This is the story of the most extraordinary child who ever stuck his tongue out at the Prime Minister. His name was Nicobobinus. He lived a long time ago, in a city called Venice, and he could do anything.

Of course, not everybody knew he could do anything. In fact, only his best friend, Rosie, knew, and nobody took any notice of anything Rosie said, because she was always having wild ideas anyway.

One day, for example, Rosie said to Nicobobinus: ‘Let’s pull up every single weed on your doorstep.’

‘Let’s not,’ said Nicobobinus (which is what Rosie thought he would say).

‘In that case,’ replied Rosie, ‘let’s discover the Land of Dragons!’

‘Don’t be daft!’ said Nicobobinus. ‘How can we do that?’

‘Because you can do anything,’ said Rosie.

So, the next morning, just as it was getting light, Rosie threw little pebbles up at Nicobobinus’s shutters. Nicobobinus was still half asleep when he looked out.

‘What’s the matter, Rosie?’ he asked.

‘Ssh!’ whispered Rosie. ‘I’ve got the buns and the lemonade.’

‘What for?’ asked Nicobobinus.

‘Supplies for the road!’ whispered Rosie.

‘Where are we going?’ asked Nicobobinus.

‘We’re going to find the Land of Dragons,’ whispered Rosie. ‘Don’t you remember?’
And they didn’t stop running until they had crossed three bridges, and tripped over a dog that was lying asleep under a garden wall, Rosie’s bottle of lemonade smashed against the wall, and the dog leapt to its feet, barking as if it had thought Dogs’ Doomsday had arrived. For a moment, they were sure it was going to bite them, but then it noticed the two buns that had rolled into the gutter, and it wolfed them down, barked ‘Thank you!’ and ran off to tell its friends.

‘We’re not going to get far without supplies,’ said Rosie gloomily.

‘I wonder if I could pick a few of those?’ said Nicobobinus, gazing up at an apple-tree on the other side of the garden wall.

‘Of course you can!’ said Rosie. ‘Stand on my shoulders.’
his wrist. But, Nicobobinus, instead of trying to run away, doubled himself up and went backwards as fast as he could, so the man’s legs were knocked from under him, and he landed in a pile of leaves.

‘Are you alright?’ called Rosie, but she didn’t hear any reply, except for the man, who growled:

‘Just you wait ... Both of you!’

‘Oh dear,’ said Rosie. ‘Sounds like trouble ...’

And she was right.

Chapter 2

Nicobobinus ran as fast as he could, across the lawn, down the path, round a hedge and into a little shed, and bolted the door.

‘Open up!’ cried the Man, and the hinges creaked and the door shook, as he banged it with his fists.

‘That door’s not going to last long,’ thought Nicobobinus to himself, and he dragged a large, old stone roller up against it.

‘Open this door at once, d’you hear?’ the Man was shouting. But Nicobobinus didn’t hear anything at all—he was too amazed by what he had found.

‘You’ll have to come out eventually,’ the Man was saying, ‘and the longer you leave it, the worse it’ll be for you.’

But he could have saved his breath. Nicobobinus was on his knees examining what he had revealed when he moved the roller. He brushed off the dust, and undid the catch, and then lifted it up ...
'Right! I’m going to break this door down!' said the Man. And then, because he knew he’d have to repair the door himself, he added: ‘Do you hear?’

The second was a rather unkind thought about his best friend, who had instigated the whole expedition, and it involved her dangling over a snake pit, while numerous fierce dragons flew at her chanting: ‘How could you do it to him? Poor Nicobobinus!’ The third thought was: ‘Suppose it’s a well? A deep, unused well, with slimy, slippery sides that you could never climb, and icy water at the bottom that …’

At this point. He discovered it was not a well ... He made this discovery very suddenly, and very painfully.

But Nicobobinus didn’t hear. Nicobobinus had disappeared through the trap-door he had discovered, and was running down stone steps that were slippery with slime and that smelt of graveyards, and that went down and down, deeper into the ground, until it became pitch black.

‘Rosie,’ said Nicobobinus to himself, ‘this is all your fault!’

