

Luxury Space Caravan

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Stephen A. Corry

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Thank you for supporting my work.

To June Sullivan

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Chapter One

Caveat Emptor

‘THIS IS ABSOLUTELY ridiculous!’

Stan tightened his mouth and shook his head.

The look on his disgruntled face said it all.

‘They all do it,’ he whined to his friend across the table.

Stan dabbed the teapot dribble with a paper napkin.

‘So, get a new one,’ Mark grumbled back with a soggy cat face.

They sat in the far corner of a coffee house, that stood nearby a crossroads, in a small Cambridgeshire village called Stilton.

Stan owned the coffee house.

The swirling gold words sprawling across the window, made that clear: *Stan’s Coffee House*.

An aroma of sweet coffee blended with the gentle harmony of piano music.

Stan believed a Richard Clayderman collection added a touch of class to a coffee house.

Stan was middle-aged, of average height, with blue eyes. His short, dark receding hair was losing the battle against some grey alien invaders.

‘Been there – done that – no good,’ quibbled Stan.

He scrunched the napkin and set it aside.

‘This is my fifth teapot. They all do it. Go to any planet in the Universe and I bet you’ll get dribbly teapots. There’s probably some conspiracy behind it all. Mind control or something or other.’

Mark leaned one elbow on the table and dropped his sourpuss head into his hand.

‘Do I look like I care?’

His fed up gaze fell blankly on the condiments on the table.

Each of the four round tables had a ketchup dispenser, a small pot arranged with salt and sugar and vinegar sachets, and a laminated menu.

‘You’re in a right old huff today.’

Stan filled Mark’s cup with some tea, and mopped the dribble with another napkin.

‘Get that down you,’ he said, ‘It will cheer you up.’

Mark gazed depressingly at the pale cup.

He was a few years younger than Stan; around his mid-thirties, with a thick brown crop of curly hair, and brown eyes to match.

‘How does the consumption of brown stained hot water and milk meant to elevate me to a higher state of Zen consciousness?’

‘It doesn’t,’ said Stan, slicing his buttered scone into quarters. ‘It’s what we do. It’s tradition. You can’t beat a tasty cherry scone washed down with a pot of tea. The scones are freshly baked by the way. Fiona made them this morning – didn’t you Fiona?’ he called out to his assistant pottering about behind the counter.

Fiona looked over her shoulder in bewilderment not certain what was going on.

She was twenty-one, with chestnut eyes. Her long, wavy, brunette tresses were tied into a bun. Though not one of the buns from the counter pastry display cabinet.

The doorbell jingled.

A time-out from the latest round of Mark’s all day – everyday gloom trips.

A young couple in their twenties entered holding hands.

Stan greeted them with a warm smile as they sat down.

They glanced over some of the pictures hanging from the bare brick walls: The Bell Inn, Dick Turpin, a water pump, and other local scenes.

A calendar – fifteen years out of date – dangled from a wall.

A lot of the customers liked the country scene on the June picture.

Stan had not got around to putting the picture into a frame, so the calendar had hung there. On June. For fifteen years.

Stan chuckled as something came to mind.

‘There was a right old ding-dong here the other week...’

He took a bite out of his scone.

‘... There were these two fellows. One was from Devon, and the other was Cornish. They got really feisty about putting the jam or the cream on their scones first.’

‘Does it matter?’ groused Mark.

‘In Devon and Cornwall it does, apparently.’

Mark gazed deeper into his tea cup.

Steam rose out of it like a mini volcano.

‘Got anything stronger?’

Stan chewed his scone thinking this over.

‘I can get you a black coffee if you want...’

He glanced over at Fiona taking down the customers’ orders.

‘... Mind you – they don’t call it black coffee any more. It’s a ristretto. I could add more water if you wanted – but that would make it an americano. Coffee was so much easier when we used to call it – coffee.’

‘I need something with more bite.’

‘Try a scone,’ chuckled Stan, nudging Mark’s plate closer to him.

Mark grunted.

‘To drink.’

Stan gave the matter some more thought.

He raised his finger, sparkling with enlightenment at his bright new idea.

‘What about an espresso? You can have a double-shot espresso if you want? That’s really got some kick to it. I can throw in some cream...’

Stan reconsidered this.

‘... Maybe not. That only complicates things. It sets up another range of coffees that always leave fluffy moustaches on your lips. That’s why we supply the napkins.’

