

Excerpt from: 'Something Rotten,' the 4th in the Thursday Next Series, published 2004 in the USA by Viking and Hodder in the UK. If you like what you read, check out the book or the series. More information can be found at www.jasperfforde.com

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Overview: Mr Yorrick Kaine, a fictional character escaped from the pages of a book, is trying to make himself dictator in the UK, assisted by an inexplicably compliant parliament, later discovered to be swayed by the secret use of an 'Ovinator', a device that makes people behave more like sheep. The reference to the Danes is due to Mr Kaine's attempts to scapegoat the 'Perfidious Danes' as the root of all internal and external political strife. The protagonist, Thursday Next, is in the studio audience with her husband, Landen Parke-Laine.

Avoid the Question Time - extract

"Good evening and welcome to *Evade the Question Time*, the nation's premier topical talk show. Tonight, as on every night, a panel of distinguished public figures generally evade answering the audience's questions and instead tow the party line."

There was applause at this, and Webastow continued:

"The show tonight comes from Swindon in Wessex. Sometimes called the third capital of England or the 'Venice on the M4', the modern Swindon of today is a financial and manufacturing powerhouse, its citizens a cross section of professionals and artists who are politically indicative of the country as a whole. I'd also like to mention at this point that *Evade the Question Time* is brought to you by Neat-Fit® Exhaust Systems, the tailpipe of choice."

He paused for a moment and shuffled his papers.

"We are honoured to have with us tonight two very different speakers from opposite ends of the political spectrum. First I would like to introduce a man who was politically dead two years ago but has managed to pull himself up to the second highest political office in the nation with a devoted following of many millions, not all of whom are deranged. Ladies and Gentlemen, Chancellor Yorrick Kaine!"

There was mixed applause when he walked on to the stage and he grinned and nodded his head for the benefit of the crowd. I leaned forward in my seat. He didn't appear to have aged at all in the two years since I had last seen him, which is what I would expect from a fictioneer. Still looking in his late twenties with black hair swept neatly to the side, he might have been a male model from a knitting pattern. I knew he wasn't. I'd checked.

"Thank you very much," said Kaine, sitting at the table and clasping his hands in front of him, "May I say that I always regard Swindon as a home away from home."

There was a brief twitter of delight from the front of the audience, mostly little old ladies who looked upon him as the son they never had. Mr Webastow went on:

"And opposing him we are also honoured to welcome Mr Redmond van de Poste of the opposition Commonsense party."

There was notably less applause as van de Poste walked in. He was older than Kaine by almost thirty years, looked tired and gaunt, wore round horn-rimmed spectacles and had a high-domed forehead that shone when it caught the light. He looked about furtively before sitting down stiffly. I guessed the reason. He was wearing a heavy flak vest beneath his suit - and with good reason. The last three Commonsense leaders had all met with mysterious deaths. The previous incumbent had been Mrs Fay Bentoss who had died after being hit by a car. Not so unusual, you might think - except she had been in her front room when it happened.

"Thank you gentlemen and welcome. The first question comes from Miss Pupkin."

A small woman stood up and said shyly:

"Hello. A Terrible Thing was done by Somebody this week, and I'd like to ask the panel if they condemn this."

"A very good question," replied Webastow, "Mr Kaine, perhaps you'd like to start the ball rolling?"

"Thank you, Tudor. Yes, I condemn utterly and completely the Terrible Thing in the strongest possible terms. We in the Whig party are appalled by the way in which Terrible Things are done in this great nation of ours with no retribution against the Somebody who did them. I would also like to point out that the current spate of Terrible Things being undertaken in our towns and cities is a burden we inherited from the Commonsense party, and I am at pains to point out that in real terms the occurrence of Terrible Things have dropped by over 28% since we took office."

There was applause at this and Webastow then asked Mr van de Poste for his comments.

"Well," said Redmond with a sigh, "quite clearly my learned friend has got his facts mixed up. According to the way *we* massage the figures, Terrible Things are actually on the increase. But I'd like to stop playing party politics for a moment and state for the record that although this is of course a great personal tragedy for those involved, condemning out of hand these acts does not allow us to understand why they occur and more needs to be done to get to the root cause of—"

"—Yet again," interrupted Kaine, "yet again we see the commonsense party shying away from its responsibilities and failing to act toughly on unspecified difficulties. I hope all the unnamed people who have suffered unclearly defined problems will understand—"

"—I *did* say we condemned the Terrible Thing," put in van de Poste, "And I might add that we have been conducting a study into the entire range of Terrible Things all the

way from Just Annoying to Outrageously Awful and will act on these findings - if we gain power."

"Trust the commonsensers to do things by half measures!" scoffed Kaine, who obviously enjoyed these sort of discussions, "by going only so far as 'Outrageously Awful' Mr van de Poste is selling his own nation short. We at the Whig Party have been looking at the Terrible Things problem and propose a zero tolerance attitude to offences as low as Mildly Inappropriate. Only in this way can the Somebodies who commit Terrible Things be stopped before they move on to acts that are Obscenely Perverse."

There was a smattering of applause again, presumably as the audience tried to figure out whether 'Just Annoying' was worse than 'Mildly Inappropriate'

"Succinctly put," announced Webastow, "At the end of the first round I will award three points to Mr Kaine for a excellent non-specific condemnation, plus one bonus point for blaming the previous government, and another for successfully mutating the question to promote the party line. Mr van de Poste gets a point for a firm rebuttal, but only two points for his condemnation as he tried to inject an impartial and intelligent observation. So at the end of the first round, it's Kaine leading with five points, and van de Poste with three."

There was more applause as the numbers came up on the scoreboard.

