

Preface
*(An illogical hope in the face of
overwhelming adversity)*

I know that some of you reading this are convinced humans are a myth, but I am here to state that they do actually exist. For those that don't know, a human is a real bipedal lifeform of mid-range intelligence, living a largely deluded existence on a small water-logged planet in a very lonely corner of the universe.

For the rest of you, and those who sent me, humans are in many respects exactly as strange as you would expect them to be. Certainly it is true that on a first sighting you would be appalled by their physical appearance.

Their faces alone contain all manner of hideous curiosities. A protuberant central nose, thin-skinned lips, primitive external auditory organs known as 'ears', tiny eyes and unfathomably pointless *eyebrows*. All of which take a long time to mentally absorb and accept.

The manners and social customs too are a baffling enigma at first. Their conversation topics are very rarely the things they want to be talking about, and I could write ninety-seven books on body shame and clothing etiquette before you would get even close to understanding them.

Oh, and let's not forget The Things They Do To Make Themselves Happy That Actually Make Them Miserable. This is an infinite list. It includes – shopping, watching TV, taking the better job, getting the bigger house, writing a semi-autobiographical novel, educating their young, making their skin look mildly less old, and harbouring a vague desire to believe there might be a meaning to it all.

Yes, it is all very amusing, in a painful kind of way. But I have discovered human poetry while on Earth. One of these poets, the very best one (her name was Emily Dickinson), said this: 'I dwell in possibility.' So let us humour ourselves and do the same. Let us open our minds entirely, for what you are about to read will need every prejudice you may have to stand aside in the name of understanding.

And let us consider this: what if there actually *is* a meaning to human life? And what if – humour me – life on Earth is something not just to fear and ridicule but also cherish? What then?

Some of you may know what I have done by now, but none of you know the reason. This document, this guide, this account – call it what you will – will make everything clear. I plead with you to read this book with an open mind, and to work out for yourself the true value of human life.

Let there be peace.

PART I

I took my power in my hand

The man I was not

So, what is this?

You ready?

Okay. Inhale. I will tell you.

This book, this actual book, is set right *here*, on Earth. It is about the meaning of life and nothing at all. It is about what it takes to kill somebody, and save them. It is about love and dead poets and wholenut peanut butter. It's about matter and anti-matter, everything and nothing, hope and hate. It's about a forty-one-year-old female historian called Isobel and her fifteen-year-old son called Gulliver and the cleverest mathematician in the world. It is, in short, about how to become a human.

But let me state the obvious. I was not one. That first night, in the cold and the dark and the wind, I was nowhere near. Before I read *Cosmopolitan*, in the garage, I had never even seen this written language. I realise that this could be your first time too. To give you an idea of the way people here consume stories, I have put this book together as a human would. The words I use are human words, typed in a human font, laid out consecutively in the human style. With your almost instantaneous ability to translate even the most exotic and primitive linguistic forms, I trust comprehension should not be a problem.

Now, to reiterate, I was not Professor Andrew Martin. I was like you.

Professor Andrew Martin was merely a role. A disguise. Someone I needed to be in order to complete a task. A task that had begun with his abduction, and death. (I am conscious this is setting a

grim tone, so I will resolve not to mention death again for at least the rest of this page.)

The point is that I was not a forty-three-year-old mathematician – husband, father – who taught at Cambridge University and who had devoted the last eight years of his life to solving a mathematical problem that had so far proved unsolvable.

Prior to arriving on Earth I did not have mid-brown hair that fell in a natural side-parting. Equally, I did not have an opinion on *The Planets* by Holtz or Talking Heads' second album, as I did not agree with the concept of music. Or I shouldn't have, anyway. And how could I believe that Australian wine was automatically inferior to wine sourced from other regions on the planet when I had never drunk anything but liquid nitrogen?

Belonging as I did to a post-marital species, it goes without saying that I hadn't been a neglectful husband with an eye for one of my students any more than I had been a man who walked his English Springer Spaniel – a category of hairy domestic deity otherwise known as a 'dog' – as an excuse to leave the house. Nor had I written books on mathematics, or insisted that my publishers use an author photograph that was now nearing its fifteenth anniversary.