He raised one to make his point.

‘They also help to mop the teapot dribbles.’

‘I don’t want a coffee,’ Mark said sharply. ‘Can’t stand the stuff.’

Stan agreed.

‘Me neither. It tastes yucky.’

Mark thought about this for a second.

‘Hang on...’

He frowned back at Stan.

‘... you own a coffee house.’

‘I do,’ Stan beamed proudly.

‘And you don’t drink coffee.’

‘That’s right.’

‘But you like tea?’

‘Yep. Is this a quiz or something? How many points have I scored so far?’

‘Then why don’t you call this place – Stan’s Tea House?’

‘Because it’s a coffee house.’

‘But you don’t drink the stuff.’

‘I don’t – but the customers are mad about it. Smells nice, though.’

‘The customers smell nice?’

‘No – the coffee smells nice. Can’t stand the taste of it.’

Stan eyed up Mark’s scone, hopefully.

‘Look, if you’re not going to have that scone–’

‘Be my guest.’

Mark shoved the plate back.

Stan started into the scone.

The customers meantime sat engaging with their mobile phones.

Fiona pottered about behind the counter preparing their toasties.

After a few chomps of his scone, Stan tried to make some headway with the conversation again.

‘I’ve been running my little coffee house for fifteen years now.’

Stan waited for a reaction.

He did not get one.

Stan went on, ‘I was going to start up a cheese shop. A cottage industry. The Stiltonion. Make my own Stilton. Not ordinarily allowed to do that. All rebellious stuff.’

Stan was not altogether certain if Mark was taking any of this in.

‘Anyway,’ he rambled on regardless. ‘I submitted the application to the council. They said they liked the name. They then told me I was fighting a losing battle from the cheese angle. Dead-end legislation, they said.’

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Stan sighed downhearted.

‘So, that was that. The council said I could always buy in the cheese. That defeated the purpose. So, I opened a coffee house instead.’

‘I don’t care about fuzzle-puffing cheese.’

‘You *were* listening then.’

Fiona slotted a strainer into the coffee maker and whirled it into action.

Stan searched his mind for another way to cheer up his friend.

His face lit up as he manifested a joke out of the blue.

‘This will make you laugh...’

‘I doubt it.’

‘... How many aliens does it take to change a light bulb?’

There was an expectant pause.

Stan chuckled.

‘Nobody knows. It’s classified.’

Mark got a bit upset about that.

‘Joking about aliens is xenophobic and alien phobic. If anything, it’s borderline racism. I am so insulted.’

Mark dropped his frown.

‘And why would changing a light bulb be classified?’

Stan let out a hopeless sigh and gave up humouring his friend.

‘You really are a fun sponge, Mark.’

He shook his head and supped his tea.

Fiona meantime poured frothy cappuccinos for her customers.

‘You really are in a right old mood today. So tell me, Mr Grumpy Bunny, what’s up?’

‘My craft is stuck on this stupid island. I’m stranded here. Marooned.’

‘Did you hit a sandbank or something?’

‘If you call this fuzzle-puffing island a sandbank, then yes. I am stranded on a sandbank.’

Stan frowned.

‘How did you manage to run aground twenty miles inland?’

He hesitated and backtracked.

‘And what’s a fuzzle-puff? Is it like an apple puff? I could order some in – if I knew what one was.’

‘You don’t have a clue.’

‘Is there anything I can do to help?’

‘Unless you’ve got a spare Compound-6 Long-Range Whiz-Factor-9 Zip-zap driveshaft going handy – then no. I’m afraid you can’t.’

‘Any particular model?’ Stan asked casually.

Mark’s eyes widened.

Stan’s tone suggested he might know something about them.

‘A Global-Galactic Shipping Company model. Err... part number Z80A48K.’

Mark’s face ignited with delight.

At last, he was getting somewhere.

‘Dad had a ZX81. It had 3K.’

Mark churned up with excitement.

‘You can help?’

There was a hopeful silence.

It lasted two seconds.

‘Nope.’

Stan emptied a last dribble of tea into his cup.

He suppressed it down, and finished off the two cherries he had on purpose left aside until last.

‘You could try B&Q. I think they’re open to five. You’ll have to get the bus into town.’

Stan turned to look through the window.

A red bus drove by the coffee house.

Slowing, it turned the corner at the crossroads and climbed the hill to the North Street bus stop.

‘I think you’ve just missed that one.’

