

PROLOGUE

A thick fog covered Dull-on-Sea, lazily rolling off the moonless ocean.

One nautical mile from shore, a bowsprit split the gloom, dragging tattered sails and a battered hull behind it. The deck of the ship seemed alive and quivered as though it had been lined with fur.



At the helm, Captain Horatio Rattus eyed the compass. One hand gripped the wheel, while the other lifted a brass flute from its case.

Not long now, my beauties!
I'll be turnin' her hard to starboard,
so ye should all be preparin'
to swim!

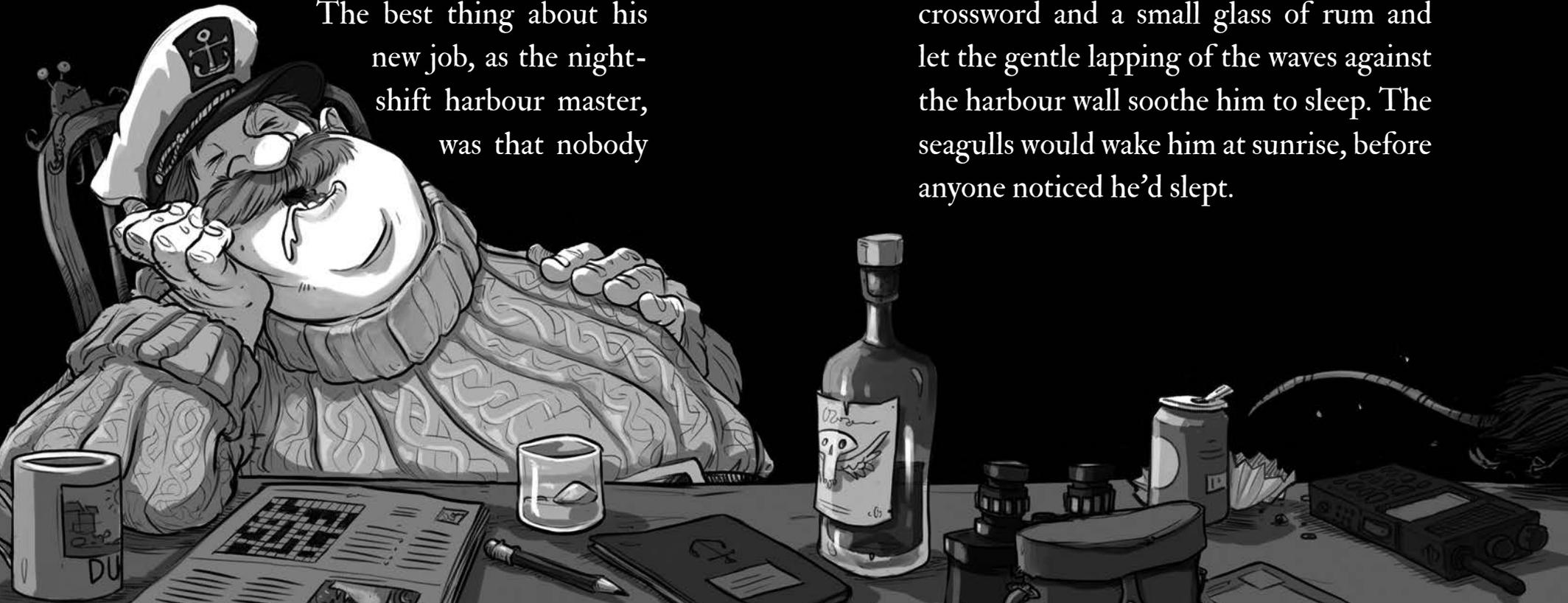


In Dull-on-Sea, Arthur Poppycock had dozed off at his desk in the harbour office. He had changed jobs recently; he'd been far too scared to return as security guard at Dull-on-Sea Museum after it had been raided by ghost pirates.

The best thing about his new job, as the night-shift harbour master, was that nobody

arrived by sea once darkness fell. Arthur did point out that the thieving ghost pirates had arrived in the early hours of the morning, but everyone assured him that he would never see a ghost pirate again.