He heard his heart pounding, and his steps echoing along the dank rock of the narrow passageway, until all at once there was nothing, and before he realized he was falling in the blackness ... he was!

Several thoughts flashed through his mind at the same time. The first was something along the lines of: ‘Bother!’ (only a bit ruder).

‘Ouff!’ said Nicobobinus, and he lay there in the pitch blackness, with not a single breath left in his body, for what seemed like the whole winter, but was probably only a few seconds.

He came to himself, in fact, just as a stone hit him on the head.

‘Ouff!’ said Nicobobinus again, and then realized he could hear footsteps high above him.

‘Stop, sir!’ he called out. But the footsteps kept on coming down.
‘Ah ha! I’ve got you now!’ cried the Man. ‘And I shall beat every bone in your body, until it is black and ...’

Nicobobinus supposed the Man was going to say ‘blue’, but, in fact, the next word he uttered sounded more like: ‘Bkfaohohrrrrggghhhhhgmph!’

It was not a word with which Nicobobinus was at all familiar, but he understood its meaning perfectly, and moved smartly out of the way.

Crash.

‘Are you alright!’ he asked.

There was silence.

Nicobobinus felt his way back in the pitch dark, until his hand touched the Man’s leather jerkin. The Man was lying still as death, but he was breathing.

‘I must get help,’ said Nicobobinus to himself, and he began groping around in the blackness to find another way out. When he found it, however, his heart sank. The only exit appeared to be a narrow gap, down by the floor, no more than a foot high.

‘I can’t squirm through that in the pitch dark!’ he said to himself, but at that very moment, he heard Rosie’s cheerful voice saying: ‘You can do it!'

Nicobobinus span round, and there—to his immense surprise—was ... nothing.

No Rosie ... No anybody ...

‘But I don’t know if it leads anywhere!’ he said to the voice in his head.

‘And it’s such a tight squeeze—I might get stuck!’

He didn’t hear Rosie’s voice again, but he knew what it would have said, and that was how he found himself wriggling down a narrow passage of stone in the pitch black.

He squirmed and he wriggled there in the black for a long, long time, and the tunnel got narrower, until he could hardly inch along it.

‘I’m going back!’ he said to himself, but he didn’t. He just kept wriggling and squirming, until suddenly he found he could stand up. He took a pace forward, and immediately fell over stone steps leading up.

‘Ow!’ he said, although what he really meant was: ‘Thank goodness!’

He began to climb, and he was still climbing some minutes later.

‘It must be a tower,’ he thought, ‘or the grandest house in Venice!’ But at that very moment, he saw a crack of light. He stretched out his hand and found himself touching a catch, that clicked softly in the dark.

A panel suddenly slid open, and Nicobobinus stepped through into the most amazing room he’d ever seen.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

These are the first two chapters from a novel called Nicobobinus by Terry Jones. It is full of humour and adventure, and you should read the whole novel if you get the chance. As well as being a writer of books and poems, Terry Jones is also a comedian, screenwriter, actor, director and historian!

WORDS TO KNOW

daft silly
jerkin a sleeveless jacket, typically made of leather
roller a heavy, cylindrical stone used to flatten grass
shutters wooden window covers
squirm to wriggle or twist the body from side to side
weed n. a wild plant growing in an unwanted place; v. to pull up weeds

COMPREHENSION

1. Answer the following questions.
   a. What do we learn about Nicobobinus in the first paragraph?
   b. Who is Rosie?
   c. Why don’t people pay attention to what Rosie says?
   d. What two things does Rosie suggest that she and Nicobobinus should do?
   e. When do the children go on their adventure and what do they take with them?
   f. Whom do they meet on their journey? Say what happens at each of the two encounters.
   g. How does Nicobobinus escape from the Man in the garden?
   h. How does Nicobobinus get out of the well?

   These questions are more difficult. Discuss them first.
   i. Why do you think Rosie said, ‘It’s one of the best ideas you’ve ever had!’ What does it say about Rosie?
   j. What are the thoughts Nicobobinus has as he is falling down the well? For each one, explain what you think he is feeling.