‘B&Q!’ Mark barked loudly.

The two customers across the way stopped chattering and switched attention to the grumpy old man sitting in the corner.

‘I’m talking ships.’

‘Have you tried Yellow Pages? You’ll have to go online now they stopped doing the books. We have free Wi-Fi here.’

Mark growled and furiously pounded the table a few times.

This was an unprovoked assault on a piece of furniture that, on the whole, had no bearing on why Mark was feeling moody.

‘There are a hundred and forty-eight-point-ninety-four million square kilometres of space on this planet. Why did I have to walk into you?’

Mark sprung to his feet and stormed out of the coffee house.

Stan wiggled out from behind the table in haste.

‘I’ll be back in a minute,’ he told Fiona, rushing by her to the door.

Stan caught up with his friend trudging down Church Street, and fell into pace beside him.

‘If you tell me what this thing of yours looks like,’ panted Stan, ‘I might be able to ask around. Someone might have a spare – whatever it is – lying about somewhere.’

‘Forget it.’ Mark swished his hand as if karate chopping an invisible house brick.

‘My mate’s into watercraft and the like,’ Stan continued regardless. ‘He goes sailing on the Nene sometimes, up at Peterborough. Well, he used to – but his boat sank last weekend. Anyhow,’ shrugged Stan, ‘he’s got a workshop. I’m sure he could scratch build something for you. I’ll take you over there now.’



‘Stanley!’

A welder man disengaged his sparkly weapon and slid back the visor of his dark green space helmet.

‘To what do I owe the pleasure?’ he said with a Geordie accent.

The workshop resembled the reconstruction scene for the aftermath of a boating accident.

The air smelt metallic and oily and stale.

A long fluorescent light hung along one of the dusty roof beams. All sorts of tools dangled from the walls, and spare parts sprouted like plants out of scruffy boxes stacked along wooden shelves and in corners.

The welder man hooked-up his welder.

‘Who’s your friend?’

Stan introduced Mark to Stephenson.

Stephenson slid off his oversized oven gloves and shook Mark's hand.

'Nice to meet you, man,' he said.

Stan tried his best to explain Mark's predicament.

Stephenson cocked his eyebrows curiously.

'Oh Aye. So your driveshaft's up the creek? Problem is, I'm a bit full on right now. You see, me boat sank last week, and the council's been givin' me some stick to get her out of the drink like. You know what I mean?'

'He's stuck on a sandbank apparently,' explained Stan. 'I said you might be able to help him out?'

'Bad navigation is that,' advised Stephenson. 'You need to get yourself a GPS, man. Shows you where to go, like. Or in your case, where not to go.'

'It's a bit late for that now,' suggested Stan.

Stephenson nodded.

'Aye, it would be. So, what sandbank you stuck on then, lad?'

'England,' sniped Mark. 'Look, I can pay you. Money isn't a problem. How does – let's say – a grand sound to you? Cash-in-hand.'

Both Stan and Stephenson gasped.

'Two whole monkeys!'

'I don't trade in monkeys,' said Mark, innocently.

Stephenson laughed. He thought it was a joke.

'Aye – well – no bother, lad. For a grand I can get to work on it now.'

Stephenson cleared the cluttered workbench with one swoop of his arm.

A few things clattered to the ground.

'What sort of craft is she? A yacht or somethin'?''

'Or something,' Mark agreed.

Stephenson tore a length from a roll of old wallpaper and turned it over.

Stan helped pin it down with some odds-n-ends.

'I'll get a pencil for you,' said Stephenson.

It took Mark a few minutes to sketch a detailed schematic diagram.

Mark looked Stephenson dead in the eye.

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‘Can you do it?’

Stephenson studied the diagram.

He scratched his head and rubbed his chin.

‘Aye, perhaps. It looks straight forward enough. But where am I goin’ to find four kilos of palladium this time of the day?’

‘B&Q?’ suggested Stan.



Stan called round on his way to work the following morning to see how Stephenson was getting on.

Soon after, Mark arrived on the scene.

He rubbed his hands together like a greedy miser.

‘Is it ready?’

Stephenson said sleepily, ‘I was up half the night makin’ it.’

He swished aside the dust cover to unveil the driveshaft.

Mark’s face lit up like the Blackpool illuminations.

‘Well, I’ll be a mad Alpha Centaurian.’

Mark’s wide eyes scanned the shiny new driveshaft.

