

Beyond Uranus

By Stewart Bruce and Nigel Moreland

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To Claire, Francesca and Amelia.

This book has seen several versions released over the last two years. This is the final version.

Beyond Uranus is book 1 of a trilogy

Beyond Uranus (2012)

The Rings of Uranus (2013)

Inside Uranus (2014)

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Chapter 1 - Leap of faith

Time was waiting to slap Roy, finally after all these years of burning the candle at both ends his name reached the top of the list. However, Time wanted to indulge itself first, with a bit of fun just to wind him up. If it had a body, instead of being a disconnected corporeal entity, its shoulders would now be merrily heaving up and down, hands wringing together in glee anticipating the approaching mirth and if Time had a mouth and a voice it would be cackling out, '*Hubble bubble, trouble and toil*' like a witch with no sense of rhyme. However it didn't and it wasn't

*

Meanwhile, six billion kilometres from Earth, hidden from any form of detection, lay an alien space station, gracefully orbiting our solar system and keeping away unwanted visitors. In a secluded corridor, two dark haired men were quietly conspiring over certain matters. The bearded one said, "His father cost my father his life, so I will welcome him as he deserves, my lord Loki."

"Don't let him know what you know, otherwise he will be forewarned. He has a way of intuitively seeing matters and you don't want to alert him."

"And you promise me..."

"I promise nothing fool! Asgardians make no bargains with insignificant humans. I merely tell you what was and what is to come. How you use that is no concern of mine, other than you never mention my name or more than just your life will be forfeit."

The bearded man turned to walk away back to his quarters, the other one gestured with his hand and disappeared.

*

Minutes later Doctor John D'Eath, the dark haired and bearded man, was sat staring at a black screen in his apartment. Every time he made contact with the other aliens, the screen seemed black and he had yet to glimpse who he had been dealing with. Apparently they lived in low-light conditions and although there are allegedly seven thousand shades of black it would take very keen sight to distinguish between them.

"Why can't we just usse your computer?" asked a voice from the dark screen.

"My computer is a stubborn son of a bitch," answered John. "You would never break it. I don't know why but each computer has its own personality and mine is so strong it would be useless trying to turn it into something functional. Every time I talk to you I have to put it somewhere it cannot hear me and then I get an interrogation about what I've been doing. I'm really beginning to loathe it with a passion."

"We have our ways, but we don't care about the program, we jussst want the computer."

"Well I have plans for my crappy computer and it involves a very heavy hammer but I'm going to get a replacement for it."

"Sso, what are you going to do Doctor D'Eath. We want sssome action from you."

"I want you to be ready to meet me in a few weeks from now."

"You will have a computer?"

"Maybe. If you come quickly when I call"

"Why? We need to know your planss."

“I am told that we have a new recruit coming and I have unfinished business with his family. Fifteen years ago my father lost everything because of his father and he killed himself for the shame of it all. He owed my father for a house he built and then the fool got himself killed before he paid. My father’s business collapsed and he couldn’t face the ruinous consequences. So, I have plans for that boy and he's not only going to provide me with a computer he's going to provide me with his life. An eye for an eye seems like a near-worthy recompense to me.”

“And who told you that he iss coming to the station?”

“I have my sources and they must remain my secret.”

“We don’t like our agents keeping ssecretsss.”

“This time you’ll have to put up with that.”

“Hmmm, ass long ass we get a mark four computer.”

“I know! You just make sure you are ready to pick me up when I give you the call, and come quickly!”

*

Be bebe bebedebeep, bebe bebedebeep bebe bebedebeep...

8.00 am on a Thursday morning and the last thing I wanted to hear was my alarm clock pounding in my ears. The rhythm of the beeps annoyingly fitted with 'Roy McCormack get out of bed, Roy McCormack get out of bed'. I tried to get 'Roy McCormack sleep for as long as you like' to fit but it never worked. As my brain swam throbbing through treacle, I cracked open my left eye and tried to focus on the offending banshee. An autonomous reaction swung my arm out as I tried by sheer brute force to weld the snooze button down. *‘Five more minutes please, I really need to sleep much more than live’* I thought to myself. *‘I really need to cut the lager from my diet. Tonight I will pack all the drinking in and be all clean living. And I promise I won’t stay up to the early hours of the morning playing computer games online.’* It was the same old lies every morning, as I promised myself that my life would be much healthier and wouldn’t involve any lager, fast food or computer games. A moment later and I was fast asleep.