2. Write out the lines of speech below. Put the name of the speaker after each one.
   a. ‘Ah ha! I’ve got you now!’
   b. ‘Let’s pull up every single weed on your doorstep.’
   c. ‘It’s one of the best ideas you’ve ever had!’
   d. ‘Ow!’
   e. ‘Open this door at once, d’you hear?’
   f. ‘You’ll think of something!’
WORKING WITH WORDS

Look at this list of words and phrases from the story.

replied          whispered          yelled          growled
called out       cried              asked           thought

Find out where they have been used in the story. Most of the time authors will use the verb ‘said’, but sometimes they need to be more precise. Pick out any four words from above and use them in sentences of your own.

Example: She said, 'Hello!'

LEARNING ABOUT LANGUAGE

SENTENCES

1. Write questions for these answers.
   (Note: Variations are possible.)
   a. She was the Prime Minister.
   b. Possibly, but I'm not sure about that.
   c. It, most certainly, is not.
   d. I did.
   e. They call them the 'terrible twins'.

2. Make up a statement, a command, a question and an exclamation for each of the pairs of words below. Don't forget the proper punctuation marks.
   Example: man/machine
   Man is not a machine. (Statement)
   Is man a machine? (Question)
   Make that man fix the machine. (Command)
   That's not a man, but a machine! (Exclamation)
   a. cat/door          b. treasure/island
   c. pots/empty       d. noise/loud

3. Convert the following exclamations into statements. Do not change the meaning.
   a. What a lovely dress!
   b. How brave you are!
   c. How angry she is!
   d. What a fine day it is!
   e. How nice of you to come!

4. Make up three statements, questions and exclamations about the story you have just read.
IDIOMATIC LANGUAGE

Here is a sentence from the story.
So they set off through the early morning town.

In this sentence the phrase set off means began a journey.
We call such an expression an idiom. There are many idiomatic expressions in English.

- Look at the ways in which the word set is used in the following:
  - set about something: begin
  - When Mrs Singh got home, she set about preparing dinner for her family.
  - set someone back: delay
  - This puncture is going to set us back one hour.
  - set in: begin
  - The winter has set in early this year.
  - set someone off: cause to begin
  - If you laugh at any of Rahul's jokes, it will set him off telling jokes all night.
  - set something off: cause to explode; cause to begin; make something look attractive
    1. At Diwali children set off fireworks in the street.
    2. The burglar broke the window and set off the alarm.
    3. This blue ribbon sets off her dark hair beautifully.
  - set on someone: attack
  - The burglar was set on by the dog.
  - set out: begin (with the intention of doing something)
  - The man set out to clean the whole house, but only cleaned one room.
  - set to: start energetically
  - If you set to, you can finish the work today.
  - set up: establish oneself in a business or profession; place in position
    1. Mr Shanbag has set up his son as a bookseller.
    2. Every day the man sets up his little stall on the street corner.

5. Now set to, and write one sentence of your own for each of the phrases above.

LISTENING AND SPEAKING

1. Listen to the description of Venice and answer the questions.
Mark the correct answers with a tick.

a. Venice is a city in
   i. Italy. [ ]
   ii. France. [ ]
b. The city is like a
   i. maze.
   ii. market.

  c. Venice is famous for its
   i. furniture.
   ii. architecture.
   iii. airport.
   iv. cars.

  d. The city is in danger of
   i. melting.
   ii. drowning.
   iii. sinking.
   iv. burning.

  e. Venice has lots of
   i. museums and cafes.
   ii. cafes and cars.
   iii. famous artists.
   iv. art and animals.

2. Write five detailed sentences about where you live. Then, in a small group, take it in turns to read out your work. Make notes on what you hear from the others. Next, take it in turns to ask questions about what you read out. How much information did your partner record?

COMPOSITION

A panel suddenly slid open, and Nicobobinus stepped through into the most amazing room he'd ever seen.

What would the most amazing room you have ever seen look like? Write a description of the room and its contents.