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Young Zaphod Plays It Safe



Bookvika publishing

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Douglas Adams

A large flying craft moved swiftly across the surface of an astoundingly beautiful sea. From mid-morning onwards it plied back and forth in great widening arcs, and at last attracted the attention of the local islanders, a peaceful, sea-food loving people who gathered on the beach and squinted up into the blinding sun, trying to see what was there.

Any sophisticated knowledgeable person, who had knocked about, seen a few things, would probably have remarked on how much the craft looked like a filing cabinet - a large and recently burgled filing cabinet lying on its back with its drawers in the air and flying.

The islanders, whose experience was of a different kind, were instead struck by how little it looked like a lobster.

They chattered excitedly about its total lack of claws, its stiff unbendy back, and the fact that it seemed to experience the greatest difficulty staying on the ground. This last feature seemed particularly funny to them. They jumped up and down on the spot a lot to demonstrate to the stupid thing that they themselves found staying on the ground the easiest thing in the world.

But soon this entertainment began to pall for them. After all, since it was perfectly clear to them that the thing was not a lobster, and since their world was blessed with an abundance of things that were lobsters (a good half a dozen of which were now marching succulently up the beach towards them) they saw no reason to waste any more time on the thing but decided instead to adjourn immediately for a late lobster lunch.

At that exact moment the craft stopped suddenly in mid-air then upended itself and plunged headlong into the ocean with a great crash of spray which sent them shouting into the trees.

When they re-emerged, nervously, a few minutes later, all they were able to see was a smoothly scarred circle of water and a few gulping bubbles.

That's odd, they said to each other between mouthfuls of the best lobster to be had anywhere in the Western Galaxy, that's the second time that's happened in a year.

The craft which wasn't a lobster dived direct to a depth of two hundred feet, and hung there in the heavy blueness, while vast masses of water swayed about it. High above, where the water was magically clear, a brilliant formation of fish flashed away. Below, where the light had difficulty reaching the colour of the water sank to a dark and savage blue.

Here, at two hundred feet, the sun streamed feebly. A large, silk skinned sea-mammal rolled idly by, inspecting the craft with a kind of half-interest, as if it had half expected to find something of this kind round about here, and then it slid on up and away towards the rippling light.

The craft waited here for a minute or two, taking readings, and then descended another hundred feet. At this depth it was becoming seriously dark. After a moment or two the internal lights of the craft shut down, and in the second or so that passed before the main external beams suddenly stabbed out, the only visible light came from a small hazily illuminated pink sign which read The Beeblebrox Salvage and Really Wild Stuff Corporation.

The huge beams switched downwards, catching a vast shoal of silver fish, which swiveled away in silent panic.

In the dim control room which extended in a broad bow from the craft's blunt prow, four heads were gathered round a computer display that was analysing the very, very faint and intermittent signals that emanating from deep on the sea bed.

"That's it," said the owner of one of the heads finally.

"Can we be quite sure?" said the owner of another of the heads.

"One hundred per cent positive," replied the owner of the first head.

"You're one hundred per cent positive that the ship which is crashed on the bottom of this ocean is the ship which you said you were one hundred per cent positive could one hundred per cent positively never crash?" said the owner of the two remaining heads. "Hey," he put up two of his hands, "I'm only asking."

The two officials from the Safety and Civil Reassurance Administration responded to this with a very cold stare, but the man with the odd, or rather the even number of heads, missed it. He flung himself back on the pilot couch, opened a couple of beers - one for himself and the other also for himself - stuck his feet on the console and said "Hey, baby" through the ultra-glass at a passing fish.

"Mr. Beeblebrox...," began the shorter and less reassuring of the two officials in a low voice.

"Yup?" said Zaphod, rapping a suddenly empty can down on some of the more sensitive instruments, "you ready to dive? Let's go."

"Mr. Beeblebrox, let us make one thing perfectly clear..."

"Yeah let's," said Zaphod, "How about this for a start. Why don't you just tell me what's really on this ship."

"We have told you," said the official. "By-products."

Zaphod exchanged weary glances with himself.

"By-products," he said. "By-products of what?"

"Processes." said the official.

"What processes?"

"Processes that are perfectly safe."

"Santa Zarquana Voostra!" exclaimed both of Zaphod's heads in chorus, "so safe that you have to build a zarking fortress ship to take the by-products to the nearest black hole and tip them in! Only it doesn't get there because the pilot does a detour - is this right? - to pick up some lobster...? OK, so the guy is cool, but... I mean own up, this

is barking time, this is major lunch, this is stool approaching critical mass, this is... this is... total vocabulary failure!"

"Shut up!" his right head yelled at his left, "we're flanging!"

He got a good calming grip on the remaining beer can.

"Listen guys," he resumed after a moment's peace and contemplation.