No, I wasn't that man.

I had no feeling for that man whatsoever. And yet he had been real, as real as you and I, a real mammalian life form, a diploid, eukaryotic primate who, five minutes before midnight, had been sitting at his desk, staring at his computer screen and drinking black coffee (don't worry, I shall explain coffee and my misadventures with it a little later). A life form who may or may not have jumped out of his chair as the breakthrough came, as his mind arrived at a place no human mind had ever reached before, the very edge of knowledge.

And at some point shortly after his breakthrough he had been taken by the hosts. My employers. I had even met him, for the

very briefest of moments. Enough for the – wholly incomplete – reading to be made. It was complete physically, just not mentally. You see, you can clone human brains but not what is stored inside them, not much of it anyway, so I had to learn a lot of things for myself. I was a forty-three-year-old newborn on planet Earth. It would become annoying to me, later on, that I had never met him *properly*, as meeting him properly would have been extremely useful. He could have told me about Maggie, for one thing. (Oh, how I wish he had told me about Maggie!)

However, any knowledge I gained was not going to alter the simple fact that I had to halt progress. That is what I was there for. To destroy evidence of the breakthrough Professor Andrew Martin had made. Evidence that lived not only in computers but in living human beings.

Now, where should we start?

I suppose there is only one place. We should start with when I was hit by the car.

Detached nouns and other early trials for the language-learner

Yes, like I said, we should start with when I was hit by the car.

We have to, really. Because for quite a while before that there was nothing. There was nothing and nothing and nothing and—
Something.

Me, standing there, on the ‘road’.

Once there, I had several immediate reactions. First, what was with the weather? I was not really used to weather you had to think about. But this was England, a part of Earth where thinking about the weather was the chief human activity. And for good reason. Second, where was the computer? There was meant to be a computer. Not that I actually knew what Professor Martin’s computer would look like. Maybe it looked like a road. Third, what was that noise? A kind of muted roaring. And fourth: it was night. Being something of a homebird, I was not really accustomed to night. And even if I had been, this wasn’t just any night. It was the kind of night I had never known. This was night to the power of night to the power of night. This was night cubed. A sky full of uncompromising darkness, with no stars and no moon. Where were the suns? Were there even suns? The cold suggested there might not have been. The cold was a shock. The cold hurt my lungs, and the harsh wind beating against my skin caused me to shake. I wondered if humans ever went outside. They must have been insane if they did.

Inhaling was difficult, at first. And this was a concern. After all, inhaling really was one of the most important requirements of being a human. But I eventually got the knack.

And then another worry. I was not where I was meant to be, that was increasingly clear. I was meant to be where he had been. I was meant to be in an office, but this wasn't an office. I knew that, even then. Not unless it was an office that contained an entire sky, complete with those dark, congregating clouds and that unseen moon.

It took a while – too long – to understand the situation. I did not know at that time what a road was, but I can now tell you that a road is something that connects points of departure with points of arrival. This is important. On Earth, you see, you can't just move from one place to another place instantaneously. The technology isn't there yet. It is nowhere near there yet. No. On Earth you have to spend a lot of time travelling in between places, be it on roads or on rail-tracks or in careers or relationships.

This particular type of road was a motorway. A motorway is the most advanced type of road there is, which as with most forms of human advancement essentially meant accidental death was considerably more probable. My naked feet were standing on something called tarmac, feeling its strange and brutal texture. I looked at my left hand. It seemed so crude and unfamiliar, and yet my laughter halted when I realised this fingered freakish thing was a part of me. I was a stranger to myself. Oh, and by the way, the muted roaring was still there, minus the muted part.

It was then I noticed what was approaching me at considerable speed.

The lights.

White, wide and low, they may as well have been the bright eyes of a fast-moving plain-sweeper, silver-backed, and now screaming. It was trying to slow, and swerve.

There was no time for me to move out of the way. There had been, but not now. I had waited too long.

And so it hit me with great, uncompromising force. A force which hurled me off the ground and sent me flying. Only not real

flying, because humans can't fly, no matter how much they flap their limbs. The only real option was pain, which I felt right until I landed, after which I returned to nothing again.