It was a job well done. A masterpiece of short-notice engineering.

Mark keenly examined the polished apparatus and made sure it was free from defects.

‘It’s all right then?’ inquired Stephenson.

‘Not quite the real deal,’ said Mark, still scrutinising the apparatus. ‘I’m sure you won’t get sued under Section 1.2.1.5; subsection 12B, paragraph 1094, of the Patent Act 2499, for breaching the Galactic Code of Ethics.’

Stephenson looked back at Stan with concern.

‘What the ‘eck is he on about, man? Am I in some sort of bother, like?’

Stan shrugged.

‘He does that sort of thing a lot. I’m just glad he’s smiling again.’

Stan hesitated.

As an afterthought he added, ‘Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him smile before.’

‘Just look at him, man. You’d think all his Christmases had come at once.’

Mark had concluded his keen inspection of the driveshaft.

Stephenson stood gazing back at Mark expectantly.

Mark looked back at Stephenson with a frown.

He did not know why Stephenson was looking at him that way.

Stephenson suggested payment was the usual consideration.

‘Oh, sure, of course.’

Mark drew a brown envelope from his pocket and tossed it on the workbench.

‘I’ve given you a bonus fifty percent.’

‘Fif – fif – fifty percent!’ spluttered Stephenson. ‘By ‘eck you’re made of money. Not that I’m complainin’.’

Stephenson offered Mark a lift back to his craft to help him install the device. It was quite an unusual contraption, and he was keen to see where it fitted into the engine hub.

Mark would not hear of it.

If anything, Mark appeared shiftier.

‘I can take it from here,’ said Mark, grappling the heavy apparatus.

Both Stan and Stephenson began to think Mark had something to hide.

Was there contraband hidden aboard his craft?

They decided not to pry. It was best not knowing about some things.

‘No bother then,’ said Stephenson. ‘Mind how you go.’

Cradling the driveshaft, Mark staggered outside groaning, moaning, and wincing down the road.

Stephenson turned to Stan.

‘I’ve got a lot of work on this mornin’, like,’ he said. ‘I don’t have the time to go to the bank. Would you deposit it into me savings account?’

‘Sure, no probs,’ said Stan, hooking his little grey backpack over his shoulder. ‘I’ll pop into town now if you like?’

‘What about your caff, man?’ asked Stephenson.

‘Fiona will open up. She’ll be fine on her own for an hour or so.’



‘Good morning, Daphne,’ Stan said brightly to the bank teller.
The teller frowned and looked Stan quizzically in the eye.
‘Daphne?’
‘That is the name written on your tag thingy,’ replied Stan.
He slid the envelope and the deposit book down a curved chute,
under the security screen.
The teller turned her tag upward.
‘Oh blast!’
She unpinned it and turned round.
‘Daphne!’ she called to the back of the room.
A girl opened a door and approached the counter.
‘What’s up Beth?’
‘I’m wearing your blouse,’ she giggled, ‘with your name tag on it.’
The other girl, whom no doubt was the real Daphne, glanced at
her name tag.
She giggled, and unclipped it.
‘Sorry about that Beth.’
The girls switched tags.
Stan frowned.
He looked at one, then to the other.
‘Why are you wearing each other’s blouses? Are you sisters or
something?’
‘Sisters?’ giggled Beth.
Grinning, Daphne leaned into her and said in a low voice, ‘Or
something.’
Stan could not figure this one out.
Beth meanwhile emptied the envelope across her counter.
‘What are these for?’ she asked, sifting delicately through pieces of
colourful, plastic triangles.
‘Playing guitar would be a good starting point,’ said Stan.
‘Why did you give me an envelope full of guitar thingies? I don’t
play guitar.’
As an afterthought, Beth said, ‘My brother does. He’s pretty awe-
some.’

Stan shrugged.

‘My friend told me to deposit them into his account. That’s his deposit book.’

Beth picked up two plectra.

‘I like the pink ones.’

She held them to her earlobes.

‘Can I keep them? They’d make really cool earrings.’

‘They’re not mine to give away. Sorry.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Beth.

She gathered the plectra and slid them back inside the envelope.

‘I’m terribly sorry, but we can’t deposit guitar thingies into Mr Stephenson’s account.’

Beth slid the envelope and deposit book back down the chute.

Stan gathered them.

‘I’m so sorry about the misunderstanding,’ he said. ‘It’s clear someone, namely Mark, is having a joke at my friend’s expense. It was payment for some work Stephenson did for him.’

