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Life, the Universe and Everything

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1

The regular early morning yell of horror was the sound of Arthur Dent waking up and suddenly remembering where he was.

It wasn't just that the cave was cold, it wasn't just that it was damp and smelly. It was the fact that the cave was in the middle of Islington and there wasn't a bus due for two million years.

Time is the worst place, so to speak, to get lost in, as Arthur Dent could testify, having been lost in both time and space a good deal. At least being lost in space kept you busy.

He was stranded in prehistoric Earth as the result of a complex sequence of events which had involved him being alternately blown up and insulted in more bizarre regions of the Galaxy than he had ever dreamt existed, and though life had now turned very, very, very quiet, he was still feeling jumpy.

He hadn't been blown up now for five years.

Since he had hardly seen anyone since he and Ford Prefect had parted company four years previously, he hadn't been insulted in all that time either.

Except just once.

It had happened on a spring evening about two years previously.

He was returning to his cave just a little after dusk when he became aware of lights flashing eerily through the clouds. He turned and stared, with hope suddenly clambering through his heart. Rescue. Escape. The castaway's impossible dream – a ship.

And as he watched, as he stared in wonder and excitement, a long silver ship descended through the

warm evening air, quietly, without fuss, its long legs unlocking in a smooth ballet of technology.

It alighted gently on the ground, and what little hum it had generated died away, as if lulled by the evening calm.

A ramp extended itself.

Light streamed out.

A tall figure appeared silhouetted in the hatchway. It walked down the ramp and stood in front of Arthur.

'You're a jerk, Dent,' it said simply.

It was alien, very alien. It had a peculiar alien tallness, a peculiar alien flattened head, peculiar slitty little alien eyes, extravagantly draped golden robes with a peculiarly alien collar design, and pale grey-green alien skin which had about it that lustrous sheen which most grey-green faces can only acquire with plenty of exercise and very expensive soap.

Arthur boggled at it.

It gazed levelly at him.

Arthur's first sensations of hope and trepidation had instantly been overwhelmed by astonishment, and all sorts of thoughts were battling for the use of his vocal cords at this moment.

'Whh . . . ?' he said.

'Bu . . . hu . . . uh . . .' he added.

'Ru . . . ra . . . wah . . . who?' he managed finally to say and lapsed into a frantic kind of silence. He was feeling the effects of having not said anything to anybody for as long as he could remember.

The alien creature frowned briefly and consulted what appeared to be some species of clipboard which he was holding in his thin and spindly alien hand.

'Arthur Dent?' it said.

Arthur nodded helplessly.

'Arthur *Philip* Dent?' pursued the alien in a kind of efficient yap.

'Er . . . er . . . yes . . . er . . . er,' confirmed Arthur.

'You're a jerk,' repeated the alien, 'a complete asshole.'

'Er . . .'

The creature nodded to itself, made a peculiar alien tick on its clipboard and turned briskly back towards its ship.

'Er . . .' said Arthur desperately, 'er . . .'

'Don't give me that,' snapped the alien. It marched up the ramp, through the hatchway and disappeared into its ship. The ship sealed itself. It started to make a low throbbing hum.

'Er, hey!' shouted Arthur, and started to run helplessly towards it.

'Wait a minute!' he called. 'What is this? What? Wait a minute!'

The ship rose, as if shedding its weight like a cloak to the ground, and hovered briefly. It swept strangely up into the evening sky. It passed up through the clouds, illuminating them briefly, and then was gone, leaving Arthur alone in an immensity of land dancing a helplessly tiny little dance.

'What?' he screamed. 'What? What? Hey, what? Come back here and say that!'

He jumped and danced until his legs trembled, and shouted till his lungs rasped. There was no answer from anyone. There was no one to hear him or speak to him.

The alien ship was already thundering towards the upper reaches of the atmosphere, on its way out into the appalling void which separates the very few things there are in the Universe from each other.

