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opening extract from

The Restaurant at the end of the Universe

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There is a theory which states that
if ever anyone discovers exactly what
the Universe is for and why it is here, it will
instantly disappear and be replaced by
something even more bizarre
and inexplicable.

There is another theory which states that
this has already happened.

1

The story so far:

In the beginning the Universe was created.

This had made a lot of people very angry and been widely regarded as a bad move.

Many races believe that it was created by some sort of god, though the Jatravartid people of Viltvodle Six believe that the entire Universe was in fact sneezed out of the nose of a being called the Great Green Arkleseizure.

The Jatravartids, who live in perpetual fear of the time they call the Coming of the Great White Handkerchief, are small blue creatures with more than fifty arms each, who are therefore unique in being the only race in history to have invented the aerosol deodorant before the wheel.

However, the Great Green Arkleseizure Theory is not widely accepted outside Viltvodle Six and so, the Universe being the puzzling place it is, other explanations are constantly being sought.

For instance, a race of hyper-intelligent pan-dimensional beings once built themselves a gigantic supercomputer called Deep Thought to calculate once and for all the Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything.

For seven and a half million years, Deep Thought computed and calculated, and in the end announced that the answer was in fact Forty-two – and so another, even bigger, computer had to be built to find out what the actual question was.

And this computer, which was called the Earth, was so large that it was frequently mistaken for a planet – especially by the strange ape-like beings who roamed its

surface, totally unaware that they were simply part of a gigantic computer program.

And this is very odd, because without that fairly simple and obvious piece of knowledge, nothing that ever happened on the Earth could possibly make the slightest bit of sense.

Sadly, however, just before the critical moment of readout, the Earth was unexpectedly demolished by the Vogons to make way – so they claimed – for a new hyperspace bypass, and so all hope of discovering a meaning for life was lost for ever.

Or so it would seem.

Two of these strange, ape-like creatures survived.

Arthur Dent escaped at the very last moment because an old friend of his, Ford Prefect, suddenly turned out to be from a small planet somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse and not from Guildford as he had hitherto claimed; and, more to the point, he knew how to hitch rides on flying saucers.

Tricia McMillan – or Trillian – had skipped the planet six months earlier with Zaphod Beeblebrox, the then President of the Galaxy.

Two survivors.

They are all that remains of the greatest experiment ever conducted – to find the Ultimate Question and the Ultimate Answer of Life, the Universe and Everything.

And, less than half a million miles from where their starship is drifting lazily through the inky blackness of space, a Vogon ship is moving slowly towards them.

2

Like all Vogon ships it looked as if it had been not so much designed as congealed. The unpleasant yellow lumps and edifices which protruded from it at unsightly angles would have disfigured the looks of most ships, but in this case that was sadly impossible. Uglier things have been spotted in the skies, but not by reliable witnesses.

In fact to see anything much uglier than a Vogon ship you would have to go inside it and look at a Vogon. If you are wise, however, this is precisely what you will avoid doing because the average Vogon will not think twice before doing something so pointlessly hideous to you that you will wish you had never been born – or (if you are a clearer minded thinker) that the Vogon had never been born.

In fact, the average Vogon probably wouldn't even think once. They are simple-minded, thick-willed, slug-brained creatures, and thinking is not really something they are cut out for. Anatomical analysis of the Vogon reveals that its brain was originally a badly deformed, misplaced and dyspeptic liver. The fairest thing you can say about them, then, is that they know what they like, and what they like generally involves hurting people and, wherever possible, getting very angry.

One thing they don't like is leaving a job unfinished – particularly this Vogon, and particularly – for various reasons – this job.

This Vogon was Captain Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz of the Galactic Hyperspace Planning Council, and he it was who had had the job of demolishing the so-called 'planet' Earth.

He heaved his monumentally vile body round in his ill-fitting, slimy seat and stared at the monitor screen on which the starship *Heart of Gold* was being systematically scanned.

It mattered little to him that the *Heart of Gold*, with its Infinite Improbability Drive, was the most beautiful and revolutionary ship ever built. Aesthetics and technology were closed books to him and, had he had his way, burnt and buried books as well.

It mattered even less to him that Zaphod Beeblebrox was aboard. Zaphod Beeblebrox was now the ex-President of the Galaxy, and though every police force in the Galaxy was currently pursuing both him and this ship he had stolen, the Vogon was not interested.

He had other fish to fry.

