

# Or Else



By Philip Siddons

Illustrations by Shaun Tan (*The Arrival* ISBN 978-0-439-89529-3) Brian Fong & Alan Lee (*Faeries* ISBN 0-8109-0301-4)



The people in the land of Itsallaboutme were a fun-loving folk. They liked themselves and they thought everyone was just like they were. They especially liked their possessions. In fact, they loved birthdays when they could spend the whole day with all the new things they had gotten as presents. They really liked their stuff.





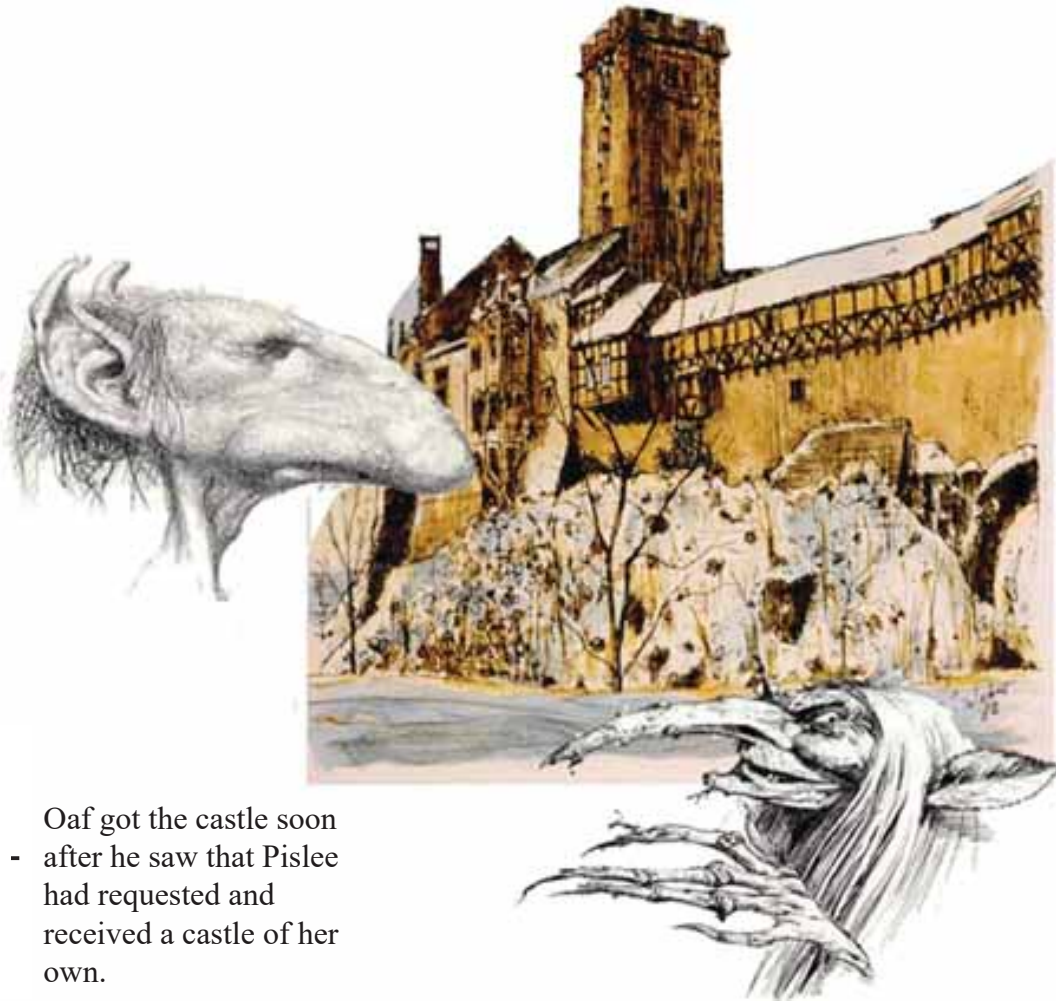
On their birthdays, they would get lots of presents. The fun thing about Itsallaboutme birthdays is that everyone would get whatever they wanted. If they wanted a new castle, they got it. If it was the latest toy or a zillion dollars, it was theirs. That's because in Itsallaboutme, it truly was all about me and since everyone was a Me, people pretty much had it made.

In time, people got bored waiting for a birthday because it would only come around once a year. That's when The Powers That Be invented a new holiday called ThankMasEr. (*Thank-Mas-Er*)

ThankMasEr was observed halfway between one birthday and the next. That meant that the good people of Itsallaboutme had two days a year when they could get anything they wanted and stay home and enjoy their stuff.

In the passing of time, people grew impatient while waiting half a year for their next gift-getting day. Therefore, The Powers That Be proclaimed that ThankMasEr was to be a floating holiday. By a unanimous vote, The Powers proactively declared that a floating holiday could be anytime someone wanted it. Every day, in fact.