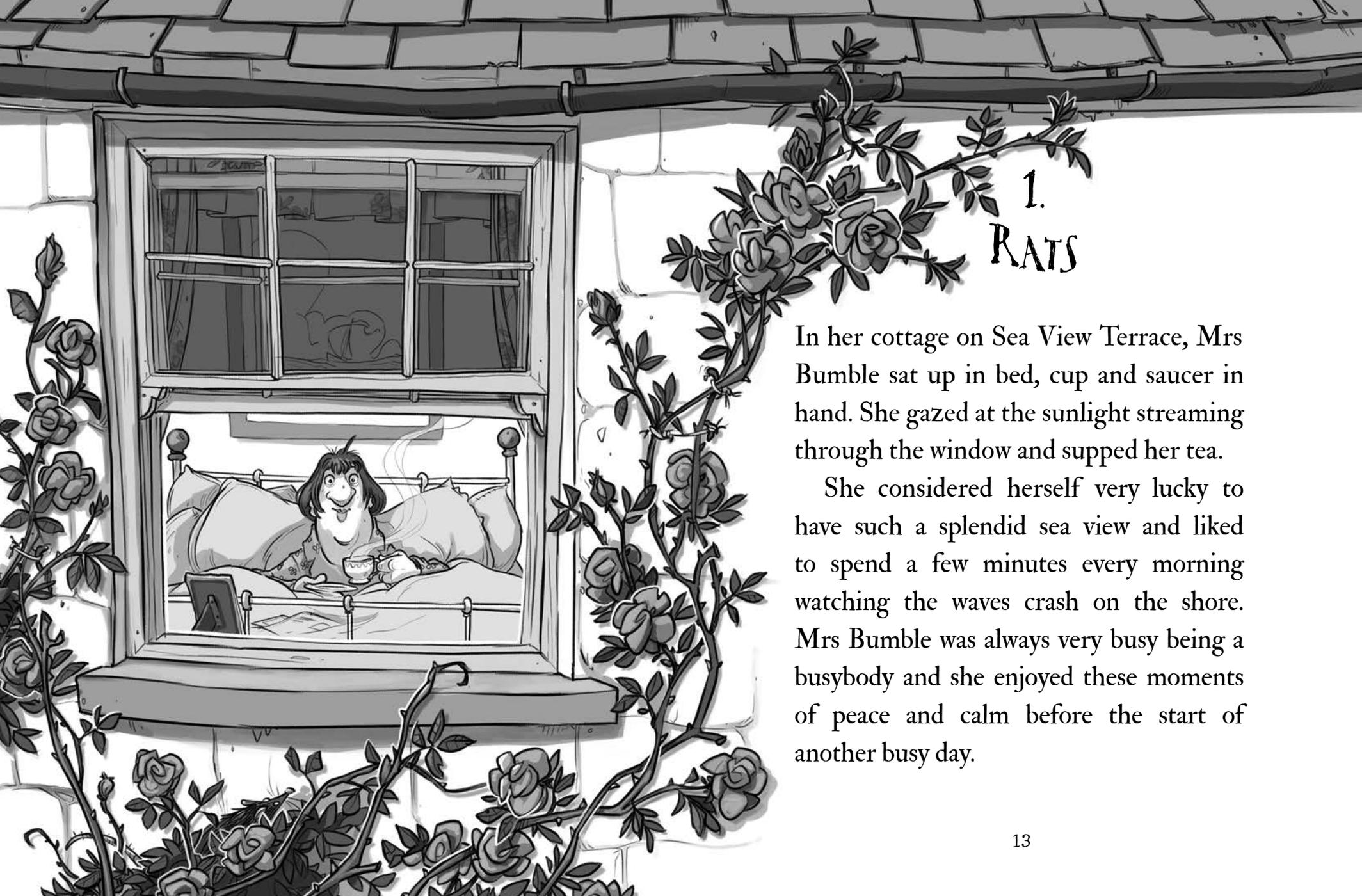
Every night, Arthur would finish his crossword and a small glass of rum and let the gentle lapping of the waves against the harbour wall soothe him to sleep. The seagulls would wake him at sunrise, before anyone noticed he'd slept.





So Arthur was asleep when they arrived, thousands of them, shrouded in darkness and sea mist.

They swam through the harbour gates, swarming up steps and ladders, scurrying along ropes and stone walls until they reached the quayside. They shook the salt water from their fur and followed the tendrils of fog into the dark alleyways of Dull-on-Sea...



