

# KANGAZANG!

TERRY COOPER



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## DEDICATIONS

To Nyssia, Mia, Mum,  
Gary Bush and Barry J. House

and especially

Douglas Adams for providing so many  
with inspiration and joy.

There are many, many tales of Man's adventures in outer space.

Some are sheer brilliance, while some are distinctly mediocre.

This is another one.

You can decide which category it falls into later.

# PROLOGUE

## *The Prophecy*

**F**ar out in the deep inky voidness of space, the imposing world of Emo Prime hung listlessly.

Its ring of asteroids encircled it, spinning and colliding enthusiastically, hundreds of miles above the mottled black-and-white surface of the planet. To the passing observer, it looked rather like the severed head of a panda bear, surrounded by a cloud of gnats. Only less furry, and not as disturbing to see.

Deep down on the surface beneath the sullen clouds, there stood a great cathedral. A towering, ornate behemoth of Gothic design, dark and foreboding, into which a steady stream of shrouded and dour figures shuffled, moaning softly to pass the time on their arduous pilgrimage.

The village meeting was in progress.

The High Priest, tall and spider-like, clad in elegant robes of the dullest colours, addressed the assembled throng of sour-faced listeners.

“Mood: Apathetic,” he called out.

“Mood: Apathetic,” replied the crowd in unison, both as an acknowledgement and answer.

Looking out over the hundreds of pale faces, each one framed by lank but shiny black hair, the Priest took a deep creaking breath, and began his sermon.

“To the Highest on high, the gods of Emo, and their desolate hearts, we send out praise. To uphold the principles of the Holy ABC – Apathy, Boredom and Complacency, we dedicate our pointless existences. This day, and forever, we yearn for the

comforting solace of a dark and cold grave.”

It was a particularly cheery one, today's sermon. After all, the Priest had some particularly cheery news to tell. He swept a wrinkly pale finger across his wrinkly pale forehead to clear his eyes of limp black hair.

“Be thou warned,” he began, accompanied by some serious finger-waggage, “That the Evil One and his accomplice are due to arrive... at any time, now that the planets have aligned. That he shall walk among us and spread the terror and fear that will end our lives.”

A visible shudder rippled through the audience; the desired response. He continued with vigour:

“That they will bring upon us the plagues and afflictions of Joy, Smiling and,” he paused for maximum effect, “..Laughter!”

The crowd began to mumble, clearly unnerved by the thought of happiness in any format. The Priest read on, with a weird grimace crossing his crumply-paper face.

“And when they arrive, we must be vigilant! We must prove to the Evil Ones that we SHALL worry! We shall NOT be happy! Only then will they tremble in fear of us! And only then will we do what must be done to purge the badness of their spirits.”

He took another final deep breath.

“WHAT WILL WE DO?” he yelled out to the crowd.

In unison again, the crowd called back:

“Complain! Condemn! Convert!”

The Priest was satisfied.

“Justice will be done,” he thought, “Our society is safe.”

But he was unaware that society as he knew it, was about to change forever.

Or, for about an hour at least.

# CHAPTER ONE

## *The Man From Kangazang*

Anyway.

Our story, like many unearthly stories, starts, rather predictably, on Earth.

Except for the previous part that didn't, obviously. You get the idea.

Jeff Spooner sat in the barber's chair, getting his bi-monthly trim. He looked around the faux-pine clad walls, and gazed at the flecks of mousy brown hair that slid down the apron in front of him. Haircuts seemed to be taking less time each month, he mused, while the percentage of silvery-grey seemed to be increasing. Surely they'd cancel each other out, at some point?

He looked up as far as he could without moving his head, and saw that his hairdresser was wearing an odd tie-pin that bore a penguin in a fetching shade of pink.

"Doing anything interesting this weekend?" asked Ray the Barber.

Ray was in his early forties, almost but-not-quite portly, but still quite energetic. He sported a rapidly greying set of hairdo and goatee, which made him look a little like a jazz musician.

His head looked like his hair was trying to evacuate his scalp and hide down around the back of his head, a sort of furry curtain. In his shirt, tie and white barbers' coat, he was always well turned-out, as are most barbers, and full of interesting yarns, many of which made no sense at all – again, as are most barbers.

Jeff looked up into the mirror, to see Ray snipping away effortlessly.

"Yeah," replied Jeff, "Sarah's birthday, innit? She wants to go to the theatre. Cats, I think. Load of rubbish – I'd rather go down the footy, but it is her birthday after all."

Ray nodded.

"Her treat I suppose. Do they have a good choice then, in the theatre?"

"Choice of what – plays?" said Jeff, in slight confusion.

"Cats," said Ray. "I wasn't aware they started selling pets there."

Jeff blinked.

"No, mate... 'Cats' – the play," he began, thinking that this might possibly be a wind-up, "They don't sell cats in a theatre, do they?"

Ray looked embarrassed and tried to make amends.

"Oh *theatre!* I thought you said...er...*THE CATTER*-y. Yeah, sorry, plays. Good choice?"

Jeff shook his head briefly, to wake up his senses a bit. The internal rattling didn't help.

"Er... yeah. Good choice of plays, yes."

He decided to leave it at that. It was too early for surrealism right now.

Jeff had known Ray the barber for nearly ten years. They weren't exactly best buddies, but since Jeff met his fiancée, and found that she was very exacting in the way she wanted her future husband to look, he had to pop in for a trim - without fail - every two weeks. Thus, he and Ray had struck up the beginnings of a friendship.

Ray did have some minor eccentricities, when he thought about it. He was the kind of guy who never quite seemed to be on the same page as everyone else. And the lifestyle: For example, he always refused an offer to go down the pub. In fact, Jeff had never seen Ray outside of his salon. He seldom talked about his family, except to say that they were far away. And he charged next to nothing for his haircuts, as if he genuinely didn't need the money and was doing it just for the fun of it. But to each his own, thought Jeff.

The barber's skilful hands swiftly completed the job.

"Cheers Ray," said Jeff, as Ray whipped the nylon apron off

him like a matador.

"What's the damage?" asked Jeff as he got up and out of the chair.

"That's um, one pound and... *seven* pence, please," replied Ray, picking a random figure out of thin air, and simultaneously opening his olde-worlde till with a push of a button.

Jeff paused.

"One pound *seven*? Have you put your prices *down* again?"

Ray smiled sheepishly.

"Well, yeah. Need to get some more customers. You know how it is..." he mumbled, looking rather embarrassed.

"I'm a fairy, my name is Nuff," said Jeff, pulling out some coins.

Ray looked a little puzzled.

"No it isn't, it's Jeff."

Jeff wasn't sure if Ray was really serious, so he let it slide.

"You really should charge more, mate. Seriously. The hairdressers down the road charge a minimum of seven quid for a dry cut. You won't be in business much longer."

Ray seemed to agree, like it was a good thing

"That's the plan," he said cheerfully.

Jeff brushed some specks of hair from his neck, and reached over for his jacket, which hung on a hook nearby.

"So, you're off on holiday, then? Or retiring?"

"A little from Column 'A', and a little from Column 'B', Jeff. Taking a trip, really. Going to... er... visit my family."

"Oh right... where did you say they are, again?" asked Jeff, putting the jacket on.

Ray closed the till.

"Kanga... Er, Kanga-da. *Canada*"

Taking a side step to allow another man to take the chair, Jeff nodded.

"Oh right. Canada. Bit nippy out there, mate, make sure you wrap up warm!"

"Well, I'll be on the beach a lot, if I can help it," said Ray, "Cheerio!"

"See ya mate," called Jeff as he stepped out of the salon

"Hang a banger," he thought, "There aren't any beaches in

Canada." Then he chuckled to himself. Ray always was a bit of a peculiar one.

Inside the salon, Ray smiled to himself.

Jeff always was a bit of a peculiar one, he thought.

But in all honesty, it was Jeff who was closer to the truth: Compared to him, Ray was the peak of peculiarity.

So peculiar, Jeff couldn't even begin to imagine how peculiar.

Peculiarities, especially in this reality, are something of a paradox. This is because there are so many millions upon billions of peculiarities in each and every aspect of existence, that they actually are the norm and not peculiar at all. So to be brutally honest (another paradox, incidentally), the most peculiar thing one could ever find is something completely normal.

But in the spirit of goodwill, progression and in the equally important spirit of 'moving-things-along-ness', we'll just assume that you share the narrow-minded human definition of peculiarity. Thought you'd agree.