The next day everyone took off work and went to pick out what they wanted for ThankMasEr .



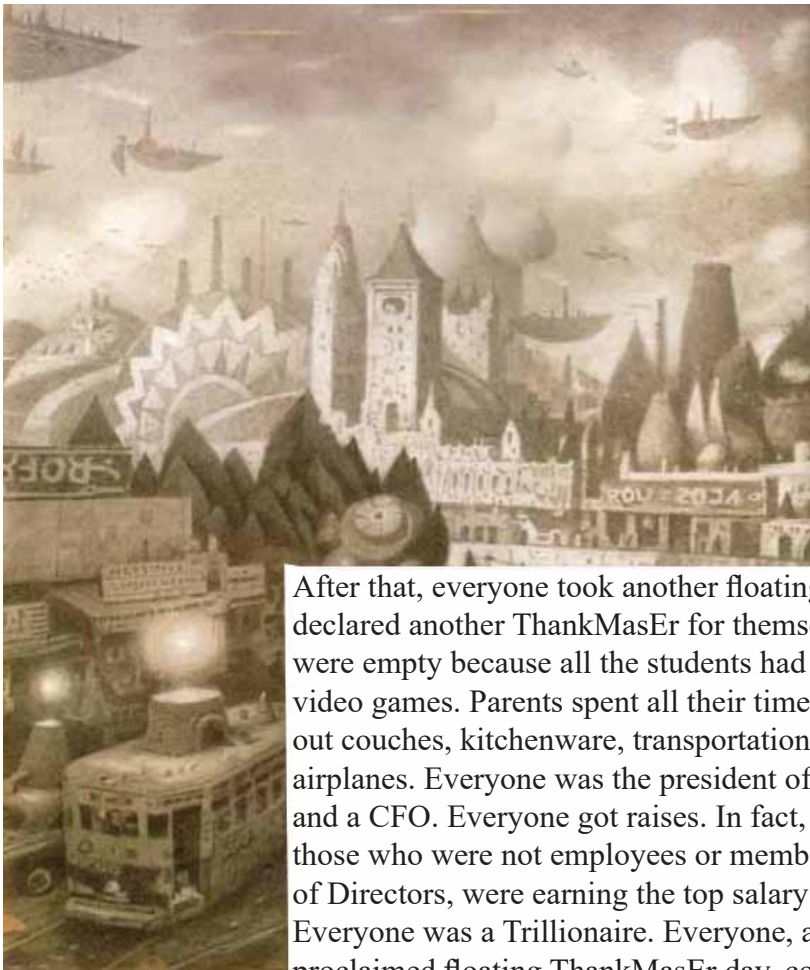
- Oaf got the castle soon after he saw that Pislee had requested and received a castle of her own.



Pislee went out and got herself a new hot tub.



Snogg conferred a PhD on himself but within ten minutes, everyone in Itsallaboutme had a doctorate.



After that, everyone took another floating holiday and declared another ThankMasEr for themselves. The schools were empty because all the students had gotten the latest video games. Parents spent all their time in stores picking out couches, kitchenware, transportation vehicles and even airplanes. Everyone was the president of the PTA, a CEO and a CFO. Everyone got raises. In fact, everyone, even those who were not employees or members of Boards of Directors, were earning the top salary in the nation. Everyone was a Trillionaire. Everyone, at the end of their proclaimed floating ThankMasEr day, couldn't wait to declare yet another ThankMasEr holiday. It was only fair.

Every day, everyone declared a ThankMasEr for themselves and everyone kept getting what they wanted. People were happy – especially the merchants. They kept selling out of every item in their stores and kept getting more stuff to sell the next day. Since there was always something people wanted, people were thrilled. They always had the latest thing.

One day, to come up with something different, The Powers That Be invented a new tradition – the Surprise holiday add-on. On Surprise day, anyone could walk up to you and say “Surprise” and you would instantly be entitled to an add-on ThankMasEr item. If you had declared a ThankMasEr and received a chest of gold, a friend could come up to you and say “Surprise!” Then you could have anything else you wanted in addition to your chest of gold.



Merchants invented marketing phrases to encourage Surprise add-ons. There were Multitudinous Mondays, Two-for-Tuesdays, Whatever Wednesdays, Thoroughly Thorough Thursdays, Freebie Fridays, Stupefying Saturdays and Funday Sundays.

Just about everyone was Surprised on their ThankMasEr day. Because everyone took a ThankMasEr day every day, whenever anyone saw someone else, they greeted them by saying “Surprise,” immediately granting a double get-whatever-you-want day.