1. RATS

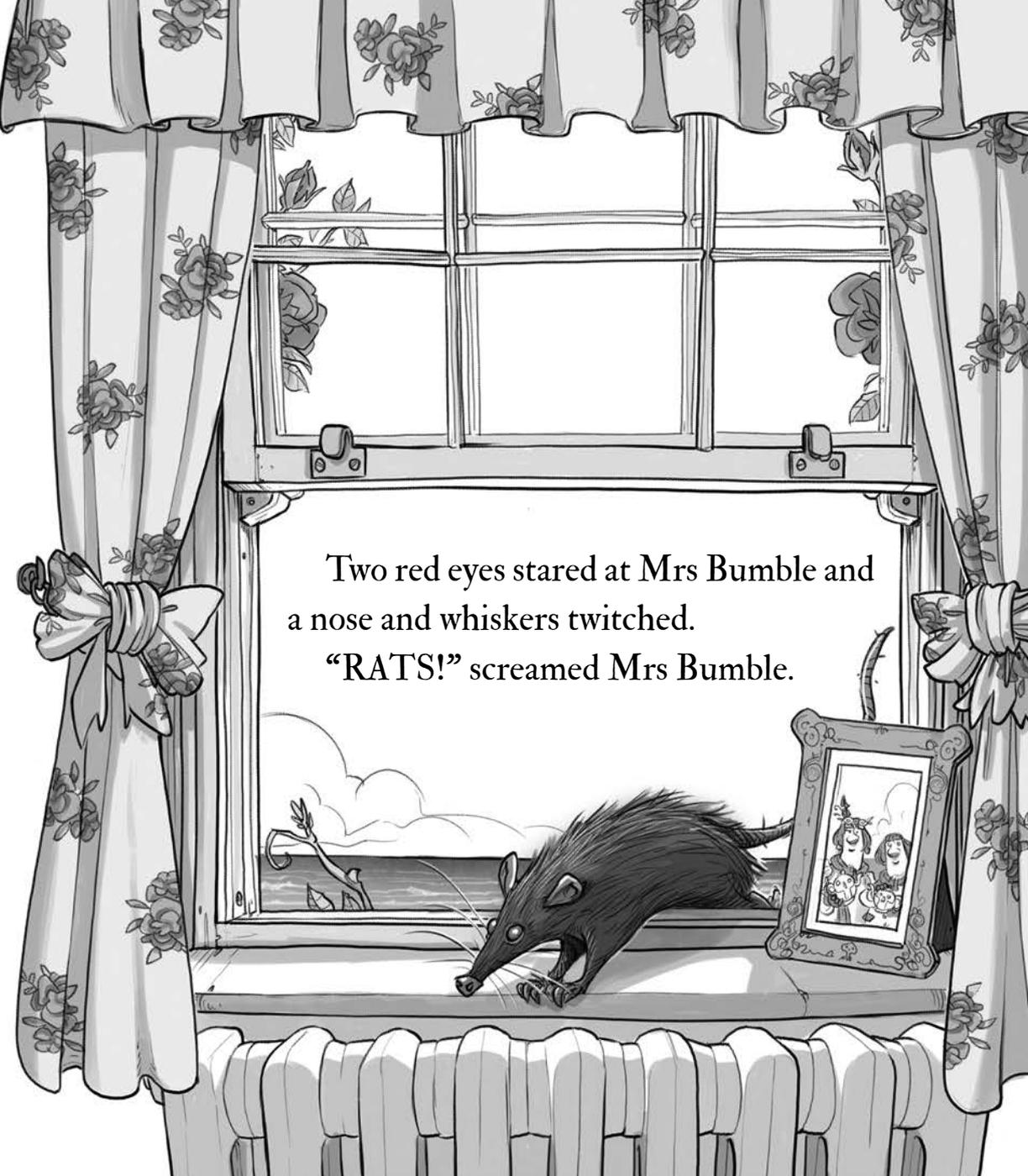
In her cottage on Sea View Terrace, Mrs Bumble sat up in bed, cup and saucer in hand. She gazed at the sunlight streaming through the window and sipped her tea.

She considered herself very lucky to have such a splendid sea view and liked to spend a few minutes every morning watching the waves crash on the shore. Mrs Bumble was always very busy being a busybody and she enjoyed these moments of peace and calm before the start of another busy day.

But this morning her peace and calm was disturbed by a scratching noise.

It was a loud scratching noise and it seemed to be coming from beneath her floorboards. It was joined by another – this one behind her head, behind her plump pillows, behind her floral wallpaper and deep within her bedroom wall. And there were more scratching noises coming from beneath her open window, where something was scratchily scampering up the climbing rose that clung to her cottage.

A black claw scabbled along the window ledge, searching for grip, before hoisting up a great, dark lump of fur.



Two red eyes stared at Mrs Bumble and
a nose and whiskers twitched.
“RATS!” screamed Mrs Bumble.