

Prologue

For those of you who already know something of Jeff Spooner and his life up until now, then well done, well read, well heard and well assimilated. And for those of you who haven't...Where *have* you been? This is important stuff, you know.

Jeffrey Richard Raymond Spooner was born on Earth on the Twentieth of December, in the late Twentieth Century. His parents, Dave and Eunice were rather surprised, as they were expecting a tax rebate.

For the next two decades and a bit, Jeffrey grew. He evolved, from 'Mummy's Special Soldier' to 'That Lazy Git Upstairs'. One rarely meets their parent's expectations. But this is alright, you see, as Jeff was to make up for his inherent lazy-gitness later on in life, when he became embroiled in galaxy-threatening struggles and misadventures, which led to him, and his new best friend, a Gent's hairdresser called Ray, saving the numerous inhabitants of the Universe from doom, despair, destruction and depression. Mustn't grumble, eh? Turned out nice again. Et Cetera.

Anyway, back to the subject of happiness, and the pursuit thereof. Some of the greatest minds known to lifekind have said, with varying degrees of accuracy, that attaining happiness in one's life is easy.

Unfortunately, nobody likes to have their metaphorical nose rubbed in the whiffy smugness of others. Or any other sensory organ for that matter. We all strive to find a lasting, personal and genuine happiness in our brief existences, and no matter how great or feeble our quests to find it may be, having some smugly-grinning freak tell us that they've achieved it before us with a foolproof method of doing so, (almost certainly a lie) is a sure way to put us back at square one on the board game of emotional contentment. More often than not it drives one mad, sometimes with tragic consequences.

Talking of emotions, I don't wish to get all Emo on you, but truly happy people are rare. Or at least, endangered. In this sector of the Galaxy, (I assume you're reading the HumanSpecies / EarthEnglish version of this book) most people love to complain that their lives are less than perfect. I know I do. Having a direct link to Human Beings, I've inherited it. On the other hand, humans like to gloss over their

perturbations with cheery quips such as, ‘Mustn’t grumble,’ ‘Still, you’ve got to laugh, haven’t you?’ and ‘Don’t worry, be happy.’”

Anyway, as I’ve said, most people are on a lifelong quest for happiness, and Jeff was no exception. He nearly got there, gaining himself a set of employable skills, a small group of friends and a beautiful fiancée named Sarah. Well, I *say* ‘beautiful’...

In the same way that Jeff was the unachieving offspring of undemanding parents, so Sarah was a similar case. In the opposite way: Kenneth and Gladys Wood insisted that their little girl should think more, do more, be more and generally be a better class of human than anyone else. Their misguided plans to better their child had tragic consequences; rather than remaining successful and happy(ish), Sarah was emotionally scarred with an inbuilt feeling of not quite being good enough, and an unshakable desire to want bigger and better things for herself. She was never satisfied, (although annoyingly smug) and despite Jeff’s attempts to placate her, her whims were legion. Things came to a head – quite literally – when she found a better alternative to Jeff: Reverend Wilson, the local priest.

Both parties had moved on with their lives. Sarah had reason to believe that Jeff had died in a bizarre toilet-related accident – I’ll explain later – and was assured of never seeing him again, while Jeff had moved on in a geographical sense – over thirty-thousand light years, to the luxurious beaches on the planet of Kangazang. See? Happiness is indeed, a state of mind. Especially if your mind’s in a right state.

I blame the parents, myself.

Sarah Wood was enjoying her life, too.

She had recently acquired a new job, and moved from the big city to another city, just not quite as big. Swansea was welcoming, breezy and getting more cosmopolitan by the day. She liked it very much – from the exhilarating sea air, the coffee shops and quaint houses, to the full-on night life. Not that she felt the need to go out and get trashed any more these days, but it was there if she needed it.

She felt she deserved a little happiness by now. Her life was in danger of doing that downward spiral thing of late, and the move and

change of pace seemed to have done the trick. Where once she was in a loveless relationship with a scruffy, kebab-loving loser, she now had Simon: a gorgeous hunk of a man. Taller, smarter, well turned out and healthier. He was a minister too, so she found him trustworthy and genuine. She wasn't particularly religious, but thought a direct line to 'The Man Upstairs' was a handy insurance policy.

Alright, so she'd begun a relationship with him while still with the other loser, but her love for him had dried up a long time ago.

Alright, so her randy reverend had initiated the affair, but it was a minor transgression that led to her new life, so perhaps he was doing the Good Lord's work.

Alright, so the recent tragic, sudden, and frankly bizarre death of her ex-fiancé made her feel a sense of guilty relief deep down inside, but one can't mourn the past forever.

Alright, so she didn't even go to the funeral. And she sold the engagement ring.

Alright, she was completely rotten to the core. No two ways about it.

But Sarah, like all notoriously evil beings in history, didn't think she was that bad. She felt that she'd done well to take the unsatisfactory life that she once had, and mould it into something far better. A new life with a new man, in a new town with a new job. Things were finally right and working well for her. And she was enjoying every second of it.

Unfortunately, just when you begin to enjoy something, when your life's roller-coaster car reaches the highest point with the best view... that's the moment it lurches into a steep nosedive, which usually makes your stomach churn and leaves you with your hair in a mess and your breakfast in your lap.