Its occupant, the alien with the expensive complexion,

leaned back in its single seat. His name was Wowbagger the Infinitely Prolonged. He was a man with a purpose. Not a very good purpose, as he would have been the first to admit, but it was at least a purpose and it did at least keep him on the move.

Wowbagger the Infinitely Prolonged was – indeed, is – one of the Universe's very small number of immortal beings.

Those who are born immortal instinctively know how to cope with it, but Wowbagger was not one of them. Indeed he had come to hate them, the load of serene bastards. He had had his immortality inadvertently thrust upon him by an unfortunate accident with an irrational particle accelerator, a liquid lunch and a pair of rubber bands. The precise details of the accident are not important because no one has ever managed to duplicate the exact circumstances under which it happened, and many people have ended up looking very silly, or dead, or both, trying.

Wowbagger closed his eyes in a grim and weary expression, put some light jazz on the ship's stereo, and reflected that he could have made it if it hadn't been for Sunday afternoons, he really could have done.

To begin with it was fun, he had a ball, living dangerously, taking risks, cleaning up on high-yield long-term investments, and just generally outliving the hell out of everybody.

In the end, it was the Sunday afternoons he couldn't cope with, and that terrible listlessness which starts to set in at about 2.55, when you know that you've had all the baths you can usefully have that day, that however hard you stare at any given paragraph in the papers you will never actually read it, or use the revolutionary new pruning technique it describes, and that as you

stare at the clock the hands will move relentlessly on to four o'clock, and you will enter the long dark teatime of the soul.

So things began to pall for him. The merry smiles he used to wear at other people's funerals began to fade. He began to despise the Universe in general and everybody in it in particular.

This was the point at which he conceived his purpose, the thing which would drive him on, and which, as far as he could see, would drive him on for ever. It was this.

He would insult the Universe.

That is, he would insult everybody in it. Individually, personally, one by one, and (this was the thing he really decided to grit his teeth over) in alphabetical order.

When people protested to him, as they sometimes had done, that the plan was not merely misguided but actually impossible because of the number of people being born and dying all the time, he would merely fix them with a steely look and say, 'A man can dream, can't he?'

And so he had started out. He equipped a spaceship that was built to last with a computer capable of handling all the data processing involved in keeping track of the entire population of the known Universe and working out the horrifically complicated routes involved.

His ship fled through the inner orbits of the Sol star system, preparing to slingshot round the sun and fling itself out into interstellar space.

'Computer,' he said.

'Here,' yipped the computer.

'Where next?'

'Computing that.'

Wowbagger gazed for a moment at the fantastic jewellery of the night, the billions of tiny diamond worlds

that dusted the infinite darkness with light. Every one, every single one, was on his itinerary. Most of them he would be going to millions of times over.

He imagined for a moment his itinerary connecting up all the dots in the sky like a child's numbered dots puzzle. He hoped that from some vantage point in the Universe it might be seen to spell a very very rude word.

The computer beeped tunelessly to indicate that it had finished its calculations.

'Folfanga,' it said. It beeped.

'Fourth world of the Folfanga system,' it continued. It beeped again.

'Estimated journey time, three weeks,' it continued further. It beeped again.

'There to meet with a small slug,' it beeped, 'of the genus A-Rth-Urp-Hil-Ipdenu.'

'I believe,' it added, after a slight pause during which it beeped, 'that you had decided to call it a brainless prat.'

Wowbagger grunted. He watched the majesty of creation outside his window for a moment or two.

'I think I'll take a nap,' he said, and then added, 'What network areas are we going to be passing through in the next few hours?'

The computer beeped.

'Cosmovid, Thinkpix and Home Brain Box,' it said, and beeped.

'Any movies I haven't seen thirty thousand times already?'

'No.'

'Uh.'

'There's *Angst in Space*. You've only seen that thirty-three thousand five hundred and seventeen times.'

'Wake me for the second reel.'

The computor beeped.

'Sleep well,' it said.

The ship fled on through the night.