In another part of the galaxy, hung the peculiar planet Orbitron. As its name suggests, it's not your common-or-garden planet. Resembling a gigantic ball-bearing or, to be more accurate, a chrome-plated Brussels Sprout, it was an entirely artificial, metal construction. Not a diabolical weapon of planetary destruction – *Star of Death, anyone?* - but a peaceful world that offered assistance, obedience and a local-rate technical assistance line to the countless peoples of the universe.

Orbitron was inhabited by – and indeed, built by, robots. Or as they preferred to be known, Orbots. It sounded better, as they now had a place to actually belong, just like the 'fleshies'. Artificial beings of all shapes and sizes lived there, from minuscule nano-surgeons to towering Constructorbots. They lived in happy compatibility and prospered, being efficient and regularly upgraded, rebooted and defragmented. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule, and Orbitron was no different from any planet, in that it had its fair share of undesirables and non-runners. These unfortunate Orbots were known as the M-Classes. So named as they were designated 'M' for malfunction.

Because the Orbots were a kindly and benevolent race, they

tried to repair their broken brothers and sisters, until it became too expensive, but some just wouldn't be fixed. They tried installing newer operating systems, re-formatting their hard drives, and even the last-resort of disconnecting them from the InfoHEX - (InformationHyperEXpressway) entirely, but the source of the bugs still managed to elude them.

The M-class Orbot lived in the lesser-developed areas of Orbitron, mainly on the surface. It was a sort of slum – the malfunctioning mechas went about their lives fending off meteor showers and magnetised space debris, while their more sophisticated cyber-siblings lived below the surface, running the server farms and doing all the techy stuff. It was on the surface of Orbitron where M4 and his female-designated cohabitant, M25 lived.

M4 was, for all purposes, a fine Orbot.

He had all his limbs and his programming was nigh-on perfect. Except – something deep and elusive in his software had a strange effect on his thought process. Everything he experienced seemed to be funny to him in some way. Humour and hilarity took over his operational matrix. He just couldn't take anything seriously.

Seriously.

No, seriously.

Although this minor malfunction didn't really interfere with his day-to-day work, his superiors stamped him with an 'M' and sent him up onto the surface because, quite frankly, they had had more than enough of his constant sniggering and jokey comments.

The ruling-class mainframes of Orbitron tolerated him for as long as they could, but in a world reliant on the solemnity of logic and conformity, there was no place for this annoying Orbot who laughed at anything, all of the time. You could understand their reasons. If you've ever worked in an office environment that had a person labelled 'the office joker', you'll know what I mean.

His cohabitant unit, M25, was perfectly fine with this. She thought it was sort of endearing and made him more human-like. She too, seemed like a perfectly operational Orbot – shiny and curved in all the right places. She was a veritable Venus in white plastic and chromed parts. But one had to be very gentle with her

– due to her phobias. This became a problem when they manifested themselves shortly after her Operation Day.

Most organisms, whether artificial or fleshy, learn to cope with irrational phobias, but M25 couldn't. Nor could those around her, as these phobias changed regularly. It could be oil that terrified her one minute, then her own feet the next. She was a nervous wreck when they dumped her on the surface, trembling at the sight of the starry sky, then wailing in fear at the arrival of M4, when he said 'hello' (then burst out laughing) for the first time. But between them, they seemed to cope fairly well, and thus, they got on with life.

Their surface tasks were to repair and refuel docking spacecraft that passed by. Occasionally, M4 would crack a really terrible joke and laugh uncontrollably at his own humour, and M25 would run away, screaming in horror as a visiting ship's dog sniffed her silver leg, but generally they did okay. But they, like the numerous other M-Class Orbots, wished for something better, something really interesting and heroic to re-define their lives. Who said that androids dream only of electric sheep?

They were about to get their wish.

And tenuous though the link may be, wishing is what brings us back to our rather un-peculiar and normal (well, *relatively* normal) human being called Jeff Spooner.

Jeff was in a bad way. He wished for a lot in his life, like everyone does, but tonight, he'd wished that he'd caught the later bus to Sarah's house. He wished he'd not decided to surprise her by turning up unannounced with the theatre tickets and medium-priced bouquet of chrysanthemums and various strands of overpriced posh grass.

But most of all, he wished he hadn't stood at Sarah's bedroom door to catch her in a rather compromising position with the local reverend. *He* may have stuck to his story about 'performing an exorcism', but that dog-collared deviant wasn't fooling anyone.

Talk about spreading the good word- he was spreading the good bird, and although Jeff had a healthy respect for the clergy and the very good work they do, he felt it only right that he should perform his very own exorcism and beat seven shades of

evil out of the vicarious vicar.

Thus, Jeff sat at the bar of the Red Lion Inn, and sniffed, watching his tears *ploop* into his un-sipped pint.

"I'm sure he won't press charges, Jeff," offered Glyn the barman, "After all, it's not going to go down very well with his superiors, and it'd ruin his career for such a young bloke..."

To Jeff, this was hardly a comfort. He sniffed again and looked up with his watery blue eyes.

"It was her birthday. Birthday! I still can't believe she'd do this to me. I never two timed her, I never mistreated her, I never once hurt her!" he whimpered.

The barman stopped him there.

"Ah – That's not strictly true, is it? There was the barbecue incident."

"That's not the same thing," mumbled Jeff, as he took a tiny sip of lager-with-a-dash-of-tears-and-runny-nose-extract.

"It wasn't intentional – how was I to know she was behind me when I swung the spatula?"

Glyn the barman suppressed his smirk. After all, Jeff was a valued regular. But the thought of Sarah with a triangular black mark on her forehead where the hot fat had branded her otherwise pretty face, did tickle him somewhat. He tried to offer more sympathy.

"You mustn't blame yourself, Jeff..."

"No, I don't..." he began calmly, but then Jeff shook like a long-dead volcano spurting into fiery activity.

"I blame her!! That evil cow! That unscrupulous, scheming sodding tart! That – that uncaring, unfeeling bloody...bloody...*wench!*"

Jeff never was very good at profanity.

He took a deep breath, and grabbed his jacket. Leaving his snot-infused beverage to the purple-nosed old soak at the bar who'd sat beside him witnessing the entire scene, he bid a mumbled, tipsy farewell to Glyn, and left for home.

To the crumpled old dipso, it was a lovely vintage, this one. *Mmmm.*

As he ambled down the high street, munching on one of

Georgiou's Special Kebabs, Jeff wondered where his life was going.

Another peculiar thing (there will be many, so try to keep up) is that most people in this life (or the next, or indeed the *previous*), only ever make big plans, decisions or analytical forays into their own existences when they are either:

- a) drunk, or
- b) unhappy, or more often than not,
- c) both.

These three physical and emotional conditions are quite possibly the very worst time to make a deep decision of this kind. Then again, it may be the best opportunity to be completely honest with oneself. Or not. That's the beauty of alcohol and melancholia-induced psychoanalysis – nothing (*and indeed everything*) is what it seems. Or maybe it isn't. But it could be.

Anyway, Jeff was no exception.

He sat down on the cold steel bench within the bus shelter, and fished out the long green chilli peppers from his kebab. Finding three, he flung them rather skilfully into the litter bin nearby, and wiped his vinegar-tainted fingers on his jeans.

As he munched on the vaguely meat-like shoe leather, he began to hum a tune. A tune which he at first thought originated in his lager-addled mind:

*“Here’s a little song I wrote,  
You might want to sing it note-for-note;  
Don’t worry...  
(bipidee bee boo beepdeedoo...)  
Be happy...”*

“Yeah, Bloody easy for you to say, *Muck-Ferret...*” slurred Jeff, to nobody in particular.

He'd read somewhere that Bobby Mc Ferrin, the writer of the offending tune, (*Also singer, composer, conductor, multi-instrumentalist and eternal optimist*) had topped himself in despair. After a little searching on the net, this had turned out to be a vicious, cruel and wholly inaccurate urban myth.

But right now, Jeff wished him dead.

“Don't worry, be bugged. Happy? *My bung-hole,*” he spat.

“The day that bloke saves a life instead of adding to the suicide figures, will probably be declared a public holiday...”

It turned out that the song wasn't in his mind at all, but drifting out of a nearby window, not far away. Jeff scrumpled up his kebab papers and dumped them into the litter bin. He walked toward the sound, mentally contemplating the gleeful strangulation of whoever seemed to be taunting him with the accursed happy ditty.

