Lovereading.co.uk

So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish

Douglas Adams

Published by Pan Books

Extract

All text is copyright © of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Prologue

Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the Western Spiral Arm of the Galaxy lies a small unregarded yellow sun.

Orbiting this at a distance of roughly ninety-two million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.

This planet has – or had – a problem, which was this: most of the people living on it were unhappy for pretty much of the time. Many solutions were suggested for this problem, but most of these were largely concerned with the movements of small green pieces of paper, which is odd because on the whole it wasn't the small green pieces of paper which were unhappy.

And so the problem remained; lots of the people were mean, and most of them were unhappy, even the ones with digital watches.

Many were increasingly of the opinion that they'd all made a big mistake in coming down from the trees in the first place. And some said that even the trees had been a bad move, and that no one should ever have left the oceans.

And then, one Thursday, nearly two thousand years after one man had been nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change, a girl sitting on her own in a small café in Rickmansworth suddenly realized what it was that had been going wrong all this time, and she finally knew how the world could be made a good and happy place. This time it

was right, it would work, and no one would have to get nailed to anything.

Sadly, however, before she could get to a phone to tell anyone about it, the Earth was unexpectedly demolished to make way for a new hyperspace bypass, and so the idea was lost, seemingly for ever.

This is her story.

1

That evening it was dark early, which was normal for the time of year. It was cold and windy, which was normal.

It started to rain, which was particularly normal.

A spacecraft landed, which was not.

There was nobody around to see it except for some spectacularly stupid quadrupeds who hadn't the faintest idea what to make of it, or whether they were meant to make anything of it, or eat it, or what. So they did what they did to everything which was to run away from it and try to hide under each other, which never worked.

It slipped down out of the clouds, seemingly balanced on a single beam of light.

From a distance you would scarcely have noticed it through the lightning and the storm clouds, but seen from close to it was strangely beautiful – a grey craft of elegantly sculpted form: quite small.

Of course, one never has the slightest notion what size or shape different species are going to turn out to be, but if you were to take the findings of the latest Mid-Galactic Census report as any kind of accurate guide to statistical averages you would probably guess that the craft would hold about six people, and you would be right.

You'd probably guessed that anyway. The Census report, like most such surveys, had cost an awful lot of money and didn't tell anybody anything they didn't already know – except that every single person in the Galaxy had 2.4 legs and owned a hyena. Since this was clearly not true the whole thing had eventually to be scrapped.

The craft slid quietly down through the rain, its dim operating lights wrapping it in tasteful rainbows. It hummed very quietly, a hum which became gradually louder and deeper as it approached the ground, and which at an altitude of six inches became a heavy throb.

At last it dropped and was quiet.

A hatchway opened. A short flight of steps unfolded itself.

A light appeared in the opening, a bright light streaming out into the wet night, and shadows moved within.

A tall figure appeared in the light, looked around, flinched, and hurried down the steps, carrying a large shopping bag under its arm.

It turned and gave a single abrupt wave back to the ship. Already the rain was streaming through its hair.

'Thank you,' he called out, 'thank you very—'

He was interrupted by a sharp crack of thunder. He glanced up apprehensively, and in response to a sudden thought quickly started to rummage through the large plastic shopping bag, which he now discovered had a hole in the bottom.

It had large characters printed on the side which read (to anyone who could decipher the Centaurian alphabet) DUTY FREE MEGA-MARKET, PORT BRASTA, ALPHA CENTAURI. BE LIKE THE TWENTY-SECOND ELEPHANT WITH HEATED VALUE IN SPACE – BARK!

'Hold on!' the figure called, waving at the ship.

The steps, which had started to fold themselves back through the hatchway, stopped, re-unfolded, and allowed him back in.

He emerged again a few seconds later carrying a battered and threadbare towel which he shoved into the bag.

He waved again, hoisted the bag under his arm, and started to run for the shelter of some trees as, behind him, the spacecraft had already begun its ascent.

Lightning flitted through the sky and made the figure pause for a moment, and then hurry onwards, revising his path to give the trees a wide berth. He moved swiftly across the ground, slipping here and there, hunching himself against the rain which was falling now with ever-increasing concentration, as if being pulled from the sky.

His feet sloshed through the mud. Thunder grumbled over the hills. He pointlessly wiped the rain off his face and stumbled on.

More lights.

Not lightning this time, but more diffused and dimmer lights which played slowly over the horizon and faded.

The figure paused again on seeing them, and then redoubled his pace, making directly towards the point on the horizon at which they had appeared.

And now the ground was becoming steeper, sloping upwards, and after another two or three hundred yards it led at last to an obstacle. The figure paused to examine the barrier and then dropped the bag he was carrying over it before climbing over himself.

Hardly had the figure touched the ground on the other side when there came sweeping out of the rain towards him a machine, lights streaming through the wall of water. The figure pressed back as the machine streaked towards him. It was a low bulbous shape, like a small whale surfing – sleek, grey and rounded and moving at terrifying speed.