"Onto the next stage of the show which we call the 'not answering the question' round. We have a question from Miss Ives."

A middle-aged woman put up her hand and asked:

"Does the panel think that sugar should be added to Rhubarb pie or the sweetness deficit made up by an additive, such as custard?"

"Thank you, Miss Ives. Mr van de Poste, would you care to not answer this question first?"

"Well," said Redmond, eyeing the audience for any possible assassins, "This question goes straight to the heart of government, and I'd like to first point out that the Commonsense party, when we were in power, tried more ways of doing things than any other party in living memory, and in consequence came closer to doing the right way of doing something, even if we didn't know it at the time."

There was applause and Joffy and I exchanged looks.

"Does it get any better?" I whispered.

"Wait until they get on to Denmark."

"I utterly refute," began Kaine, "the implication that we aren't doing things the right way. To demonstrate this I'd like to wander completely off the point and talk about the Health Service Overhaul that we will launch next year. We want to replace the outdated 'Preventative' style of healthcare this country has relentlessly pursued with a 'Wait until it gets really bad' system which will target those most in need of medical treatment - the sick. Yearly health screenings for all citizens will end and be replaced by a 'Tertiary' diagnostic regime which will save money and resources."

Again, there was applause.

"Okay," announced Webastow, "I'm going to give van de Poste three points for successfully not answering that question at all, but five points to Kaine who not only ignored the question, but instead used it as a platform for his own political agenda. So with six rounds still to go, we have Kaine with ten points, and van de Poste with six. Next question please."

A young man with dyed red hair sitting on our row put his hand up.

"I would like to suggest that the Danish are *not* our enemy, and this is nothing more than a cynical move by the Whigs to blame someone else for our own economic troubles."

"Ah!" said Webastow, "The controversial Danish question. I'm going to let Mr van de Poste avoid this question first."

van de Poste looked unwell all of a sudden and glanced nervously towards where Stricknene and Gayle were glaring at him.

"I think," he began slowly, "that if the Danish are as Mr Kaine describes, I will offer my support to his policies."

He dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief as Yorrick began:

"When I came to power England was a nation in the grip of economic decline and social ills. No-one realised it at the time and I took it upon myself to demonstrate by any means in my power the depths to which this great nation had fallen. With the support of my followers, I have managed to demonstrate reasonably clearly that things aren't as good as we thought they were, and what we imagined was peace and co-existence with our neighbours was actually a fool's paradise of delusion and paranoia. Anyone who thinks..."

I leaned over to Joffy.

"Do people believe this garbage?"

"I'm afraid so. I think he's working on the 'people will far more readily believe a big lie than a small one' principle. Still surprises me, though."

"...whoever disturbs this mission," rattled on Kaine, "is an enemy of the people, whether they be Danish or Welsh sympathisers eager to overthrow our nation, or ill-informed lunatics who do not deserve the vote, or a voice."

There was applause but a few boos, too. I saw Colonel Gayle make notes on a scrap of paper as to who was shouting them, counting out the seat numbers as he did so.

"But why the Danish?" continued the man with the red hair, "they have a notoriously fair system of parliament, an impeccable record of human rights and a deserved reputation of upstanding charitable works in third world nations - I think these are lies, Mr Kaine!"

There were gasps and intakes of breath but a few head noddings, too. Even, I think, from van de Poste.

"For the moment at least," began Kaine in a conciliatory tone, "everyone is permitted an opinion and I thank our friend for his candour. However, I would like to bring the audience's attention to an unrelated yet emotive issue that will bring the

discussion away from embarrassing shortcomings of my administration and back into the arena of populist politics. Namely: The disgraceful record of puppy and kitten death when the Commonsense party were in power."

At the mention of puppies and kittens dying there were cries of alarm from the elder members of the audience. Confident that he had turned the discussion, Kaine went on:

"As things stand at the moment, over one thousand unwanted puppies and kittens are destroyed each year by lethal injection which are freely available to veterinarians in Denmark. As committed humanitarians, the Whig party have always condemned unwanted pet extermination."

"Mr Van de Poste?" asked Webastow, "How do you react to Mr Kaine's diversionary tactics regarding kitten death?"

"Clearly," began van de Poste, "kitten and puppy death is regrettable, but we in the Commonsense party must bring it to everyone's attention that unwanted pets have to be destroyed in this manner. If people were more responsible with their pets, then this sort of thing wouldn't happen."

"Typical of the Commonsense approach!" barked Kaine, "blaming the population as though they were feeble-minded fools with little personal responsibility! We in the Whig party would never condone such an accusation, and are appalled by Mr van de Poste's outburst. I will personally pledge to you now that I will make the puppy home deficit problem my primary concern when I am made dictator."

There were loud cheers at this and I shook my head sadly.

"Well," said Webastow happily, "I think I will give Mr Kaine a full five points for his masterful misdirection, plus a bonus two points for obscuring the Danish issue rather than facing up to it. Mr van de Poste, I'm sorry that I can only offer you a single point. Not only did you tacitly agree to Mr Kaine's outrageous foreign policy, but you answered the unwanted pet problem with an honest reply. So at the end of round three Kaine is galloping ahead with seventeen points, and van De Poste bringing up the rear with seven. Our next question comes from Mr Wedgwood."

"Yes," said a very old man in the third row, "I should like to know if the panel supports the Goliath Corporation's change to a faith based corporate management system."

And so it dragged on for nearly an hour, Kaine making outrageous claims and most of the audience failing to notice or, even worse, care. I was extremely glad when the programme drew to a close with Kaine leading thirty-eight points to van de Poste's sixteen, and we filed out of the door.