Sarah had recently become engaged to Simon, her magnificent minister, and proudly showed off the engagement ring to everyone. It was so much nicer and more expensive than the one she had from... *him*.

Jeff. Jeffrey Richard Raymond Spooner. Jeffo. The Jeffster. Scruffy painter and decorator. Lager lover and Kebab addict. She reluctantly allowed herself to reminisce about the day they met: she was out with a group of friends, celebrating a birthday. They'd already had a meal and a few bottles of wine, so although the night was relatively young –

let's say irresponsibly adolescent – the gang was already well on the way to alcoholic oblivion. Alcoblivion, if you will.

She remembered standing in a noisy, run-down bar called Kiwi's. It was a cramped pub that thought it was a disco. There were far too many people in there for the size of the place, and all of them thought it was a disco too. A better description of the place would be a 'Dipsoteque'. Some patrons were tipsy, some utterly smashed, and the others were getting there rapidly, courtesy of 'Happy Hour', which curiously, lasted for about five very happy hours. Every so often, this reasonably attractive, mousy-haired guy would stagger past her group, on his way to the bar or the toilets. He'd catch her eye and grin inanely.

The first time he did it, she looked away. The next time, she smiled back, then looked away. The third time, she decided to pull a face at him. The only reasonably funny and abnormal face she could do was that twisty one, where your top lip goes off to the right and your bottom one goes off in the opposite direction. Looks very seductive. Well, not really. Anyway, she did this, which made him smile, and the next time he walked past, he did the same face. Ah, the subtleties of romantic courtship. Four and a half billion years of evolution, pretty much wasted.

This went on for a good couple of hours, both gurning neanderthals pulling weird faces at each other, until finally Jeff had the courage to stop and slur something. To cut a long story short, they ended up together in a bus shelter, exchanging phone numbers, half-truths and saliva. Then he asked Sarah for a loan of a few quid so that he could get a taxi home.

Now she thought about it, that was the pattern for their relationship: a little show of affection in return for a monetary loan. All the time! Money for this, money for that. Promises to pay it back that never amounted to anything. In fact, in the twelve months of whirlwind romance that she'd known Jeff, she only remembered him repaying her once. And that was the day on which Jeff died. And the bizarre way in which it happened.

She remembered it well, that very strange day. After catching her and Wilson in one of many compromising positions, Jeff had finally realized that it was all over. She recalled him visiting her in the wee small hours, semi-drunk, to tell her that he was going to Canada to think things over. Then, a few hours after she'd sent him away, there

was an apparent explosion at the local barber shop. The investigating police never found the bodies of the proprietor, Ray Scump, nor Jeff. And the airports confirmed that he never left the country either. They established that he'd visited the doomed barber shop earlier that afternoon, upon Sarah's behest. When Jeff had last spoken to Sarah, she'd asked him for the fifty pounds that he owed her. A few minutes after the explosion, the money dropped out of the sky – literally, landing on her balcony. Seconds after that, she (and her new man) were hit by a few litres of human waste products.

The police deduced that the explosion must have been a gas main, which blew both Ray and Jeff to smithereens, fractured the sewage pipes, flinging the slurry up into the air. It was just good (or bad, depending on your perspective) luck, that the poop-goop landed on Sarah. But she had her money back. And that was a good thing, at least. And she didn't see the point of attending Jeff's funeral, as he wasn't even there. It is, after all, rather difficult to bury a smithereen.

Except we know that it didn't happen like that at all.

The facts were these:

Jeff had discovered Ray, completing repairs to his spacecraft, the magnificently-titled 'Marshmallow Penguin', and the subsequent launch was what led everyone to believe it was a gas explosion. Once airborne, Jeff insisted on returning Sarah's money to her, by having Ray hover the ship directly above her house. As a final touch, Jeff emptied the ship's chemical lavatory out of the hatch, to thank Sarah for cheating on him. Revenge, as the saying goes, is indeed a splash best served cold. And a bit lumpy. Then they sped off to the stars, to carve their legends... Ah, what a story.

But I digress. Again. There will be much digressing. You'll have to forgive me and try to keep up, as my mind is on an infinite number of things at once. I'm good

Chapter ONE

The Kangazanian sun shone upon the reclining figure of Jeff Spooner, as he lay in his hammock, sipping a finely blended cocktail. Across the silvery, chrome sand, he could see his friend Barbaray Sprambladack Fasstalón-Scump (or 'Ray' for short, because nobody could remember it for long) immersed in a game of table tennis against a giggling male Orbot named Gridlock. The bearded barber was highly proficient in the game, and despite Gridlock's lightning fast reflexes and finely tuned synthetic joints, Ray kicked his plastisteel bottom every time. The breeze carried the inviting smoky aroma of kebabs, sizzling gently on a nearby barbecue grill. This, to Jeff, was pretty much as good as it gets. His cocktail almost slurped, he called out.

"Tail! Couple more of these, please love!"

From a nearby beach hut walked a shapely female android. She had been designated M25, her product code back on her homeworld of Orbitron, but Jeff had given her a more interesting nickname. Tailback was her new name, although Jeff had taken to abbreviating it to 'Tail.'

Her robotic 'brother' Gridlock, the giggling ping-pong player, was originally designated 'M4'. Both Orbots were made on Orbitron, (hence the term 'Orbots') and were happy to be free and living life like the 'fleshies', among their human friends. They too, were living the dream.