He turned the corner, and saw Ray's Gent's Salon.

The shop lights were on, and there was some definite activity inside. A party, perhaps? Jeff had never seen Ray in the pub, and he knew that Ray's family were in Canada. More to the point, Ray said he never touched alcohol, so why would there be music and life inside a barber's shop at nearly midnight?

Jeff crept closer to the window. Vertical blinds prevented him from getting a good view of the proceedings, but he could see Ray in there, dancing around with his brush, and a black rubbish sack, to the strains of Kylie Minogue's first hit single, 'I Should Be So Lucky'. Mercifully, Mc Ferrin had had his three minutes.

Jeff smiled. Dancing to Kylie? He'd never seen Ray with a woman and concluded that he must be a little 'light in the loafers', so to speak. After all, he surmised, aren't *most* male hairdressers?

It's also true that those with the narrowest of minds prefer to tar others with the widest of brushes. But Jeff's rather narrow mind was due to be expanded laterally, not to mention exponentially from this night on.

Not that it was a problem for Jeff. He knew a few of the gay folk in the town, and didn't really mind what side their bread was buttered – so long as they kept their buttery knives to themselves, and didn't poke them into his peanut butter. And Ray seemed like the straight-acting type, which made him alright in Jeff's book.

*“It's not homophobia to be annoyed by a mincing fool like the ones they put on the telly,”* was his usual motto regarding the subject.

*“But who'd've thunk it? Gay Ray.”*

Actually, it seemed less outlandish the more he thunk it. The tie-pin with the pink penguin on suddenly made sense.

It was at that point that Ray stopped the CD of eighties hits playing, and unlocked the salon door. He dragged the bin bag

outside, and headed for the large lock up garage adjacent to the shop.

Jeff took a few steps back into the shadows of the wall next to him, and watched as Ray unlocked the large chains that held the huge wooden door of the lock-up. In actual fact, it was an old converted hay-loft, as Ray's salon was an old farm-house, a very nice place to live and work. How he could afford it while charging so little for a dry cut was indeed another mystery to add to the enigmatic chap.

Jeff remained there for a few moments, wobbling in the shadows, watching the proceedings. He did quite well, until Georgiou's Special Kebab did an acrobatic leap within his stomach, forcing out the loudest gurgling *ke-burp* that he'd had ever created.

Ray spun around. He brandished his broom like a baseball bat. Jeff stepped out of the dark corner, both hands raised.

"Whoa! Whoa! It's me, Ray. It's Jeff!"

Ray remained keenly alert, almost guiltily stunned. He shook the broom, threateningly.

"Don't come any closer!" he said, still looking terrified.

Things would have probably gone a little smoother had Jeff not seen the spaceship in the garage behind Ray.

And thrown up everywhere.

Jeff Spooner wasn't the only person having a hard time coping with recent events. For example, Reverend Wilson, the young and sinful vicar who had recently exercised (as opposed to *exorcised*) Jeff's fiancée, was nursing a few egg-sized bumps on his head, a split lip and "*two luvverly black eyes...*" as the song went. Jeff had surprised himself by doing such a thorough renovation job on the randy Rev's face, as he wasn't a violent man by any means. But if you're going to engage in facial pummellage, it's probably better to pummel someone who deserves it.

Talking of which, the vicar was driving home in his little car, wondering if he was going to be binged out of the priesthood altogether the next morning. "Surely", he thought, "This is the work of the Devil" The wicked temptress that cruelly seduced him, and his subsequent punishment... Or was it his act of mercy

to such a pretty and needy woman that led Satan's follower to dish out such a terrible and bloody wrath?

Whatever it was, he'd have a lot of explaining to do in the morning. Hopefully, the Good Lord would provide him with a sign.

Jeff's ex-fiancée Sarah was also finding it difficult to come to terms with what had transpired only a few hours ago.

Lying in bed alone, she gazed out of the window, looking at the clear moonlit sky. But her face revealed a thin wry smile. Her concerns were for the severely dented reverend who had been in her arms (and a few other places) earlier on that night.

She smiled because she had managed to have her 'cake' and 'eat' it all this time, and now that her loser of a boyfriend had found out, she no longer had to deal with him. In all honesty, it turned out that Sarah really was an 'evil cow, an unscrupulous, scheming sodding tart, and an uncaring, unfeeling bloody... bloody... *wench*', to quote Jeff. But suddenly, the smile faded. A tear welled up in her eye, as she realised that all was not quite well...

Jeff still owed her fifty quid.

Another person having a lifestyle crisis at this crucial juncture in our tale was the evil dictator, Lord Rancydd of Skragg. Although he wasn't strictly anything to do with Jeff's troubled existence, he would soon set events in motion to make life a little more trying for our hapless human.

Approximately one hundred and thirty-five parsecs away, within the impressive cluster of youthful stars called the Pleiades, lay the Skraggi Empire. A gigantic, galaxy-wide kingdom, which had been ruled for millennia by a family of vindictive and savage rulers. The latest in the line was Lord Rancydd, victor of countless battles, murderer of billions and fearful god of war to every nearby system.

And father to Kelvin.

Lord Rancydd lay dying in his jewel-encrusted golden bed, his only son at his side. Kelvin was a little under thirty, thin and nervous, and unlike his father, he wasn't really the vindictive and savage type. True, he'd *read* about countless battles, *imagined*

insulting millions and tried to be a fearful god of war to the next door neighbours' pets. But Kelvin was about to inherit the title Lord Rancydd the Third, Overlord of Skragg. In all honesty, he would rather have been reading magazines of dubious subject matter outside, in the garden shed.

On second thought, Lord Rancydd wasn't the one having difficulty in his life, as there was only about a minute left of it. Kelvin was the one going through the emotional mangle, buttocks-first. He sat beside the huge bed and watched the hours tick by as his five hundred year old father took thin gasps of air.

Back on Earth, it was two a.m. in the morning, and Jeff Spooner sat inside the garage staring up at Ray, with an empty feeling in his stomach. The reason for this feeling was literal – his stomach contents were outside the garage, doing a rather convincing Jackson Pollock impersonation.

Ray had helped Jeff clean up, and handed him a strong coffee, which helped, but not a lot, because he was looking at a scene which was chock-full of mind-boggle-ation; His local barber, building a spacecraft, inside a garage (out of what looked like wool - what *was* that odd smell?), and a small army's worth of explosives piled underneath the shell-shaped ship.

*Was Ray some kind of terrorist?* Jeff had to ask to get this issue out of the way. Tactfully, too. It wouldn't do to upset him.

“Are you some kind of terrorist, Ray? Like er... Al-Pacino... no, Al-Qaeda?”

Ray smiled warmly, rather unlikely for an AK-47 brandishing nutjob.

“No, of course not. Don't be ridiculous.”

This was a big relief. Jeff sighed and took a long sip of welcoming coffee.

“I'm an alien.”

Jeff's coffee left the way it went in, only twice as fast.

This had been quite a bizarre day for Jeff, all things considered, and if truth be told, for the High Priest of Emo Prime, M4 and M25 the dysfunctional Orbots, Reverend Wilson, Sarah the scum-queen, Glyn the barman and the crusty old dipso, Lord Rancydd Of Skragg and young Kelvin. Even Bobby McFerrin, on

the other side of the world, wasn't feeling so chipper at that particular moment.

Only Ray seemed to be having a pretty normal sort of day. But at two in the morning, Jeff decided he might as well embrace the madness and go along with it. He resigned himself to the belief that, at some point, reason would soon slip back into the proceedings. Either that or a male nurse would top up his medication and re-tighten the straps.

"I think it's time I explained myself," said Ray, pacing around the odd mottled spacecraft. Jeff could only smile weakly as coffee dripped from his chin.

"Right – you *aren't* imagining all this, I *am* an alien, and this is my only way off this planet," he continued, pacing around.

Jeff looked at the insane craft and the deceptively sane barber. At this point, he could only assume that Ray had run through the crazy forest and hit every tree.

"Er...okay, Ray. But one question -"

"Only one?"

"Well, alright – a couple. How can you be an alien? I've known you for, well... at least ten years!"

Ray stopped pacing, and sat down on a wooden crate near Jeff.

"Firstly, my name isn't Ray. Well, it is, but that's only part of it."

"Er...oh-*kay* then. So, what's the rest of it?"

Ray took a deep breath of fresh dignity.

"My name is Barbaray Sprambladack Fasstalón-Scump."

