

PROLOGUE

The Prophecy

Far 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 quite as disturbing to see.

Emo Prime wasn't, as its name might suggest, a place where emotions were of prime concern. In fact, since a couple of pale creatures crawled apathetically out of their primeval slime millions of years before, emotions were something of a nuisance, and not at all welcomed. During their early history, the Emo people had experienced many of the extremely damaging trends that advanced societies share – vicious, long-running wars that decimated the populations of both sides, followed by post-conflict population explosions, resulting in an overabundance of people who jostled and competed for living space and food, then starvation, unrest, violence, more wars, reality television, coffee shops on every street corner, and finally more general unhappiness for all concerned.

It was decided by the highest authorities on Emo Prime, that

the source of all these self-replicating social problems was extreme emotion. Either hatred bubbled up unexpectedly like methane emissions in a bathtub, or joy reduced the minds of everyone to blissful nonsensical mush, resulting in carelessness and more of the aforementioned problems. Something had to be done. And so they decided to totally revolutionise their society by banning one of the pesky emotional states. To ban both of these problematic feelings would have been difficult, as the Powers That Be weren't all that bright, and weren't sure what the remaining states-of-mind would be. So they held elections, surveys, local rate phone votes and population-wide referendums that would determine which emotion would be made illegal, thus saving their planet from further turmoil. The results were in. The mass of information was piled up in a large room and the Powers That Be stood and gazed up at it in awe.

In the end, they tossed a coin.

The public would never find out, it was a lot less hassle than sifting through the collected information, and they could all get home in time for 'Celebrity Substantial Sibling' on the telly that night.

It was decreed then, that happiness, joy, cheerfulness, glee, bliss and all other positive emotions would be outlawed and discouraged. As an additional measure, any music that was more than a droning dirge, or over thirty-five beats-per-minute was destroyed; colours were removed from clothing, paintings, foods and nature as much as possible. In theory it was still possible to buy and wear a Hawaiian-style shirt, but only if you were prepared to wear it in fifteen identical shades of black.

A leaflet was drawn up to help the people of Emo Prime adjust to their new emotional status. It was a single sheet, folded twice, on black paper with grey text. The title:

LIVING: AS EASY AS ABC (Apathy Boredom and Complacency)

This leaflet was filled with information about what was now considered illegal and how best to conform to the new governmental guidelines. It was widely distributed and accepted by the populace as the way things were going to be from that point on. Before long, the information in the leaflet was being taught in schools and displayed on billboards, and over the decades that followed, it was revised, re-written and amended until it became known as the Holy ABC: A tome of over five hundred pages, dedicated to ridding the planet of anything remotely concerned with enthusiasm or contentment. Even smiling was banned, under threat of rather nasty electro-shock therapy. (Of course, if one were deviant enough to enjoy such treatment, the alternative was too terrifying to contemplate. Legends tell of it involving a number of pigeons and the removal of one's clothing.)

Incredibly, this bizarre course of actions had the desired effect on the people of Emo Prime. There were no more wars, because everyone was in a state of apathy, no new and exciting ideas to raise their pulse-rates due to ingrained boredom, and nobody wanted to change the way things were because of the general malaise of complacency that hung over the minds of everyone there. It was peace. Of a sort. In banning the positive emotions, the entire planet's populace were pushed into embracing the negative ones. And that worked rather well. To keep the threat of their society crumbling ever-present, they invented a prophecy of doom. It was vague enough to re-use and recycle countless times, and it could be rolled out every time they needed to rein the people in. The prophecy warned of the arrival of an 'Evil One' (*always a good, non-gender-specific place to start*),

and their accomplice, (*best to give them a sidekick, just in case*) who would visit their planet (*as some people used to, before it became the least enjoyable place to visit*), and try to tell anyone to 'cheer up'. Heaven forbid.

The highest governing bodies of Emo Prime established a ruling class to ensure the compliance and strict adherence to the rules of the Holy ABC. A High Priest was elected, charged with the task of holding regular meetings, broadcast around the globe, that ensured the rules were stated, the people were sedated by fear, and control was maintained. The mood was, as always, apathetic.

