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Mostly Harmless

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Anything that happens, happens.

Anything that, in happening, causes something
else to happen, causes something else to happen.

Anything that, in happening, causes
itself to happen again, happens again.

It doesn't necessarily do it
in chronological order, though.

1

The history of the Galaxy has got a little muddled, for a number of reasons: partly because those who are trying to keep track of it have got a little muddled, but also because some very muddling things have been happening anyway.

One of the problems has to do with the speed of light and the difficulties involved in trying to exceed it. You can't. Nothing travels faster than the speed of light with the possible exception of bad news, which obeys its own special laws. The Hingefreel people of Arkintoofle Minor did try to build spaceships that were powered by bad news but they didn't work particularly well and were so extremely unwelcome whenever they arrived anywhere that there wasn't really any point in being there.

So, by and large, the peoples of the Galaxy tended to languish in their own local muddles and the history of the Galaxy itself was, for a long time, largely cosmological.

Which is not to say that people weren't trying. They tried sending off fleets of spaceships to do battle or business in distant parts, but these usually took thousands of years to get anywhere. By the time they eventually arrived, other forms of travel had been discovered which made use of hyperspace to circumvent the speed of light, so that whatever battles it was that the slower-than-light fleets had been sent to fight had already been taken care of centuries earlier by the time they actually got there.

This didn't, of course, deter their crews from wanting to fight the battles anyway. They were trained, they were ready, they'd had a couple of thousand years'

sleep, they'd come a long way to do a tough job and by Zarquon they were going to do it.

This was when the first major muddles of Galactic history set in, with battles continually re-erupting centuries after the issues they had been fought over had supposedly been settled. However, these muddles were as nothing to the ones which historians had to try and unravel once time-travel was discovered and battles started *pre*-erupting hundreds of years before the issues even arose. When the Infinite Improbability Drive arrived and whole planets started turning unexpectedly into banana fruitcake, the great history faculty of the University of Maximegalon finally gave up, closed itself down and surrendered its buildings to the rapidly growing joint faculty of Divinity and Water Polo, which had been after them for years.

Which is all very well, of course, but it almost certainly means that no one will ever know for sure where, for instance, the Grebulons came from, or exactly what it was they wanted. And this is a pity, because if anybody had known anything about them, it is just possible that a most terrible catastrophe would have been averted – or at least would have had to find a different way to happen.

Click, hum.

The huge grey Grebulon reconnaissance ship moved silently through the black void. It was travelling at fabulous, breathtaking speed, yet appeared, against the glimmering background of a billion distant stars, to be moving not at all. It was just one dark speck frozen against an infinite granularity of brilliant night.

On board the ship, everything was as it had been for millennia, deeply dark and silent.

Click, hum.

At least, almost everything.

Click, click, hum.

Click, hum, click, hum, click, hum.

Click, click, click, click, click, hum.

Hmmm.

A low-level supervising program woke up a slightly higher level supervising program deep in the ship's semi-somnolent cyberbrain and reported to it that whenever it went click all it got was a hum.

The higher level supervising program asked it what it was supposed to get, and the low-level supervising program said that it couldn't remember exactly, but thought it was probably more of a sort of distant satisfied sigh, wasn't it? It didn't know what this hum was. Click, hum, click, hum. That was all it was getting.

The higher level supervising program considered this and didn't like it. It asked the low-level supervising program what exactly it was supervising and the low-level supervising program said it couldn't remember that either, just that it was something that was meant to go click, sigh every ten years or so, which usually happened without fail. It had tried to consult its error look-up table but couldn't find it, which was why it had alerted the higher level supervising program to the problem.

The higher level supervising program went to consult one of its own look-up tables to find out what the low-level supervising program was meant to be supervising.

It couldn't find the look-up table.

Odd.

It looked again. All it got was an error message. It tried to look up the error message in its error message look-up table and couldn't find that either. It allowed a couple of nanoseconds to go by while it went through all this again. Then it woke up its sector function supervisor.

The sector function supervisor hit immediate problems. It called its supervising agent which hit problems too. Within a few millionths of a second virtual circuits that had lain dormant, some for years, some for centuries, were flaring into life throughout the ship. Something, somewhere, had gone terribly wrong, but none of the supervising programs could tell what it was. At every level, vital instructions were missing, and the instructions about what to do in the event of discovering that vital instructions were missing, were also missing.