Jeff couldn't help but snigger. Ray was prepared for this moment, thanks to his lungful of dignity, and so carried on regardless.

"I've been stranded here since the early eighties, when my ship– *this*," he indicated the craft, "got severely damaged by the atmosphere. Most of the outer shielding got burnt up, and I've been repairing it ever since."

"Repairing it? With what?"

"With this!" replied Ray, delving his hand into the black bin liner, and pulling out a large, itchy-looking clump of human hair.

"Keratin!" he exclaimed proudly. "The finest trans-galactic insulation shielding known to lifekind!"

He sniffed the clump momentarily.

"Alright, so it smells a bit strange, but there's no denying its unique properties!"

Jeff suddenly realised the smell was this spacecraft, about the size of a Sherman Tank. It reeked of Brylcreem, shampoo and, well... hair. He had the weirdest urge to crack a joke.

"So this is your... *haircraft*?" he asked, with a big smug grin, "Your... *hairship*?" he continued, beginning to smirk.

Ray looked tiredly at him.

"Yes, Jeff. Hairoplane, Hairliner, Hairodynamic Hairycopter. I've heard all the jokes. Long ago. And they weren't that funny then. Did you have some more questions?"

"Er, yeah," said Jeff. "Is that a pile of explosives underneath it? And if so, what the hell for? Are you trying to kill yourself?" he asked incredulously, yet sensibly.

Ray stood up and pointed to the crates of highly explosive materials upon which the fibrous flying machine sat.

"These – are for initial thrust. I don't have the thrust capability to escape the Earth's basic gravity field, so I have to use the crude explosive force of this material to get me up into the air, and from there, I can pilot it out into free space."

Jeff widened his eyes. Each new answer managed to freak him out even more than the last.

"You mean to tell me, you're gonna get inside that – that *thing*, and blow yourself sky-"

"-Sky high, Yes! Exactly!" concluded Ray with a smile that defied sanity.

"Once airborne, the wondrous properties of Keratin take over, and *whoosh!* Off I go!"

He embellished the statement with a particularly enthusiastic hand gesture, meant to symbolise a rocket *whooshing* up into the sky. In actual fact, it resembled a Nazi salute.

To the casual observer, the spaceship looked like an oversized Brillo pad. Measuring about thirty feet in length, at least twelve feet high and about twenty feet wide, it was a finely-woven mass of thin hairs, twisted and thatched, with no visible means of propulsion or wings. It was pointed at the front end, so it sort of resembled an upturned rowing boat – only knitted from fine

wool. Just beneath the outer layer of hair, there was what looked more like a conventional spacecraft - an inner shell of metal with glass portholes. A closer analogy would be an army tank in a tea-cosy. A small array of computers with the standard flashing lights graced the inner walls of the cabin. In all, it was the sort of impossible-to-behold sight that would get one carted off to the funny farm double-quick time, if one ever tried to tell somebody important about it.

Jeff quickly realised this, and shook the marbles inside his skull.

"Alright, hang on. Suppose you *do* actually get into orbit – where the hell are you gonna go? Have you got oxygen? Warp-drive? A bog, even?"

He was feeling like a non-swimming dwarf who had just been flung into the Mariana Trench.

Ray tried his best to explain.

"Look, it's quite elementary, to be honest: Keratin is made up of billions of cells that react to the vacuum of space and they form a nearly impregnable shield against radiation, cold and space debris. But the best thing about it is – it's like a living solar panel – I can sail on the solar winds indefinitely, at unimaginable speeds! No need to refuel, ever!"

"What about oxygen?"

"I have a recycling unit. Provides water, too!"

"The bog?"

"Chemical toilet. £27.99, EBay."

"Oh. So much for alien tech, then. Weren't you off to Canada though?"

"Not quite," said Ray. "Kangazang. My home planet. Lovely place, I'm telling you... beaches of pure chrome." He sighed a little homesick sigh.

Jeff had heard enough. He took a deep breath of fresh sanity, and smiled falsely as he stood up to face Ray. *Or was it Barbaray Sprungdiddly Wotsit? Whatever.* He wanted to go home and lie down for a bit. A month would do it.

"Okay, well, cheers for that, mate. All the best with the big bang and all that," he began, but Ray put a hand on his shoulder, which made Jeff want to soil his undergarments.

“Jeff, I need your help. I can't pilot this thing alone.”

Jeff trembled. “This has got to be the part,” he thought, “Where I get probed somewhere sensitive, or Ray rips his skin off to reveal a bulbous pulsating walnut... hopefully on his shoulders.”

“Come on, Jeff,” said Ray, sounding like a bar-room buddy who wanted to get a round in, “Think about it; you need a holiday. Why not take a trip to the stars and back? I can drop you off anywhere you like!”

Jeff considered it.

“Anywhere?” he asked.

“Anywhere - except Pluto, Ganymede, Tau Ceti, Emo Prime... and Swansea.”

“Why not Swansea?”

“Have you *been* to Swansea?”

“Oh, right. Fair point.”

“So - what do you say,” beamed Ray, “Are you coming along? It'll be fun - And I'll throw in free haircuts! What have you got to lose?”

It was a tempting offer to a lovelorn, tipsy loser at nearly three in the morning.

Jeff had a quick think, and his conscience postulated some theories:

He could get space-sick.

He could get lost forever.

He could be killed by some alien menace.

He could die.

“Oh, what the hell? Let's go for it.” he replied.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Space Flight For The Beginner*

Jeff and Ray spent the next hour packing some essentials for the trip, with Jeff asking Ray a question every time one popped into his head. Ray answered each one patiently, to the best of his ability.

“Why did you come to Earth, again?” asked Jeff. Ray was packing a small suitcase with the few earthly possessions he had gathered; his 'Top Hits Of The Eighties' CD, his haircutting equipment and various sentimental knick-knacks. He stopped packing momentarily to answer.

“Well, basically because of my parents. They kept on at me to get a trade under my belt, you know? Something that would keep me in steady employment.”

He continued to fold some clothes and put them in the case, as Jeff listened patiently.

“My dad was one of the most famous hairdressers in the galaxy, you know... After I left school, I took a year off to travel, popped over this end of the galaxy to see what jobs there were, and I was surprised to find that I could cut hair as good as my old man. That's when I learned that the job description was in my name – Barbaray, Ray the Barber! Crazy coincidence, isn't it?”

Jeff wasn't impressed.

“Nah, not really. I know a guy called Dave Van Berger – runs a burger van on the industrial estate where I work We call him Dave Burger-Van.”

Ray smiled.

Jeff paused for a second, deep in thought.

“Hang on a mo, work! What am I gonna do about my job?”

“Well, you’re a painter and decorator, aren’t you?” said Ray. “Plenty of painting and decorating needed out there. I know of one planet where they don’t even have paint! All the houses have bare stone walls – you could make a small fortune on there alone!”

This was good news to Jeff.

“Oh! Great! Should I nip home and get my brushes then?”

“No need, we’ll get you a set en route to Kangazang.”

Jeff shrugged his shoulders. “I am a fairy, my name is Nuff.”

Ray paused this time.

“You keep saying that. What does it mean?”

Jeff tried to explain that it was a semi-comedic way of saying ‘fair enough’, but Ray just couldn’t grasp the concept of a fairy, which was ironic, as Ray’s extensive knowledge of countless alien races provided him with an insight far beyond that of any earth man. But somehow, no matter how wildly he stretched his imagination, a tiny flying magical female, complete with tutu and a wand, was inexplicable and highly unlikely.

“No, I’m sorry,” decided Ray. “That all sounds a bit far-fetched.”

Finally, everything was packed and ready. The last thing to do was to bolt together the curved steel walls which went around the underside of the spaceship. These were to help focus the blast of the explosives upward, as opposed to sideways. Jeff and Ray set to work with a socket set each, tightening the bolts as best they could.

Ray paused.

“Jeff, can I ask you a question?”

“Yeah, go on,” said Jeff.

It was only fair that he did. After all, the sun was due up in a couple of hours, and most of the night was spent with Jeff’s questions.

“What are you going to do about your fiancée? After all, I don’t think she’d want to come with you on this trip. Do you want to see her one more time before we set off?”

Jeff hadn’t really considered this. Now that he was relatively sober, he felt a little guilty for battering her lover. Maybe they’d both feel better if she knew that he was going away for a few

months.

"Yeah. Good point, actually. I think I should at least tell her I'm off for a while. Don't want her to report me missing to the police... That's if she even cares anymore."