In less than a month, everyone in Itsallaboutme owned nearly everything that could be bought. Everyone had the latest thing because whenever anyone got the latest thing, everyone else got it as well. If your neighbor got something you didn’t have, you got it also. There was no “keeping up with the Jones” because everyone owned what the Jones (and everyone else) had.

Everyone drove a Hummer.



Everyone had new kitchens installed in their castles. Everyone had unlimited wireless Internet access and everyone got every television channel and movie ever produced.



Several things started to happen in Itsallaboutme.

People spent a lot of time in the stores. Merchants loved it because their stores were always full of shoppers. They would typically greet their customers with “Surprise” and all shoppers could get even more of whatever they wanted. But when shoppers would finally go home with their new stuff, they’d soon have to head back to get more because they’d see their neighbor had something they wanted. It wasn’t out of envy for their neighbors’ latest possession. They simply realized that they hadn’t yet thought to get that item.

Soon, everyone in Itsallaboutme was either traveling back and forth between their home and the stores or were already in a store picking out the next latest thing. Everyone, then, was either living in a store or was traveling in their Hummer. No one was ever home enjoying their things. Instead, they had to enjoy their new products at the store when they picked them out or were stuck in a traffic jam going home. In a way, it was a little tedious.

Since everyone had their own castle, there was always room to add new stuff. But after months of busy ThankMasEr floating holidays, allowing everyone to get whatever they wanted, castles were filling up. After their castle motes filled up with merchandise, they had trouble lowering their drawbridges to deliver more presents to themselves.





Nobody in Itsallaboutme went to work or school anymore and the parents started getting testy with their kids. Children were disobeying their parents. As families were spending all their time together either in a store or in their Hummers, they began to get on each other's nerves. The adults, in their weariness, sometimes snapped at each other and their kids. Children, in their weariness, sometimes quarreled with one another.

To amuse themselves, some children began to steal – just so they could get things faster. They didn't want to wait until their next ThankMasEr day.



Seeing a general decline in children's behavior, The Powers That Be decided to take matters into their own hands and put a stop to the unruly childish behavior.

Cirrus, on The Powers That Be Board, had two misbehaving children so on her next ThankMasEr day, she asked for an idea to stop the bad behavior. This is what she got.

The idea that came to her was to utter a threat of "*Or Else*" to stop her children from misbehaving. "You better stop arguing *Or Else*," she said. With that, the children would straighten up and behave.

As soon as other members of The Powers That Be Board saw Cirrus use the threat of *Or Else*, they all wanted the magic and got it. In no time, every parent in Itsallaboutme began using the "Or Else" with their children. Children began to behave for a few minutes.

A half hour after that, one of the children in route from a store, got what she wanted when she said, "I want to know what Else (it is) that I'll get if I don't behave."

Her sister, sitting next to her, instantly wished for the same thing. Then every child in the family said "Surprise" to each other in that Hummer – all wanted to know about "the Else." Within an hour, every child in town asked for the answer to the same question.

Everyone got their wish. The Powers That Be immediately hired Else to show up whenever a parent uttered the threat.



It happened that Else was never much of a threat himself. He lived in his Hummer and decided he didn't want to be in the stores or in the constant traffic going to and from the shopping center.

It also happened that Else didn't feel very good about himself because he looked frightening. That's why The Powers That Be hired him. They contracted with Else to walk in a room so that people would get scared. He was supposed to show up whenever a parent said to their child "you do this or else" and then he would come in and be the "or else" that was threatened.

Else got a lot of work. He went everywhere, showing up in the midst of angry parents who were reprimanding their unruly children. As soon as children saw him come in the door, a look of shock and dismay settled on their faces. They bowed their heads in fear.

Else didn't like this but he was only doing his job. He basically loved kids. His looks had scared people his whole life and he was seldom invited to parties. He was usually picked last to be on a team when sides were chosen for games. In fact, Else couldn't remember *ever* being chosen for a team. The team leaders acted as if they were done picking their teams and went off to play, leaving him in the bleachers to watch.

Most of his assignments to be the "Or Else" were coming over his cell phone from parents who were either at a store waiting in the checkout line or driving along the road with their loaded Hummers. Their misbehaving children were usually stuck in the back seat, crammed in with all the acquired things from the store.



Else figured out that the children were lonely and feeling somewhat frustrated. They felt abandoned by their parents – left to fend for themselves in the relatively confined waiting lines leading to the store check-out counters. They were also crammed in the back seat of the family Hummer with the other newly acquired merchandise.

Else really didn't do anything like scream or wave his arms once he made his initial scary entrance. He did notice that after a few minutes, the children were no longer afraid of him. As he sat with them, he saw that they were sad.

You see, after Else arrived, the parents went back to focus on their new gifts – thinking that they had solved their children's behavioral problems.