Small modules of software – agents – surged through the logical pathways, grouping, consulting, re-grouping. They quickly established that the ship's memory, all the way back to its central mission module, was in tatters. No amount of interrogation could determine what it was that had happened. Even the central mission module itself seemed to be damaged.

This made the whole problem very simple to deal with. Replace the central mission module. There was another one, a backup, an exact duplicate of the original. It had to be physically replaced because, for safety reasons, there was no link whatsoever between the original and its backup. Once the central mission module was replaced it could itself supervise the reconstruction of the rest of the system in every detail, and all would be well.

Robots were instructed to bring the backup central mission module from the shielded strong room, where they guarded it, to the ship's logic chamber for installation.

This involved the lengthy exchange of emergency codes and protocols as the robots interrogated the agents as to the authenticity of the instructions. At last the robots were satisfied that all procedures were correct. They unpacked the backup central mission module

from its storage housing, carried it out of the storage chamber, fell out of the ship and went spinning off into the void.

This provided the first major clue as to what it was that was wrong.

Further investigation quickly established what it was that had happened. A meteorite had knocked a large hole in the ship. The ship had not previously detected this because the meteorite had neatly knocked out that part of the ship's processing equipment which was supposed to detect if the ship had been hit by a meteorite.

The first thing to do was to try to seal up the hole. This turned out to be impossible, because the ship's sensors couldn't see that there was a hole, and the supervisors which should have said that the sensors weren't working properly weren't working properly and kept saying that the sensors were fine. The ship could only deduce the existence of the hole from the fact that the robots had clearly fallen out of it, taking its spare brain, which would have enabled it to see the hole, with them.

The ship tried to think intelligently about this, failed, and then blanked out completely for a bit. It didn't realize it had blanked out, of course, because it had blanked out. It was merely surprised to see the stars jump. After the third time the stars jumped the ship finally realized that it must be blanking out, and that it was time to take some serious decisions.

It relaxed.

Then it realized it hadn't actually taken the serious decisions yet and panicked. It blanked out again for a bit. When it awoke again it sealed all the bulkheads around where it knew the unseen hole must be.

It clearly hadn't got to its destination yet, it thought,

fitfully, but since it no longer had the faintest idea where its destination was or how to reach it, there seemed to be little point in continuing. It consulted what tiny scraps of instructions it could reconstruct from the tatters of its central mission module.

'Your !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! year mission is to !!!!! !!!!! !!!!!, !!!!!, !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! !!!!!, land !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! a safe distance !!!!! !!!!! monitor it. !!!!! !!!!! !!!!! . . .'

All of the rest was complete garbage.

Before it blanked out for good the ship would have to pass on those instructions, such as they were, to its more primitive subsidiary systems.

It must also revive all of its crew.

There was another problem. While the crew was in hibernation, the minds of all of its members, their memories, their identities and their understanding of what they had come to do, had all been transferred into the ship's central mission module for safe keeping. The crew would not have the faintest idea of who they were or what they were doing there. Oh well.

Just before it blanked out for the final time, the ship realized that its engines were beginning to give out too.

The ship and its revived and confused crew coasted on under the control of its subsidiary automatic systems, which simply looked to land wherever they could find to land and monitor whatever they could find to monitor.

As far as finding something to land on was concerned, they didn't do very well. The planet they found was desolately cold and lonely, so achingly far from the sun that should warm it, that it took all of the Envir-O-Form machinery and LifeSupport-O-Systems they carried with them to render it, or at least enough parts of it, habitable. There were better planets nearer in, but the ship's Strateej-O-Mat was obviously locked into Lurk

mode and chose the most distant and unobtrusive planet and, furthermore, would not be gainsaid by anybody other than the ship's Chief Strategic Officer. Since everybody on the ship had lost their minds no one knew who the Chief Strategic Officer was or, even if he could have been identified, how he was supposed to go about gainsaying the ship's Strateej-O-Mat.

As far as finding something to monitor was concerned, though, they hit solid gold.

2

One of the extraordinary things about life is the sort of places it's prepared to put up with living. Anywhere it can get some kind of a grip, whether it's the intoxicating seas of Santraginus V, where the fish never seem to care whatever the heck kind of direction they swim in, the fire storms of Frastra where, they say, life begins at 40,000 degrees, or just burrowing around in the lower intestine of a rat for the sheer unadulterated hell of it, life will always find a way of hanging on in somewhere.

It will even live in New York, though it's hard to know why. In the winter time the temperature falls well below the legal minimum, or rather it would do if anybody had the common sense to set a legal minimum. The last time anybody made a list of the top hundred character attributes of New Yorkers, common sense snuck in at number 79.