Ray walked around the ship and placed a fatherly hand on Jeff's shoulder.

"It's probably the right thing to do. We're almost ready to go. You go and see her, I'll be waiting for you to get back."

"Cheers mate," replied Jeff, as he put his leather jacket on and made for the door, "Don't go off without me, will ya?"

"Don't you worry, I won't," came the reply, although Ray was a little bit worried that Jeff might think of returning with an army unit, or at least the nice young men in their clean white coats.

Sarah awoke from her sleep by the tap-tap-tapping of tiny stones bouncing off her window. She got out of bed, checked the time, and wrapped a dressing gown around her. She flung open the curtains, and opened the balcony doors, expecting to see the new man in her life, standing down below. Instead, she got Jeff.

Sarah sighed in disgust.

"I thought I told you to stay out of my life! What are you doing?" she hissed, trying to keep the noise to a minimum.

Jeff looked up with genuine sorrow in his eyes.

"I had to see you. I'm off, Sarah. I dunno when I'll be back."

Sarah was not impressed at his timing, but quite pleased at the news. She yawned and adjusted her dressing gown.

"I really don't care, Jeff. Where are you going, anyway?"

Jeff didn't want to lie, but felt it the best thing to do, under the circumstances.

"Canada."

Sarah still wasn't impressed.

"Canada. You don't know anyone in Canada."

She looked again at the clock.

"It's half past four. Is that all you came to tell me?"

She was getting annoyed. But Jeff was feeling much in the way of regret.

"Yeah, well... no, I... Well, I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry about what happened earlier, and if you think we could work it

out, then I'll come back sooner and we can talk."

"Yeah? Well you *should* be sorry, the things you did. He's a *vicar*, for God's sake!"

Sarah wasn't aware of the accuracy of her statement. He was indeed a vicar, and it *was* entirely for God's sake.

"How could you do that?" she hissed again – like the snake she was.

Jeff, being a little insulted, took a step forward, holding up an index finger loaded with accusation.

"Hang on a minute– how could *you* do what you did to me? How long had you two been carrying on behind my back?"

Most of Jeff's sympathy had evaporated by now. Sarah realised it was getting ugly again and just wanted it to be over.

"Go home, Jeff. I don't want to talk things over. I don't even want to see you again. Not ever." She stepped back into her room.

Jeff watched her leave and as a parting shot, called out.

"You're a right bitch, Sarah! I must've been insane to love you!"

Sarah heard the insult, and turned around. She went back onto the balcony for the last word.

"You still are! And you can drop my fifty quid through my letter box in the morning!"

Quickly, she went back inside, slamming the balcony doors to prevent Jeff from getting another retort out.

Jeff welled up again, as he shuffled off in pain. But he was angry again, and even more determined to leave her, the town and the entire bloody planet for good.

Meanwhile, Sarah picked up her mobile phone, and as a final act of defiance, accompanied by the same wry grin as before, she called her randy reverend. Classy.

Jeff stopped off at his flat to grab a rucksack of clothes, a pack of cards to pass the time, fresh trainers and his toothbrush. He saw a framed photo of himself with Sarah, in happier times, sitting together on a beach in the sun. He picked it up gently and removed the back of the frame. He folded the picture in half, and slid it into his back pocket. Grabbing his rucksack, he made for the door.

By the time he got back to Ray's garage, it was nearly light.

Ray came out of the salon with a kettle and two mugs, for in-flight tea breaks.

“Are you okay, Jeff?” he asked, noticing his friend’s solemn expression.

“Yeah, I’m alright,” replied Jeff dumbly, “I just can’t get over how I could’ve been fooled by that two-faced, two-timing, good-for-nothing tart.”

Ray tried his best to sound sympathetic.

“Don’t let it get you down. You know, there are plenty more tarts in the, er, oven. And now you’ve got the entire galaxy to fish for one!”

Jeff seemed to brighten up at hearing this horrendous mix of metaphors.

“What – you mean there are more single birds on other planets?”

“Absolutely! The choice, my friend, is yours! And most of them only have the one face, just as you prefer!”

Jeff felt a lot better, although he had to admit the prospect of getting off with some green and tentacled honey was still a little daunting. After all, he wasn’t Captain Kirk.

He took the photo of himself and Sarah out, and looked at it, but now, all he felt was a smouldering anger. Stuffing it recklessly back into his pocket, he mentally resolved to start a new life – a life out among the stars. With a new bird. And if she was green, who cares? He was neither fussy, nor a racist. The tentacles might come in handy too. He’d just have to cross that bridge when the moment arrived. He took a deep breath, and slung his rucksack over one shoulder.

“Come on Ray,” he called out, “What are we waiting for?”

At the same time as this life-changing epiphany was taking place for Jeff, other things were afoot. Reverend Wilson had answered the early morning phone call from Sarah, and had turned his car around, heading back to her place. Sarah had told him about Jeff’s decision to leave the country, and so he guessed that things were improving for him. Perhaps this was the sign from above that he was waiting for.

He parked the car outside the block, and got out. Looking up at the balcony, he saw the curtains in the darkened room ripple,

then part, as Sarah stepped out onto the balcony, in her wispy nightdress. She smiled a wide, welcoming smile, and threw down her keys. Wilson caught the keys and blew her a silent kiss. He excitedly went to the door of the flat.

Sarah greeted her man-of-the-cloth with a passionate embrace. She quickly got him out-of-the-cloth and they both retired to the bed. Wilson took a moment to thank the good Lord for his luck, as Sarah whispered to him.

"I told you it'd all work out. Good things come to those who wait..."

This may be so, but they also say, *"From above, the wicked shall receive their just reward."*

You'd do well to remember that.

Jeff climbed up into the spacecraft. He looked around and was pleasantly surprised to see that it wasn't as cramped, or as hairy - or indeed as *smelly* - as he thought it might be. In fact, the subtle aroma of hair conditioning products was more like a built-in air-freshener. After all, it wouldn't do to be traversing immense galactic distances inside an armpit. He found a place to dump his rucksack, between some of Ray's boxes, and went up front to the cockpit area.

He took a seat next to the pilot's chair. It was a converted barber's chair, naturally, and as it had been recently outfitted with seat belts and a number of control panels, it really looked the part. Jeff secretly hoped that he wasn't left alone to pilot the thing at any point in the near future. He reached out in front of him, and touched the thick glass windshield. It seemed to be gently vibrating, as if the ship had a slight pulse deep inside.

He still didn't understand much about this crazy ship, or indeed about his new travelling companion, the man from Kangazang. Just when you think you know someone, they turn out to be completely enigmatic.

Just then, the walking enigma entered the craft.

"So, what do you think of her then?" beamed Ray "Splendid, isn't she?" he added, obviously very proud.

Jeff looked at Ray with mock disdain.

"What a piece of *junk*!!" he whined, trying to sound American.

The pop-culture reference was lost on Ray, and he looked clearly upset.

“Well... well, that's a fine way to start the trip! I did my best! It wasn't easy, you know, collecting hair for over a decade...” he trailed off.

Jeff realised his faux pas.

“It was a joke, mate! You know? It's what Luke Skywalker said, innit?”

Ray looked even more upset.

“So - you told *him* too, then, did you? Thanks a bunch!” he sniffed.

Jeff thought he was going to burst into tears, and had to take a moment to explain the whole movie reference thing to him, before he could compose himself enough to carry on.

Once sufficiently calm, Ray went to the outer door of the ship. He grabbed the inner handle, and pulled it as hard as he could. It clanged shut, followed by a thin *hissss* sound, as the oxygen recycler kicked in. Jeff attempted to swallow, but it felt like someone had lodged a small hedgehog in his throat.

Strapping himself in, Ray turned to Jeff, who was staring dead ahead and going whiter by the second.

“It'll be alright, Jeff,” said Ray, as soothingly as he could. “It's just like riding a bike.”

Jeff remained staring and still. A bead of sweat ran down his forehead.

“I... can't... ride... a... bike... Ray!” he muttered through tight lips.

Cold, heavy seconds dripped by, as Ray checked a variety of switches and lights around him.

Jeff cracked.

“Just get on with it!” he finally blurted. “I'm crapping my pants!”

“I am a Fairy, and Nuff is my name,” replied Ray in victory, and pressed a button on his control panel. The ship began to vibrate, accompanied by a low rumbling, like distant thunder.

Underneath the spacecraft, a timer on the pile of explosives began to tick down. It read: Ten.