Tailback poured two more exotic-looking cocktails and headed across the sands. The standard white plastic plating that usually covered her had been replaced with that of finely brushed bronze, giving her an expensive suntanned look. A multi-coloured sarong completed her outfit, blowing gently in the sea air. Tailback was Jeff's latest, best, and if truth be told, strangest girlfriend. He tried not to think of the logistics and oddities of a synthetic girlfriend, but as the days passed, he grew closer to her, and she to him.

Tailback didn't initially understand the feeling of love, even though she had detailed definitions of the word and its possible applications for organic lifeforms, but the more time she spent with Jeff, the more she seemed to grasp the concept. In all honesty, she was coping better than most. After all, as a wise Welshman once sang, 'What is love, anyway? Does anybody love anybody, anyway?'

Jeff pushed his sunglasses up onto his head and smiled at his girl.

"Here you are, sweetie," purred the Orbot. Jeff took the drink and

Tailback planted her sculpted lips onto his. The sun had warmed her faceplate up nicely, making Jeff jump momentarily.

“Ow! Hot lips!” he grinned. Tailback turned and carried the second drink over to Ray, who had finished his ping-pong game, and was heading for Jeff.

The portly ex-hairdresser hopped and skipped, as the sand was getting a bit too hot for comfort. The sea sloshed back and forth, the way thick custard would. Actually, exactly the way thick custard would, as that is exactly what it was. Rubbish for surfing, but lovely on pie, naturally.

“So – how are you finding it then?” said Ray. “I told you it was a nice place.”

“Awesome, mate. Just perfect. Got me a drink, got me girl, and got me friends around. What more could a bloke want?”

Tailback indicated the barbecue.

“I think the kebabs are ready, too.”

Jeff sighed in utter contentment. He raised his drink.

“Cheers, everybody!”

Suddenly, the custardy sea began to bubble ferociously and erupt. Everyone spun around to see a huge metallic lozenge emerge from the liquid. It was covered in small indentations, and Jeff recognised it as the shape of a monkey nut shell. Only this nut was over a hundred feet long.

A loud voice boomed out over the bubbling sea, shaking the trees as it rumbled.

“People of Kangazang! You are now prisoners of the armed forces of Macadamia! Your land and riches are now our property, and any resistance will be crushed. So says our Great Prophecy!”

Ray was far from intimidated. After all he’d been through, a giant talking nut shell wasn’t going to frighten him easily. He grinned a confident grin.

“Oh, I don’t think so. How ‘bout we show these nutjobs who’s boss around here, eh Jeff?”

“Jeff?”

Ray turned his head to see Jeff running away across the beach as fast as possible, with Tailback following after him.

Ray sighed.

“Wait for me!” he yelled.

He tried his best to run away from the obvious threat of molecular

disintegration, but his flip-flop sandals couldn't get any purchase in the millions of chrome balls that made up the beach. He fell over, rolled and found himself sitting on the rattling bearings as the giant nut-shell split open, revealing a squad of dreaded Macadamian warriors. The squat humanoids, encased in beige walnut-style armour, marched down a ramp into the thick yellow sea, and kept on marching.

Ray could only sit and stare in fear at the soldiers. Actually that's not true; he did that, but he also thought up a number of insulting names for Jeff and Tailback, who had deserted him and were nowhere to be seen. The soldiers waded out of the goeey slop and formed a semi-circle around the trembling barber. One barked an order.

"Take me to your leader!"

Ray looked dumbfounded.

"Eh? Wasn't I supposed to say that?"

The Macadamian leader removed his wooden headgear, revealing a smooth and shiny head with minimal features.

"No! YOU will take ME to your leader, and we shall discuss the surrender of Kangazang! We are here to take over and rule this world, in the name of the Macadamian Empire."

Ray had to think fast. Unfortunately, he could only think incredibly slowly.

"Er... Why?" he asked.

The nut looked as though someone had just dry roasted and eaten a close relative.

"Why? Because that is our purpose! That is what we're here to do! Our Great Prophecy says so!"

Ray got to his feet and was surprised to discover that he was about three feet taller than the warriors.

"I see. Erm, how old is this great prophecy, then?" he said.

The nut looked deep in thought. Or at least as deep in thought as a nut could look. Finally he looked up, a blank expression on his already mostly blank face.

"Um, it's about a million years old, I think. So are you going to...?"

"A million years old?" interrupted Ray. He put a friendly arm around the leader's shoulders. The rest of the warriors looked at each other in confusion.

"Listen, why don't you look at it like this: You're sent out halfway across the galaxy, declaring war on a planet that has no military forces

anyway, just to fulfil some ancient prophecy that was written by your long-dead ancestors? What's the point in that?"

He had a point. There was no point. That was his point, and it was good. Good point.

The nut scratched his head. It smelt like peanut butter, which was nice.

"Well, we have to fulfil the prophecy, don't we? That's what prophecies are for, I thought."

Ray remained friendly and upbeat, sensing that this particular nut was cracking.

"Yes, well, back in the day, of course! But prophecies are often flung down on paper without the slightest care for the poor nutjobs – no offence – who have to fulfil them! Now, a million years later, the books are crumbling, the writers long gone, and there's nothing to stop you lot from turning it into a bit of a holiday! Take a look around! Sun, sea, drinks and all the R&R you like!"

