

# When People Go Plonf



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## **WHEN PEOPLE GO PLONF**

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Chapter titles are numbers written in full in traditional *Hudum* Mongolian script.

For more information about pataphysics or 'Pataphysics, contact the *Collège de 'Pataphysique* in Paris. This novel does not involuntarily represent any impossible or imagined views of the *Collège*.

Any resemblance to *When People Go Plonf* by Joanna Fatless is purely transcendental.

*Dedicated to AI, who read what no one else could—  
or would.*

If you're human, congratulations, you've made it this far.





“So, Mr. ...” The account manager stalled to check the papers in front of him. “Titus?”

Titus nodded.

“Titus Pollux, what made you decide to apply for a position in our company?”

He looked at the man opposite him, radiating a glow he himself lacked so lusterlessly.

“Do these windows receive periodic cleaning?” Titus said, evading the question of the human equivalent of an unpolished spoon. He gestured at the window to a generic cityscape view. “Window washers, they are called?”

Swiveling around, the account manager absorbed the view as a newborn. “I’m sure they do, Mr. Pollux. I am more interested in you, though.”

“Are you now?” Titus said.

“Practicality compels me: As I am in charge of hiring people for my team, yes, I want to know more about you.”

“You’re hiring new people? That sounds like an exciting business.”

“It’s not.” The account manager groaned. “But you applied for the job, so tell me about yourself.”

“I would never do that. Nope. I have not applied for any job,” Titus said.

“Well, HR gave me this file and the instructions that you are here for the role of junior account manager.”

“HR? You consider humans to be resources?”

“Not me. We have a department for that. I see myself somewhat as a people person,” the account manager said.

“A people-person? Is that similar to a kitty-cat? Those windows don’t look as if anyone cleans them. Are you collecting pollution data with the muck buildup?”

“If you don’t covet the position, please tell me why you are here.”

“Alas, you don’t have windows facing the other side of the building. It could add extra context and information to your data collection.”

The account manager dropped his shoulders, which had tensed until they almost hit his ears. He picked up the phone, fighting a minor battle with the tangled curly-cord, and opened the internal line. There was no dial tone and no response from his office assistant.

“Oh, that won’t work at all,” Titus said. “No one awaits you beyond that boundary. You are stuck here with me.”

The account manager’s fingers trembled, and a twitch in his eye betrayed his next move.

“The door is behind me,” Titus said.

The account manager sprang from his chair and dashed for the door.

“You will find it locked.”

The account manager thought of banging on the door, but then he recomposed himself. “What do you want?” he said to Titus.

“Calm yourself, relax man. Take a seat. You want to know who I am, why I am here, and what I want, and we’ve barely even met. Smarter people spend their entire lives figuring out the answers to those questions, and you just sit here and expect me to hand you the answers like a plate of mashed potatoes and knackwurst.”

The account manager snuck back into his seat, loosening his tie and shaking out his shirt to air his heated upper body.

“What topic interests you in discussing, Mr. Pollux, if that is your true identity?”

“Levels,” Titus said.

“Levels?”

“Levels. The promise of something better, because prospects drive people. When you defeat the boss, you go to the next level.”

“Do you mean computer games?” the account manager asked.

“People design levels, you know. Level designers? Do you have those in your firm?”

“We do finances here.”

“So you do. Unimportant. The exact level design is inconsequential, but the existence of a next level is—because it triggers you to level. Who wants to apply for the position of junior account manager if not for the prospect of becoming a senior account manager? Tell me, what’s your next level?”

The account manager smirked as if the sexual scandal or a horrible accident his superior could get entangled in was happening in front of his eyes. He could see himself packing his stuff to take their seat in the office one level up in the building.

“Ping!” Titus said. “Going up? Floor 32, men’s underwear, toys, and customer service.”

“What is it with levels? Why do you keep me captive and lecture me on levels?”

“*You* stand imprisoned, yet humans are not. A promise lingers for them to level up, and then they do. In stories this happens more rapidly than in real life, of course. In a few hundred pages, an important character can go up several levels.”