Ray counted down the seconds aloud.

"Nine... Eight... Seven..."

"Is it too late to change me mind?" asked Jeff.

"Oh, absolutely! Here we go..."

"Three... Two... One..."

Jeff squeezed his eyes shut tight. Ray looked rather tense too. Nothing happened.

They waited a few more seconds.

Still nothing.

Jeff kept his eyes shut.

"What's happening?" he pleaded.

Ray, for once, didn't have the foggiest. He checked the instruments around him.

"No, not that, that's ok... So's that one... Erm..."

Jeff opened his eyes and released his vice-like grip on the armchair.

"So... It's not working then?" he correctly deduced.

Ray unstrapped himself, and went to the rear of the ship.

"You stay there, I need to do something back here."

For a couple of minutes all was silent. Ray was still down the other end of the darkened craft, and Jeff was beginning to get bored. He flicked the tiny furry dice that Ray had hung up on the ceiling.

"Ray?" he called, "Do you need any help back there?"

"No thanks, I'm fine, Jeff!"

"What are you doing anyway?"

"If you *must* know, I'm having a dump!"

"Oh. Sorry!"

Jeff smiled. Then chuckled to himself. Twisting around in his seat, he called back to Ray.

"Save me some paper won't you, I might need to go -"

BOOM.

Out in the street, a lone policeman was knocked off his feet by the shockwave.

He looked up to see the roof of Ray's lock-up shatter into millions of matchsticks, and a thirty-foot Brillo pad shoot up into the air like a cannonball.

The spaceship was airborne.

At the same moment, Sarah and Reverend Wilson were having nocturnal fun and games, and the deafening noise made both of them squeal with delight.

“Jesus Christ!” gasped Sarah. “Was that the earth moving?”

“Blasphemer,” purred Wilson, as he kissed her again, glad of the sign from above.

Inside the now floating spacecraft, Ray wailed in shock and terror, as he raced back to the pilot's chair, holding his trousers up. He wrestled with the controls and punched buttons all around him frantically. Jeff screamed like a five year-old on the Ghost Train. With real ghosts.

“We're up! It's working!” shouted Ray in triumph.

“No kidding,” screamed Jeff, “What happens now?” he added, still in his infantile octave.

Ray swung his control pad over to the left, then to the right. He stabbed at a couple of buttons above his head and then the ship stopped shaking. It floated gently upwards for a few hundred feet, and then settled, bobbing softly. This was just one of the miracles of finely woven, electronically stimulated Keratin.

“Now we prepare to leave the solar system.” smiled Ray. “But first, I need to clean up back there.”

He ran back to the chemical toilet.

Jeff called again.

“Don't be too long mate. I think I need to go really soon, okay?”

He leaned forward as far as his seat belt would allow, and looked out of the front windscreen. The ground bobbed up and down - or rather the ship did, and Jeff put a hand over his mouth as a precaution, as a feeling of vertigo came over him. It was like standing over a model village after downing half a bottle of some insanely strong drink.

A few moments later, Ray returned to the cockpit, and made his apologies. Jeff hurriedly accepted them, and unbuckled himself so that he could avail himself of the lavatory too. He had done an admirable job of not soiling himself (from either end) in the last five minutes, and wanted, if at all possible, to remain that way.

As he sat in both mental contemplation and bodily

evacuation, he looked out of a small porthole, and noticed that the sun was just coming up over the horizon. It looked awesome. And the sunlight bathed the interior of the ship in a golden glow, which warmed the air, and reminded Jeff of his youthful Sunday nights after a bath, his newly washed mullet smelling of shampoo.

Ray called out to him.

“Are you finished? We need to get moving before somebody spots us and gets the air force out!”

This was the weirdest feeling – to actually *be* the occupant of a flying saucer. Perhaps someone down on the surface was already taking blurry video footage of the strange craft currently hovering a couple of hundred feet in the air above the town. But who'd believe it?

Jeff stood up, and re-buckled his belt. As he stepped out of the toilet cubicle, he noticed the crumpled photo of himself and Sarah on the floor. It must have fallen out of his jeans as he went to the toilet.

He thought for a minute. Then checked his wallet for currency.

“Ray? Can we make a quick stop?”

Over at her flat, Sarah pushed the balcony doors open, and stepped out to see the sunrise. Her new man, Wilson, joined her, wrapping his arms around her. It was a new dawn, a new day, a new life...and they were feeling good. As the song goes.

Sarah turned to face Wilson. She smiled her wide smile of contentment.

“This was a perfect night. Thanks for coming round.” she breathed.

“It was my pleasure entirely,” replied Wilson, equally breathily.

“We've weathered the storm. Only good things ahead for us from now on.”

Sarah kissed him tenderly.

“Nothing in the world could spoil this moment.”

Suddenly, the princely sum of fifty pounds dropped out of the sky, rolled up with an elastic band around the notes. Sarah picked it up, and then looked up to see where it could have come from.

Two hundred feet above them, Jeff emptied the chemical toilet.  
*"From above, the wicked shall receive their just reward."*  
And so they did. Here endeth the lesson.

A hundred and thirty five parsecs away lay the dying ruler of the Skraggi Empire. Lord Rancydd looked, for all intents and purposes, like he'd died months ago, and was already embalmed, mummified and beginning to turn to dust. So, not good then. He was four hundred and ninety-six years old, (by the Skraggi calendar), and the time of his passing was long overdue.

Lying upon his bejewelled golden death-bed, with the water-filled mattress which he insisted on having installed during his younger, more virile days, he coughed a pathetic cough, and his eyelids flickered open a tiny amount. Through watery, semi-cataracted eyes, he looked upon the face of his only son, Kelvin.

Kelvin sniffed again. In part, due to his sorrow at the imminent passing of his old man, and partly because he was trying to work out what the awful smell was.

"Father?" he asked tenderly, "Father, can you hear me?"

"More's the bloody pity." replied Lord Rancydd, in a feeble whisper. He'd dreaded this day: the day when his glorious reign would come to an end because it would be utterly ruined by the inauguration of his idiot son. He'd had hamsters that were more evil than Kelvin. A pet slug that was more driven. And now, this embarrassing flaccid tool, this immature damp tissue of a boy, was soon to be hailed as the Supreme Overlord of the Mighty Skragg Empire. Oh, the shame of it! At this point, he smiled – at least he'd be dead and gone and not have to live through the humiliation of it all.

Kelvin saw the smile, and took it as an indication of love from his dad. He leaned a little closer, cleared his throat, and said his well-rehearsed piece.

"Father, I- I- well, I just, er...just want you to know that when they, I mean, when I become Overlord, I'll do my best – I mean my very best, that is, er...to be a great ruler like what you was."

So much for the speech. First thing he resolved to do in the morning was fire the royal speech-writers. He carried on in his own words.

“Dad, this isn't easy for me. I mean, I don't think I'm cut out to be an evil overlord like you and Grandad, but I have learned a lot, and I can see the rewards, um, if only in the tax reliefs.”

Lord Rancydd smiled again. And again, Kelvin took this as a sign of his dad's approval, when in actual fact the thought that accompanied it was, “*Ah...won't be long now...Hurry up, you scythe-wielding bonebag, I'm ready to go.*”

He coughed again, then spoke.

“Kelvin, just remember this, and you will do well: Every time you make a decision, listen to what your heart tells you... Then ignore it and do the complete opposite. -cough- Only this will ensure the Empire's future. Don't fail me son, or I'll be back to haunt the crap out of you forever.”

Kelvin nodded sagely, wringing his thin hands. He had one more question.

“Father – where's the family fortune hidden?”

Lord Rancydd exhaled in despair. Dust came out.

“Spent the lot. I'm not having you waste my money - cough - on toys and flowery shirts. If you want to be a success, seek the Universal Remote. Then you can rule over everything and everyone. And for Bod's sake, don't make a mess of it.”

Kelvin took his father's twig-like hands in his own.

“I'll find it, Dad. And I'll make you proud, you can count on me.”

He stood up, to show his determination and resolve.

“I'll rule the Empire as well as anyone! Entire star systems will cower in my shadow, as I make the power of my anger known. Races will fall, and... and...”

He suddenly looked at his father, motionless and quite dead.

“Oh bugger.”

Inside Ray's hovering Shredded Wheat, Jeff was in tears. Not tears of pain or sorrow, but immense hilarity. He thumped both his fists on the arms of his co-pilot's chair, as he giggled insanely.