Nothing and nothing and –

Something.

A man wearing clothes stood over me. The proximity of his face troubled me.

No. A few degrees more than troubled.

I was repulsed, terrified. I had never seen anything like this man. The face seemed so alien, full of unfathomable openings and protrusions. The nose, in particular, bothered me. It seemed to my innocent eyes like there was something else inside him, pushing through. I looked lower. Noticed his clothes. He was wearing what I would later realise were a shirt and a tie, trousers and shoes. The exact clothes he should have been wearing and yet they seemed so exotic I didn't know whether to laugh or scream. He was looking at my injuries. Or rather: *for them*.

I checked my left hand. It hadn't been touched. The car had collided with my legs, then my torso, but my hand was fine.

'It's a miracle,' he said quietly, as though it was a secret.

But the words were meaningless.

He stared into my face and raised his voice, to compete with the sound of cars. 'What are you doing out here?'

Again, nothing. It was just a mouth moving, making noise.

I could tell it was a simple language, but I needed to hear at least a hundred words of a new language before I could piece the whole grammatical jigsaw together. Don't judge me on this. I know some of you need only ten or so, or just a single adjectival clause somewhere. But languages were never my thing. Part of my aversion to travel, I suppose. I must reiterate this. I did not want to be sent here. It was a job that someone had to do and – following my blasphemous talk at the Museum of Quadratic Equations, my so-called crime against mathematical purity – the hosts believed

it to be a suitable punishment. They knew it was a job no one in their right mind would choose to do and, though my task was important, they knew I (like you) belonged to the most advanced race in the known universe and so would be up to the job.

‘I know you from somewhere. I recognise your face. Who are you?’

I felt tired. That was the trouble with teleportation and matter shifting and bio-setting. It really took it out of you. And even though it put it back in to you, energy was always the price.

I slipped into darkness and enjoyed dreams tinged with violet and indigo and home. I dreamed of cracked eggs and prime numbers and ever-shifting skylines.

And then I awoke.

I was inside a strange vehicle, strapped to primitive heart-reading equipment. Two humans, male and female (the female’s appearance confirmed my worst fears. Within this species, ugliness does not discriminate between genders), dressed in green. They seemed to be asking me something in quite an agitated fashion. Maybe it was because I was using my new upper limbs to rip off the crudely designed electrocardiographic equipment. They tried to restrain me, but they apparently had very little understanding of the mathematics involved, and so with relative ease I managed to leave the two green-clothed humans on the floor, writhing around in pain.

I rose to my feet, noticing just how much gravity there was on this planet as the driver turned to ask me an even more urgent question. The vehicle was moving fast, and the undulating sound waves of the siren were an undeniable distraction, but I opened the door and leapt towards the soft vegetation at the side of the road. My body rolled. I hid. And then, once it was safe to appear, I got to my feet. Compared to a human hand, a foot is relatively untroubling, toes aside.

I stood there for a while, just staring at all those odd cars, confined to the ground, evidently reliant on fossil fuel and each

making more noise than it took to power a polygon generator. And the even odder sight of the humans – all clothed inside, holding on to circular steer-control equipment and, sometimes, extra-biological telecommunications devices.

I have come to a planet where the most intelligent life form still has to drive its own cars . . .

Never before had I so appreciated the simple splendours you and I have grown up with. The eternal light. The smooth, floating traffic. The advanced plant life. The sweetened air. The non-weather. Oh, gentle readers, you really have no idea.

Cars blared high-frequency horns as they passed me. Wide-eyed, gape-mouthed faces stared out of windows. I didn't understand it, I looked as ugly as any of them. Why wasn't I blending in? What was I doing wrong? Maybe it was because I wasn't in a car. Maybe that's how humans lived, permanently contained in cars. Or maybe it was because I wasn't wearing any clothes. It was a cold night, but could it really have been something so trivial as a lack of artificial body-covering? No, it couldn't be as simple as that.

I looked up at the sky.