Be bebe bebedebeep, bebe bebedebeep bebe bebedebeep...

8.05 am on a Thursday morning and the last thing I wanted to hear was my alarm clock pounding in my ears. I cracked open my left eye and tried to focus on the swirling form of the offending banshee. I swung my arm out and tried to weld the snooze button down. *‘I can do five more minutes, I really do need to sleep more than live’* I thought. Just like every morning I went through the timings in my head. Get up at ten past eight, a quick five minute shower, dress, have a strong cup of coffee to overpower the taste of the grunge in my mouth. Get into the car by eight thirty and arrive ready for school at eight forty for the staff meeting at eight forty-five. In my head it always worked but in reality it never did, and then I was asleep again.

Be bebe bebedebeep, bebe bebedebeep bebe bebede clunk!

8.10 am on a Thursday morning and the last thing I wanted was to hear my alarm clock pounding in my ears. Opening my left eye, I tried to focus on the banshee that was shrieking so loudly. My arm swung out intending to crush the snooze button, halting before crashing onto it. “I’ve got to get up” I slurred sleepily to myself and pulled my arm back

whilst the stupid, annoying noise continued. I swung my legs off the bed and with a clenched fist satisfyingly punished the kill button.

The cool water of the long since broken shower cascaded over me, shocking a semblance of life into my shivering, abused body and mind. The chore of dressing was fumblingly accomplished, to be followed by a mug of strong, hot coffee and then I was reluctantly ready to leave. As I shuffled towards the front door I caught sight of my physical deterioration in the mirror, my once dark hair was beginning to shine with grey. My tummy used to be really flat until I hit thirty but then my six-pack had bloated to nine. I wasn't yet fat, but you could tell my diet consisted of calorific crap, vis-a-vis lager and pizza. I grabbed hold of each side of my gut and pushed my hands in toward each other so I could see what I would look like with a big beer belly, "Yuck!" I coned myself with another promise to be healthier and thirty seconds later I was in the car and, as usual, late.

On a good day I could make it to work in ten minutes. On a very good day all the traffic lights would be green. The old dodderers would be sleeping until after the rush hour and all the farmer's tractors would be locked away in sheds. Today wasn't a good day. The world and its dog were out, just to get in my way. Time was having such fun watching me getting ever more uptight, throwing my hands in the air and swearing at another curiously swift change of the lights against me. "You bastards! Why don't we get as long as they do?" I irritably enquired of no one other than the light sequence. Making matters worse were the half-asleep ones at the front. "Are you here for a holiday? Look it is green, get a shift on feller." Or, "What're you waiting for, a written invitation?" The creepers are the worst. They try to hold the car on the clutch, usually failing. Then when the lights finally turn green they get all excited, over-react and dump the clutch, stalling the car. So we all miss a turn, "Plonker!" Though, of course, I didn't curse loudly enough to be heard by anyone outside my car. I didn't want to cause offence. Time was tickled. If it had a body, which it didn't, then it would have been tickled pink!

Then the bad luck took a turn for the worse and went Lemming-like for an early morning plummet. When for some unknown reason I sensed a presence in the car and my eyes were drawn to the rear view mirror. What I saw didn't register immediately but later I would come to realise that I'd seen myself, a second Roy sitting in the back seat alongside someone else mostly out of sight. A chill scampered up my spine, then jumped off the top of my head and bravely ran for cover. I leaned forwards and putting my other mouth close to my ear, told myself to watch for Simon's car tonight. Then the unseen stranger said "That's enough information, punch the TWAT now" and then they were gone, I flinched but didn't feel a thing! Perhaps they weren't referring to me. Then the back seat was empty again, how strange!

'Now that's something you don't see every day,' thought Time, *'two of the same victim, together in the same place, how odd. Two stones with one bird, I feel lucky punk! You've made my day.'* Rhyme wasn't the only thing that he didn't do well. Then Time felt the familiar tug of a temporal displacement field and watched the second Roy depart along with the other person from the rear of the humans car transport thingy and he was also there as the other two arrived at when they went, in time that is. After all, Time is everywhere all the time. *'Hmmm, father needs to know about this, he'll want to keep an eye on all three of that pair.'* At which point, Time was satisfied with Roy's havoc and went off to victimise someone else.