The soldiers mumbled in agreement, nodding. Many of them lowered their weapons in relief. The leader raised a hand.

"Well, that does sound like more fun, I freely admit. But what do you mean by, 'no military forces?'" he asked.

"This is a peaceful world!" said Ray. "Fun! Leisure and relaxation! Nobody stresses out here! Nobody fights! The only disagreements are between lovers, who refuse to hang up the phone first!"

"Ooo," said the nut in astonishment. For a race bred especially for the horrors of war, the concept of anything other than glorious battle was a lot to take in.

"Well, we could use a change of pace. What do you think, men?" asked the leader. The soldiers were all up for a bit of a break, and they nodded, mumbling enthusiastically. Ray was pleased.

"There you go then! Park the ship over by the cliffs there, everyone relax and I'll go mix the drinks!"

As Ray turned, the leader of the nuts tapped him on the back.

"We can't just do this all day every day though. We'll get bored! After all, we were grown for war, you know."

Ray had an idea. He was getting good at finding realistic solutions to abstract problems now. It must have been rubbing off on him from Jeff. He looked at the mildly confuddled nut.

"What's your name, sergeant?" he asked.

“Colonel.” said the soldier.

“Oh, sorry. What’s your name, Colonel?”

“Kernel.”

Ray blinked. “We’re getting mixed up. What’s your name again?”

“Kernel.”

“That’s your name?”

“Yes, Kernel.”

“And your rank?”

“Colonel.”

“Ah, I see!” declared Ray. “Colonel Kernel!”

“That’s right.”

“Oh! Brilliant! Okay then, Colonel Kernel,” said Ray brightly, “Here’s what we’ll do – I’ll go and have a word with the Kangazanian authorities on your behalf. I’m sure I can convince them to let you lot stay on, as a sort of home guard. In the meantime, you lot go and relax. You’ll soon get the hang of it. Be good to come out of your shells.” Ray winked, more in admiration of his own wit than anything else. Colonel Kernel needed clarification.

“So, what your saying is, we hang around all day...?”

“Yeeees...” said Ray.

“...And if there are any problems, we’ll be called to sort it out? Like a planetary defence force?”

“Yes. Exactly!”

“...And that’s it?” asked the Colonel.

“In a – pardon the expression – nutshell.”

The soldiers ran off, whooping and screaming in delight. Ray felt a tremendous sense of achievement.

Life was good.

Trouble In Paradise

The problem is not the problem. The problem is your attitude about the problem.

– Ann Brashares

Far away... well, *far* doesn't quite cut it.

Immense distances away... No, that doesn't do it justice, either.

Unimaginably tremendous, mind-meltingly, *tape-measure-mockingly* far away (*that'll do*), Sarah's ex-fiancé was alive and well, and he too, was enjoying a new life.

Jeff Spooner, were he the type of small, petty and childish person to rub one's nose in his good fortune, would have a field day, as he was having a much better time than Sarah could imagine.

"Ahh... Just think, mate," he called out across the beach to his friend. "If that snooty cow Sarah could see me now, I bet she'd chuck her guts up in frustration!" He smiled and sipped a little more of his cocktail.

Needless to say, Jeff WAS the type of small, petty and childish person to rub one's nose in his good fortune. But that didn't make him a bad person. Well, not really. Not in the Grand Scheme of Things.

This was Kangazang, far across the galactic disc, birthplace of Ray, and new home to Jeff. Together these two unlikely heroes had managed to reach this, their destination after much hardship, adventure and sheer good fortune. Having also managed to save countless millions of people from injustice, suffering and extinction, it made them the 'good guys'. In the Grand Scheme Of Things.

In fact, the Grand Scheme Of Things owed them a debt of immense gratitude. Their tale up to this point would've made enthralling reading – a thrilling and hilarious novel. Probably priced around £9.99 from all good Earth bookshops. But Jeff and Ray were happy just to be here on this multi-coloured ball of luxury, under the sun and living the good life.

"Oh, let it go, man. Just let it go," said Ray wearily. "She's not worrying about you, so just forget about her. Why do you insist on bringing her up all the time?"

Clearly, this wasn't the first time Jeff had brought her up.

Jeff lifted his oversized sunglasses and sat them on his head.

"I know, mate. Sorry. It's just that sometimes I wonder what might've happened for us if things had worked out, y'know?"

Ray shrugged.

"I suppose so. But then again, look at us! Look at all this!"

He spread his arms open wide, trying to sell the majesty of the colourful surroundings. Jeff cocked his head.

"What – chest hair? Nice." He smiled. "Yeah, you're right, mate. Isn't bad, is it?" he grinned.

"Isn't bad?" repeated Ray. "Isn't bad? You're wearing a flowery shirt, drinking a cocktail, served by a gorgeous woman, next to a beach house, on a beach, on one of the most perfectly amazingly attractive planets in the entire galaxy! I'd say that was a little more than 'isn't bad', wouldn't you?"

"Although..." said Jeff, remembering his original point, "I always thought I would've had a son, you know? A little lad to bring up, teach him to play footy... help him with his homework... see him graduate, borrow money from him and all that. Don't suppose it's gonna happen now, is it?"

Ray looked exasperated.

