

(fade-in) Chapter 18 (fade-out)

And the next thing that happened after that was that the Heart of Gold continued on its way perfectly normally with a rather fetchingly redesigned interior. It was somewhat larger, and done out in delicate pastel shades of green and blue. In the centre a spiral staircase, leading nowhere in particular, stood in a spray of ferns and yellow flowers and next to it a stone sundial pedestal housed the main computer terminal. Cunningly deployed lighting and mirrors created the illusion of standing in a conservatory overlooking a wide stretch of exquisitely manicured garden. Around the periphery of the conservatory area stood marble-topped tables on intricately beautiful wrought-iron legs. As you gazed into the polished surface of the marble the vague forms of instruments became visible, and as you touched them the instruments materialized instantly under your hands. Looked at from the correct angles the mirrors appeared to reflect all the required data readouts, though it was far from clear where they were reflected from. It was in fact sensationally beautiful.

Relaxing in a wickerwork sun chair, Zaphod Beeblebrox said, "What the hell happened?"

"Well I was just saying," said Arthur lounging by a small fish pool, "there's this Improbability Drive switch over here ..." he waved at where it had been. There was a potted plant there now.

"But where are we?" said Ford who was sitting on the spiral staircase, a nicely chilled Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster in his hand.

"Exactly where we were, I think ..." said Trillian, as all about them the mirrors showed them an image of the blighted landscape of Magrathea which still scooted along beneath them.

Zaphod leapt out of his seat.

"Then what's happened to the missiles?" he said.

A new and astounding image appeared in the mirrors.

"They would appear," said Ford doubtfully, "to have turned into a bowl of petunias and a very surprised looking whale ..."

"At an Improbability Factor," cut in Eddie, who hadn't changed a bit, "of eight million seven hundred and sixty-seven thousand one

hundred and twenty-eight to one against."

Zaphod stared at Arthur.

"Did you think of that, Earthman?" he demanded.

"Well," said Arthur, "all I did was ..."

"That's very good thinking you know. Turn on the Improbability Drive for a second without first activating the proofing screens. Hey kid you just saved our lives, you know that?"

"Oh," said Arthur, "well, it was nothing really ..."

"Was it?" said Zaphod. "Oh well, forget it then. OK, computer, take us in to land."

"But ..."

"I said forget it."

Another thing that got forgotten was the fact that against all probability a sperm whale had suddenly been called into existence several miles above the surface of an alien planet.

And since this is not a naturally tenable position for a whale, this poor innocent creature had very little time to come to terms with its identity as a whale before it then had to come to terms with not being a whale any more.

This is a complete record of its thoughts from the moment it began its life till the moment it ended it.

Ah ... ! What's happening? it thought.

Er, excuse me, who am I?

Hello?

Why am I here? What's my purpose in life?

What do I mean by who am I?

Calm down, get a grip now ... oh! this is an interesting sensation, what is it? It's a sort of ... yawning, tingling sensation in my ... my ... well I suppose I'd better start

finding names for things if I want to make any headway in what for the sake of what I shall call an argument I shall call the world, so let's call it my stomach.

Good. Ooooh, it's getting quite strong. And hey, what's about this whistling roaring sound going past what I'm suddenly going to call my head? Perhaps I can call that ... wind! Is that a good name? It'll do ... perhaps I can find a better name for it later when I've found out what it's for. It must be something very important because there certainly seems to be a hell of a lot of it. Hey! What's this thing? This ... let's call it a tail - yeah, tail. Hey! I can can really thrash it about pretty good can't I? Wow! Wow! That feels great! Doesn't seem to achieve very much but I'll probably find out what it's for later on. Now - have I built up any coherent picture of things yet?

No.

Never mind, hey, this is really exciting, so much to find out about, so much to look forward to, I'm quite dizzy with anticipation ...

Or is it the wind?

There really is a lot of that now isn't it?

And wow! Hey! What's this thing suddenly coming towards me very fast? Very very fast. So big and flat and round, it needs a big wide sounding name like ... ow ... ound ... round ... ground! That's it! That's a good name - ground!

I wonder if it will be friends with me?

And the rest, after a sudden wet thud, was silence.

Curiously enough, the only thing that went through the mind of the bowl of petunias as it fell was Oh no, not again. Many people have speculated that if we knew exactly why the bowl of petunias had thought that we would know a lot more about the nature of the universe than we do now.