Sometimes, thought Roy, my brain can deal with really odd stuff, whereas at other times it capitulates and just blanks it out as though it never happened. Normally I could cope with seeing myself in a mirror. I don't claim to be unusually gifted or anything, it's just one of those shocks that life somehow prepares you for. Today was different, there I was moving independently and talking to me before I'd said anything. I'd like to say that my brain was now a seething mass of thought and reactions, possibly engaging the 'fight or flight' mechanisms. However, the cells that dealt with all the difficult stuff were now lying down in a darkened room, swigging bottles of 'Milk of Amnesia' and the only ones doing any work were those who dealt with the common-place actions like breathing, heart beating, not weeing myself and driving. Fortunately, none of those decided to get creative and we moved along in the traffic without incident.

So, I passed the minutes by praying the traffic would keep moving and calming myself by thinking about some of the classes I was going to teach. Had my dad still been around I'm sure he would have been proud of me, but becoming a teacher had happened by accident and for the last ten years I'd been in a job I no longer had any enthusiasm for. Teaching a subject I loved to kids I didn't. What went wrong? Three years I'd spent at university doing a computer science degree and I loved it. I should have wowed the world, and at the very least ended up in a top company keeping their I.T. department running whilst earning big wages. So that by now I would have enough to retire. I blamed my college mate Tim. During the last year of my degree Tim had said to me "Why don't you get a Post Graduate Teaching Certificate?"

"What for? I'm going to be Bill Gates' bitch," I flippantly replied.

"It's a backup plan," Tim said, "in case you don't land one of those big jobs. It will mean you can teach instead. Whilst you're teaching you can still apply for the big bucks but have a nice secure job with a regular income and lots of holidays." It all sounded so logical and made such good sense. Funny how bad advice sometimes pretends to be so shrewd.

When I was a youngster I always thought teachers finished their day early and had lots of holidays. What I didn't realise is that it was just the kids that finished early and I was still in school two hours after they had left and a lot of my evenings at home would be taken up with marking. I didn't realise that I would spend most of my holidays writing schemes of work. I didn't realise that my job would turn into a seven day week, working at least sixty hours, fifty weeks of the year. I didn't realise it would suck the life out of me. That's a lot of 'I didn't realise' that I didn't realise!

By the time my teaching career had settled down and I had the time to apply for jobs I found I wasn't getting interviews. On phoning some of the companies I got similar answers "We were quite impressed with your application but we need to employ an I.T. specialist not a teacher. We've kept your details and have them on file." A teacher! How the bloody hell did that happen?

Pulling into the car park at the Beaufield School I could see that mine was the only space that was empty, so I slotted the car into place. Yanking the hand brake on, it occurred to me that it was something of a Freudian gesture indicating that I too wasn't going anywhere. At precisely 8.45 am, I stepped out of the car and took a long look at the crumbling edifice representing the school building, wondering if nineteen seventies architects had ever had any training. It was an unimaginatively regular cold grey, utilitarian and featureless building and

definitely without soul. Thoughts of Thomas Gradgrind from Dickens 'Hard Times' crossed my mind, with questions over whether or not we had improved since then.

The designer thought it would be a great idea to clad the whole building with glass. Had he or she ever met any teenagers? Over the years as each, and almost every, pane of glass had been broken they were begrudgingly replaced with grey painted sheets of ply wood until the whole building had deteriorated from fresh and shiny, to a depressingly bland medley with panels of infill grey. That each year the council bought a slightly different shade meant that batches of panels were in diverse tints, allowing the school to be dated. Like cutting a tree down and counting the rings, here you only needed to count the hotchpotch of different greys and you'd know how old the school was.

From above the reception what was supposed to be a black eagle, but looked more like a stuffed vulture, gazed hungrily on those who passed underneath. Doing so, I made my way up the main corridor towards the staffroom. I always thought the main corridor was an ironic pre-cursor to the day because it was so depressing. Painted in off-white aged to drab, it remained unheated, unattractive and lacking in any display work to inspire the pupils. With each step along the corridor, vitality was sucked from the hapless victim and only the stoutest zombies ever reached the far end.