"Never happy, are you? Look at this life, and look at that lady of yours." he pointed to the beach house, where the bronzed mechanical beauty was lying in the shade of the veranda. Jeff had to admit, life was pretty sweet. He sighed, trying to let it go, as Ray had implored him to do.

"Yeah, it's a definite improvement, I gotta say. I'm not broody though, not the way birds get. Just thinking about the possibilities – or lack of 'em, you know?"

Tailback wasn't basking in the cosmic rays, as they had little effect on her, save for a minimal amount of solar recharging. She just liked to lounge around as it made her feel more human, and therefore closer to Jeff. There was just one problem. She was beginning to discover that her artificial construction brought with it a problem. And with this problem, she was beginning to feel unhappy.

But still, she loved her man. She loved her man so much that she doted on him, obeyed his every word. And unfortunately, being an Orbot, she was conditioned to hear and record every word he said, whether she wanted to hear it or not. This had become something of a recurring undesirable anomaly, as in the six months she'd known him, he mentioned his ex-fiancée exactly seventy four point five times, and his thoughts about becoming a father a hundred and eight times. Jeff had just described her as a 'lack of possibilities'. It shouldn't hurt, but it

was beginning to.

Being made entirely of plastic, metal and silicon wasn't conducive to reproduction, and she lamented this. In private though – it wouldn't do to let Jeff know that she was unhappy with these feelings of helplessness.

All the same though, she looked over at Jeff swaying contentedly in his hammock, waved calmly, and then closed her eye shutters. Had she the necessary biological components, she would've cried a tear.

Jeff waved back at his girl, then wiggled his eyebrows up and down until the shades slid down over his eyes again. He dropped the empty cocktail glass onto the sand underneath his hammock and put his hands behind his head. Suddenly, he felt a tickling sensation from within his nose.

“Ahh-CHEEEW!” blurted Jeff. Ray jumped back to avoid the projected sneeze.

“Bod almighty! Coming down with a cold? Or is it a spot of hayfever?” asked Ray.

Jeff shook his head and rubbed his moist hooter.

“Nah, I sometimes sneeze in the sun. It's a strange thing, dunno why. Maybe it's the sunlight, or something. I definitely do it a bit more here than I do on Earth.”

Ray held up an Eureka-like finger.

“It's P.S.R. That's what you've got.”

Jeff was impressed and also amazed that someone had actually given it a scientific-sounding name.

“Really? Why do I sneeze then?”

“Well basically, the probable cause is a congenital malfunction in nerve signals in the trigeminal nerve nuclei. The fifth cranial nerve, the trigeminal nerve, is apparently responsible for sneezes. Some people have an association between this nerve and the nerve that transmits visual impulses to the brain. Overstimulation of the optic nerve triggers the trigeminal nerve, and this causes the photic sneeze reflex. Hence P.S.R. But what do I know? – I'm a barber, not a doctorologist.”

Jeff blinked.

“Yeah, thought as much,” lied Jeff, following it up with, “HAAA-KYEW-FAH!”

“Gesundheit!” said Ray.

He waved a hairy hand back and forth across his hairy face.

"Phew, it's a hot one today. I'm popping inside for a cup of tea and a sit-down. You coming?" he asked.

Jeff made the requisite 'mm-mm' noise signalling his refusal to come along, so Ray skipped off across the ball bearings, accompanied by his own strangely simian noises that denoted hot feet. Gridlock decided to accompany Ray, mimicking his hopping gait, and laughing insanely at it.

Gridlock wasn't having any personal crises at all. Far from it. When he lived back home on Orbitron, he and Tailback were assigned to spacecraft repair duties on the surface, as they were designated part of the 'M' Class, the 'M' meaning 'Malfunction'. Until Jeff had dubbed him 'Gridlock', his name was M4.

Gridlock's personal failing was that he found nearly everything amusing and couldn't help laughing at it – whatever it was. A lot of people seemed to find it annoying. In fact the only time he'd been totally serious for more than a few minutes was when he was smashed to smithereens by a huge drawbridge, then brought back to life through complicated and incredibly miraculous processes by a fabled object called the Universal Remote.

But for Gridlock, laughter was always the best medicine, and his sense of humour proved to be his saving grace. Here on Kangazang, good vibes and smiles were always in demand, as it was a planet-wide holiday world. The weird thing about this planet was that it was surrounded by a small number of minor stars, each exerting their own pull on the world, and this gave Kangazang the strangest twisting, turning orbit, which kept its entire surface in daylight – sunny, bright daylight all the time. Ideal for holidays, not so good for migraines, solarphobic lifeforms, nocturnal animals and lovers of a good night's sleep. Suffice to say, blindfolds were the top-selling item on the planet.

Gridlock had become something of a celebrity on Kangazang. He was the world's first synthetic stand-up comedian. From cocktail bars on the beaches at first, to sell-out stadium tours, people came from far and wide to check out the hilarious comedy stylings of this talented Orbot. His routines about how they did things differently on other planets were side-splittingly funny. Especially when he told them what he'd learned about Earth from Jeff and Ray.

"What's the difference between an Alpha Centaurian and an

Earthman? Tentacles, ventricles and testicles!"