“Oh, God! That was just perfect! Absolutely top banana! Ah – Ooh, me sides! Oh, you should've seen them, Ray! Ker-Splatch! And they had no idea what the hell happened! I bet – *hee hee!* - I bet they thought – *haha!* - I bet they thought it was a massive

seagull!”

He went into fits of laughter again.

Ray was smiling. At least Jeff had cheered up, but he did think that dousing one's unfaithful partner with three litres of chemically-treated human sewage was a little excessive.

He sat back down in the pilot's chair, and buckled up.

“Come on, then – let's make tracks.”

He waited for Jeff to wipe the tears from his eyes, and then punched an array of buttons, and moved a thick lever forward. The ship bobbed up and down twice, then began to pick up speed.

Jeff had lost most of his fear by now, and was really looking forward to the trip.

“Wahay!” he exclaimed, “Say goodbye and good riddance to that pointless armpit of a town, Ray! It's margueritas on the beaches of Shangalang from now on!”

Ray considered correcting him by reminding Jeff that his home planet was called Kangazang, but thought it best not to spoil his mood, and so he let the Bay-City-Rollerism go uncommented on.

“Here we go, Jeff. Full throttle!” announced the pilot, and with a satisfying dose of G-forces, the entire planet seemed to drop away beneath them, and become a speck in the distance.

Just as they left the Earth's atmosphere, they were nearly hit by another small spaceship going in the opposite direction. Ray swerved his craft just in time, and yelled obscenities at the careless pilot.

“That was a close one! Must be rush hour?” gasped Jeff.

Back on the surface of Earth, in a small town in North America, a schoolgirl walked through the park. She noticed the small ship, as it came down, and crashed not too far from her...

But that's another story entirely.

Ray's airborne hairball flew onwards and upwards, at sphincter-clenching speed. Soon, all they could see was a black velvety expanse, dotted with twinkling diamonds. Up, down, left and right – there was space. Infinity. Endless void. The temperature in the ship went down by a few degrees, and Jeff noticed this,

with a shiver.

“Forgot me gloves. I guess this is the cold of deep space. Is it going to get much colder?” he asked.

Ray shook his head.

“No, I just put the air-conditioning on. Can't drive without it, to be honest.”

Jeff raised his eyebrows – air con! He was impressed.

“Do you want to see something interesting?” said Ray, pointing to a grey speck out in front.

Jeff nodded.

“What's that, then?”

“We're approaching the moon. Press that orange button in front of you.”

Jeff searched for a moment, then pointed to a small square orange button that looked like a liquorice allsort.

“This one?”

Ray hummed a sound like a 'yes', as he piloted the ship nearer to the grey ball.

Jeff pushed the button. The windscreen of the spacecraft became active, as a grid divided up the previously clear glass. Ray touched one of the squares, and it grew larger, magnifying the view by a few hundred times.

Jeff stared in awe, almost entirely speechless. He uttered a soft “Blimey *Charlie!*”, as he realised he was the first human being in nearly forty years to look upon the moon's surface with the naked eye. The dusty craters, the craggy hills and meteorite-scarred plains were laid out before him as if they came from a top Hollywood special effects company.

Ray pointed to a large area of relatively flat ground.

“The Sea Of Tranquillity,” he declared proudly, “Site of Mankind's giant leap.”

Jeff squinted.

“Hang on...that can't be it. There's no flag or landing craft. You must be on the wrong side or something.”

Ray shook his head.

“No, that's definitely it. Trust me.”

Jeff was aware that he was debating this with an alien space traveller – he was a little out of his depth, to be honest, but he

stuck to his guns.

“No, mate. They left a plaque, too. The flag fell over, I remember reading about that, but there should be a lunar rover-buggy thing, and some other stuff... Wait a minute!” he exclaimed in shock. “Are you saying that those myths are true? That we didn't go to the moon at all?”

Once the shock subsided, his heart began to sink. After all, Jeff was born in July, 1969 – a week after Armstrong's legendary speech. It felt like he'd been betrayed. Lied to all these years by his teachers and that corpulent warthog, Patrick Moore.

He was even more shocked by Ray's answer.

“No, of course you got to the moon. All the stuff you left there is still on the surface, but it's over on the dark side. Let me show you.”

He banked the ship around, and they orbited the moon, until they entered the shadowy, hidden half of the moon. Ray put some lights on, and there, in a rocky canyon, was a twinkling pile of NASA's finest technology, and some early Russian probes. Lunokhod 1, the pressure cooker on pram wheels, was there too, untouched and still relatively shiny.

Jeff tingled with excitement. He got even more electrified to think that this was *only* the useless old moon. How was he going to cope with seeing a completely new planet that you could walk upon, breathing the air and meeting the people?

He turned to Ray.

“That's nuts! That's un-flipping-believable! How did all this stuff get over there?”

“That was the work of the 'moonies',” replied Ray nonchalantly.

Before Jeff could picture a group of crazy religious cult members in space, Ray explained.

“The moonies are the inhabitants of the moon. They live beneath the surface, and usually don't come out unless there's something to do. They weren't too happy to see all this junk left behind, so they tidied up a bit. It's a sort of museum-cum-scrap yard now, but I have heard that the leader of the moonies wears a pair of silk, star-spangled boxer shorts!”

Ray chuckled to himself. Jeff slumped back in his seat,

breathless.

“That’s mental.”

Ray agreed.

“Yes it is. I’d never wear that flag so close to my nether regions!”

He returned the screen to its original configuration.

“I’ll show you some more things like this as we pass the planets, but we can’t see them all – it’s a long way to Tipperary, as they say in er... anywhere except Tipperary.”

He flicked some switches, and the ship began to accelerate. It was moving at speeds much faster than anything on Earth did, but in the blackness of space, it felt like they were floating calmly in a barge.

The remaining planets of the Solar System loomed. As they passed, Ray divulged what few interesting facts he knew about them, to a mostly silent and astonished Jeff Spooner.

Mars, for example, was another scrap yard. And there was water there, lots of it – but it was in red powder form. Just add Hydrolectin Sulphamite.

Jupiter – its mighty Red Spot is actually a thriving market, run by enterprising Martians, who sold powdered water.

Saturn was just as it looked. Uninhabitable and hostile. Apart from its beautifully impressive banded rings of ice crystals, it was, frankly, a bit rubbish.

After a while, they approached Uranus. Jeff made all the usual jokes, but was surprised to learn that it was composed entirely of sewage from the inhabited planets that they’d just passed. Hence the name. It’s smell was detectable as far away as Jupiter. It was, quite literally, a crap planet. Planet of crap.

Pluto was, or so the legend says, the huge skull of a fallen warrior from Ursa Minor. He’d got his head chopped off and sent into orbit around the Sun, as a warning to any other would-be planetary barbarians. Now, it was just an unrecognisable pitted and ice-coated rock. Since Earth astronomers disputed its status as a bona fide planet, it was demoted to the lower echelons of ‘dwarf planet’, which essentially was the same as calling it a ‘floating stone’. Thus, it was even less interesting, despite its mythical origins.

Soon, even Pluto was a faint speck in the distance. Jeff stood

at the rear of the ship, looking out as his Solar System faded away into the void. Here he was, covering more interplanetary miles than most of the deep space probes, and he didn't even have a space suit on.

"Mental!" he said again, to himself, thinking of old black and white footage of American astronauts in their fat-suits.

Suddenly he looked down at his feet.

"Ere, Ray," he called, "Why aren't we weightless? I was really looking forward to that bit."

Ray turned in his seat.

"Gravity field. Look around the walls and floors."

Jeff did as he was told, and noticed that the floors and walls had tiny round discs embedded into them, about the size of small coins.

"What? So these things stop stuff from floating then?" surmised Jeff eloquently, pointing to one of the discs.

"That's right," said Ray. "They continuously adjust and balance out the molecular densities of everything contained within the matrix of sensors. It's quite simple really. Without them, the G-forces experienced by our sub-light speeds would crush us to paste."

Jeff was just a tad disappointed. He wanted to bounce around the cabin in slow-motion like the NASA guys. Who wouldn't?

"Can't you turn 'em down for a bit? I'd really like to see what it's like."

Ray tried to protest.

"Space travel isn't a game, Jeff. It involves balance, physics and complicated calculations, you know."

Jeff felt a sulk coming on.

"Aww, please? Come on! It's just that weightlessness is probably the coolest thing about space travel, y'know?"

Ray gave in.