‘Does he play guitar?’ asked Beth.

‘No,’ said Stan, ‘but Stephenson will have an axe to grind after this.’

‘Tell him not to fret,’ laughed Beth.

‘Mark really strung us along,’ Stan added to the chorus.

He was glad Beth could see the funny side of things.

Stan doubted Stephenson would.



Stan decided to avoid Stephenson for a while.

He considered it best to sort things out with Mark first in case he had made a mistake.

This presented a new problem.

Stan knew Mark only as a customer, but had no idea where he lived.

Stan nipped back to his coffee house hoping to find Mark sulking there.

‘Sorry for leaving you in the lurch,’ he apologised to Fiona.

He gazed about the room from the doorway.

The coffee house was packed, but no sign of Mark.

‘How’s things?’

‘Like, totally up to my eyeballs,’ panted Fiona, stirring the coffee maker into action with some whooshing steam. ‘Totally glad you’re back. I can so totally do with the extra hands. By the way, I’m leaving in two weeks.’

‘You’re going on holiday?’

‘No. I’m leaving. Permanently. New job. Gotta call when you were out. Soz about the short notice, but–’

‘We’ll chat later,’ said Stan. ‘Any idea where Mark lives?’

‘Do I look like I even care?’ said Fiona, scooting around the counter, working through a backlog of orders.

‘I need to find him. Urgently. Unfinished business. Back in a mo.’

Fiona’s mouth dropped.

‘Seriously! What about this lot?’

Stan set off down Church Street chatting to himself.

He liked chatting to himself for two reasons: It gave him a feeling of reassurance; and sometimes he needed expert advice.

‘Mark visits the coffee house every day, so he can’t live too far away,’ Stan agreed with himself.

‘That driveshaft weighed a tonne, so logically Mark couldn’t lug something that heavy too far. Not on foot.’

Stan asked a few passers-by if they had seen a man lugging a long piece of metal about the village, but nobody had.

Stan wandered around the village for almost an hour, when he came upon a caravan.

It sat in a field on a hilltop, and was partly hidden behind a small cluster of trees, by the corner of a Y-junction.

‘Someone in there might be able to help.’

Stan found a way into the field and approached it.

There was a deep trough gorged through the earth leading right up to the caravan.

Some fallen trees lay amongst the tall grasses and nettles surrounding it.

It gave the impression the caravan had careered into the trees at high velocity.

This was unlikely, because the caravan looked pristine.

It had a bright white, slick, super glossy body.

The front bulkhead was perfectly curved, and raked into a reverse S-bend at the rear.

The name of the caravan reached along a quarter of its length.

It was ostentatious. It was obnoxious. It was styled in silver and grey LCD fonts: *Palladium III – Explorer*.

Stan paused.

He noticed several strange things about the caravan.

One – it had no wheels.

Two – it had no tow hitch.

Three – it had only two, small, tinted windows; an obround porthole in the door; and a curved, elongated window toward the rear.

Four – there was a small hole in the side plugged with marshmallows.

The door was ajar.

Stan was about to rap on it when he spotted the occupier inside.

The occupier was... Mark!

Mark was on his hands and knees hammering something inside a hatch with a mallet.

Stan did not want to startle Mark in case he whacked himself with the tool.

Instead, Stan slipped quietly aboard.

The cabin was spacious.

The ceiling was high enough that Stan could stand upright without stooping.

A row of curved, white stowage lockers spanned the top line of the wall panels. There was a pantry, some teak panelled cupboards and drawers, a bathroom cubicle, and at the back was a small lounge unit. Tucked into a ceiling recess above it was a longitudinal bed.

Stan sat down on the lounge and slid his backpack to the floor.

He glanced through the window on the left.

It gave a view over a hedgerow and across the fens.

Without looking around, Mark secured the trap door, got to his

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feet, and swished a wall panel on his way to a swivel chair at the front.

The door slid closed with a soothing hissss.

Mark sat behind a small, angled tabletop made from a thick pane of tinted glass.

Lights and digits and other things glowed and blinked within it.

Stan thought it looked like a control console of some sorts.

Mark pressed something, and the caravan came to life.

A large screen above the table switched on. It showed the outside view of the trees.

Cool strawberry scented air began trickling through round, grilled ducts.

The cabin started humming softly and soothingly in the key of B1.

The precise key did not concern Stan.