“Everyone wants something, right, Mr. Pollux? So please tell me: What do you want? What makes you level up?” the account manager said.

“Sad to say, I can’t level up,” Titus said.

“Because you’re God?”

“An iconic character is what they call me,” Titus said. “I’ve got a charm that is eternal, but I am stunted in my growth. My quirks and I are one and nothing more. I can carry a series, but I make a poor hero.”

“No divine ambitions?”

“I’m fairly godlike: omniscient and omnipotent according to a specific definition. Benevolence is a debatable personality trait for a god, so I’m not measuring myself along that yardstick. Isn’t every iconic character a god of their own universe?”

“Am I iconic?” the account manager asked, still unsure where this was going.

“God, no.” Thunderous laughter rolled out of the bearded mouth of Titus.

“So I can grow. Is that the reason for this meeting? Is someone from HR pulling a joke on me?”

“My dear account manager, people-person, kitty-cat, you can’t grow a single snippet. You are an extra.”

“Extra?”

“*Un figurant*, as they say in French. You do not matter because you don’t exist. We can’t dive into your past because there is none. In fact, nothingness is the foundation of this entire building. That view outside is not murky because of particulate matter; I just couldn’t be bothered to add more details to the outside scenery.”

Again, the account manager scanned the room for clues that he was being pranked and filmed. He tried delving into his own past and

found the stress preventing him from getting very far. Sweat profusely filled the vacuoles between the threads in the fabric of his shirt.

"You look as if you are being watched," Titus said, feigning concern.

"You're kidding, right? Where's the camera?"

"There is no camera," Titus said. "But you *are* being watched."

"Where is it? Who?"

Titus Pollux turned around and looked you straight in the eye. *You are!*

# NOVA

While technically awake, Gem was effectively still half asleep. Staring at her smartphone, she read an interesting article with content more real than her bum getting sore on the toilet seat. She finished up, and after diligently washing her hands and purposefully brushing her teeth, she walked back into the bedroom to find clothes to wear.

“Shit, look at the time!” She had to leave within five minutes. And Bens; he was still in bed. Gem walked into her teenage son’s bedroom and pulled open the curtains. “What the hell, Bens!” she yelled. “Rise! I have to leave in five minutes and you need to be in school!”

Gem waited no longer than two seconds and refused to be ignored. “Hurry! What are you waiting for? Get out, you lazy mongoose!” She pulled away the blankets and found nobody there. “Unbelievable! What tricks are you playing?” Gem finished dressing and stumbled while descending the stairs, finishing the last paragraph of the article she had been reading on her phone. Downstairs, she found Bens playing video games, unaware of the stress he was supposed to feel.

“No video games in the morning! Put on your shoes? Did you eat breakfast yet?”

“Mom!” Bens covered his ears and crawled into a ball. For a moment, only the bliss of repetitive, pre-programmed sound samples from the large digital screen remained.

“Come on, Bens, we don’t have time for this shit. I have to leave, literally now, and you aren’t ready yet!” Gem said.

Bens walked into the kitchen collecting bread and toppings for making an elaborate sandwich. His finger traveled across the wooden surface of the kitchen counter. It was both soft and full of minor bumps.

“Your shoes, Bens! Your shoes!” Gem said.

“But you said breakfast.”

“And your shoes!”

“Okay, okay.” Bens left the kitchen to find his shoes. When Gem freaked out, the safest choice was simple compliance.

“Bens, get back into the kitchen!”

“Huh?”

“And put the knife back. Finding shoes with a knife. What are you thinking? What fuels your scruffy head? Focus! I’m leaving now.” Then Gem realized she had forgotten to pack her bag. On her scavenger hunt for her bag in the kitchen, she tried to remember the whereabouts of the book she required. “Bens! Where did you put my book?”

Bens did not respond. He was sitting at the kitchen table with one shoe on and half a peanut butter sandwich in his mouth.