It has been said that Vogons are not above a little bribery and corruption in the same way that the sea is not above the clouds, and this was certainly true in his case. When he heard the words 'integrity' or 'moral rectitude' he reached for his dictionary, and when he heard the chink of ready money in large quantities he reached for the rule book and threw it away.

In seeking so implacably the destruction of the Earth and all that therein lay he was moving somewhat above and beyond the call of his professional duty. There was even some doubt as to whether the said bypass was actually going to be built, but the matter had been glossed over.

He grunted a repellent grunt of satisfaction.

'Computer,' he croaked, 'get me my brain-care specialist on the line.'

Within a few seconds the face of Gag Halfrunt appeared on the screen, smiling the smile of a man who knew he was ten light-years away from the Vogon face he was looking at. Mixed up somewhere in the smile

was a glint of irony too. Though the Vogon persistently referred to him as 'my private brain-care specialist' there was not a lot of brain to take care of, and it was in fact Halfrunt who was employing the Vogon. He was paying him an awful lot of money to do some very dirty work. As one of the Galaxy's most prominent and successful psychiatrists, he and a consortium of his colleagues were quite prepared to spend an awful lot of money when it seemed that the entire future of psychiatry might be at stake.

'Well,' he said, 'hello my Captain of Vogons Prostetnic, and how are we feeling today?'

The Vogon Captain told him that in the last few hours he had wiped out nearly half his crew in a disciplinary exercise.

Halfrunt's smile did not flicker for an instant.

'Well,' he said. 'I think this is perfectly normal behaviour for a Vogon, you know? The natural and healthy channelling of the aggressive instincts into acts of senseless violence.'

'That,' rumbled the Vogon, 'is what you always say.'

'Well again,' said Halfrunt, 'I think that this is perfectly normal behaviour for a psychiatrist. Good. We are clearly both very well adjusted in our mental attitudes today. Now tell me, what news of the mission?'

'We have located the ship.'

'Wonderful,' said Halfrunt, 'wonderful! And the occupants?'

'The Earthman is there.'

'Excellent! And . . .?'

'A female from the same planet. They are the last.'

'Good, good,' beamed Halfrunt. 'Who else?'

'The man Prefect.'

'Yes?'

'And Zaphod Beeblebrox.'

For an instant Halfrunt's smile flickered.

'Ah yes,' he said, 'I had been expecting this. It is most regrettable.'

'A personal friend?' enquired the Vogon, who had heard the expression somewhere once and decided to try it out.

'Ah, no,' said Halfrunt, 'in my profession, you know, we do not make personal friends.'

'Ah,' grunted the Vogon, 'professional detachment.'

'No,' said Halfrunt cheerfully 'we just don't have the knack.'

He paused. His mouth continued to smile, but his eyes frowned slightly.

'But Beeblebrox, you know,' he said, 'he is one of my most profitable clients. He has personality problems beyond the dreams of analysts.'

He toyed with this thought a little before reluctantly dismissing it.

'Still,' he said, 'you are ready for your task?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Destroy the ship immediately.'

'What about Beeblebrox?'

'Well,' said Halfrunt brightly, 'Zaphod's just this guy, you know?'

He vanished from the screen.

The Vogon captain pressed a communicator button which connected him with the remains of his crew.

'Attack,' he said.

At that precise moment Zaphod Beeblebrox was in his cabin swearing very loudly. Two hours ago, he had said that they would go for a quick bite at the Restaurant at the End of the Universe, whereupon he had had a blazing row with the ship's computer and stormed off to his cabin shouting that he would work out the Improbability factors with a pencil.

The *Heart of Gold*'s Improbability Drive made it the most powerful and unpredictable ship in existence. There was nothing it couldn't do, provided you knew exactly how improbable it was that the thing you wanted it to do would ever happen.

He had stolen it when, as President, he was meant to be launching it. He didn't know exactly why he had stolen it, except that he liked it.

He didn't know why he had become President of the Galaxy, except that it seemed a fun thing to be.

He did know that there were better reasons than these, but that they were buried in a dark, locked-off section of his two brains. He wished the dark, locked-off section of his two brains would go away because they occasionally surfaced momentarily and put strange thoughts into the light, fun sections of his mind and tried to deflect him from what he saw as being the basic business of his life, which was to have a wonderfully good time.

At the moment he was not having a wonderfully good time. He had run out of patience and pencils and was feeling very hungry.

'Starpox!' he shouted.