There was evidence of the moon now, veiled by thin cloud. It too seemed to be gawping down at me with the same sense of shock. But the stars were still blanketed, out of sight. I wanted to see them. I wanted to feel their comfort.

On top of all this, rain was a distinct possibility. I hated rain. To me, as to most of you dome-dwellers, rain was a terror of almost mythological proportions. I needed to find what I was looking for before the clouds opened.

There was a rectangular aluminium sign ahead of me. Nouns minus context are always tricky for the language learner, but the arrow was pointing only one way so I followed it.

Humans kept on lowering their windows and shouting things at me, above the sound of their engines. Sometimes this seemed good-humoured, as they were spitting oral fluid, in my direction,

orminurk-style. So I spat back in a friendly fashion, trying to hit their fast-moving faces. This seemed to encourage more shouting, but I tried not to mind.

Soon, I told myself, I would understand what the heavily articulated greeting ‘get off the fucking road you fucking wanker’ actually meant. In the meantime I kept walking, got past the sign, and saw an illuminated but disconcertingly unmoving building by the side of the road.

I will go to it, I told myself. I will go to it and find some answers.

Texaco

The building was called ‘Texaco’. It stood there shining in the night with a terrible stillness, like it was waiting to come alive.

As I walked towards it, I noticed it was some kind of refill station. Cars were parked there, under a horizontal canopy and stationed next to simple-looking fuel-delivery systems. It was confirmed: the cars did absolutely nothing for themselves. They were practically brain dead, if they even had brains.

The humans who were refuelling their vehicles stared at me as they went inside. Trying to be as polite as possible, given my verbal limitations, I spat an ample amount of saliva towards them.

I entered the building. There was a clothed human behind the counter. Instead of his hair being on the top of his head it covered the bottom half of his face. His body was more spherical than other humans’ so he was marginally better looking. From the scent of hexanoic acid and androsterone I could tell personal hygiene wasn’t one of his top priorities. He stared at my (admittedly distressing) genitalia and then pressed something behind the counter. I spat, but the greeting was unreciprocated. Maybe I had got it wrong about the spitting.

All this salivatory offloading was making me thirsty, so I went over to a humming refrigerated unit full of brightly coloured cylindrical objects. I picked one of them up, and opened it. A can of liquid called ‘Diet Coke’. It tasted extremely sweet, with a trace of phosphoric acid. It was disgusting. It burst out of my mouth almost the moment it entered. Then I consumed something else. A foodstuff wrapped in synthetic packaging. This was, I would

later realise, a planet of things wrapped inside things. Food inside wrappers. Bodies inside clothes. Contempt inside smiles. Everything was hidden away. The foodstuff was called Mars. That got a little bit further down my throat, but only far enough to discover I had a gag reflex. I closed the door and saw a container with the words 'Pringles' and 'Barbecue' on it. I opened it up and started to eat. They tasted okay – a bit like sorp-cake – and I crammed as many as I could into my mouth. I wondered when I had last actually fed myself, with no assistance. I seriously couldn't remember. Not since infancy, that was for sure.

'You can't do that. You can't just eat stuff. You've got to pay for it.'

The man behind the counter was talking to me. I still had little idea of what he was saying, but from the volume and frequency I sensed it wasn't good. Also, I observed that his skin – in the places on his face where it was visible – was changing colour.

I noticed the lighting above my head, and I blinked.

I placed my hand over my mouth and made a noise. Then I held it at arm's length and made the same noise, noting the difference.

It was comforting to know that even in the most remote corner of the universe the laws of sound and light obeyed themselves, although it has to be said they seemed a little more lacklustre here.

There were shelves full of what I would shortly know as 'magazines', nearly all of which had faces with near-identical smiles on the front of them. Twenty-six noses. Fifty-two eyes. It was an intimidating sight.

I picked up one of these magazines as the man picked up the phone.