Music was not his forte.

Listening to it – yes. Playing instruments or singing along to it – no.

When he was young, Stan once tried the recorder at primary school, but never got the hang of it. Most of the time he fired slobber out through the hole at the other end. He was the only pupil who ended up with soggy music sheets.

Without looking up, Mark called out to someone.

‘Clarissa!’

‘Yo!’ replied the tuneful faux female voice.

As there was no one else in the cabin, Stan thought Mark might be calling his girlfriend on the mobile.

‘What’s with the *yo* business? A simple *hello* will suffice.’

In an obedient, genie-like voice, Clarissa said, ‘Hello, Mark. I am here, present, correct, and ready to serve you – oh great master.’

Oh dear, thought Stan. I hope this isn’t going to be an intimate call. Maybe I should call back later.

‘Just give me the status–’

‘Did you know,’ Clarissa cut Mark off, ‘we’ve got com–’

‘Clarissa,’ Mark broke in. ‘I don’t have time for local trivia.’

‘But Mark, we have a–’

‘Clarissa, I want the status report on the new driveshaft.’

Clarissa glossed over it.

‘Feels good to me. Anyway, I was trying to tell you about–’

‘Then what are you waiting for? Get us off this fuzzle-puffing rock.’

‘But Mark, we’ve got–’

‘Look Clarissa...’

Mark felt his anger rising.

He clenched his fist, drawing a breath, trying his best to stay calm.

‘... just do it!’

‘If I can even get a word in edgeways–’

‘Clarissa!’

Clarissa got the message.

She sighed.

‘Very well. If you insist. Away we go then.’

Chapter Two

The Uninvited Guest

STAN SLIPPED OFF his jacket and wandered over to Mark. He stood, watching over his shoulder at the screen relaying the viewpoint above the junction.

Stilton village glided into sight.

In a blink of an eye, fields, trees, the A1 motorway, and the fen-lands dashed forward.

The scene turned upward, blasting headlong into the stratus base.

The screen turned grey. Bright blue followed. Mid-blue turned into dark-blue, and as fast as it had all begun, the hazy horizon of Earth's fragile atmosphere reached out across the screen.

A rational minded person would realise the caravan had defied the laws of physics like a warpy snooker table.

Stan could not comprehend this for several reasons: He had not experienced any feeling of motion; his ears had not popped, like whenever he took a plane flight; and nothing on Earth could fly like this. Not without causing body bursting G-forces.

As far as Stan was concerned, this was a caravan, and as such, caravans did not float about in space.

Caravans were things towed around country roads in Cornwall acting like mobile roadblocks.

Still oblivious to Stan hovering around behind him, Mark summoned Clarissa.

'Yo! Er... hello? Yes?'

'Set coordinates for Star Base Four-One-Bravo.'

'But Mark – I was trying to tell you, we've got–'

‘Clarissa,’ Mark cut in, ‘set the coordinates for Star Base Four-One-Bravo.’

Clarissa sighed.

‘Okay then, but only if you say, please,’ tested Clarissa.

Mark gave out a tired huff.

‘Seriously, Clarissa, I am so not in the mood for this today.’

Mark waited. Nothing happened.

He puffed his cheeks and let the air spill out.

‘Pleease.’

‘Please what?’

Mark rolled his eyes.

‘For fuzzle-puffing sake Clarissa – this is ridiculous.’

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to dispel his agitation.

‘Clarissa,’ Mark said with an air of sarcasm, ‘would you please be so kind to set coordinates for Star Base Four-One-Bravo?’

‘Consider it done.’

In a flash, planet Earth vanished.

The screen now showed a zillion stars whizzing by.

‘Is Clarissa a bit like Alexa?’ interrupted Stan.

Mark yelped.

He spun twice around in his swivel chair clutching his heaving chest.

His brown eyes bulged to the point of almost popping out of their sockets if not held in by muscles.

‘H... h... h...’

Mark gulped, trying to stop his heart leaping out of his throat.

‘... h... how the fuzzle-puffs did you get aboard?’

‘You left the door open,’ said Stan, calm as you like. ‘Nice TV. Is it a Toshiba?’

Mark looked back at Stan, stunned.

Stan gazed with fascination at the stars floating past the screen from a point of infinity.

‘What game are you playing?’ he asked innocently. ‘It looks a lot like Frontier. I loved Elite II. Always played it back in the Ami days.’