In the summer it's too darn hot. It's one thing to be the sort of life form that thrives on heat and finds, as the Frastrans do, that the temperature range between 40,000 and 40,004 is very equable, but it's quite another

to be the sort of animal that has to wrap itself up in lots of other animals at one point in your planet's orbit, and then find, half an orbit later, that your skin's bubbling.

Spring is over-rated. A lot of the inhabitants of New York will honk on mightily about the pleasures of spring, but if they actually knew the first thing about the pleasures of spring they would know of at least five thousand nine hundred and eighty-three better places to spend it than New York, and that's just on the same latitude.

Fall, though, is the worst. Few things are worse than fall in New York. Some of the things that live in the lower intestines of rats would disagree, but most of the things that live in the lower intestines of rats are highly disagreeable anyway, so their opinion can and should be discounted. When it's fall in New York, the air smells as if someone's been frying goats in it, and if you are keen to breathe, the best plan is to open a window and stick your head in a building.

Tricia McMillan loved New York. She kept on telling herself this over and over again. The Upper West Side. Yeah. Mid Town. Hey, great retail. SoHo. The East Village. Clothes. Books. Sushi. Italian. Delis. Yo.

Movies. Yo also. Tricia had just been to see Woody Allen's new movie, which was all about the angst of being neurotic in New York. He had made one or two other movies that had explored the same theme, and Tricia wondered if he had ever considered moving, but heard that he had set his face against the idea. So: more movies, she guessed.

Tricia loved New York because loving New York was a good career move. It was a good retail move, a good cuisine move, not a good taxi move or a great quality of pavement move, but definitely a career move that ranked amongst the highest and the best. Tricia was a TV anchor person, and New York was where most of

the world's TV was anchored. Tricia's TV anchoring had been done exclusively in Britain up to that point: regional news, then breakfast news, early evening news. She would have been called, if the language allowed, a rapidly rising anchor, but . . . hey, this is television, what does it matter? She was a rapidly rising anchor. She had what it took: great hair, a profound understanding of strategic lip gloss, the intelligence to understand the world and a tiny secret interior deadness which meant she didn't care. Everybody has their moment of great opportunity in life. If you happen to miss the one you care about, then everything else in life becomes eerily easy.

Tricia had only ever missed one opportunity. These days it didn't even make her tremble quite so much as it used to to think about it. She guessed it was that bit of her that had gone dead.

NBS needed a new anchor. Mo Minetti was leaving the *US/AM* breakfast show to have a baby. She had been offered a mind-bubbling amount of money to have it on the show, but she had declined, unexpectedly, on grounds of personal privacy and taste. Teams of NBS lawyers had sieved through her contract to see if these constituted legitimate grounds, but in the end, reluctantly, they had to let her go. This was, for them, particularly galling because normally 'reluctantly letting someone go' was an expression that had its boot on quite another foot.

The word was out that maybe, just maybe, a British accent would fit. The hair, the skin tone and the bridgework would have to be up to American network standards, but there had been a lot of British accents up there thanking their mothers for their Oscars, a lot of British accents singing on Broadway, and some unusually big audiences tuning in to British accents in wigs on Masterpiece Theatre. British accents were

telling jokes on David Letterman and Jay Leno. Nobody understood the jokes but they were really responding to the accents, so maybe it was time, just maybe. A British accent on *US/AM*. Well, hell.

That was why Tricia was here. This was why loving New York was a great career move.

It wasn't, of course, the stated reason. Her TV company back in the UK would hardly have stumped up the air fare and hotel bill for her to go job hunting in Manhattan. Since she was chasing something like ten times her present salary, they might have felt that she could have forked out her own expenses, but she'd found a story, found a pretext, kept very quiet about anything ulterior, and they'd stumped up for the trip. A business class ticket, of course, but her face was known and she'd smiled herself an upgrade. The right moves had got her a nice room at the Brentwood and here she was, wondering what to do next.

The word on the street was one thing, making contact was another. She had a couple of names, a couple of numbers, but all it took was being put on indeterminate hold a couple of times and she was back at square one. She'd put out feelers, left messages, but so far none had been returned. The actual job she had come to do she had done in a morning; the imagined job she was after was only shimmering tantalizingly on an unreachable horizon.

Shit.