Talking of which, "McCormack?" crackled a voice, like finger nails scraped down a blackboard. I didn't have to look around to see who it was, as I recognised the icy blast of the Head Teacher, Mr Williams, rattling with the chill of his constant anger. And I'll swear blind that the ambient temperature always dropped by at least two degrees in his presence. I often thought about why he was so angry and came to the conclusion that it was because the kids hated him, and parents, and the staff, and the governors, and the support staff, caretakers, dinner ladies, cleaners and probably his own family too. The kids all sniggered, when he swept past, and called him 'Batman' behind his back because he always wore his graduation gown. It was as though it had been surgically affixed. Here we were in the twenty first century, at a secondary school with students from the rump-end of nowhere and he wore a gown. Served him right to be called Batman and hated by everybody including, surely, his wife.

"You're late," he said, with a little too much triumph in his voice for my liking.

"Touché and ditto," I replied informatively. "The meeting started three minutes ago." Looking the man in the eyes was always an uncomfortable experience. Hidden away within their depths were glimpses of something akin to superiority, an air of overlordship. Using the teachers as his vassals helping to control the apprentice serfs indented to the school. It made me shiver.

"You think you're so funny McCormack but I'm not due to be in that meeting this morning as I have an appointment with a parent. And as for being late I got into school at seven forty five this morning. Were you even awake at seven forty five?" Maybe people hated him because he was always so smug and an artisan at bullying, oh yes he'd perfected the science of emotional thumping.

"Look, I'd love to stand here and pass pleasantries with you but I'm a bit late for a meeting. I shall have to give my apologies and explain that I was held up by the Head Teacher."

“You’re not funny McCormack and you do know this is the fourth time you’ve been late this week, but then why would you break the habits of a lifetime?”

“Is this going to last long? By the time I get to this meeting it’ll be all over.”

“Go now but remember you have a performance management review coming up and I’m going to make sure I’m sitting on that meeting.”

“Oh no,” I said this with all the emotionless sarcasm I could muster. Minor threats from the Head were, for me anyway, common place and meaningless. I knew that nothing would be or could be done so long as my teaching was judged as good along with my exam results. I turned and continued to walk at a leisurely pace towards the staffroom. “I’m watching you McCormack,” came a fading voice behind me and I chuckled to myself. Batman’s a stalker, but at least he didn’t tell me he loved me.

I missed the meeting and the day went like most days. Registration had the usual suspects turning up late like every other Thursday, or Wednesday, Tuesday, Monday or Friday for that matter. Lesson one was a brave attempt at teaching year seven pupils how to use a spreadsheet. Set four wasn’t the lowest ability set but they were close. The difference between sets four and five was that most of the kids in four could turn the computers on.

I thought about playing “Question Bingo”. It’s a game where teachers write five questions they think will be asked by the kids during the lesson. As each question is asked it is crossed off. After the last question you shout out “BINGO!” During the lesson I prepared my five questions:

How do you add two numbers together?

Where has my work gone from last lesson?

Why can’t I save my work?

Can I go to the toilet?

Why can’t I do this in Word?

I think I would have shouted bingo in the first five minutes with seven set four and a total of four times during the lesson.

The other lessons drearily passed, almost without notice and my shouting ‘BINGO’ was becoming monotonously repetitive. Then suddenly, I was facing the final hurdle of the day’s last class. Through all this though, I couldn’t shake the nagging sensation at the back of my mind that something unexpected was expected. A tiny tendril of thought was quietly ringing a bell, something mellifluous and almost obscured within the mists of important but lost.

Last up was to be year nine set two. Most of the students had already decided if they were going to opt for the computer course next year so the class had two very distinct groups. One group were hard workers trying to impress me with their I.T. skills and the other group couldn’t give a crap. In ten years of teaching I’d never learnt how to motivate the ‘couldn’t give a crap’ students because my empathic nature meant that I too couldn’t give a crap.

Had the last five lessons been the only day of my life that I would ever teach, I guess I would have found it interesting. However, after ten years of this I had lost my mojo and it was fair to say I was bored out of my tiny little skull. Let’s face it, I was in the wrong job but trapped in a rut and unable to break or escape from the cycle.

There was a great feeling of relief when the final bell went, and not just from the kids. I had about four hours worth of marking but I decided to leave it for the weekend because 'that's what weekends are for, isn't it?' Sods Law meant that the drive home was ironically quick and I was soon watching the news on television. My TV was probably a little too big for my living room and to be honest dominated it, but it was great for playing games on. I guess my whole house was a bit small but two bedrooms seemed fine for somebody that lived by themselves, until Murphy's Law kicked in and the amount of stuff I accumulated expanded to fill the space available. It was a modern house in a small, quiet estate just far enough from my school for the local kids to go to a different one.