The two officials had said nothing. Conversation at this level was not something to which they felt they could aspire. "I just want to know,"

insisted Zaphod, "what you're getting me into here."

He stabbed a finger at the intermittent readings trickling over the computer screen. They meant nothing to him but he didn't like the look of them at all. They were all squiggly with lots of long numbers and things.

"It's breaking up, is that it?" he shouted. "It's got a hold full epsilonic radiating aorist rods or something that'll fry this whole space sector for zillions of years back and it's breaking up. Is that the story? Is that what we're going down to find? Am I going to come out of that wreck with even more heads?"

"It cannot possibly be a wreck, Mr. Beeblebrox," insisted the official, "the ship is guaranteed to be perfectly safe. It cannot possibly break up"

"Then why are you so keen to go and look at it?"

"We like to look at things that are perfectly safe."

"Freeeeoow!"

"Mr. Beeblebrox," said an official, patiently, "may I remind you that you have a job to do?"

"Yeah, well maybe I don't feel so keen on doing it all of a sudden.

What do you think I am, completely without any moral whatsits, what are they called, those moral things?"

"Scruples?"

"Scruples, thank you, whatsoever? Well?"

The two officials waited calmly. They coughed slightly to help pass the time. Zaphod sighed a "what is the world coming to" sort of sigh to absolve himself from all blame, and swung himself round in his seat.

"Ship?" he called.

"Yup?" said the ship.

"Do what I do."

The ship thought about this for a few milliseconds and then, after double checking all the seals on its heavy duty bulkheads, it began slowly, inexorably, in the hazy blaze of its lights, to sink to the lowest depths.

Five hundred feet.

A thousand.

Two thousand.

Here, at a pressure or nearly seventy atmospheres, in the chilling depths where no light reaches, nature keeps its most heated imaginings.

Two foot long nightmares loomed wildly into the bleaching light, yawned, and vanished back into the blackness.

Two and a half thousand feet.

At the dim edges of the ship's lights guilty secrets flitted by with their eyes on stalks.

Gradually the topography of the distantly approaching ocean bed resolved with greater and greater clarity on the computer displays until at last a shape could be made out that was separate and distinct from its surroundings. It was like a huge lopsided cylindrical fortress which widened sharply halfway along its length to accommodate the heavy ultra-plating with which the crucial storage holds were clad, and which were supposed by its builders to have made this the most secure and impregnable spaceship ever built. Before launch the material structure of this section had been battered, rammed, blasted and subjected to every assault its builders knew it could withstand in order to demonstrate that it could withstand them.

The tense silence in the cockpit tightened perceptibly as it became clear that it was this section that had broken rather neatly in two.

"In fact it's perfectly safe," said one of the officials, "it's built so that even if the ship does break up, the storage holds cannot possibly be breached."

Three thousand, eight hundred and twenty five feet.

Four Hi-Presh-A SmartSuits moved slowly out of the open hatchway of the salvage craft and waded through the barrage of its lights towards the monstrous shape that loomed darkly out of the sea night. They moved with a sort of clumsy grace, near weightless though weighed on by a world of water.

With his right-hand head Zaphod peered up into the black immensities above him and for a moment his mind sang with a silent roar of horror.

He glanced to his left and was relieved to see that his other head was busy watching the Brockian Ultra-Cricket broadcasts on the helmet vid without concern. Slightly behind him to his left walked the two officials from the Safety and Civil Reassurance Administration, slightly in front of him to his right walked the empty suit, carrying their implements and testing the way for them.

They passed the huge rift in the broken backed Starship Billion Year Bunker, and played their flashlights up into it. Mangled machinery loomed between torn and twisted bulkheads, two feet thick. A family of large transparent eels lived in there now and seemed to like it.

The empty suit preceded them along the length of the ship's gigantic murky hull, trying the airlocks. The third one it tested ground open uneasily. They crowded inside it and waited for several long minutes while the pump mechanisms dealt with the hideous pressure that the ocean exerted, and slowly replaced it with an equally hideous pressure of air and inert gases. At last the inner door slid

open and they were admitted to a dark outer holding area of the Starship Billion Year Bunker.

Several more high security Titan-O-Hold doors had to be passed through, each of which the officials opened with a selection of quark keys. Soon they were so deep within the heavy security fields that the UltraCricket broadcasts were beginning to fade, and Zaphod had to switch to one of the rock video stations, since there was nowhere that they were not able to reach.

A final doorway slid open, and they emerged into a large sepulchral space. Zaphod played his flashlight against the opposite wall and it fell full on a wild-eyed screaming face.

Zaphod screamed a diminished fifth himself, dropped his light and sat heavily on the floor, or rather on a body which had been lying there undisturbed for around six months and which reacted to being sat on by exploding with great violence. Zaphod wondered what to do about all this, and after a brief but hectic internal debate decided that passing out would be the very thing.