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 crumpley-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.

And it would take precisely four minutes and fifty-one seconds.

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 hair looked like it 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. "Organising me stag do, innit?"

Ray nodded.

"Oh yes. Big day coming up, isn't it? Two weeks?"

"Yeah. Hence the trim: Sarah wants a groomed groom," said Jeff with a grin.

Ray smiled. "Then her Groom shall be groomed!"

Jeff looked a little dumbfounded. But he had other things on his mind. He wasn't usually an unhappy person, and Ray noticed the change in his usual bright demeanour.

"You look less than chipper, Jeff, if you don't mind my saying so. What's up? Worried about the wedding?"

"Well, sort of. I'm more worried about Sarah. Do you think women get the jitters, same as us men?"

Ray thought it was an odd question to ask. But then again, Ray thought the majority of Jeff's questions were odd. He racked his brain for an answer.

"I'm not sure. Depends on the curry."

Jeff blinked, momentarily trying to connect the answer with his question.

"No, mate – You know, the pre-nuptial jitters. Second thoughts about going through with it, and all that?"

"Maybe," said Ray, avoiding yet another social faux-pas, "It's certainly a terrifying prospect. Why's that then?"

Jeff sighed sadly. "I dunno. It's just that... well, she's been a bit... off, lately."

"Off?" gasped Ray, momentarily freezing. "Stale? Decomposing? Does she smell?"

"No, you nutter, you know! Distant. Not very chatty."

Ray smiled. "Oh I see. You care about her a lot, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do. She's the best thing to ever happen to me, you know? I thought I'd never get married. Thought I'd be the

perennial bachelor boy. All my mates got hitched and started families, but not me. Then I met her. She pretty much saved me from a rubbish life. But I'm worried about her. I don't see her smiling much, these days. Well when I get home she is, but it soon fades, and then she goes to bed early without me."

Ray saw that Jeff was in need of sage advice. Unfortunately he had very little idea about what to say to this particular customer. Still, he had to try.

"Oh. Well, perhaps you should try to cheer her up a bit? I'm not sure, but I read that women like gifts. Flowers. Chocolate shoes. That sort of thing."

Jeff raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry, Jeff," said Ray. "I'm not really an expert on women."

Jeff looked at the pink tie-pin again, mentally confirming a suspicion he'd long held.

"No, didn't think you were. Flowers, though. Good point, that might work. Think I'll surprise her with some. Why not, eh? She's worth it after all. Maybe even a show. I'll pop into the theatre on the way home. *Cats*, I think."

"Do they have a good choice then?" asked Ray, finishing up the trim.

"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. But Jeff surmised that perhaps his barber had a sheltered upbringing. Perhaps his parents moved around before finally settling somewhere. Maybe his dad was in the armed forces: being stationed in a long and confusing succession of different countries does tend to mix things up a bit for a child. Thus, Ray seemed a solitary sort of guy. For example, he refused Jeff's offer to come out for his stag weekend, and in fact he always declined an offer to go down the pub. When he thought more about it, Jeff had never seen Ray outside of his salon. Surely a barber can't be that busy? 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. Nice to see a person who genuinely loves their job and takes pride in a task well done. Plus, with Sarah's demands for a 'groomed groom', he didn't fancy paying the best part of a tenner for a trim anywhere else. Yes, Ray was definitely cheap and cheerful.

The barber's skilful hands swiftly completed the job, and

whipped the nylon apron off him like a matador.

"Cheers Ray, what's the damage?" asked Jeff as he got up and out of the chair.

"There's no damage! It's quite neat! Look in the mirror!" said Ray in shock.

"Har har. What do I owe you?"

"That's um, one pound and... *seven* pence, please!" Ray seemed to have picked a random figure out of thin air, and opened 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 a few 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, "On the beach? In Canada? Brrr!" 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. For example: if one were at a zoo, peering into a vivarium of stick insects, the sight of say, a Volkswagen Beetle, would appear to be the strange object.