And so on. You had to be there. If you could get a ticket, that is. What Gridlock thought was funniest about it was that he never had to write material or practice his routines. All he did was talk about any given subject and the audiences would be creased up in paroxysms of tittering. Which was extremely lucrative – with his immense salary rolling in, he bought everyone expensive gifts – Tailback, who he regarded as his sister, received the lovely goldy-bronze plating that she wore with pride. Ray was chuffed to have his trusty little spacecraft, the *Marshmallow Penguin*, completely overhauled and re-covered with a hi-tech, woven keratin layer to replace the smelly patchwork job that Ray had done back on Earth with bags of hair cuttings. They even had a ship-to-ship teleport device, but this was not used as yet because no one had the bravery to try it.

Jeff was given a palatial beach house, where for most days of the year, everyone lived.

Being an M-Class Orbot no longer affected Gridlock's life. In fact he saw it as a blessing, and it was his earning potential that kept him, and his new dysfunctional family living in the lap of luxury.

Tailback was also an M-Class Orbot. Her malfunction was one that made her afraid of everything, a phobia that would change every few minutes. Gridlock found it funny, but then again, he found everything funny.

Luckily, Tailback had overcome her phobia problem when her M.I.N.D, or Micro-Intelligence Neural Databank, had been invaded and reworked by a sophisticated virus that was designed to turn her into a slave for an evil galactic tyrant named Overlord Kelvin of Skragg. This was all sorted out amicably, you'll be glad to know, and Kelvin is now a humble and benevolent ruler, calling himself 'Kelvin The Reasonable'. Apparently, he's quite a skilled hairdresser these days too, thanks to Ray's gift of styling products. But the end result was that Tailback no longer feared anything and everything. She was pretty much cured. Woo. And indeed, Hoo. Everyone was happy. But remember I said that happy people are rare?

Jeff had nodded off in his hammock again. Wow – it's all action here, isn't it?

He snored in the shade, swaying gently in the breeze, and nobody wanted to disturb the poor chap. As he dozed, the pretty bronze Orbot stared at him in sad silence. She had listened to him snoring and mumbling for nearly an hour, and picked out a few words in between grunts: "Little lad", "Alright Son?" and "Goal!" were prevalent. Yes, parenthood certainly seemed to be on his mind, and so Tailback made the decision to leave him there and then, so that he'd be free to meet someone who could give him the child he so obviously wanted.

With a determined effort, she turned on her heel and walked into the house, passing Ray and Gridlock, who were sitting on the sofa giggling at a comedy show. They didn't notice her at all as she walked, out through the front door and stopped a hovering TaxiKab as it passed by.

With a final miserable look at Jeff, still snoring in unconscious bliss, she directed the Kab driver to the spaceport. Destination: Anywhere.

Oops! Where are my manners?

I completely forgot to introduce myself. And here I am, waffling on regardless. You could've stopped me. Oh, then again, maybe not. Anyway, better late than never. Allow me to introduce myself, dear reader.

If you're reading this voluntarily, then you're probably afflicted with some kind of debilitating neural dementia, but if you are of sound mind, then the main question in your mind may well be, 'Who is this narrator-type entity?' Well, a more modest person would say it's not important, but I'm neither modest nor insignificant. I'm extremely important in fact. But I did promise you at some point in the past, that I would reveal my identity. And yes, at some point in the future, I shall. But not now. Not yet. All you need to know is that I am completely unique, extremely powerful, and my name is ErHuer. Yes, it's a little unconventional for a name. It's pronounced 'Er - Hugh - Er', okay? Try it a few times; you'll soon get the hang of it.

So that's me - ErHuer. Unique and pretty much omnipotent. Chronicler of the life and misadventures of one Jeff Spooner and his companions. That's all you need to know about me for now. You see, I could tell you

everything right now, but it'd get a tad confusing. So if it's all the same with you, I'll carry on and drop some need-to-know facts in when you, er...*need to know* them. Alright? Jolly good. Let us continue then.

Were snoring an Olympic sport, Jeff would have won a gold medal easily, from within his hammock. Inside his dream, he was playing football with a small boy, presumably his son. Both father and son laughed as they passed the ball to and fro. The little boy ran up for a big kick but as he did so, he transformed into a seven-foot tall killer robot. When he kicked the ball, it too transformed, becoming metallic and bearing nasty looking spikes on the outside. The ball flew at him, too fast to dodge. Then there was the reliable caress of pain. Much of it.

Jeff woke up face down on the warm sand, having fallen out of his hammock. He groaned and looked up to see Ray running towards him in a state of panic. He got up and approached the befuddled barber.

"What's up, matey?" said Jeff.

Ray had never looked so panicked.

"It's my dad! I had a call from Mum! It's Dad!"

Fearing the worst, Jeff trod carefully.

"Eh? Your mum? Or your dad? What's happened?"

"My dad! He's left my mum! He's lost his marbles and left!"

"Blimey, when did this happen?"

"Two years ago!"

Jeff stopped fearing the worst.

"Oh. Old news then. You had me worried for a second then!"

Ray was still visibly shaken.

"No! No! You don't understand! It's all my fault! I should've come back sooner. What are we going to do? I've got to find him!"

Jeff didn't quite understand the urgency. After all, if it had happened two years ago, the matter was probably done and dusted. But Ray was feeling like a man who'd returned home after a holiday and found his front door piled up with unopened mail. There was a lot of catching up to do, since he left for Earth a decade ago, and truth to tell, he'd spent a little too long relaxing when he should have been keeping in touch with his nearest and dearest.