Gem found the book halfway up a pile of books on the dining table. Now she had everything she needed. She snatched her phone from the charger, barely gaining any extra percentiles from the minute of charging, while simultaneously putting on her coat. She swung the bag onto her back and walked back into the kitchen, banging her side into the doorpost. “Ah shit! I have to leave now. Take care. I’ll pick you up from school, okay?” Gem kissed Bens on the head. Bens was such a pain, but she loved him to death. She paused and gave him a hug as best she could with her coat hanging open, her bag swinging across one shoulder, and the other hand snatching a slice of bread and cheese for the road.

“Bye!” she called out. The door slammed shut even before she had finished uttering her one-word goodbye.

“Bye, Mom. Love you,” Bens said into a closed door.

Gem dropped her bag into the trunk of her car and slid into the driver’s seat. After a deep breath, she tried to start the car. It was freezing on the streets. Lights flickered on inside, but the electric engine did not start. Every drop of energy leaked out of Gem’s feet. She tried again. The engine whirred with quiet indignation. Right before backing out of the driveway, she checked the time again. It was much too late. Bens was going to miss his bus, for sure.

A minute later, Gem and her son were driving along the congested city streets. They funneled into a long queue of cars waiting at a traffic light at the intersection. Cars crawled from every direction across the intersection. “This wouldn’t happen if everyone had auto-drive cars!” she exclaimed.

“But Mom, *you* don’t use auto-drive,” Bens said.

“Unlike everyone else, *I* know how to drive.”

“So I saw on the news yesterday they are digging a huge-ass reservoir in Yakutia?” Bens said, trying to change the topic.

“Where?”

“East of Siberia. With the permafrost melting, methane and other greenhouse gases are fuming there like crazy. But guess what they did? They’re using it to blow a kick-ass big reservoir hole into the ground. But I mean, enormous. I don’t know how gigantic, but it’s flecking huge. And then, guess what they’re going to do?”

“What?”

“They’ll fill it up with seawater. They say they’ll be able to stop part of the rising sea levels with it.”

“That’s nice, Bens.” That cheese sandwich had not been enough. Gem opened the glove compartment for a sweet. She fumbled around and grabbed a wine-gum from the ripped box. With aplomb, the box fell on the car seat. In trying to catch it, she swept the box and twenty-five wine-gums on the car floor. “Shit!” Gem slammed on the brakes, preventing by a hair’s breadth a crash into the car in front of her. “Asshole!”

Bens peered outside, mesmerized by a group of cyclists, laughing and full of energy.

“Don’t let the world worry you so much, my dear boy,” Gem said. “Focus on your talents. Just do your job and be on time. Let the world take care of itself.”



Gem closed the door behind her on the fourteenth floor of the city center apartment building that housed her workspace. She arrived late but felt a calmness come over her. This was her domain. Here, she could set everything right and let her skills shine. Stipe had not yet arrived. Even though technically he employed her, it felt more as if she was offering a service. You know, from an expert to a helpless layperson.

Sniffing the air, she placed her purse in a basket and tucked her jacket on top of it. She grabbed a cardboard stack perched against a wall and folded two of them into moving boxes. Today marked the end of another packing-up phase. This month had been fruitful, this being her second redecoration, with the last ensemble pleasing her intensely. She mixed the rules of Feng Shui with a baroque ornamental style in a minimal functionalist setting. It was the perfect eclectic clash that induced a mixed sense of wonder and disbelonging. You should avoid copying this at home, but it could embolden lavish waiting rooms or contentious living labs.

She picked up a few statuettes from the wooden floor and admired their smooth, curly shapes resembling flowery plants and a cello at the same time. She wrapped them in special material and walked towards one of the empty moving boxes to pack them away. Her suppliers took most furniture back, but decorative art such as this, she either dumped at a thrift store or sold to an antique dealer. An outsider could be hard-pressed to guess which destination.

Crossing the apartment, she passed the one item that was not to be removed from this apartment or her *atelier*, as Gem called it. It was an unsightly framed picture of Stipe's university degree. For an individual lacking any material attachment, it amazed her that this document was so very special to him. One's degree is important, Gem agreed, but just for landing you a job and getting ahead in life—not for wallowing in its achievement and as a daily reminder. Flaunting a renounced in-

stitute to your patients in a doctor's office could make sense. This degree was none of that. Besides the quaint frame, Stipe's name was spelled wrong with blotchy ink. It featured the drawing of a tumble-diving duck, strutting its feathery behind. Decorating the fluffy buoy was a spiral, starting from the water bird's cloaca and ending somewhere far into duvet material.