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. Where once, robots were created to serve, the Orbots had turned things around, and their reputation for efficient service became well known and respected across the galaxy. People would come from far and wide, often at great expense to get their computer systems, starships and robotic servants repaired by a race that didn't make mistakes or add a few quid to the bill when the customer's head was turned. The Orbots had integrity. In fact, their installed integrity was internally integrated. Interesting.

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 – albeit a spotlessly clean and organised one. 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.

M4 was designed as a starship mechanic, built to humanoid specifications, loaded up with software that enabled him to repair almost any kind of spacecraft, and sent out to serve the Terran military forces in the Urff system. His placement was only semi-successful: On the one hand, he was extremely good at his work, and kept the morale of the troops high, with his penchant for seeing the funny side of life. On the other hand, the top brass were extremely irritated at his penchant for seeing the funny side of death. A tense military struggle in the far-off regions of the galaxy was no place for an Orbot that found everything hilarious. Military funerals seemed to lose some of their respectful sobriety when suppressed giggling kept coming from the back of the crowd. So finally, he was discharged from the armed forces and

sent back to Orbitron, just as M25 was.

The Mainframes placed him in a small mechanical tool production unit near the surface of Orbitron, where he coped rather well. Or at least he thought he was coping well. It was only after he was jumped upon by his co workers, who tried to batter him to pieces for laughing at the word 'tool' every single time it was said, that it was decided he was a lost cause. 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. 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. M25 was created for the numerous roles normally reserved for female humanoids. No, not just the seedy ones, but across the universe, where humanoid life seemed to prefer the standard 'two arms, two legs and a head' configuration, the males of that species also preferred, and often demanded, a certain type of anthropomorphic attractiveness; long lower limbs, elegant bodily curves, pleasant demeanour and bright, attentive eye modules. M25 certainly had these upgrades, and was destined to do well, as a waitress, hostess, child-carer, nurse, or any of the myriad tasks that female humanoids do so much better than their male counterparts. She, like M4, also seemed like a perfectly operational Orbot – 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.

M25 was unpacked from her factory wrappings a day after her Operation Day. Upon first activation, she was programmed with her designated task: that of running a pre-school nursery on the planet Woymalus. As any parent knows, a nursery can be a noisy, terrifying environment. More so for the carer than the child. The nursery was an ear-splitting racket of crying and screaming.

The babies were quite loud too.

The children of Woymalus are just like many other species, except the Woym species as its name suggests, are related to earthworms. Fortunately for them, they developed limbs to allow them to move about a little better than their earth-bound cousins, but when you throw a multi-phobic android into a room of young, enthusiastic (and truth be told, a little slimy) children who create a constantly changing environment of sound, sights, smells, textures and experiences, you really shouldn't expect peaceful harmony. The owners of the nursery were not happy. The parents complained.

The kids loved it, though.

Thus, M25 was shut down, stuffed back into the packaging and sent back to Orbitron for diagnosis and possible repair. Sadly, the diagnosis revealed that she had a similar problem to that of M4: not a physical problem, but her behavioural software contained a flaw that could replicate itself if threatened with fresh coding. Plus she'd added the fear of worms and bubble-wrap to her list of terrifying things. In layman's terms, she was knackered.

The ruling Mainframes attempted to repair her until the cost of repairs exceeded the cost of her construction, and then they

gave up – simply replacing her forehead plate with one marked 'M', and sent her up and out.

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. The thought of a destiny, something spontaneous and random in their lives made them feel a little less like Orbots and a little more like humans. 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.

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 try to beat the evil out of the vicarious vicar. In actual fact, it didn't go past the first punch, but for Jeff that was a bit of a victory, as he wasn't usually a violent man.

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

Jeff thought back on all the times he hadn't been there for Sarah; on the evening of their very first date, he'd made a complete mess of things. Sarah arrived at the local cinema on time, only to hang around on her own for over two hours. When Jeff did finally turn up, (due to his mate's car breaking down and an unreliable taxi driver with no sense of direction), he'd left his wallet at home, so he had to borrow money from Sarah to pay the cab fare, the cinema tickets, popcorn and drinks. To add to the confusion, the only film showing at that particular late hour was a rather distasteful slasher movie which didn't go down well with Sarah's aversion to graphic horror.