She caught a cab from the movie theatre back to the Brentwood. The cab couldn't get close to the kerb because a big stretch limo was hogging all the available space and she had to squeeze her way past it. She walked out of the fetid, goat-frying air and into the blessed cool of the lobby. The fine cotton of her blouse was sticking like grime to her skin. Her hair felt as if she'd bought it at a fairground on a stick. At the front

desk she asked if there were any messages, grimly expecting none. There was one.

Oh . . .

Good.

It had worked. She had gone out to the movie specifically in order to make the phone ring. She couldn't bear sitting in a hotel room waiting.

She wondered. Should she open the message down here? Her clothes were itching and she longed to take them all off and just lie on the bed. She had turned the air conditioning way down to its bottom temperature setting, way up to its top fan setting. What she wanted more than anything else in the world at the moment was goose pimples. Then a hot shower, then a cool one, then lying on a towel, on the bed again, drying in the air conditioning. Then reading the message. Maybe more goose pimples. Maybe all sorts of things.

No. What she wanted more than anything else in the world was a job in American television at ten times her current salary. More than anything else in the world. In the world. What she wanted more than anything else at all was no longer a live issue.

She sat on a chair in the lobby, under a kentia palm, and opened the little cellophane-windowed envelope.

'Please call,' it said. 'Not happy,' and gave a number. The name was Gail Andrews.

Gail Andrews.

It wasn't a name she was expecting. It caught her unawares. She recognized it, but couldn't immediately say why. Was she Andy Martin's secretary? Hilary Bass's assistant? Martin and Bass were the two major contact calls she had made, or tried to make, at NBS. And what did 'Not happy' mean?

'Not *happy*?'

She was completely bewildered. Was this Woody Allen trying to contact her under an assumed name? It

was a 212 area code number. So it was someone in New York. Who was not happy. Well, that narrowed it down a bit, didn't it?

She went back to the receptionist at the desk.

'I have a problem with this message you just gave me,' she said. 'Someone I don't know has tried to call me and says she's not happy.'

The receptionist peered at the note with a frown.

'Do you know this person?' he said.

'No,' Tricia said.

'Hmmm,' said the receptionist. 'Sounds like she's not happy about something.'

'Yes,' said Tricia.

'Looks like there's a name here,' said the receptionist. 'Gail Andrews. Do you know anybody of that name?'

'No,' said Tricia.

'Any idea what she's unhappy about?'

'No,' said Tricia.

'Have you called the number? There's a number here.'

'No,' said Tricia, 'you only just gave me the note. I'm just trying to get some more information before I ring back. Perhaps I could talk to the person who took the call?'

'Hmmm,' said the receptionist, scrutinizing the note carefully. 'I don't think we have anybody called Gail Andrews here.'

'No, I realize that,' said Tricia. 'I just—'

'I'm Gail Andrews.'

The voice came from behind Tricia. She turned round.

'I'm sorry?'

'I'm Gail Andrews. You interviewed me this morning.'

'Oh. Oh good heavens yes,' said Tricia, slightly flustered.

'I left the message for you a few hours ago. I hadn't heard so I came by. I didn't want to miss you.'

'Oh. No. Of course,' said Tricia, trying hard to get up to speed.

'I don't know about this,' said the receptionist, for whom speed was not an issue. 'Would you like me to try this number for you now?'

'No, that'll be fine, thanks,' said Tricia. 'I can handle it now.'

'I can call this room number here for you if that'll help,' said the receptionist, peering at the note again.

'No, that won't be necessary, thanks,' said Tricia. 'That's my own room number. I'm the one the message was for. I think we've sorted this out now.'

'You have a nice day now,' said the receptionist.

Tricia didn't particularly want to have a nice day. She was busy.

She also didn't want to talk to Gail Andrews. She had a very strict cut-off point as far as fraternizing with the Christians was concerned. Her colleagues called her interview subjects Christians and would often cross themselves when they saw one walking innocently into the studio to face Tricia, particularly if Tricia was smiling warmly and showing her teeth.

She turned and smiled frostily, wondering what to do.

Gail Andrews was a well-groomed woman in her mid-forties. Her clothes fell within the boundaries defined by expensive good taste, but were definitely huddled up at the floatier end of those boundaries. She was an astrologer – a famous and, if rumour were true, influential astrologer, having allegedly influenced a number of decisions made by the late President Hudson, including everything from which flavour of cream whip to have on which day of the week, to whether or not to bomb Damascus.