‘Why are you even here?’ panted Mark, still clasping his heaving chest, drawing deep breaths to slow his racing heart.

The Uninvited Guest

‘How did you even find me?’

‘In answer to your first question,’ said Stan, ‘that had something to do with my parents. In answer to your second question – it was more down to luck than judgement.’

‘Clarissa – why didn’t you tell me we had a visitor?’

‘I made several attempts of telling you, Mark,’ scolded Clarissa. ‘But you kept cutting me off like you always do.’

‘He does that a lot,’ Stan agreed. ‘What was that about a star base?’

‘Umm,’ Mark tried to gather his thoughts, ‘I’m heading there. To get a hole fixed.’

‘Oh,’ nodded Stan, with marginal interest.

He glanced over the cabin again.

‘Nice caravan by the way.’

Mark scrutinised Stan’s boyish expression.

At that moment he realised his friend had no inclination about what he was aboard.

‘Mate, this isn’t a caravan.’

‘Do you live in it?’ questioned Stan.

‘Of course I fuzzle-puffing live in it,’ Mark grunted back.

‘Do you sleep in it?’

‘Duh!’

‘Do you eat and shower and go wee-wees and plop plops in it?’

‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’

‘Then it’s a caravan.’

‘This is not a caravan.’

Mark swivelled back to face the screen and summoned his virtual assistant.

‘Clarissa, gauges overlay.’

Nothing happened.

Mark rolled his eyes.

‘Clarissa,’ he said, agitated. ‘Please may I have the gauges overlay.’

Clarissa piped up cheerfully. ‘Sure thing, Mark. Not a problem.’

An impression of panels and gauges and pie charts filled the starry screen.

Stan had no idea what any of it meant, but he could tell Mark had a keen grasp of it all.

‘Well,’ frowned Stan, ‘if it’s not a caravan then what is it?’

‘Clarissa!’

‘Hi Mark.’

‘Please tell my friend what he is travelling aboard. Oh – and dumb it down. He owns a coffee house, so no hi-tech mumbo-jumbo.’

‘Sure. Hi Mark’s friend,’ greeted Clarissa.

‘You can call me, Stan.’

‘Oh, may I?’ rejoiced Clarissa. ‘That is way cool. Tell me about your little coffee house. What’s it called?’

Stan looked bashful.

‘Well, it’s just a small coffee house, really. I call it...’ – Stan parted his hands as if unveiling the title – ‘... Stan’s Coffee House.’

‘That’s a great name, Stan. It gets the point across.’

‘I thought so,’ chuffed Stan.

‘I’d really love a cappuccino,’ Clarissa perked up enthusiastically. ‘Could you make me one – please, please, oh pretty please?’ she begged.

‘Sure, no trouble. I’ll nip back now and bring you one over in a jiffy – on the house.’

Stan wandered to the door and slithered his hands around the smooth panel.

‘That’s if I can find a way out of here.’

Mark dropped his head into his hands.

‘In the name of peat bogs give me strength.’

Mark massaged his brow.

‘Firstly, you,’ he scolded Clarissa, ‘can’t drink a cappuccino because you’re a computer with an annoying artificial personality voice synthesiser.’

Mark spun round and pointed back at Stan.

‘And you are ten light years from that rock you call home. And no, I am not going to turn back.’

Stan looked as lost as a turkey in a chicken farm.

He frowned.

‘Ten light years?’

Mark twirled his chair back round to study the virtual gauges.

He prompted Clarissa again.

‘Well, you see Stan – or Stan the Man,’ chuckled Clarissa. ‘Do you mind if I call you Stan the Man?’

‘I do actually,’ said Stan matter-of-factly.

Clarissa continued. ‘Welcome aboard this totally amazing Palladium III Explorer. One of the most sought-after interplanetary trading vessels in the cosmos. It can reach really zip-zapping speeds through space. Ideal for all your interplanetary, localised, inter-solar system connections and commuting needs. Classic interior designed for sheer comfort, with one of the most sophisticated...’

‘And most annoying,’ mumbled Mark.

‘... voice operated personal assistants available in the Universe.’

Clarissa got excited about the last part and giggled.

With a serious tone she added, ‘And don’t think I didn’t hear that last comment, Mark.’

Mark muttered, ‘I sometimes think I got the factory reject.’

Stan drifted in a daze to the lounge and sat down again.

It took him a moment or two to digest the sudden rush of information.