Surely that wasn't a reason to embark on an affair, was it?

Perhaps it was the time he'd forgotten her birthday completely: They'd just moved in together, and Sarah came home from a hard day at work. There on the living room table, was a large box which filled her with excitement. She'd talked about wanting a cute little Labrador puppy, or the latest fragrance and makeup set from Paris. Upon opening it, was a brand new home lager brewing kit. His offer of letting her taste the first pint brewed was of little comfort.

Surely even that was no reason to be unfaithful?

Maybe it was the afternoon he ran over her father's sandal-

clad foot with the lawnmower. Or the day he fell out of the shower, grabbed the curtain rail and pulled the ceiling down. Or the time he turned up at her work's Christmas party, completely sozzled, and sang 'Especially For You' on one knee. To her boss. Minus trousers.

It could even have been the time he tried to fix the doorbell at her place, and made a complete canine's casserole of it, leaving the chimes hanging at eye level in the hall. Maybe he should've fixed that.

Whatever it was, he had to admit that he hadn't been a model boyfriend. And perhaps the sum total of his failings had been enough to make her seek comfort in the arms of another man.

"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 – There was a wasp! I had a spatula! How was I to know she was behind me when I swung it?"

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 bint! 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.

It was going nowhere and fast. In fact, it was probably going in reverse gear, very fast indeed. He still loved Sarah, though. That was for certain. Who else would have given up smoking to be with her? Who else would have let her win on the games console so many times and make it look like he was trying? Who else would have bought her the Labrador puppy that she so wanted?

Alright, so he'd bought the puppy, but after stopping off in the Red Lion for a few afternoon jars, he got a little confused and ended up swapping the dog for a home brew kit. But he did buy the puppy to begin with. The thought was what counted.

And they did have some fun times together. Sarah loved Jeff for the hapless idiot he was. At least at first. Her plan was to take this feckless, unfit, very basic man and sculpt him into prime,

neat, submissive, husband material. Needless to say it hadn't quite worked. Initially, she thought his absent-mindedness was endearing, so she accepted it. Later on, she found that he was rather naïve, and willing to go with any schedule, plan or suggestion that she came up with. This came in handy later on in their relationship when she needed him out of the way so she could embark on her quest to find a suitable replacement. One of the best ways of losing Jeff for an hour or two was to hand him a few pounds and send him off for a haircut. He'd invariably be tempted by the pocket full of change that was left over, and spend it in the local.

Thus, instead of ending their fatally-flawed relationship and looking like the villain of the piece, Sarah decided to keep him at arms length for as long as possible, while interviewing a few likely candidates in the meantime, until he called the wedding off. Jeff didn't call it off, though. He loved Sarah like a baby bird loves regurgitated worms. Alright, he wasn't perfect, but he had a deep respect for her: She was gorgeous. She was successful, and she was so much smarter, more ambitious than his other brief romantic encounters. To him, she was a princess, and in a topsy-turvy play of role reversal, she rescued him from a life of solitary drudgery. Anyone willing to care for a man who had resigned himself to a lifetime of loneliness was an angel in his mind.

This, coupled with his realisation that she had grown tired of him months ago, was the hardest thing to take. His princess had revealed herself as the wicked witch all along. What really hit him the hardest was the pain of seeing her satisfied smile when he pushed open the bedroom door and caught her with the reverend. She showed no remorse, only relief at the revelation. Finally – no more secrets and lies. Jeff was on the scrap heap, and that was that.

And so, Jeff needed to do some serious thinking about his

directionless life, his empty heart and the one pound and seven pence that he'd spent on a pointless haircut that day.

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 buggered. Happy, my bunghole," 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 crumpled 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? Ray's family were, so he said, all in Canada. More to the point, Ray once 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 his barber 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 knives to themselves. And Ray seemed like the straight-acting type, which Jeff felt more comfortable with.