Meanwhile, on Earth, it began to pour with rain and Arthur Dent sat in his cave and had one of the most truly rotten evenings of his entire life, thinking of things he could have said to the alien and swatting flies, who also had a rotten evening.

The next day he made himself a pouch out of rabbit skin because he thought it would be useful to keep things in.

2

This morning, two years later than that, was sweet and fragrant as he emerged from the cave he called home until he could think of a better name for it or find a better cave.

Though his throat was sore again from his early morning yell of horror, he was suddenly in a terrifically good mood. He wrapped his dilapidated dressing gown tightly around him and beamed at the bright morning.

The air was clear and scented, the breeze flitted lightly through the tall grass around his cave, the birds were chirruping at each other, the butterflies were flitting about prettily, and the whole of nature seemed to be conspiring to be as pleasant as it possibly could.

It wasn't all the pastoral delights that were making Arthur feel so cheery, though. He had just had a wonderful idea about how to cope with the terrible lonely isolation, the nightmares, the failure of all his attempts at horticulture, and the sheer futurelessness and futility

of his life here on prehistoric Earth, which was that he would go mad.

He beamed again and took a bite out of a rabbit leg left over from his supper. He chewed happily for a few moments and then decided formally to announce his decision.

He stood up straight and looked the world squarely in the fields and hills. To add weight to his words he stuck the rabbit bone in his hair. He spread his arms out wide.

'I will go mad!' he announced.

'Good idea,' said Ford Prefect, clambering down from the rock on which he had been sitting.

Arthur's brain somersaulted. His jaw did press-ups.

'I went mad for a while,' said Ford, 'did me no end of good.'

Arthur's eyes did cartwheels.

'You see,' said Ford, ' – . . .'

'Where have you been?' interrupted Arthur, now that his head had finished working out.

'Around,' said Ford, 'around and about.' He grinned in what he accurately judged to be an infuriating manner. 'I just took my mind off the hook for a bit. I reckoned that if the world wanted me badly enough it would call back. It did.'

He took out of his now terribly battered and dilapidated satchel his Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic.

'At least,' he said, 'I think it did. This has been playing up a bit.' He shook it. 'If it was a false alarm I shall go mad,' he said, 'again.'

Arthur shook his head and sat down. He looked up.

'I thought you must be dead . . .' he said simply.

'So did I for a while,' said Ford, 'and then I decided I was a lemon for a couple of weeks. I kept myself

amused all that time jumping in and out of a gin and tonic.'

Arthur cleared his throat, and then did it again.

'Where,' he said, 'did you . . . ?'

'Find a gin and tonic?' said Ford brightly. 'I found a small lake that thought it was a gin and tonic, and jumped in and out of that. At least, I think it thought it was a gin and tonic.

'I may,' he added with a grin which would have sent sane men scampering into trees, 'have been imagining it.'

He waited for a reaction from Arthur, but Arthur knew better than that.

'Carry on,' he said evenly.

'The point is, you see,' said Ford, 'that there is no point in driving yourself mad trying to stop yourself going mad. You might just as well give in and save your sanity for later.'

'And this is you sane again, is it?' said Arthur. 'I ask merely for information.'

'I went to Africa,' said Ford.

'Yes?'

'Yes.'

'What was that like?'

'And this is your cave, is it?' said Ford.

'Er, yes,' said Arthur. He felt very strange. After nearly four years of total isolation he was so pleased and relieved to see Ford that he could almost cry. Ford was, on the other hand, an almost immediately annoying person.

'Very nice,' said Ford, in reference to Arthur's cave. 'You must hate it.'

Arthur didn't bother to reply.

'Africa was very interesting,' said Ford, 'I behaved very oddly there.'

He gazed thoughtfully into the distance.

'I took up being cruel to animals,' he said airily. 'But only,' he added, 'as a hobby.'

'Oh yes,' said Arthur, warily.

'Yes,' Ford assured him. 'I won't disturb you with the details because they would—'

'What?'

