life already by everything life had thrown at him.

The lines on his palm spelled out – SUCKER! Palm reading existed in Cavalier’s world. It was how you said hello – stuck out your right hand to one another and let them see into your past, your present and your future. No one had any secrets from anyone that was. That was better. At least it was supposed to be better. Cavalier did not dig it. Dig it he did not.

Cavalier took the midnight boat going anywhere. The seas were rough where he lived. Then again, everything was rough when you’re Cavalier.

It doesn’t have to be like this, Lion would say. Just cheer up. As if it was that easy. Cavalier would travel by boat – try to escape the hunters, the night mice, the pothead birds who lived in houses of bones, the permanent presence of death – the palm reader. Cavalier would leave this behind and sail.

The waters were rough – but he had prepared for it – weren’t the last 25 years perpetration for rough seas ahead?

He was lucky that he brought a couple of the night mice with him. He said the spells that made them glow. They helped to light his way.

The night mice were nervous of the water. They regretted ever nibbling on his toes.

We’re sorry – they squeaked in tiny voices! But the noise of the sea drowned them out.

They were concerned about finding a place to hide – the sun was coming up and everyone know what happens to night mice in the day. It’s not a simple transition of night mouse to day mouse. A night mouse in the day is no night mouse at all. they ARE A PILE OF GRATED CHEESE ON THE CARPET.

The sea wasn’t just the sea. At this time of night the sea was everything that Cavalier had ever hated – had ever been afraid of. It blew through his ears like an executioner’s promise of one clean stroke.

The waters rose. Took Cavalier and the night mice higher and higher into the air. Higher even than the trees and the tree houses – they were ascending.

Cavalier would rather he wasn’t taking the night mice with him. He considered for a moment pushing them overboard. But where would that leave him. In the dark. In the dark and lonely.

In this light the waters looked red as his palms that he burnt in the fire.

When Cavalier came ashore – he found himself face to face with a very strange creature. It looked a bit like one of the night mice.

But also like his friend, Lion.

This was a creature that he couldn’t have imagined existing. Couldn’t have imagined drawing – even if you gave him free reign to draw whatever he wanted.

It had a lovely smile.

He called it Graham.

There was light where he had landed. He wasn’t used to having so much light around him. His world was one of caves. Of fires in corners and glowing mice. This light didn’t come from the sun either. It came from each creature. He could recognise the sadness but this felt – special. Like a sadness that knew itself. Knew how to deal with itself. Had manifested itself into all kinds of new creatures.

The creature’s eye’s shone out blankly. He was blind. At least blind to what Cavalier was. Oh no – he wasn’t blind at all! What is your favourite kind of fruit – asked Graham (its name wasn’t Graham at all. It was L-MUR076654251 but Cavalier wasn’t to know that). No one know anything until they give it a name. Cavalier thought of changing his name – but weren’t all the others already taken?

Cavalier’s palms began to grow. He stuck them in the earth. They took root. Cavalier thought he might become one with the earth here. Maybe he would become a tree.

He could feel the burns healing. He couldn’t even remember how they were burnt. All he could feel now was new life and new growth. It felt wonderful to feel the fronds push out of him.

The frond grew and grew and grew until they stopped being fronds. They became the tails of whales.

Cavalier was becoming a rose. Just as the seawater had risen him up, now nature was rising in him. Curing his burns and his sadness. Could this be what the night mice had been nibbling away? Now that the were behind him, he had space to grow. His tail whale hands.

He ran his hands though the water at the shore and his finger tales splashed and flashed across the blue blue surface.

This was being alive! This was more than anything he had experienced in caves.

Why couldn’t he always feel like this? Why was this reserved for only those who had made difficult journeys. Why couldn’t feeling like this be for always.

sILVER FISH DARTED BETWEEN HIS FINGERS.

The fish weren’t just saying hello – they were eating him!

But it wasn’t the same chewing fury of the flames from the fire when he had burnt his books. This eating was doing him a favour.

As he looked closer – the fish weren’t the only things eating at his fingers. The sea itself had grown larger. It loomed over him with a mouth of its own. A mouth that contained all the mouths of all it held in is murky depths. The sea smiled at Cavalier King Charles Spaniel.

The Sea’s smile is something that should be looked at only by the very brave. It is a deceptive thing – at once welcoming and terrifying. It was this smile that Cavalier was looking into. And just as quickly as the glow of contentedness set upon it – it fled. And he was left, empty except for his fear staring into the mouth of the ocean. The mouth of Neptune.

“You weren’t supposed to have survived”, the Sea said to Cavalier.

“It must’ve been the night-mice. They must’ve saved me. I thought I was going to go under but they lit the way,” said Cavalier King Charles Spaniel .

The sea mused. “Night mice, eh?”

“Night mice, “ Cavalier confirmed.

“I haven’t heard of them before – you’ve come from far away, haven’t you?”.

Cavalier shrugged. Maybe you’ve just never looked properly. “Night mice are very good at hiding.”

Neptune spat something at Cavalier. It was a key! The key would be the thing that could take him home. If that’s where he wanted to go. Lion would be back from his appointment with the Beautician Wizard by now?

The key could take him away from the beach with Graham and the silver fish. It could lead him onwards – if onwards was where Cavalier wanted to go. Maybe here would be enough.

His hands began to pulse with a new energy.

 No – it wasn’t a fart – it was more cosmic than that.