Else would leave to go on another assignment and the household was left to its own devices. Within moments of Else's departure, the entire family would head back to the stores because they thought of a few more things to buy.



Else thought the Thanksmaser holiday and the additional Surprise wish granting had gotten out of hand. People weren't playing in the park, reading, learning at school or even working. Everyone was either commuting to and from a store or stuck in store checkout lines. Else decided to try something different.

On the next day, he said "Surprise" and gave himself a day off from being the "Or Else" and stayed in his Hummer to write a story. He wrote about Thanksmaser. As he wrote about all that had happened, he laughed. The more he wrote, the louder he laughed. As he heard himself laugh, he realized that he hadn't heard anyone in town laugh since Thanksmaser had begun.



"I know what I should do" Else said to himself. "I'll make kids laugh when they're misbehaving. I'll read them a funny story. They'll laugh and stop misbehaving."

Else got another call from a frantic parent, demanding that he come over immediately and give their children the "Or Else" treatment. This time Else came in the door, waited until the kids got over their shock at his arrival and then sat down by them.

This was a change for him but the parents didn't notice because they were soon in the next room flipping through catalogues, looking for new things to buy. Else got out his book about Thanksmaser and began reading. As the children heard the descriptions of the castles filling up with things, the long lines in the stores and the hours of commuting to and from the stores, they laughed. They laughed at how crazy it was that everyone was doing this. They laughed because Else was laughing. As he read it and laughed, this was the first time they had experienced laughter on Thanksmaser. Laughing was delightful. The kids began to love having Else come to be with them.

Else's bond with kids began to deepen. What started out as a punishment for unruly kids turned into something the children liked. Everyone wanted Else to visit and read and laugh with them.



Another thing happened. The children started behaving. When they were stuck in the check-out line waiting for their parents or crunched in the back of their Hummers amidst the packages, they laughed. They told stories they had read in Else's book. Instead of quarreling, they even made up new stories and wished for more visits from Else.

This did not go unnoticed by The Powers That Be. They appointed a team of Intern Powers That Be to study the situation. Since everyone was a black-belt 6 sigma certified statistical specialist, the Intern Powers That Be ran 45 focus groups and calculated the statistical probability of all of their theories, settling on one. The theory was that the children were responding to visits from Else because he was paying attention to them. *Someone was actually reading to them and making them laugh.*

Since children misbehaved less, The Powers That Be decided to award Else. They couldn't give him money because he was a zillionaire like everyone else. They knew that they couldn't make him President of the PTA or the nation or even Chief Firefighter because he, like everyone else, already had those titles.

“That’s it” cried a Powers That Be board member. “We’ll tell him that he’s something.” The next day, before a nation-wide television audience, The Powers That Be brought Else up on the stage. The TV host said, “You’re really Something (Else). Thanks for getting us to read to our children. From this time onward, we declare today to be Something Else day in all the land.”



Everyone cheered along with the recorded audience applause that was piped into the television studio.

Immediately there were requests for Else’s next book. To comply, Something Else went to the back seat of his Hummer and began to write.

Book publishers waited in line to be the next publisher of Something Else. Everyone wanted Something Else and stopped shopping because by now, they had everything they wanted except Something Else.

In the time ahead, Else turned to writing more about the things people tended to do if they stopped shopping and began to talk with their children. His books were about friendships that form when people talk with and listen to one another.

People began to stop buying things. They enjoyed talking with their children and making friends with their neighbors. ThankMasEr and the special Surprise add-on wishes gradually went away.

Folks were getting along much better than before and the roadway was easier to navigate. Traffic and shopping mall congestion had almost disappeared.

The national output of products and services had dropped but that made the merchants so unhappy that they came to The Powers That Be to complain.

After some discussion, The Powers That Be reinstated one holiday – birthdays – but just once a year. The rule was that you couldn't get things for yourself but only for someone who was having a birthday. With that, the birthday present giving put their economy back on track and it made life simpler for everyone – especially the merchants.

Instead of spending all their time in the stores or in rush-hour traffic jams buying things for themselves, people socialized. They stopped talking about things and began to take an interest in one another. They caught up on the latest events and passed along, for others to read, Something Else's latest book.



They laughed. Sometimes they sang. Often they danced. At times they cried about sad things others experienced. In general, they felt more alive, now that they were not standing in line at the store. They felt that anything that happened to others was, in a way, happening to them. They felt more connected.

Six months after they had declared Else to be “Something Else,” The Powers That Be changed the name of their country. It became The Land of Itsallabouteveryone.



When Else heard this on his Hummer’s radio he smiled. Then he laughed. Then he began a new book about wonderful people who lived in a magic land called You’llNeverBelieveWhatLiesAhead. ♠