He beckoned to Jeff as he headed back to the house.

"Come on Jeff, I've got to go and see my mum. She must be in a real state."

Jeff sighed in agreement and followed him cross the beach.

Inside the house, Gridlock was packing a case for Ray. It was a simple job: sandals, three quarter length shorts and Kangazanian shirts. Like the Hawaiian variety, only the sea was yellow, the sand was silver, and the palm trees purple. He sniggered to himself as he mentally re-played last night's stand-up comedy routines. Ray entered with Jeff in tow.

"All ready, Grid?" asked Ray.

The Orbot nodded, closing the case.

"Yes indeed, Mister Ray. Case closed. Har har."

Gridlock opened the case again.

"Look, it's an open and shut case! Hee hee!"

Then he disconnected his head unit, and put it on top of the case.

"Oh no! I'm a real headcase! It's a nutcase! Ha ha ha!"

Jeff groaned. How this artificial idiot managed to become a success with this cheese-laden material was beyond him.

"Pack it in, Grid!" complained Jeff. Gridlock fell over in hysterics at this.

"Ha ha ha! I have! Packed it in the case!"

"Oh suit yourself..." groaned Jeff, suddenly realising he'd done it again. Gridlock kept on hooting with laughter, while reattaching his head.

"Hoo hoo! Suit myself! Priceless!"

Ray came in. He grabbed the case from the bed and made for the back door. Jeff followed behind him. They were greeted by their little ship, the *Marshmallow Penguin*, on the landing pad at the bottom of the garden.

She was looking a lot neater now, thanks to her new outer coating. Jeff remembered when he first saw the rowing-boat shaped vessel. It used to look fuzzy and it had a weird shampooy smell, but now it was glistening in grey and silver.

Ray climbed aboard and after throwing his suitcase into the hold, he went up front to the cockpit and strapped himself in.

Jeff stood at the ship's ramp with Gridlock, who shook his hand.

"Good luck Jeff. Have a good flight!" he said. Jeff looked around for Tailback.

"Where's Tail?" he asked. Gridlock chuckled.

"Pinned on donkey!"

"I'm serious, Grid. Is she in the house?" asked Jeff sternly. Gridlock looked back at the house, and employed his X-ray cameras to look through the house for Tailback. She wasn't in sight.

"No. In fact..." he scanned the entire area, revolving his head 360 degrees.

"She's not even in my line of sight. For a radius of over half a mile." Jeff's heart sank. He suddenly felt incomplete. He called up to Ray.

"Ray! We've got a problem! Tail's gone missing!"

Jeff turned back to Gridlock.

"Did she say she was off somewhere? Shopping? Jogging? Anything!"

Gridlock blinked dumbly.

"Not that I know of."

Jeff felt panic growing inside him. After a couple of months of stress-free living, this was not a nice thing to be experiencing. Ray came to the door of the ship.

"What's that you said?"

Jeff reiterated, only this time with added panic.

"Tailback's gone! Nobody knows where she is! She's left me! No – she's been kidnapped! That's it! Someone's nicked her! I knew it was a bad idea to show off that bronze plating! Someone's gone and nabbed her so they can sell the scrap!"

For once, Gridlock didn't grin. He visibly shuddered. Luckily, Ray was far more chilled out.

"Ah, it'll be okay, don't worry! She's probably popped to the shops for more juice and burger buns. In most cases, she's usually back in an hour or so."

"But...but...but..." stammered Jeff.

"But relax!" said Ray, trying to calm his friend. "She's not too far away, I'm sure. Bod Almighty, you humans are so jittery. She's not going anywhere, Jeff. This is her home and she likes it here, why would she leave?"

Why indeed? Why would Ray's father leave? Why would anyone in their right mind/mainframe want to leave this Eden of hedonism? The answer is that simply, they *weren't* in their right minds.

Ray had bigger cod to casserole. He grabbed Jeff's wrist and dragged him up onto the ramp of the *Penguin*, despite Jeff's feeble whimpers of 'ifs and 'buts'.

“Come on,” said Ray. “My dad’s done a runner from Mum and I’ve really got to go and see her – find out what it’s all about. Gridlock can stay here and let us know when Tailback comes back. Right, Grid?”

“Right, Ray. Don’t worry, Jeff...” started Gridlock. Jeff interrupted him.

“Don’t even think of saying ‘be happy’, alright?” he warned. Gridlock looked at his own feet, sniggering lightly.

Jeff went inside the ship and joined Ray in the cockpit. He strapped himself in as Ray operated the controls to start the little spacecraft’s engines.

Down on the ground, Gridlock waved, as the flat, bullet-shaped craft rose up and sped off in the direction of the city centre. His smile faded, leaving him with a rarely-seen, melancholy look.

“Find my sister. Please?”

On board, Ray and Jeff were very tense. Both men sat silently, having thoughts of their missing loved ones on their minds.

Finally Jeff spoke, trying to make conversation in the hope that it’d distract him from his own problems.

“So... er... Were you close to your dad then?” he asked.

Ray nodded.

“Yeah, I suppose you could say so. He showed me most of his haircutting techniques from an early age. I wasn’t brilliant at it, initially, but I was the talk of the town, thanks to my skills.

“You must’ve been good then?” asked Jeff. Ray shook his head.