"Oh, for Bod's sake! Alright! But only for half an hour, okay?"

Jeff beamed and clapped his hands quickly in front of his chest like a kid who'd just unwrapped a shiny bicycle.

Ray remembered that Jeff was good enough to accompany him on his interstellar voyage, and a little fun would keep his guest in high spirits. He operated a few switches, and brought the

ship to a complete stop, which took half an hour to accomplish because of their incredible speed and no brakes to slow them down. He unbuckled his seatbelt and joined Jeff who was standing in the middle of the cabin, still beaming insanely.

“Ready?” asked Ray. Silly question, really. Jeff was born for this moment, if nothing else.

“Whoop! Hold on, Ray. I'd better clip the toilet lid down.”

“Good thinking,” replied Ray.

As soon as Jeff came back to the middle of the cabin, Ray reached up to the ceiling, and opened a small hexagonal hatch. Inside was a T-shaped handle. He turned the handle anti-clockwise and the gentle hum which was audible in the cabin shifted down in pitch. As it did so, Jeff was filled with the strangest feeling. His cheeks – both pairs – began to rise up, free of their weight.

His spine felt less encumbered, and his small-but-perfectly-formed beer belly gurgled as it began to float. He looked down, and watched as his feet lifted off the floor gently. Ray had begun to float also, his white barbers' coat billowing up around his head.

With a whoop of joy, Jeff pushed himself off a wall and floated across the cabin, trying to spin as he went. This was rather boring to Ray, so he pulled out a paperback and just hung in the air, turning the page every minute or so.

Jeff was squealing with childish delight as he *boinged* from wall to floor and floor to ceiling repeatedly. He flew down to the boxed provisions and grabbed a can of cola, opened it and giggled as he spent ten minutes pretending to be a shark, chasing and gobbling up wobbly droplets of liquid. There wasn't much in the way of fun that could compare to the sensation. Except perhaps that one time at his twenty-first birthday party, with the strip-o-gram girl and the squirry cream.

Ray had reached the end of one particularly amusing chapter in his book – something about mice and towels – and decided that it was time to recommence the journey.

“Okay, Jeff,” he called out, “That's enough for now. Maybe later you can play some more, but now it's time to get going again.”

Jeff protested with an immature, “Awww...”, but Ray was resolute. He grabbed the handle, and slowly twisted it clockwise

to its original position. Both men floated gently to the floor again. This too, was a weird feeling – just like lying in a bath of water while the plug is pulled: Everything slowly becomes infused with its correct weight again. Try it.

Jeff watched keenly as Ray did this, and Ray noticed it.

“Don't go playing with this control, Jeff,” he warned.

“I'm serious. Turn it too far, and we'd be pressed into the floor as if we were made of lead. So no touchy.”

Jeff held up his hands.

“Hey – I gotcha. No touchy.”

Ray went back to the pilot seat, and started the craft in motion once more. Soon the stars were whizzing past the portholes again. Jeff sat on the closed toilet lid and relived the past thirty minutes in zero-gravity. He grinned foolishly. Looking around, he called over to Ray.

“Ere, Ray? Does this ship have a name then, or is it just a hairship?” he asked, thinking that he might get the opportunity to suggest a title for the fibrous flying machine.

Ray continued to pilot the ship but leaned his head back.

“Yes, actually it does. I named her after the family pet back home.”

“Well, what is it then?”

“I call her the *'Marshmallow Penguin'*.”

Ray pointed to his pink penguin-shaped tie pin.

“*Marshmallow Penguin?*” repeated Jeff, in total incredulity. “That's a stupid name for a pet, let alone a spaceship!”

“No, you misunderstand,” continued Ray. “Our family pet was a Marshmallow Penguin. They're common on Kangazang. Similar to penguins on Earth, I suppose, only pink and yellow in colour. Very smart animals. Very loyal. Very sweet.”

“So what was your pet penguin's name then? Something equally mad I bet.”

“Of course not. We called her Tania.”

Jeff threw his head forward into his hands and let out another big sigh of astonishment mixed with a giggle of amusement. He was fast realising that everything he'd ever learnt up until now was a tiny crumb of nothingness floating in an endless ocean of undiscovered knowledge.

He also felt a tiny crumb of hunger deep inside his belly, and realised that he was feeling a little peckish.

“Erm... is there any grub on board?” he called. “I haven't eaten since last night's kebab, and most of that ended up on the floor.”

Ray called back, his attention still on the view ahead.

“Yes, there's a box over to the port side. Have a look – there should be some provisions. Bring me a snack too, there's a good chap.”

Jeff looked around, and found the box. In it were a number of oversized toothpaste tubes, in silver, with twisty caps at one end. Jeff smiled. He'd read about astronauts food, and now he'd get to try it. Finding a good, tightly packed tube, he unscrewed the cap. He squeezed an inch of deep red paste out of the tube and sniffed it. No actual smell. Judging by the colour of it, he hazarded a guess.

“Must be steak,” he surmised.

Beside the box was a larger box with some 'proper' food in it: two loaves of bread, some cutlery, tins of assorted food, and a small tub of margarine. “*Mmm... Sarnies.*” he thought. Sitting cross-legged on the floor of the spaceship, he quickly knocked together two thick steak-paste sandwiches.

He stood up, and went over to the front of the ship, stuffing a sandwich whole into his mouth, and had a go at eating the thick gooey stuff. At first, it had no taste at all. Then he paused, giving his taste buds time to report to his brain. It was cold. It was sticky.

It wasn't steak, that was for sure. Maybe he'd get used to it.

Jeff handed a sandwich to Ray.

“What's in it?” asked the barber cautiously.

Jeff chewed the viscous, glue-like concoction, in order to swallow a large part of it. It wasn't easy. Finally, he had enough room in his mouth to answer.

“Steak paste,” he mumbled, “From the tube. It's not great though, to be honest.”

Ray looked up with as much tenderness as he could muster in his eyes.

“That's not food, Jeff.”

Jeff stopped chewing.

“It's burgundy hair dye.”

Jeff started choking. He ran back to where the chemical toilet was, and spat the remainder of his sandwich into the bowl. He coughed a few times, but wasn't able to throw up. Wailing in disgust and shock, he tried to push a finger or two down his throat, but only succeeded in choking himself a bit more. Finally he gave up. Ray set the ship to drift along on its own, and walked back to see his poorly crewmate.

He found Jeff looking into a small shaving mirror.

"My bloody teeth are purple!"

Ray tried his best to be comforting.

"Sorry, Jeff. I should've said something. I packed my hairdressing stuff to show my parents when we got home."

A terse silence greeted the comment.

Ray tried a feeble grin.

"For what it's worth... It's a good look on you."

Jeff spun around, feeling angry for the first time since they'd taken off.

"A good look?! A good look? I'm gonna die of food poisoning, my corpse will have purple teeth, and you tell me it's a good bloody look?" he roared.

Ray took a few steps back. He'd never seen Jeff this angry before. He stepped on the discarded silver tube, and looked down at it. Picking it up, he quickly scanned the small printed label on the side of the tube. He showed it to Jeff, who was still fuming.

"Here you go – it's non-toxic. And the colour washes out in six shampoos."

Jeff, who was actually very relieved to hear this, rooted around in his rucksack for his toothbrush and some toothpaste.

"Water!" he barked.

Ray nodded quickly and ran to the wall. He unclipped a small metal canteen from its cubby-hole in the wall panel, and went over to the water/air recycling unit. Pushing a blue button, he filled the canteen with freshly reconstituted water, and handed it to Jeff. Snatching the canteen from Ray, Jeff sat himself down in the floor, and began to brush his teeth thoroughly, spitting purple froth into a coffee mug.

Ray leaned over in sympathy.

"I'm sorry Jeff..." he began, but Jeff wasn't in the mood to talk, nor could he, as he had half a tube of toothpaste and a brush in his mouth. Instead, he just grunted, and glared at Ray.

Ray put both palms up in acceptance.

"I'll go back to the cockpit, I think."

He backed away, then turned and sat back down into the pilot's chair.

Jeff kept scrubbing away at his teeth, until his gums bled and they felt like they were vibrating. He took another swig of water and checked his teeth. The purple dye had mostly gone, but there was a faint violet hue to them, along with a weird, chemical taste. He huffed in resentment, and decided to stay there on the floor for a while. At least until he cooled off. He lay back, lacing his fingers together behind his head, and closed his eyes. The humming of the spacecraft's internal systems soon made him drift off to sleep.

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