Tricia had savaged her more than somewhat. Not on the grounds of whether or not the stories about the

President were true, that was old hat now. At the time Ms Andrews had emphatically denied advising President Hudson on anything other than personal, spiritual or dietary matters, which did not, apparently include the bombing of Damascus. ('NOTHING PERSONAL, DAMASCUS!' the tabloids had hooted at the time.)

No, this was a neat topical little angle that Tricia had come up with about the whole issue of astrology itself. Ms Andrews had not been entirely ready for it. Tricia, on the other hand, was not entirely ready for a re-match in the hotel lobby. What to do?

'I can wait for you in the bar, if you need a few minutes,' said Gail Andrews. 'But I would like to talk to you, and I'm leaving the city tonight.'

She seemed to be slightly anxious about something rather than aggrieved or irate.

'OK,' said Tricia. 'Give me ten minutes.'

She went up to her room. Apart from anything else, she had so little faith in the ability of the guy on the message desk at reception to deal with anything as complicated as a message that she wanted to be doubly certain that there wasn't a note under the door. It wouldn't be the first time that messages at the desk and messages under the door had been completely at odds with each other.

There wasn't one.

The message light on the phone was flashing, though.

She hit the message button and got the hotel operator.

'You have a message from Gary Andress,' said the operator.

'Yes?' said Tricia. An unfamiliar name. 'What does it say.'

'Not hippy,' said the operator.

'Not *what*?' said Tricia.

'Hippy. What it says. Guy says he's not a hippy. I

guess he wanted you to know that. You want the number?'

As she started to dictate the number Tricia suddenly realized that this was just a garbled version of the message she had already had.

'OK, OK,' she said. 'Are there any other messages for me?'

'Room number?'

Tricia couldn't work out why the operator should suddenly ask for her number this late in the conversation, but gave it to her anyway.

'Name?'

'McMillan, Tricia McMillan.' Tricia spelt it, patiently.

'Not Mr MacManus?'

'No.'

'No more messages for you.' Click.

Tricia sighed and dialled again. This time she gave her name and room number all over again, up front. The operator showed not the slightest glimmer of recognition that they had been speaking less than ten seconds ago.

'I'm going to be in the bar,' Tricia explained. 'In the bar. If a phone call comes through for me, please would you put it through to me in the bar?'

'Name?'

They went through it all a couple more times till Tricia was certain that everything that possibly could be clear was as clear as it possibly could be.

She showered, put on fresh clothes and retouched her makeup with the speed of a professional, and, looking at her bed with a sigh, left the room again.

She had half a mind just to sneak off and hide.

No. Not really.

She had a look at herself in the mirror in the elevator lobby while she was waiting. She looked cool and in

charge, and if she could fool herself she could fool anybody.

She was just going to have to tough it out with Gail Andrews. OK, she had given her a hard time. Sorry but that's the game we're all in – that sort of thing. Ms Andrews had agreed to do the interview because she had a new book out and TV exposure was free publicity. But there's no such thing as a free launch. No, she edited that line out again.

What had happened was this:

Last week astronomers had announced that they had at last discovered a tenth planet, out beyond the orbit of Pluto. They had been searching for it for years, guided by certain orbital anomalies in the outer planets, and now they'd found it and they were all terribly pleased, and everyone was terribly happy for them and so on. The planet was named Persephone, but rapidly nicknamed Rupert after some astronomer's parrot – there was some tediously heart-warming story attached to this – and that was all very wonderful and lovely.

Tricia had followed the story with, for various reasons, considerable interest.

Then, while she had been casting around for a good excuse to go to New York at her TV company's expense she had happened to notice a press release about Gail Andrews, and her new book, *You and Your Planets*.

Gail Andrews was not exactly a household name, but the moment you mentioned President Hudson, cream whips and the amputation of Damascus (the world had moved on from surgical strikes. The official term had in fact been 'Damascectomy', meaning the 'taking out' of Damascus), everyone remembered who you meant.

Tricia saw an angle here which she quickly sold to her producer.

Surely the notion that great lumps of rock whirling in space knew something about your day that you didn't

must take a bit of a knock from the fact that there was suddenly a new lump of rock out there that nobody had known about before.

That must throw a few calculations out, mustn't it?

What about all those star charts and planetary motions and so? We all knew (apparently) what happened when Neptune was in Virgo, and so on, but what about when Rupert was rising? Wouldn't the whole of astrology have to be rethought? Wouldn't now perhaps be a good time to own up that it was all just a load of hogwash and instead take up pig-farming, the principles of which were founded on some kind of rational basis? If we'd known about Rupert three years ago, might President Hudson have been eating the boysenberry flavour on Thursday rather than Friday? Might Damascus still be standing? That sort of thing.