“Nope. Totally rubbish. They only talked about me because their pet dogs would come home scalped. But I had to practice somehow.”

Jeff grinned.

“What’s your dad’s name, by the way?”

“Barbacol Shoclashoo Fasstalon-Scump. Col, for short, I suppose,” said Ray. “Yours?”

“Dave.”

“Dave? Wow,” said Ray. “Weird name.”

Talking of names, Sarah had given some thought as to her own. One thing that had slightly bothered her in the past was Jeff’s frankly stupid surname. Spooner. It was only when they got engaged that it dawned

up on her, that having Jeff for a husband would result in adding insult to injury. There were no redeeming features associated with taking his name. 'Sarah Spooner' sounded comedic, and not at all cool. Having the initials, S.S. was also inadvisable, as it happened to be associated to Schutzstaffel, the notorious military unit assigned to Hitler. *So* not cool. Even if, as Jeff used to say, she was a bit of a Nazi when she wanted to be.

Even if she did the pretentious hyphenation thing, which was becoming more common these days, where stubborn, egotistical young women refused to abandon their surnames because of tradition, and an unspoken paranoia that the marriage wouldn't last, she'd be no better off. 'Sarah Wood-Spooner'; People would laugh. And quite rightly.

At least now, the thought of marrying Simon meant that she'd be spared the painful branding, and better still, if she changed her surname, she could at least retain the same initials. Or the hyphenated option of 'Wood-Wilson' sounded better. Yes, it was definitely preferable. She sighed her relief as she got into her car and drove out of the driveway, heading for work. She adjusted her smart designer jacket, blissfully unaware that the label of the designer was sticking up out of her collar, revealing the last two letters; S.S. Ironically, the original designer of the jacket had been responsible for designing the uniforms of the infamous 'Schutzstaffel' all those years ago. So basically it was a case of, if the Gestapo uniform fits, wear it.

It was a big day for Sarah, as she had been told that Head Office had planned to come over to the UK with the express intention of greeting her specifically. Sarah had been transferred to the Swansea office and today was her first day there. Hence the smart suit.

Promotion meant a shockingly large pay rise, less work, more meetings, and fittingly enough, a brand new sparkling German automobile on top. Wunderbar! Geld, Geld, Geld.

Wealth is extremely complicated. Gaining more of it is surprisingly easy for those who have it, but nigh-on impossible for those who don't. Losing it is simplicity for the wealthy, and not even an issue for the deprived. They say money is the root of all evil. This isn't strictly true, but in the following specific case, it's incredibly accurate:

Picture a coin. It sits in someone's pocket. This someone is an adult. They have a child. Both adult and child are at a seaside games

arcade. The child sees a toy in a machine called a 'Claw Crane'. The parent hands the coin to the child, and the child puts it into the machine. A three-fingered claw is manipulated into position, swaying over the toy like a hesitant vulture.

With a hopefully decisive yet hopelessly pointless punch of a button, the vulture swoops down, opening its chromed talons, and lands upon the unsuspecting stuffed toy. Then, as always, the claw retracts, its metallic fingers possessing all the strength of wet spaghetti, and the toy remains there, unmoved. The child protests, and is given many, many more coins to repeat the futile exercise, until finally, drained of all suitable change, the adult is forced to drag away their child until the next unsuspecting person happens to come along to the machine.

Remember the coin? Well, its' journey hasn't ended. The coin rolls down a chute, along various tracks, through numerous mechanisms, where it lands into a metal box that holds a thousand other similar coins.

On the planet Earth alone, there are over eighty thousand seaside resorts, and a rough estimate of half a million Claw Cranes. Although many of these are thought to originate from the Far East, what most humans don't know is that these machines are all made by and linked to, a shadowy company called WORM Inc. (Western Original Recreation Machines Incorporated). This company makes more money than the major religions, computer manufacturers, oil barons, Hollywood movies, Reality TV programmes and Morris Dancers combined.

All the staggeringly large profits from the Claw Cranes go to WORM Inc., to fund a scheme which supplies financial support to a sinister force of alien creatures, who hide beneath the surface of the Earth. The money supplies them with housing, privacy, income and anonymity. Oh, and they're also building a colossal spaceship right under the ground.

Be warned, be vigilant or leave the planet quick-sharpish, if I were you. That's where your small coin is going. Pure evil. And talking of *witch*...

Sarah, like our hypothetical coin, was hard, cold and two-faced. She, like the metal monetary unit, was on her own journey heading for

unknown things, an unimagined destiny, as she drove along the road towards her new office. Excitedly, she passed the time imagining the décor of her new top-floor office. Much like the way a coin would imagine the metal box filled with hundreds of its siblings, Sarah imagined that this immaculate workplace was her ideal destination.

Except it wasn't. The coin wasn't to know that it was part of an altogether bigger plan. A scheme concocted by the most diabolical minds. And Sarah was exactly like the coin in this respect.

The tall building shone in the morning sun, like a huge faceted stalagmite. Glass doors slid open to allow her entry to the reception area, where a thin secretary sat, face frozen in an unnerving pretend grin of hospitality. She stared unblinking, as she greeted Sarah.

"Good morning, Miss Wood. Welcome to WORM Incorporated. We've been expecting you."

No good could come of this. Still, Sarah wasn't to know. Not yet anyway.