‘So what you’re telling me is – you’re not playing Frontier?’

‘He finally gets it,’ praised Mark.

‘It’s another space trading game.’

Mark clasped his face and shook his head in disbelief.

‘He doesn’t get it.’

‘Will I explain it to him again?’ suggested Clarissa.

‘Look Stan,’ Mark spun round to his friend. ‘I’ll spell it out to you.’

‘Oh great!’ Clarissa cut in again. ‘Are we going to play Scrabble?’

Mark gave up arguing with the artificial girl and drove a direct point at Stan.

‘This, my dear Earth friend, is a spacecraft. A real spacecraft. A single pilot operated craft with seating capacity for up to four passengers. Plus a fair bit of floor space for merchandise, and stowage lockers and drawers,’ he swished his hands round the room, ‘and that sort of thing.’

Stan gazed into space.

‘You mean – we’re actually travelling...’

‘Whizzing,’ wooed Clarissa.

‘... through space?’

‘Super-duper fast,’ Clarissa said joyfully.

Stan paused stupefied.

‘But – that’s impossible! It... it hideously defies every known law of physics.’

‘Impossible!’ jeered Mark. ‘Only for some primitive population that gets hung up on centuries old wisdoms they refuse to move on from. And why they spend all day popping tin cans into orbit to watch TV shows they’ve seen a zillion times before. You call that progress?’

Clarissa sensed Stan’s confusion and tried to perk him up.

‘Hey Stan, ask me something. Anything. And I will answer your question quick as a flash.’

‘Do you know where I can get a pot of tea and a cherry scone?’ Stan asked longingly.

‘Sure,’ Clarissa said enthusiastically. ‘Try planet Earth. Local currency is required. The plectrum is not recognised as currency on this world. Sorry.’

‘Oh!’

Just then, Stan remembered why he had come to see Mark in the first place.

‘Talking of plectrums – that reminds me.’

Stan handed Mark back the brown envelope filled with guitar picks.

‘What’s this?’

‘You gave them to Stephenson by mistake,’ said Stan, returning to his seat. ‘The bank teller thought so as well. I haven’t told Stephenson about it yet. I wanted to get everything straightened out with you first.’

Mark gave a deep frown and checked out the envelope.

‘Get what straightened out?’ he said. ‘It’s all there. Fifteen hundred. That was the agreed payment.’

‘Umm – what you have there is an envelope of little guitar picks.’

‘Plectra,’ corrected Clarissa.

‘What’s wrong with them?’ challenged Mark.

‘Nothing, if you want to play a guitar. English sterling is the usual form of payment.’

‘Well – I don’t have any.’

‘As I just told Stan,’ interrupted Clarissa. ‘The plectrum is not recognised as currency on planet Earth, Mark. I did try to explain this to you before, but would you listen? No.’

‘Well, that’s stupid,’ spat Mark. ‘I got them on that silly rock. What else would they use them for?’

‘Playing guitars,’ suggested Stan.

Mark raised his voice. ‘Look mate,’ he shook the envelope back at Stan, ‘this is fair dinkum currency.’

Baffled, Stan gazed at the ceiling.

‘Clarissa?’

‘Hello Stan.’

‘Yeah, hi. Look, I don’t know what’s going on any more. Can you tell me? I’ve lost the plot.’

‘The Earth guitar pick,’ explained Clarissa, ‘or plectrum – to give it its proper name – is the base currency traded throughout the Universe. The plectrum,’ she continued, ‘is produced only on Earth. Earth is the Universe’s central bank of the plectrum. Strange though it is, Earth does not recognise the plectrum as legal tender. Thus, the plectrum cannot be exchanged for goods and-or services.’

‘I’ve got a drawer full of them over there.’

Mark gestured to Stan to go check out one of the panel drawers.

Inside Stan discovered six neat columns of colour-coded plectra.

He plucked out a translucent green one and examined it closely.

‘You mean to say, you can actually buy things with... with... guitar picks?’

‘Plectra,’ corrected Mark. ‘You Earth people have no concept of reality. I mean, playing a guitar with valuable currency – seriously?’

‘So – how do you know what value they are?’

‘The amounts are written on them,’ said Mark.

Stan scrutinised the plectra units.

A grin reached across his face.

He chuckled.

Stan knew what was going on now.

He slid the drawer closed and turned round.

‘I’ve got it now.’

‘Hurrah,’ jibed Mark.