Gail Andrews had taken it all reasonably well. She was just starting to recover from the initial onslaught when she made the rather serious mistake of trying to shake Tricia off by talking smoothly about diurnal arcs, right ascensions and some of the more abstruse areas of three-dimensional trigonometry.

To her shock she discovered that everything she delivered to Tricia came right back at her with more spin on it than she could cope with. Nobody had warned Gail that being a TV bimbo was, for Tricia, her second stab at a role in life. Behind her Chanel lip gloss, her *coupe sauvage* and her crystal blue contact lenses lay a brain that had acquired for itself, in an earlier, abandoned phase of her life, a first-class degree in mathematics and a doctorate in astrophysics.

As she was getting into the elevator Tricia, slightly preoccupied, realized she had left her bag in her room and wondered whether to duck back out and get it. No. It was probably safer where it was and there wasn't

anything she particularly needed in it. She let the door close behind her.

Besides, she told herself, taking a deep breath, if life had taught her anything it was this:

Never go back for your bag.

As the elevator went down she stared up at the ceiling in a rather intent way. Anyone who didn't know Tricia McMillan better would have said that that was exactly the way people sometimes stared upwards when they were trying to hold back tears. She must have been staring at the tiny security video camera mounted up in the corner.

She marched rather briskly out of the elevator a minute later, and went up to the reception desk again.

'Now, I'm going to write this out,' she said, 'because I don't want anything to go wrong.'

She wrote her name in large letters on a piece of paper, then her room number, then 'IN THE BAR' and gave it to the receptionist, who looked at it.

'That's in case there's a message for me. OK?'

The receptionist continued to look at it.

'You want me to see if she's in her room?' he said.

Two minutes later, Tricia swivelled into the bar seat next to Gail Andrews, who was sitting in front of a glass of white wine.

'You struck me as the sort of person who preferred to sit up at the bar rather than demurely at a table,' she said.

This was true, and caught Tricia a little by surprise.

'Vodka?' said Gail.

'Yes,' said Tricia, suspiciously. She just stopped herself asking, 'How did you know?' but Gail answered anyway.

'I asked the barman,' she said, with a kindly smile.

The barman had her vodka ready for her and slid it charmingly across the glossy mahogany.

'Thank you,' said Tricia, stirring it sharply.

She didn't know quite what to make out of all this sudden niceness and was determined not to be wrong-footed by it. People in New York were not nice to each other without reason.

'Ms Andrews,' she said, firmly, 'I'm sorry that you're not happy. I know you probably feel I was a bit rough with you this morning, but astrology is, after all, just popular entertainment, which is fine. It's part of show-biz and it's a part that you have done well out of and good luck to you. It's fun. It's not a science, though, and it shouldn't be mistaken for one. I think that's something we both managed to demonstrate very successfully together this morning, while at the same time generating some popular entertainment, which is what we both do for a living. I'm sorry if you have a problem with that.'

'I'm perfectly happy,' said Gail Andrews.

'Oh,' said Tricia, not quite certain what to make of this. 'It said in your message that you were not happy.'

'No,' said Gail Andrews. 'I said in my message that I thought *you* were not happy, and I was just wondering why.'

Tricia felt as if she had been kicked in the back of the head. She blinked.

'*What?*' she said quietly.

'To do with the stars. You seemed very angry and unhappy about something to do with stars and planets when we were having our discussion, and it's been bothering me, which is why I came to see if you were all right.'

Tricia stared at her. 'Ms Andrews—' she started, and

then realized that the way she had said it sounded exactly angry and unhappy and rather undermined the protest she had been trying to make.

'Please call me Gail, if that's OK.'

Tricia just looked bewildered.

'*I* know that astrology isn't a science,' said Gail. 'Of course it isn't. It's just an arbitrary set of rules like chess or tennis or, what's that strange thing you British play?'

'Er, cricket? Self-loathing?'

'Parliamentary democracy. The rules just kind of got there. They don't make any kind of sense except in terms of themselves. But when you start to exercise those rules, all sorts of processes start to happen and you start to find out all sorts of stuff about people. In astrology the rules happen to be about stars and planets, but they could be about ducks and drakes for all the difference it would make. It's just a way of thinking about a problem which lets the shape of that problem begin to emerge. The more rules, the tinier the rules, the more arbitrary they are, the better. It's like throwing a handful of fine graphite dust on a piece of paper to see where the hidden indentations are. It lets you see the words that were written on the piece of paper above it that's now been taken away and hidden. The graphite's not important. It's just the means of revealing their indentations. So you see, astrology's nothing to do with astronomy. It's just to do with people thinking about people.