When I first bought the house the previous owners had been into loud, bright colours and a lot of the rooms were subjugated by colours like sunburst yellow and orange flame. My tastes were much more conservative and I redecorated throughout with more subtle tones of blues, cream and greens. They had left a family of wooden gnomes in the garden and I had taken murderous delight watching them blister and turn to charcoal, smouldering on their own bonfire.

I checked my watch and as it was only four o'clock I thought I would plug myself into a game and have a couple of hours of playing. I switched my TV to the channel I have for my games console and loaded up my favourite first person shooter, put my headphones and microphone on and waited to join a death match. I found a good one with sixty five players. The idea of the game was to shoot everybody and even when they all decided to join forces against me during the second game I still came out on top of the leader board, too easy.

I went back to the main menu and chose another shooter and joined the first available multiplayer game. "Oh Christ not Zombie Love" Came a soft American accent over my ear piece. This was a more intimate killing field with only five players.

"Who in the hell is Zombie Love?" asked another player.

"Do you like winning?" said the first player.

"Yea, of course I do," said the second.

"Then forget it cos you ain't gotta chance with Zombie Love in the game."

By this time I had five kills so I decided to join in the conversation. "Come on lads be sporting. Remember it's not about winning it's about how you play the game that's important. A bit like the Korean war but with less blood."

"You're full of shit Zombie Love," said one of the players.

"Jesus Christ I swear to God I didn't see him," came the player's voice I'd just killed.

Over the next five minutes the conversation of the other players turned to co-operation and a pact that they only fired on me and not on each other. I loved it when this happened in a game because it presented me with a much bigger challenge. Playing against real people was brilliant because they are often unpredictable and much more of a challenge than the artificial intelligence built into the games for single player mode. Players joining forces to fight against me was increasingly common in most shooter games but I loved the challenge and didn't take it as an insult.

The funny thing was that after an hour of playing the game the same players were still in the game and still trying to remove me from the top of the leader board. I didn't mind the insults I was hearing over my headphones or the shouting or swearing because I knew deep down that they were having as much fun trying to beat me as I was winning.

“Sorry guys I need to stop and get something to eat. I’ll be back in about an hour if you want to be a bunch of losers again.” There was a stream of abuse from most of the players about me leaving followed by them saying their goodbyes in various fashions, some of them not rude.

It was about 6.00pm and so a pizza went into the oven and some lager went into the fridge. At 6.20 I was eating the best warmed up frozen pizza money could buy and opening my first can of lager. As I chomped through my slice of pizza I thought about the night’s entertainment. What to do or more precisely what to play? I didn’t watch much TV, I would catch the news when I came home and that would be about it. I hated the ‘reality’ shows where you take everyday people and put them into manufactured situations and to be honest, I hated the most of the rest of it too. So, as a rule, my evenings would be spent marking schoolwork or playing computer games.

I’d played and finished single player mode on all of my vast collection but my biggest passion was playing online, against other opponents and the more there were the more I liked it. I didn’t mind what genre game I was playing as long as I could play it against other people. It was this absorbing hobby that kept me awake to the early hours and made me late for work but I was hooked because I was good, very good. In the last five months of playing I was unbeaten, which was a very private fact that I was very proud of.

After finishing my pizza and clearing up the cardboard and cellophane, I went to the fridge to collect the second lager of the evening. As I open the fridge door and reached for the can, the front door bell rang. I picked up the lager and thought *‘That’s funny.’* It was funny because I didn’t get evening visitors. I’d invite friends around occasionally but they generally didn’t pop round unannounced. I opened my lager and walked towards the front door. The bell rang again. “OK, OK, keep your hair on,” I said under my breath.

As I opened the door there stood a man with the bearing of a club bouncer – no that’s unfair, he was broad but not fat and wobbly like some bouncers. He was wearing a black suit, about my height with very white albino-like skin, short spiky white hair and black rimmed glasses with lenses that had a pink tinge to them. There was a few seconds of silence followed by me saying “Yes?”

The man looked at me and as he did I couldn’t help but notice his eyes. They darted left and right like he was looking at a rapid tennis match or a speeded up version of that early video game Pong.