On Earth, the media is still locked in a pre-capsule age and most of it has to be read via an electronic device or via a printed medium made of a thin, chemically pulped tree-derivative known as paper. Magazines are very popular, despite no human ever feeling better

for having read them. Indeed, their chief purpose is to generate a sense of inferiority in the reader that consequently leads to them needing to buy something, which they do, and then feel even worse, and so need to buy another magazine to see what they can buy next. It is an eternal and unhappy spiral that goes by the name of capitalism and it is really quite popular. The particular publication I was holding was called *Cosmopolitan*, and I realised that if nothing else it would help me grasp the language.

It didn't take long. Written human languages are preposterously simple, as they are made up almost entirely of words. I had interpolated the entire written language by the end of the first article, in addition to the touch that can boost your mood – as well as your relationship. Also: orgasms, I realised, were an incredibly big deal. It seemed orgasms were the central tenet of life here. Maybe this was the only meaning they had on this planet. Their purpose was simply to pursue the enlightenment of orgasm. A few seconds of relief from the surrounding dark.

But reading wasn't speaking and my new vocal equipment was still sitting there, in my mouth and throat, like yet more food I didn't know how to swallow.

I placed the magazine back on the shelf. There was a thin vertical piece of reflective metal beside the stand, allowing me a partial glimpse of myself. I too had a protruding nose. And lips. Hair. Ears. So much *externality*. It was a very inside-out kind of look. Plus a large lump in the centre of my neck. Very thick eyebrows.

A piece of information came to me, something I remembered from what the hosts had told me. *Professor Andrew Martin*.

My heart raced. A surge of panic. This was what I was now. This was who I had become. I tried to comfort myself by remembering it was just temporary.

At the bottom of the magazine stand were some newspapers. There were photographs of more smiling faces, and some of dead bodies too, lying beside demolished buildings. Next to the newspapers

was a small collection of maps. A *Road Map of the British Isles* was among them. Perhaps I was on the British Isles. I picked up the map and tried to leave the building.

The man hung up the phone.

The door was locked.

Information arrived, unprompted: *Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge University*.

‘You’re not bloody leaving,’ said the man, in words I was beginning to comprehend. ‘The police are on their way. I’ve locked the door.’

To his bafflement, I then proceeded to open the door. I stepped out and heard a distant siren. I listened, and realised the noise was only three hundred metres away and getting rapidly closer. I began to move, running as fast as I could away from the road and up a grass embankment towards another flat area.

There were lots of stationary haulage vehicles, parked in an ordered geometric fashion.

This was such a strange world. Of course, when viewed afresh there were only strange worlds but this one must have been strangest of all. I tried to see the similarity. I told myself that here all things were still made of atoms, and that those atoms would work precisely as atoms always do. They would move towards each other if there was distance between them. If there was no distance between them, they would repel each other. That was the most basic law of the universe, and it applied to all things, even here. There was comfort in that. The knowledge that wherever you were in the universe, the small things were always exactly the same. Attracting and repelling. It was only by not looking closely enough that you saw difference.

But still, right then, difference was all I saw.

The car with the siren was now pulling into the fuelling station, flashing blue light, so I hid among the parked lorries for a few minutes. I was freezing, and crouched into myself, my whole body

shaking and my testicles shrinking. (A male human's testicles were the most attractive thing about him, I realised, and vastly unappreciated by humans themselves, who would very often rather look at anything else, including smiling faces.) Before the police car left I heard a voice behind me. Not a police officer but the driver of the vehicle I was crouched behind.

'Hey, what are you doing? Fuck off away from my lorry.'

I ran away, my bare feet hitting hard ground scattered with random pieces of grit. And then I was on grass, running across a field, and I kept on in the same direction until I reached another road. This one was much narrower and had no traffic at all.

I opened the map, found the line which matched the curve of this other road and saw that word: 'Cambridge'.

I headed there.

As I walked and breathed in that nitrogen-rich air the idea of myself was forming. Professor Andrew Martin. With the name, came facts sent across space by those who had sent me.

I was to be a married man. I was forty-three years old, the exact mid-point in a human life. I had a son. I was the professor who had just solved the most significant mathematic puzzle the humans had ever faced. I had, only three short hours ago, advanced the human race beyond anyone's imagining.

The facts made me queasy but I kept on heading in the direction of Cambridge, to see what else these humans had in store for me.