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.

To prematurely remove the mystery that currently surrounds our bizarre barber would be churlish, obvious and probably spoil things somewhat. But to shed a little light on the subject is probably a good idea.

Ray Scump (*his correct title will be revealed to you in precisely one thousand, three hundred and sixty-two words*), didn't really need the money, and coped rather well. But for the sake of maintaining an already implausible but completely factual dramatic narrative, I won't tell you much about it right now. But soon.

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 bump on his head and a blackened eye. Jeff had surprised himself by handing out the black eye, as he wasn't a violent man by any means. But if you're going to engage in pugilistic pummelage, it's probably better to pummel someone who deserves it. Unfortunately for Wilson, Jeff momentarily lost control at the sight of his beloved in the arms of another man that he did smite said vicar, in a moment of furious anger. He wasn't proud of it, but betrayal can be a terrible thing to push one to the darker side of the psyche. He wasn't responsible for the bump on the noggin though. (That happened when Wilson, chasing after a fleeing Jeff, hit his forehead on a low-hanging doorbell chime.)

Talking of which, the vicar was driving home in his little car, wondering if he was going to be bunged 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 (and the clanging chimes of doom) to exact such a terrible revenge?

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 slightly dented reverend who had been in her arms, and elsewhere, 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 bint, 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.

The planet Skragg smouldered angrily like a red hot coal trying to stay lit. And like the hypothetical coal, the planet's leader was also smouldering, fighting to stay alive in order to

maintain control over his gigantic kingdom, which had been ruled for millennia by a procession 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, now just under a century old, 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 ailing father took thin gasps of air.

Back on Earth, the hours had also ticked by. 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 as Ray continued.

"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, scheming Sarah, 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. No particular reason, I just thought I'd mention it.

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.

Ray stood up and took a deep breath.

"I think it's time I explained myself," he said, pacing around the odd mottled spacecraft, "You *aren't* imagining all this, I *am* an alien, and this is my only way off this planet,"

Jeff could only smile weakly as coffee dripped from his chin. He 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 another 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 accurately resembled a Nazi salute, which did little to convince Jeff that the barber wasn't a beardy-weirdy.

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.”

“Didn't you already have one in the ship?”

“I did. Broke it. Had to get a replacement.”

“Oh. That's... weird. 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.

Ray had lived on Earth now for almost two decades. He had never intended to stay quite this long, and kept reasonably quiet, and in a state of social solitude. Only a stream of daily customers needing tonsorial trimmage kept him in touch with the ways of the world. He was an excellent barber though. His father had taught him the necessary skills, and this was to save him in the long run; his customers provided him with the supply of keratin that he needed, so the cheap haircuts guaranteed him a good supply, if only in small instalments.

Ray's solitude meant that he'd only had a basic understanding of the ways of Earth dwelling humans, their codes and conventions, and the history of the quaint blue planet. He made enough money to pay for his salon and lock-up in the first few years, while his spaceship's food replicator machine provided meals during this time. He lowered his prices regularly, to attract more and more customers. Then the replicator ceased to work, so most of his profits went on food and utility bills. After all, repairing the ship was of the utmost importance, and staying alone and relatively undetected was the cheapest way to live. His main source of entertainment was radio, as a barber's working life is set to a musical soundtrack. It was through radio that he gained a love for cheesy 1980's music: the pop hits that he'd first heard upon his arrival on Earth had become firm favourites, and his CD of the hits of that decade was one of his prized possessions. But now, it seemed like the time had come to leave Earth. And Ray felt a secondary type of melancholia. He realised that he'd grown fond of Earth, and would miss it once back home on the silvery sands of Kangazang. He decided that the least he could do to repay the humans for their hospitality, was to do a good deed for one of them. And poor, confused Jeff Spooner looked like a human in need of a change of pace.

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 must ask you not to tell anyone about me. In fact, why not come with me? I could do with the company. "

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.

Then again, he could meet a nice bird for a change.

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