He came to a few minutes later and pretended not to know who he was, where he was or how he had got there, but was not able to convince anybody. He then pretended that his memory suddenly returned with a rush and that the shock caused him to pass out again, but he was helped unwillingly to his feet by the empty suit - which he was beginning to take a serious dislike to - and forced to come to terms with his surroundings.

They were dimly and fitfully lit and unpleasant in a number of respects, the most obvious of which was the colourful arrangement of parts of the ship's late lamented Navigation Officer over the floor, walls and ceiling, and especially over the lower half of his, Zaphod's, suit. The effect of this was so astoundingly nasty that we shall not be referring to again at any point in this narrative - other than to record briefly the fact that it caused Zaphod to throw up inside his suit, which he therefore removed and swapped,

after suitable headgear modifications, with the empty one. Unfortunately the stench of the fetid air in the ship, followed by the sight of his own suit walking around casually draped in rotting intestines was enough to make him throw up in the other suit as well, which was a problem that he and the suit would simply have to live with.

There. All done. No more nastiness.

At least, no more of that particular nastiness.

The owner of the screaming face had calmed down very slightly now and was bubbling away incoherently in a large tank of yellow liquid - an emergency suspension tank.

"It was crazy," he babbled, "crazy! I told him we could always try the lobster on the way back, but he was crazy. Obsessed! Do you ever get like that about lobster? Because I don't. Seems to me it's all rubbery and fiddly to eat, and not that much taste, well I mean is there? I infinitely prefer scallops, and said so. Oh Zarquon, I said so!"

Zaphod stared at this extraordinary apparition, flailing in its tank.

The man was attached to all kinds of life-support tubes, and his voice was bubbling out of speakers that echoed insanely round the ship, returning as haunting echoes from deep and distant corridors.

"That was where I went wrong" the madman yelled, "I actually said that I preferred scallops and he said it was because I hadn't had real lobster like they did where his ancestors came from, which was here, and he'd prove it. He said it was no problem, he said the lobster here was worth a whole journey, let alone the small diversion it would take to get here, and he swore he could handle the ship in the atmosphere, but it was madness, madness!" he screamed, and paused with his eyes rolling, as if the word had rung some kind of bell in his mind, "The ship went right out of control! I couldn't believe what we were doing and just to prove a point about lobster which is really so overrated as a food, I'm sorry to go on about lobsters so much, I'll try and

stop in a minute, but they've been on my mind so much for the months I've been in this tank, can you imagine what it's like to be stuck in a ship with the same guys for months eating junk food when all one guy will talk about is lobster and then spend six months floating by yourself in a tank thinking about it. I promise I will try and shut up about the lobsters, I really will. Lobsters, lobsters, lobsters - enough! I think I'm the only survivor. I'm the only one who managed to get to an emergency tank before we went down. I sent out the Mayday and then we hit. It's a disaster isn't it? A total disaster, and all because the guy liked lobsters. How much sense am I making? It's really hard for me to tell."

He gazed at them beseechingly, and his mind seemed to sway slowly back down to earth like a falling leaf . He blinked and looked at them oddly like a monkey peering at a strange fish. He scrabbled curiously with his wrinkled up fingers at the glass side of the tank. Tiny, thick yellow bubbles loosed themselves from his mouth and nose, caught briefly in his swab of hair and strayed on upwards.

"Oh Zarquon, oh heavens," he mumbled pathetically to himself, "I've been found. I've been rescued..."

"Well," said one of the officials, briskly, "you've been found at least." He strode over to the main computer bank in the middle of the chamber and started checking quickly through the ship's main monitor circuits for damage reports.

"The aorist rod chambers are intact," he said.

"Holy dingo's dos," snarled Zaphod, "there are aorist rods on board...!"

Aorist rods were devices used in a now happily abandoned form of energy production. When the hunt for new sources of energy had at one point got particularly frantic, one bright young chap suddenly spotted that one place which had never used up all its available energy was - the past. And with the sudden rush of blood to the head that such insights tend to induce, he invented a way of mining it that very same night, and within a year huge tracts of the

past were being drained of all their energy and simply wasting away. Those who claimed that the past should be left unspoilt were accused of indulging in an extremely expensive form of sentimentality. The past provided a very cheap, plentiful and clean source of energy, there could always be a few Natural Past Reserves set up if anyone wanted to pay for their upkeep, and as for the claim that draining the past impoverished the present, well, maybe it did, slightly, but the effects were immeasurable and you really had to keep a sense of proportion.

It was only when it was realised that the present really was being impoverished, and that the reason for it was that those selfish plundering wastrel bastards up in the future were doing exactly the same thing, that everyone realised that every single aorist rod, and the terrible secret of how they were made would have to be utterly and forever destroyed. They claimed it was for the sake of their grandparents and grandchildren, but it was of course for the sake of their grandparent's grandchildren, and their grandchildren's grandparents.