“Roy McCormack?”

“Yes. But I’m not buying anything and I don’t want God.”

“That’s good because I’m not selling anything. My name is Simon Philberts, do you mind if I come in? I have a job opportunity that I’d like to offer you. May I please come in to discuss the terms?”

I thought about this. Could it be that one of the companies I’d applied to years before had actually kept my information on file and were now looking for an I.T. specialist with an interest in education? I realised that this could be a job offer that could get me out of my crappy teaching job. His voice sounded normal enough, though what the local axe murderer would have sounded like I didn’t know, I took a punt. “OK,” I said, “but this had better be good.

I opened the door further so Simon could step through, closed the door behind him and led him into my living room. We shook hands, mine buried in his, but his grip was light so this certainly wasn't the hand of a bouncer or bailiff or even a manual worker and certainly not a murderer, I thought. I held my hand out and gestured to an arm chair in which Simon sat, well more correctly he sort of graciously flowed into the chair which groaned under the weight of a man a good deal heavier than I.

Just at that moment my phone rang, "Please excuse me I should get that, but I won't be a moment, I'll ask them to call me back later."

"Fine, we'll talk afterwards Mr McCormack."

I crossed over to the phone and answered giving my number.

"Roy," It was my mum, "I was feeling a bit lonely so I thought I'd ring for a chat."

"Mum, that's fine but I have someone here at the moment, a visitor, erm Simon Philberts I think he said."

"Oh! OK then Roy, you talk to your Simon, I'll call you tomorrow then?"

"Yes let's talk tomorrow mum. Goodbye." I put the phone down. Mum seemed strangely quick to leave us to it and I'm sure there was an edge to her voice when she said 'your Simon'. I brushed the uneasy feeling aside and turned towards my visitor.

"So, what exactly do you want?" I said, as I sat in the chair adjacent to him.

"You are Roy McCormack."

"Yes."

"And you teach."

"Yes."

"And play a lot of online games."

"Yes."

"Which you use the online game tag of Zombie Love."

"Erm Yeeess." I responded hesitatingly, starting to wonder where this was going.

"I work for a company that seeks out and recruits people with certain talents. We recruit people in all sorts of professions but your gaming ability has really shown up on our radar and we would like to offer you a position within our organisation. The work you will do is not directly related to the computer games industry, but you will find your skills very useful if you can adapt them to various other situations. We only recruit the best and are very selective to whom we make a job offer." Simon spoke in a boring monotone. It was like he was giving me the most important information of my life but didn't care because he'd said it a thousand times before.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing and my optimism flowered. *'This could be it,'* I thought. *'I bet this could be a chance to earn mega bucks and get out of teaching. Even if there wasn't a huge amount of money it could still be a way out of teaching.'* I was hooked. "OK, you've got my attention so tell me more."

"I cannot be too precise with the information at this moment but I can give you hints about what we want. Once you've signed your contract I can reveal all the information you need but the main thing to know at the moment is this. This is a onetime offer and if you decline you will never be approached again. You have twenty four hours to decide if you want to accept the offer. If you agree then you start on Saturday and will be collected at nine

o'clock in the morning. Whilst you are working for us, for reasons that will become apparent, any contact with friends and family will have to be minimal."

I thought the last part wasn't too bad because I didn't have many friends. My mum would phone every now and again but she lived three hundred miles away, which was a five or six hour drive. I hadn't had a girlfriend in eight years, not since dating 'Bridget the Midget' who was actually six feet tall. However, having only twenty four hours to decide and starting on Saturday was cutting it short. "What about my job?"

"Our research suggests you are not that bothered about teaching?" said Simon. "However, we will sort out all the paper work with your school and the local authorities so it won't be a problem. You do hate your job don't you? And if you accept this offer I promise you that you won't look back financially, nor will you need to teach again."

"OK then," I said, "so what can you tell me?"

Simon eased himself forward on the chair and looked straight at me. Well at least his head was pointing in my direction, his eyes continued their dance. "The job placement is far away," he said. I waited for him to give more information but that's as much as he said.

I scratched my chin and said "Like Gateshead?"

"It's much further than Gateshead."

"Newcastle?"

There was a pause as Simon seemed to consider if I was taking the Michael or just being very stupid. He opted for the stupid conclusion. "It's even further than Newcastle and you are going to take some time to truly appreciate how far this offer will take you." he said.