'So when you got so, I don't know, so emotionally *focused* on stars and planets this morning, I began to think, she's not angry about astrology, she really is angry and unhappy about actual stars and planets. People usually only get that unhappy and angry when they've lost something. That's all I could think and I couldn't make any more sense of it than that. So I came to see if you were OK.'

Tricia was stunned.

One part of her brain had already got started on all sorts of stuff. It was busy constructing all sorts of rebuttals to do with how ridiculous newspaper horoscopes were and the sort of statistical tricks they played on people. But gradually it petered out because it realized that the rest of her brain wasn't listening. She had been completely stunned.

She had just been told, by a total stranger, something she'd kept completely secret for seventeen years.

She turned to look at Gail.

'I . . .'

She stopped.

A tiny security camera up behind the bar had turned to follow her movement. This completely flummoxed her. Most people would not have noticed it. It was not designed to be noticed. It was not designed to suggest that nowadays even an expensive and elegant hotel in New York couldn't be sure that its clientele wasn't suddenly going to pull a gun or not wear a tie. But carefully hidden though it was behind the vodka, it couldn't deceive the finely honed instinct of a TV anchor person, which was to know exactly when a camera was turning to look at her.

'Is something wrong?' asked Gail.

'No, I . . . I have to say that you've rather astonished me,' said Tricia. She decided to ignore the security camera. It was just her imagination playing tricks with her because she had television so much on her mind today. It wasn't the first time it had happened. A traffic monitoring camera, she was convinced, had swung round to follow her as she walked past it, and a security camera in Bloomingdales had seemed to make a particular point of watching her trying on hats. She was obviously going dotty. She had even imagined that a bird in Central Park had been peering at her rather intently.

She decided to put it out of her mind and took a sip of her vodka. Someone was walking round the bar asking people if they were Mr MacManus.

'OK,' she said, suddenly blurting it out. 'I don't know how you worked it out, but . . .'

'I didn't work it out, as you put it. I just listened to what you were saying.'

'What I lost, I think, was a whole other life.'

'Everybody does that. Every moment of every day. Every single decision we make, every breath we draw, opens some doors and closes many others. Most of them we don't notice. Some we do. Sounds like you noticed one.'

'Oh yes, I noticed,' said Tricia. 'All right. Here it is. It's very simple. Many years ago I met a guy at a party. He said he was from another planet and did I want to go along with him. I said, yes, OK. It was that kind of party. I said to him to wait while I went to get my bag and then I'd be happy to go off to another planet with him. He said I wouldn't need my bag. I said he obviously came from a very backward planet or he'd know that a woman always needed to take her bag with her. He got a bit impatient, but I wasn't going to be a complete pushover just because he said he was from another planet.

'I went upstairs. Took me a while to find my bag, and then there was someone else in the bathroom. Came down and he was gone.'

Tricia paused.

'And . . .?' said Gail.

'The garden door was open. I went outside. There were lights. Some kind of gleaming thing. I was just in time to see it rise up into the sky, shoot silently up through the clouds and disappear. That was it. End of story. End of one life, beginning of another. But hardly a moment of this life goes by that I don't wonder about

some other me. A me that didn't go back for her bag. I feel like she's out there somewhere and I'm walking in her shadow.'

A member of the hotel staff was now going round the bar asking people if they were Mr Miller. Nobody was.

'You really think this . . . person was from another planet?' asked Gail.

'Oh, certainly. There was the spacecraft. Oh, and also he had two heads.'

'*Two?* Didn't anybody else notice?'

'It was a fancy dress party.'

'I see . . .'

'And he had a bird cage over it, of course. With a cloth over the cage. Pretended he had a parrot. He tapped on the cage and it did a lot of stupid "Pretty Polly" stuff and squawking and so on. Then he pulled the cloth back for a moment and roared with laughter. There was another head in there, laughing along with him. It was a worrying moment, I can tell you.'

'I think you probably did the right thing, dear, don't you?' said Gail.

'No,' said Tricia. 'No, I don't. And I couldn't carry on doing what I was doing either. I was an astrophysicist, you see. You can't be an astrophysicist properly if you've actually met someone from another planet who's got a second head that pretends to be a parrot. You just can't do it. I couldn't, at least.'