'Disturb you. But you may be interested to know that I am singlehandedly responsible for the evolved shape of the animal you came to know in later centuries as a giraffe. And I tried to learn to fly. Do you believe me?'

'Tell me,' said Arthur.

'I'll tell you later. I'll just mention that the *Guide* says . . .'

'The . . .?'

'*Guide. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.* You remember?'

'Yes. I remember throwing it in the river.'

'Yes,' said Ford, 'but I fished it out.'

'You didn't tell me.'

'I didn't want you to throw it in again.'

'Fair enough,' admitted Arthur. 'It says?'

'What?'

'The *Guide* says?'

'The *Guide* says that there is an art to flying,' said Ford, 'or rather a knack. The knack lies in learning how to throw yourself at the ground and miss.' He smiled weakly. He pointed at the knees of his trousers and held his arms up to show the elbows. They were all torn and worn through.

'I haven't done very well so far,' he said. He stuck out his hand. 'I'm very glad to see you again, Arthur,' he added.

Arthur shook his head in a sudden access of emotion and bewilderment.

'I haven't seen anyone for years,' he said, 'not anyone. I can hardly even remember how to speak. I keep forgetting words. I practise, you see. I practise by talking to . . . talking to . . . what are those things people think you're mad if you talk to? Like George the Third.'

'Kings?' suggested Ford.

'No, no,' said Arthur. 'The things he used to talk to. We're surrounded by them, for Heaven's sake. I've planted hundreds myself. They all died. Trees! I practise by talking to trees. What's that for?'

Ford still had his hand stuck out. Arthur looked at it with incomprehension.

'Shake,' prompted Ford.

Arthur did, nervously at first, as if it might turn out to be a fish. Then he grasped it vigorously with both hands in an overwhelming flood of relief. He shook it and shook it.

After a while Ford found it necessary to disengage. They climbed to the top of a nearby outcrop of rock and surveyed the scene around them.

'What happened to the Golgafrinchans?' asked Ford.

Arthur shrugged.

'A lot of them didn't make it through the winter three years ago,' he said, 'and the few who remained in the spring said they needed a holiday and set off on a raft. History says that they must have survived . . .'

'Huh,' said Ford, 'well well.' He stuck his hands on his hips and looked round again at the empty world. Suddenly, there was about Ford a sense of energy and purpose.

'We're going,' he said excitedly, and shivered with energy.

'Where? How?' said Arthur.

'I don't know,' said Ford, 'but I just feel that the time is right. Things are going to happen. We're on our way.'

He lowered his voice to a whisper.

'I have detected,' he said, 'disturbances in the wash.'

He gazed keenly into the distance and looked as if he would quite like the wind to blow his hair back dramatically at that point, but the wind was busy fooling around with some leaves a little way off.

Arthur asked him to repeat what he had just said because he hadn't quite taken his meaning. Ford repeated it.

'The wash?' said Arthur.

'The space–time wash,' said Ford, and as the wind blew briefly past at that moment, he bared his teeth into it.

Arthur nodded, and then cleared his throat.

'Are we talking about,' he asked cautiously, 'some sort of Vogon laundromat, or what are we talking about?'

'Eddies,' said Ford, 'in the space–time continuum.'

'Ah,' nodded Arthur, 'is he? Is he?' He pushed his hands into the pocket of his dressing gown and looked knowledgeably into the distance.

'What?' said Ford.

'Er, who,' said Arthur, 'is Eddy, then, exactly, then?'

Ford looked angrily at him.

'Will you listen?' he snapped.

'I have been listening,' said Arthur, 'but I'm not sure it's helped.'

Ford grasped him by the lapels of his dressing gown and spoke to him as slowly and distinctly and patiently as if he were somebody from a telephone company accounts department.

'There seem . . .' he said, 'to be some pools . . .' he said, 'of instability . . .' he said, 'in the fabric . . .' he said . . .