At that same precise moment, Ford Prefect was in mid-air. This was not because of anything wrong with the ship's artificial gravity field, but because he was leaping down the stairwell which led to the ship's personal cabins. It was a very high jump to do in one bound and he landed awkwardly, stumbled, recovered, raced down the corridor sending a couple of miniature service robots flying, skidded round the corner, burst into Zaphod's door and explained what was on his mind.

'Vogons,' he said.

A short while before this, Arthur Dent had set out from his cabin in search of a cup of tea. It was not a quest he embarked upon with a great deal of optimism, because he knew that the only source of hot drinks on

the entire ship was a benighted piece of equipment produced by the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation. It was called a Nutri-Matic Drinks Synthesizer, and he had encountered it before.

It claimed to produce the widest possible range of drinks personally matched to the tastes and metabolism of whoever cared to use it. When put to the test, however, it invariably produced a plastic cup filled with a liquid which was almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea.

He attempted to reason with the thing.

'Tea,' he said.

'Share and Enjoy,' the machine repeated and produced another one.

'Share and Enjoy' is the company motto of the hugely successful Sirius Cybernetics Corporation Complaints division, which now covers the major land masses of three medium-sized planets and is the only part of the Corporation to have shown a consistent profit in recent years.

The motto stands – or rather stood – in three-mile-high illuminated letters near the Complaints Department spaceport on Eadraz. Unfortunately its weight was such that shortly after it was erected, the ground beneath the letters caved in and they dropped for nearly half their length through the offices of many talented young complaints executives – now deceased.

The protruding upper halves of the letters now appear, in the local language, to read 'Go stick your head in a pig', and are no longer illuminated, except at times of special celebration.

Arthur threw away a sixth cup of the liquid.

'Listen, you machine,' he said, 'you claim you can synthesize any drink in existence, so why do you keep giving me the same undrinkable stuff?'

'Nutrition and pleasurable sense data,' burbled the machine. 'Share and Enjoy.'

'It tastes filthy!'

'If you have enjoyed the experience of this drink,' continued the machine, 'why not share it with your friends?'

'Because,' said Arthur tartly, 'I want to keep them. Will you try to comprehend what I'm telling you? That drink . . .'

'That drink,' said the machine sweetly, 'was individually tailored to meet your personal requirements for nutrition and pleasure.'

'Ah,' said Arthur, 'so I'm a masochist on a diet, am I?'

'Share and Enjoy.'

'Oh shut up.'

'Will that be all?'

Arthur decided to give up.

'Yes,' he said.

Then he decided he'd be damned if he'd give up.

'No,' he said, 'look, it's very, very simple . . . all I want . . . is a cup of tea. You are going to make one for me. Keep quiet and listen.'

And he sat. He told the Nutri-Matic about India, he told it about China, he told it about Ceylon. He told it about broad leaves drying in the sun. He told it about silver teapots. He told it about summer afternoons on the lawn. He told it about putting in the milk before the tea so it wouldn't get scalded. He even told it (briefly) about the history of the East India Company.

'So that's it, is it?' said the Nutri-Matic when he had finished.

'Yes,' said Arthur, 'that is what I want.'

'You want the taste of dried leaves boiled in water?'

'Er, yes. With milk.'

'Squirted out of a cow?'

'Well, in a manner of speaking I suppose . . .'

'I'm going to need some help with this one,' said the machine tersely. All the cheerful burbling had dropped out of its voice and it now meant business.

'Well, anything I can do,' said Arthur.

'You've done quite enough,' the Nutri-Matic informed him.

It summoned up the ship's computer.

'Hi there!' said the ship's computer.

The Nutri-Matic explained about tea to the ship's computer. The computer boggled, linked logic circuits with the Nutri-Matic and together they lapsed into a grim silence.

Arthur watched and waited for a while, but nothing further happened.

He thumped it, but still nothing happened.

Eventually he gave up and wandered up to the bridge.

In the empty wastes of space, the *Heart of Gold* hung still. Around it blazed the billion pinpricks of the Galaxy. Towards it crept the ugly yellow lump of the Vogon ship.

3

'Does anyone have a kettle?' Arthur asked as he walked on to the bridge, and instantly began to wonder why Trillian was yelling at the computer to talk to her, Ford was thumping it and Zaphod was kicking it, and also why there was a nasty yellow lump on the vision screen.

He put down the empty cup he was carrying and walked over to them.

'Hello?' he said.

At that moment Zaphod flung himself over to the polished marble surface that contained the instruments that controlled the conventional photon drive. They materialized beneath his hands and he flipped over to