'I can see it would be hard. And that's probably why you tend to be a little hard on other people who talk what sounds like complete nonsense.'

'Yes,' said Tricia. 'I expect you're right. I'm sorry.'

'That's OK.'

'You're the first person I've ever told this, by the way.'

'I wondered. You married?'

'Er, no. So hard to tell these days, isn't it? But you're

right to ask because that was probably the reason. I came very close a few times, mostly because I wanted to have a kid. But every guy ended up asking why I was constantly looking over his shoulder. What do you tell someone? At one point I even thought I might just go to a sperm bank and take pot luck. Have somebody's child at random.'

'You can't seriously do that, can you?'

Tricia laughed. 'Probably not. I never quite went and found out for real. Never quite did it. Story of my life. Never quite did the real thing. That's why I'm in television, I guess. Nothing is real.'

'Excuse me, lady, your name Tricia McMillan?'

Tricia looked round in surprise. There was a man standing there in a chauffeur's hat.

'Yes,' she said, instantly pulling herself back together again.

'Lady, I been looking for you for about an hour. Hotel said they didn't have anybody of that name, but I checked back with Mr Martin's office and they said that this was definitely where you staying. So I ask again, they still say they never heard of you, so I get them to page you anyway and they can't find you. In the end I get the office to fax a picture of you through to the car and have a look myself.'

He looked at his watch.

'May be a bit late now, but do you want to go anyway?'

Tricia was stunned.

'Mr Martin? You mean Andy Martin at NBS?'

'That's correct, lady. Screen test for *US/AM*.'

Tricia shot up out of her seat. She couldn't even bear to think of all the messages she'd heard for Mr MacManus and Mr Miller.

'Only we have to hurry,' said the chauffeur. 'As I heard it, Mr Martin thinks it might be worth trying a

British accent. His boss at the network is dead against the idea. That's Mr Zwingler, and I happen to know he's flying out to the coast this evening because I'm the one has to pick him up and take him to the airport.'

'OK,' said Tricia, 'I'm ready. Let's go.'

'OK, lady. It's the big limo out the front.'

Tricia turned back to Gail. 'I'm sorry,' she said.

'Go! Go!' said Gail. 'And good luck. I've enjoyed meeting you.'

Tricia made to reach for her bag for some cash.

'Damn,' she said. She'd left it upstairs.

'Drinks are on me,' insisted Gail. 'Really. It's been very interesting.'

Tricia sighed.

'Look, I'm really sorry about this morning and . . .'

'Don't say another word. I'm fine. It's only astrology. It's harmless. It's not the end of the world.'

'Thanks.' On an impulse Tricia gave her a hug.

'You got everything?' said the chauffeur. 'You don't want to pick up your bag or anything?'

'If there's one thing that life's taught me,' said Tricia, 'it's never go back for your bag.'

Just a little over an hour later, Tricia sat on one of the pair of beds in her hotel room. For a few minutes she didn't move. She just stared at her bag, which was sitting innocently on top of the other bed.

In her hand was a note from Gail Andrews, saying, 'Don't be too disappointed. Do ring if you want to talk about it. If I were you I'd stay in at home tomorrow night. Get some rest. But don't mind me, and don't worry. It's only astrology. It's not the end of the world. Gail.'

The chauffeur had been dead right. In fact the chauffeur seemed to know more about what was going on inside NBS than any other single person she had

encountered in the organization. Martin had been keen, Zwingler had not. She had had her one shot at proving Martin right and she had blown it.

Oh well. Oh well, oh well, oh well.

Time to go home. Time to phone the airline and see if she could still get the red-eye back to Heathrow tonight. She reached for the big phone directory.

Oh. First things first.

She put down the directory again, picked up her handbag, and took it through to the bathroom. She put it down and took out the small plastic case which held her contact lenses, without which she had been unable properly to read either the script or the autocue.

As she dabbed each tiny plastic cup into her eyes she reflected that if there was one thing life had taught her it was that there are times when you do not go back for your bag and other times when you do. It had yet to teach her to distinguish between the two types of occasion.

3

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy has, in what we laughingly call the past, had a great deal to say on the subject of parallel universes. Very little of this is, however, at all comprehensible to anyone below the level of Advanced God, and since it is now well established that all known gods came into existence a good three millionths of a second after the Universe began rather than, as they usually claimed, the previous week, they already have a great deal of explaining to do as it is, and are therefore not available for comment on matters of deep physics at this time.