Arthur looked foolishly at the cloth of his dressing

gown where Ford was holding it. Ford swept on before Arthur could turn the foolish look into a foolish remark.

'. . . in the fabric of space–time,' he said.

'Ah, that,' said Arthur.

'Yes, that,' confirmed Ford.

They stood there alone on a hill on prehistoric Earth and stared each other resolutely in the face.

'And it's done what?' said Arthur.

'It,' said Ford, 'has developed pools of instability.'

'Has it?' said Arthur, his eyes not wavering for a moment.

'It has,' said Ford with a similar degree of occular immobility.

'Good,' said Arthur.

'See?' said Ford.

'No,' said Arthur.

There was a quiet pause.

'The difficulty with this conversation,' said Arthur after a sort of pondering look had crawled slowly across his face like a mountaineer negotiating a tricky outcrop, 'is that it's very different from most of the ones I've had of late. Which, as I explained, have mostly been with trees. They weren't like this. Except perhaps some of the ones I've had with elms which sometimes get a bit bogged down.'

'Arthur,' said Ford.

'Hello? Yes?' said Arthur.

'Just believe everything I tell you, and it will all be very very simple.'

'Ah, well I'm not sure I believe that.'

They sat down and composed their thoughts.

Ford got out his Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic. It was making vague humming noises and a tiny light on it was flickering faintly.

'Flat battery?' said Arthur.

'No,' said Ford, 'there is a moving disturbance in the fabric of space–time, an eddy, a pool of instability, and it's somewhere in our vicinity.'

'Where?'

Ford moved the device in a slow, lightly bobbing semi-circle. Suddenly the light flashed.

'There!' said Ford, shooting out his arm. 'There, behind that sofa!'

Arthur looked. Much to his surprise, there was a velvet-paisley-covered Chesterfield sofa in the field in front of them. He boggled intelligently at it. Shrewd questions sprang into his mind.

'Why,' he said, 'is there a sofa in that field?'

'I told you!' shouted Ford, leaping to his feet. 'Eddies in the space–time continuum!'

'And this is his sofa, is it?' asked Arthur, struggling to his feet and, he hoped, though not very optimistically, to his senses.

'Arthur!' shouted Ford at him. 'That sofa is there because of the space–time instability I've been trying to get your terminally softened brain to get to grips with. It's been washed up out of the continuum, it's space–time jetsam, it doesn't matter what it is, we've got to catch it, it's our only way out of here!'

He scrambled rapidly down the rocky outcrop and made off across the field.

'Catch it?' muttered Arthur, then frowned in bemusement as he saw that the Chesterfield was lazily bobbing and wafting away across the grass.

With a whoop of utterly unexpected delight he leapt down the rock and plunged off in hectic pursuit of Ford Prefect and the irrational piece of furniture.

They careered wildly through the grass, leaping, laughing, shouting instructions to each other to head

the thing off this way or that way. The sun shone dreamily on the swaying grass, tiny field animals scattered crazily in their wake.

Arthur felt happy. He was terribly pleased that the day was for once working out so much according to plan. Only twenty minutes ago he had decided he would go mad, and now here he was already chasing a sofa across the fields of prehistoric Earth.

The sofa bobbed this way and that and seemed simultaneously to be as solid as the trees as it drifted past some of them and hazy as a billowing dream as it floated like a ghost through others.

Ford and Arthur pounded chaotically after it, but it dodged and weaved as if following its own complex mathematical topography, which it was. Still they pursued, still it danced and spun, and suddenly turned and dipped as if crossing the lip of a catastrophe graph, and they were practically on top of it. With a heave and a shout they leapt on it, the sun winked out, they fell through a sickening nothingness, and emerged unexpectedly in the middle of the pitch at Lord's Cricket Ground, St John's Wood, London, towards the end of the last Test Match of the Australian Series in the year 198—, with England needing only twenty-eight runs to win.

3

Important facts from Galactic history, number one:
(Reproduced from the *Siderial Daily Mentioner's Book of Popular Galactic History*.)