"Is it in this country?"

"No."

"Europe?"

"No."

"Got it. Australia."

"No."

I started thinking out aloud. "How can that be? Australia is around the other side of the planet from us. You cannot get further than Australia."

"You're thinking in very linear terms Mister McCormack. Try to think a bit more out of this world."

I chuckled to myself and said "The moon!"

"I hear the laughing and you are now thinking more three dimensionally, but you are still light years from the truth."

"Saturn?"

"Not even warm."

"Jupiter?"

"Jupiter is closer to Earth than Saturn." His eyes picked up tempo again and then slowed down.

"Your Anus!"

"I think you will find its pronounced Uranus."

I put on my best posh English accent and said "I think you'll find its pronounced Your Anus."

"Uranus."

“Your Anus.”

“I am sure it is pronounced Uranus.”

“Are you English?” I asked.

“No,” said Simon.

“Are you from Earth?”

“Err... you may struggle with this, but no.”

“Ah, that explains a lot! Then as a fully qualified Englishman and true born Earthman I can definitely tell you that it is absolutely pronounced Your Anus.”

Simon’s eyes had gone into overdrive. Although his speech remained at the same speed and it still had the same monotone boring lilt to it, I could tell he was getting very annoyed. Through almost gritted teeth he said “Let’s leave the pronunciation and move on. Further than Ur... the planet we’ve been discussing.”

“After that there’s just Neptune and Pluto but Pluto’s been downgraded to a minor planet.”

Simon’s eyes had returned to their usual game of pong. “Excellent and well done. Now think about the distance between Earth and Pluto, about three billion miles. Take that number and double it and that’s the distance of your new job.”

I could feel my eyebrows rise. I didn’t quite know what to think. I could feel the opportunity of a life time disappear as I consumed the information or was it disinformation? It was certainly too fantastic to believe. Simon was obviously a nut case with no job offer. Perhaps I should have felt angry with him for wasting my time but I actually felt a little depressed because I’d been so excited about the prospect of getting a real job in I.T. with a big salary, company car and all the trimmings. What I’d actually been offered was completely nuts and this man, if you could call him that, was blatantly one can short of the full six.

“So what you’re offering is a job that you cannot tell me anything about. You want me to sign the contract tomorrow and the job placement is out in space, twice the distance of Pluto.”

Simon looked intense and his eyes had slowed to a steady beginners tennis match. Then he said “I know it all sounds a bit fantastic but this could be the opportunity of a lifetime for you. What I need you to do is to take a leap of faith. Trust me and you will never regret your decision.”

All I could think was that Simon was bonkers. “I think it’s time for you to go.”

Simon raised himself up from the chair and walked with a surprisingly light tread to the front door. “Remember Mister McCormack you have twenty four hours.”

“Yea, whatever.”

I opened the door to let Simon leave. I stood there and watched as Simon walked down the drive. What a disappointing end to the evening and although I should have slammed the door, I leaned against the frame in disbelief of the complete and utter bullshit I had been told. Simon rounded the end of the drive and went out of sight. A couple of seconds later a car door opened with a hissing sound then shut with a barely audible clunk. Commanding my attention, I heard an unusual whine like a distant jet engine starting and then a sleek black car swished past the end of my drive. I did a double-take because the car wasn’t touching the ground and had no wheels! It actually glided past, entirely wheel-free, floating a foot above the ground. “Fuck me!”

That was the moment when recall and realisation banded together and hit me, just as I thought ‘*Well that was unexpected. Hang on a minute, unexpected, unexpected, unexpected...*’ My brain inserted a ‘Break’ clause which allowed me to escape the nested loop. I cautiously turned around to see if I would be there to impart some further information, but no I was alone and the only one of me.

Deep down at the bottom of my mind, in a tiny little shed behind the door with the modest sign saying ‘All visitors welcome, please come in and browse’, well no one bothers to pry where they are welcome. People only use subterfuge or jemmys to sneak into the places with big signs saying ‘KEEP OUT’. Anyway behind this door, two of my brain-cells were congratulating each other for not letting me slam the door behind Simon and watching for the car.