The official from the Safety and Civil Reassurance Administration gave a dismissive shrug.

"They're perfectly safe," he said. He glanced up at Zaphod and suddenly said with uncharacteristic frankness, "there's worse than that on board. At least," he added, tapping at one of the computer screens, "I hope it's on board."

The other official rounded on him sharply.

"What the hell do you think you're saying?" he snapped.

The first shrugged again. He said "It doesn't matter. He can say what he likes. No one would believe him. It's why we chose to use him rather than do anything official isn't it? The more wild the story he tells, the more it'll sound like he's some hippy adventurer making it up. He can even say that we said this and it'll make him sound like a paranoid." He smiled pleasantly at Zaphod who was seething in a suit

full of sick. "You may accompany us," he told him, "if you wish."

"You see?" said the official, examining the ultra-titanium outer seals of the aorist rod hold. "Perfectly secure, perfectly safe."

He said the same thing as they passed holds containing chemical weapons so powerful that a teaspoonful could fatally infect an entire planet.

He said the same thing as they passed holds containing zeta-active compounds so powerful that a teaspoonful could blow up a whole planet.

He said the same thing as they passed holds containing theta-active compounds so powerful that a teaspoonful could irradiate a whole planet.

"I'm glad I'm not a planet," muttered Zaphod.

"You'd have nothing to fear," assured the official from the Safety and Civil Reassurance Administration, "planets are very safe. Provided,"

he added - and paused. They were approaching the hold nearest to the point where the back of the Starship Billion Year Bunker was broken. The corridor here was twisted and deformed, and the floor was damp and sticky in patches.

"Ho hum," he said, "ho very much hum."

"What's in this hold?" demanded Zaphod.

"By-products" said the official, clamming up again.

"By-products..." insisted Zaphod, quietly, "of what?"

Neither official answered. Instead, they examined the hold door very carefully and saw that its seals were twisted apart by the forces that had deformed the whole corridor. One of them touched the door lightly.

It swung open to his touch. There was darkness inside, with just a couple of dim yellow lights deep within it.

"Of what?" hissed Zaphod.

The leading official turned to the other.

"There's an escape capsule," he said, "that the crew were to use to abandon ship before jettisoning it into the

black hole," he said. "I think it would be good to know that it's still there." The other official nodded and left without a word.

The first official quietly beckoned Zaphod in. The large dim yellow lights glowed about twenty feet from them.

"The reason," he said, quietly "why everything else in this ship is, I maintain, safe, is that no one is really crazy enough to use them. No one. At least no one that crazy would ever get near them. Anyone that mad or dangerous ring very deep alarm bells. People may be stupid but they're not that stupid."

"By-products," hissed Zaphod again, - he had to hiss in order that his voice shouldn't be heard to tremble - "of what."

"Er, Designer People."

"What?"

"The Sirius Cybernetics Corporation were awarded a huge research grant to design and produce synthetic personalities to order. The results were uniformly disastrous. All the "people" and "personalities"

turned out to be amalgams of characteristics which simply could not co-exist in naturally occurring life forms. Most of them were just poor pathetic misfits, but some were deeply, deeply dangerous. Dangerous because they didn't ring alarm bells in other people. They could walk through situations the way that ghosts walk through walls, because no one spotted the danger.

"The most dangerous of all were three identical ones - they were put in this hold, to be blasted, with this ship, right out of this universe.

They are not evil, in fact they are rather simple and charming. But they are the most dangerous creatures that ever lived because there is nothing they will not do if allowed, and nothing they will not be allowed to do..."

Zaphod looked at the dim yellow lights, the two dim yellow lights. As his eyes became accustomed to the light

he saw that the two lights framed a third space where something was broken. Wet sticky patches gleamed dully on the floor. Zaphod and the official walked cautiously towards the lights. At that moment, four words came crashing into the helmet headsets from the other official.

"The capsule has gone," he said tersely.

"Trace it" snapped Zaphod's companion. "Find exactly where it has gone. We must know where it has gone!"

Zaphod slid aside a large ground glass door. Beyond it lay a tank full of thick yellow liquid, and floating in it was a man, a kindly looking man with lots of pleasant laugh lines round his face. He seemed to be floating quite contentedly and smiling to himself.

Another terse message suddenly came through his helmet headset. The planet towards which the escape capsule had headed had already been identified. It was in Galactic Sector ZZ9 Plural Z Alpha.

The kindly looking man in the tank seemed to be babbling gently to himself, just as the co-pilot had been in his tank. Little yellow bubbles beaded on the man's lips. Zaphod found a small speaker by the tank and turned it on. He heard the man babbling gently about a shining city on a hill.

He also heard the Official from the Safety and Civil Reassurance Administration issue instructions that the planet in ZZ9 Plural Z Alpha must be made "perfectly safe."