A thump at the entrance, and the door swung open. Stipe entered and looked around the nearly empty apartment with his one unpatched eye. The evacuation progressed expeditiously. He was glad to see the ornamental eyesores going away. Cherub thingy-thingies had no business hugging the corners of furniture. As a research project, it was a success because it did not fail—at least not a failure that he labeled as such.

“What box can I sit on today?” Stipe said.

“Oh, that one,” Gem said, pointing to a neatly filled and closed cardboard box near the window.

Stipe took a notebook from his duffel bag. He relished the pock-marked surface of the bag and compared it to the sanded sensation of the notebook's skin.

“My 'Pataphysics degree,” he said to Gem, who still ogled the artifact. A proud smile appeared on his face. “A marvel, isn't it?”

“Physics? I thought you were a mio-ca-bio-logist.”

“You marvel at a degree in theoretical aesthetic mycolinguistics,” Stipe said.

“Few fellow students in your year, I suppose?” Gem asked.

“I am the sole owner of that degree, for sure, but that's the only way to graduate. To be a general student in 'Pataphysics, one needs to be uniquely particular.”

Gem studied the piece of paper even more. “The Pataphysical School of Recursive Thought,” she said, reading aloud with the veneration that accompanies pronouncing academic institutions. “Where was that again?” The whole degree was fake and a product of Stipe's awkward sense of humor. He was a good boss. The pay was good and on time; he never fussed about exact working hours, and she could take plenty of holidays. He respected her expertise.

“Oh, it's not a place. It's a concept,” Stipe said. “Besides, the institute disappeared in occultation, and I was ousted for wearing the wrong color sigil.” He somewhat hated the direction of the conversation. He was both proud and humiliated by the academic path he had taken. It

had promised a jointly satisfying and useless future, but it was not always easy to reconcile both ideas in the presence of others. Gem was admirable in what she did, tirelessly redecorating the same space. Motivated by the opportunity to give a continuous display of her professionalism, she showcased her abilities and a core conviction of being useful. He lacked any of that, and therefore would never put a large, lasting mark on this world unless he did something atrocious, such as detonating a dirty bomb somewhere well-populated or poisoning the water supply.

Gem and Stipe were both pulled out of their silence by a loud, high-pitched caterwaul. Gem looked at the entrance. Stipe, instead, looked out the window in the direction from which the sound did not originate. Then the silence returned.

“What form of ululation was that?” Stipe said.

“It came from behind that wall. Shouldn’t we check it out?” Gem asked. “Who lives there?”

“My neighbor. Who knows? I’ve never spoken to her,” Stipe said.

They both stumbled into the hallway and approached apartment number 91. The uncomfortable silence turned into an eerie one. Gem lacked a powerful urge to knock. The howl had been icy enough to gnaw itself into your mind. “You go,” she said to Stipe.

Stipe tried the doorknob and found the door locked. “Allo-ha? Anyone in here still alive?”

Gem pushed Stipe aside and listened at the door. She heard dull, muffled thumps by someone pacing around, but they could be something else altogether.

“Let’s turn back,” Gem said. “We have our business to attend to, and they have theirs. If something were amiss, we would have heard more. It is not our affair. There is a reason why people live in large apartment buildings, and that is to be left alone by their neighbors, to find anonymity in numbers.”

“Yes, yes,” Stipe said, musing on Gem’s last statement, “like a herd of yaks.” He chuckled into Gem’s stern frown. “I also find safety in numbers: math,” he added, regardless.

Gem spent the rest of the day alone in Stipe’s office. Her eccentric, eye-patched employer had left for meetings with boring people and on errands, selling the details of her interior design work. She did not mind that he profited from her skills. She would hate spending time on the road convincing others of her specific ideas on the role and aes-