*

Having put its wheels down so it didn’t attract any unwanted attention, the sleek black car whined its way through the night. Eventually, it dipped underground into the car park of a black glassed building. A dark suited figure with spiky white hair and pale skin left the vehicle and made his way to a lift. He pressed a button and waited for it to arrive, stepping inside when the doors silently opened. At the requested floor, he emerged into a corridor with a single door at the end. The Gold lettering on it declared “Director”. Simon knocked and waited. Ten seconds later a muffled shout summoned him in with the word “Come!”

Simon entered a large room. Opposite him at the other end of the room was a dark wooden desk with a monitor placed to one side of it. Behind it sat a man in a dark suit with dark rimmed glasses, short white hair and very pale nearly white skin. The lenses of the glasses were tinted pink, and behind them his eyes were playing ping pong. These two men were almost mirror images of each other and could pass for identical twins, yet strangely they were not traditionally related.

“Sit.” Simon sat.

“Tell me how it went,” said the director.

“He was an idiot.”

“You know that’s not true, you’ve seen the data and you know the history. We need him and I suspect he is going to play a vital role in the organisation. We both know that things are happening and we need Roy’s ability to analyse and make intuitive guesses.”

Rubbing his eyes with a hand under his glasses, he said “I don’t mean to be rude Director, but my usual client for enrolling into the program is an Oxbridge graduate of science. Typically with several post graduate qualifications and an I.Q. that’s bouncing off the top of the scale. By comparison, Roy appears to have an IQ exceeded by his own shoe-size and is frankly, an idiot. I don’t get it and I cannot understand your logic, it’s almost as if he’s some sort of genetic throwback like a modern-day caveman. He’s a lager guzzling, pizza eating I.T. failure that teaches in a dead end school.”

The director took a deep breath to calm him and said “You knew the father and so did I. His father didn’t have any of those qualities you described of your usual client and look what he achieved.”

“Yes,” said Simon “and look how it ended.”

“All we ever found was the drive section of his shunter, we didn’t even find a body and we don’t know the true story of how it ended.”

“But the records show...”

The director interrupted with “The records show nothing other than speculation. We don’t really know what happened and I doubt we ever will. Incidentally, I’ve also spoken with Roy’s mother, Margaret, and she won’t say anything until he’s settled.”

“That’s good, but are you sure you’re not doing this because of his father?”

“Simon, you’ve seen the data, you know this could work regardless of who you normally recruit. Do you think he’ll agree?”

“I don’t know Director. Talking of his father, I spotted one of his jars of layered sands sitting in the corner on a table.”

“I hope you didn’t mention it?”

“No, not at all.”

“Good! When you drove away, did you retract the wheels and use hover mode?”

“Yes Director.”

“Did he see you?”

“Yes, I used the jet whine to attract his attention and he was definitely watching as I drove past.”

“Excellent. What story did you tell him about where the station is?”

“I used the planets as a guide to distance and explained that it far beyond Your Anus.”

The director’s head jerked up and with some confusion and he said “Don’t you mean Uranus?”

“I bloody knew it!” said an exasperated Simon.

*

That Thursday night was a very strange one for me. I sat in my front room sipping my lager and had a good think about the events that had passed. I hadn’t done much serious thinking for a while and fair comment, I needed to dust the cogs a bit. All my life I’d followed seemingly shrewd advice and this was where it had got me. Don’t get me wrong, my life was, if anything, a little too comfortable. Simons offer was bonkers but that car suggested something, what harm could it do? Surely if that was real then the offer would be real? If I had witnessed something as weird as a floating car then perhaps there is a completely mad job offer situated outside our solar system. Perhaps the strangest thing was the way in which I had, so matter of fact, accepted the existence of aliens and their space station in our solar system, it was almost as if something or someone was calling to me.

All these thoughts kept swirling around my head all evening and before I knew it the time was 12.30am and time for bed. For about the first time in five years I hadn’t played a game.

In bed I lay awake for another two hours. I knew I would be knackered in the morning but I couldn’t sleep. I had reached a schism, I knew one when it bit me and this was a real humdinger. The left fork would carry on down the road of unfulfillment and boredom, to a lifetime of degeneration and emotional flat-lining. The right fork, however, could lead to who knows what? An adventure for sure, something that will make the heart beat faster. At that point I knew that my decision had been made and a plan slowly began to form in my head. I would accept the offer and if Simon turned out to be a complete nutter it wouldn’t make any difference because the job wouldn’t exist. And then there was that car. I couldn’t

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