The figure instinctively threw up his hands to protect himself, but was hit only by a sluice of water as the machine swept past and off into the night.

It was illuminated briefly by another flicker of lightning crossing the sky, which allowed the soaked figure by the roadside a split second to read a small sign at the back of the machine before it disappeared.

To the figure's apparent incredulous astonishment the sign read, 'My other car is also a Porsche.'

2

Rob McKenna was a miserable bastard and he knew it because he'd had a lot of people point it out to him over the years and he saw no reason to disagree with them except the obvious one which was that he liked disagreeing with people, particularly people he disliked, which included, at the last count, everybody.

He heaved a sigh and shoved down a gear.

The hill was beginning to steepen and his lorry was heavy with Danish thermostatic radiator controls.

It wasn't that he was naturally predisposed to be so surly, at least he hoped not. It was just the rain which got him down, always the rain.

It was raining now, just for a change.

It was a particular type of rain that he particularly disliked, particularly when he was driving. He had a number for it. It was rain type 17.

He had read somewhere that the Eskimos had over two hundred different words for snow, without which their conversation would probably have got very monotonous. So they would distinguish between thin snow and thick snow, light snow and heavy snow,

sludgy snow, brittle snow, snow that came in flurries, snow that came in drifts, snow that came in on the bottom of your neighbour's boots all over your nice clean igloo floor, the snows of winter, the snows of spring, the snows you remember from your childhood that were so much better than any of your modern snow, fine snow, feathery snow, hill snow, valley snow, snow that falls in the morning, snow that falls at night, snow that falls all of a sudden just when you were going out fishing, and snow that despite all your efforts to train them the huskies have pissed on.

Rob McKenna had two hundred and thirty-one different types of rain entered in his little book, and he didn't like any of them.

He shifted down another gear and the lorry heaved its revs up. It grumbled in a comfortable sort of way about all the Danish thermostatic radiator controls it was carrying.

Since he had left Denmark the previous afternoon, he had been through types 33 (light pricking drizzle which made the roads slippery), 39 (heavy spotting), 47 to 51 (vertical light drizzle through to sharply slanting light to moderate drizzle freshening), 87 and 88 (two finely distinguished varieties of vertical torrential downpour), 100 (post-downpour squalling, cold), all the seastorm types between 192 and 213 at once, 123, 124, 126, 127 (mild and intermediate cold gusting, regular and syncopated cab-drumming), 11 (breezy droplets) and now his least favourite of all, 17.

Rain type 17 was a dirty blatter battering against his windscreen so hard that it didn't make much odds whether he had his wipers on or off.

He tested this theory by turning them off briefly, but as it turned out the visibility did get quite a lot worse.

It just failed to get better again when he turned them back on.

In fact one of the wiper blades began to flap off.

Swish swish swish flop swish swish flop swish swish flop swish flop swish flop flop flap scrape.

He pounded his steering wheel, kicked the floor, thumped his cassette player till it suddenly started playing Barry Manilow, thumped it again till it stopped, and swore and swore and swore and swore and swore.

It was at the very moment that his fury was peaking that there loomed swimmingly in his headlights, hardly visible through the blatter, a figure by the roadside.

A poor bedraggled figure, strangely attired, wetter than an otter in a washing machine, and hitching.

'Poor miserable sod,' thought Rob McKenna to himself, realizing that here was somebody with a better right to feel hard done by than himself, 'must be chilled to the bone. Stupid to be out hitching on a filthy night like this. All you get is cold, wet, and lorries driving through puddles at you.'

He shook his head grimly, heaved another sigh, gave the wheel a turn and hit a large sheet of water square on.

'See what I mean?' he thought to himself as he ploughed swiftly through it. 'You get some right bastards on the road.'

Splattered in his rear mirror a couple of seconds later was the reflection of the hitchhiker, drenched by the roadside.

For a moment he felt good about this. A moment or two later he felt bad about feeling good about it. Then he felt good about feeling bad about feeling good about it and, satisfied, drove on into the night.

At least it made up for having been finally overtaken by that Porsche he had been diligently blocking for the last twenty miles.

And as he drove on, the rainclouds dragged down the sky after him, for, though he did not know it, Rob McKenna was a Rain God. All he knew was that his working days were miserable and he had a succession of lousy holidays. All the clouds knew was that they loved him and wanted to be near him, to cherish him, and to water him.

3

The next two lorries were not driven by Rain Gods, but they did exactly the same thing.

The figure trudged, or rather sloshed, onwards till the hill resumed and the treacherous sheet of water was left behind.

After a while the rain began to ease and the moon put in a brief appearance from behind the clouds.

A Renault drove by, and its driver made frantic and complex signals to the trudging figure to indicate that normally he would have been delighted to give the figure a lift, only he couldn't this time because he wasn't going in the direction that the figure wanted to go, whatever direction that might be, and he was sure the figure would understand. He concluded the signalling with a cheery thumbs-up sign, as if to say that he hoped the figure felt really fine about being cold and almost terminally wet, and he would catch him next time around.