

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Einstein's Underpants

Anthony McGowan

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Acknowledgements

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About the Book

Meet the Freaks:

- Maths Geek Alexander
- Tortoise Boy and Cedric
- The Human Hurricane
- Really Annoying Girl
- Unluckeon
- Jamie
- Felicity the Official Secretary

Guided by crazy Uncle Otto, they battle a stinking alien commander and use a pair of underpants in a nail-bitingly scary but hilarious bid to save the world.

Anthony McGowan

Einstein's
Underpants

And How They Saved the World

Corgi Yearling

For Alex Mohar Csaky

CHAPTER 1

BAD NEWS FOR PLANET EARTH

ADMIRAL THLUGG OF the Borgia Empire was in a good mood.

This was unusual.

Admiral Thlugg hadn't been in a good mood for almost eight hundred Earth years – although, in fairness, he was notoriously grumpy, even by Borgia standards.

It was the delicious taste of the three Russian cosmonauts that was responsible. The cosmonauts had been part of the World Space Programme's attempt to explore the moons of Jupiter. Their spacecraft, *Putin's Revenge*, had been picked up by a Borgia scout vessel, which took them back through the wormhole to the main fleet.

Being captured by grumpy aliens is never very pleasant, but it was most unfortunate that the cosmonauts encountered the Borgia. The Borgia were perhaps the most despicable life form in the galaxy. Their philosophy was simple: they found, they killed, they ate.

Actually, the very term 'life form' didn't really work for the Borgia as they hardly had a form at all, looking as they did like a heavy sneeze come to life. There was no obvious up or down or back or front to them; not even a real inside or out. They had no eyes, ears, mouths or limbs of their own. They did have a sort of internal beak-like tusk, made from a carbon-tungsten alloy, which they used to help break up and digest some of their chewier victims, but that just floated around inside them like a tooth in a jar of marmalade.

However, they did possess the distinctly unpleasant ability to put to temporary use body parts from whatever other species they had just consumed. So Admiral Thlugg had one

eye, a hand and a buttock from the cosmonauts protruding from various points around his gelatinous body.

Being eaten by Admiral Thlugg was, of course, very bad news for the cosmonauts.

It was also very bad news for planet Earth.

The Borgia communicated mainly by means of smell, which was, frankly, rather silly (as well as smelly). They had two main venting holes, through which they emitted the complex aromas that constituted their language. Thlugg now vented his commands, wafting out little puffs of yellowy gas into one of the smellocaster tubes that ran around his ship: *Lemon, lavender, kippers, cheese, cheese, hint of mint, mature cheddar, milk left out on a hot day turning but not yet completely sour, cheese.*

Or, in our language: 'Engine room, engage fusion thrusters; helmsman, steer course 4512987-6049.99; kitchen, put the kettle on.'

The Borgia attack on planet Earth had begun.

Very bad news for planet Earth.

But that was not all.

That was not even the worst of it.

Not by a long shot.

Because something else was coming. Something more destructive, even, than the Borgia.

Asteroid c4098 was on its way.

Asteroid c4098 was a hunk of rock the size of Wales, travelling at 127,000 kilometres an hour, approaching from the opposite side of the Earth to the Borgia invasion fleet. In four days' time it was going to crash into the middle of the United States, where it would leave a crater big enough to hold an ocean. In a few moments, every living thing in North America would die, with the possible exception of some especially hardy bacteria.

The matter displaced by the impact would form a mushroom cloud reaching high into the stratosphere. Dust

would blow around the world, bringing on a winter that would last for a hundred years.

Never mind global warming, this was global freezing.

And what would be left alive after that time? Those same hardy bacteria. Cockroaches. Rats. Mushrooms.

Bad news, indeed, for planet Earth.

CHAPTER 2

CHECKMATE

PLANET EARTH WAS in trouble, but so was the chess club at St Jude's High School. It was in trouble because it had been invaded. Not by Thlugg and his Borgia stormtroopers, but by Big Mac and the other baboons in his gang.

The chess club was made up of every four-eyed brainiac, weakling, dweeb and nerd in the school. Some were gangly beanpoles with the co-ordination of blind baby kangaroos. Some were shaped like cupcakes. Some like teapots. All any of them hoped for was to get through the day without having their dinner money stolen, or their faces rubbed into the dirt, or being chased by a kid with some dog poo on the end of a stick. In short, they were about as cool as a group of fat clowns sipping hot soup in a sauna.

Alexander wasn't as uncool as the other kids in the chess club. In fact he wasn't really uncool at all, apart from being a bit of a maths geek. He had dark-brown hair and a pleasant round face, and would usually smile unless there was a good reason not to. Alexander wasn't even a chess fanatic. He only hung out at the chess club because of his best friend, Melvyn. Melvyn needed looking after. Melvyn was nice and maybe just a tiny bit boring, but he was also famously unlucky. He was always the one who got poohed on by pigeons or bitten by yappy little dogs or yelled at by mad people in the street.

His worst piece of luck was that on the very first day of school back at the beginning of Year Seven, his mother had dropped him off and given him a sloppy kiss in front of everyone. That kind of thing sticks with you for ever. Since

then he'd had to spend most of his break times hiding from the sort of kids who teased you for being kissed by your mum, and by that I mean almost all the kids in the school, and by 'teased' I mean slapped over the head continually until it was time to go home.

So Alexander used to try to keep Melvyn out of harm's way, even if that sometimes meant that Melvyn's bad luck rubbed off on him.

Usually Mr Van was in charge of the chess club, but today he was late. Mr Van was like a grown-up version of the chess-club nerds. He was probably in the staff toilets trying to comb some of the old food out of his beard. The kids in his class would place bets about what you could find in Mr Van's beard. One day it had been some fragments of fried egg. Another time it was several strands of pot noodle. Once it was a whole chip.

Big Mac and his baboons weren't specifically looking for Melvyn when they burst into the chess club, but they were pleased when they found him there. It was like being a goldminer, and finding a diamond by mistake.

'What have we here?' said Big Mac in his Big Mac voice, which was actually quite high and squeaky – though it was best not to mention that or laugh at him for it or he'd probably kick you in the parts that would make *your* voice high and squeaky too.

Melvyn was playing chess with a skinny, very slightly buck-toothed person called Felicity, the only girl who went to chess club.

Melvyn groaned. It was the sort of timeless sound made all through history by villagers when they saw the barbarians ride up on their horses, ready to steal all their stuff and then burn down their houses and probably ride away with all the pretty girls and most of the plain ones as well, just leaving the cross-eyed and the chubby behind.

Felicity disappeared. The truth is, she was probably safe.

Melvyn found himself alone in the middle of a circle, with the chess-club brainiacs looking on helplessly, like mice watching a weasel.

‘How would you like to *do* this, Wilson?’ said Big Mac pleasantly. ‘You’ve got a couple of options. Either you can just hand over your dinner money now, or we can slap your head for a while, make fun of the way your mum kisses you, slap you a bit more, push you around, make you clean the whiteboard with your tongue – the usual things. What do you say?’

Melvyn didn’t say anything. He just reached into his blazer pocket and fished around for his two pounds.

‘Wait.’

Alexander hadn’t meant to say anything either. He knew it was best just to pay up like they always did.

As soon as he said ‘Wait,’ he knew he was in trouble. Without realizing how it had happened, he found that he was now in the middle of the circle as well, next to Melvyn. Had he barged through, or had they spread out to engulf him? He wasn’t sure.

‘It’s all right,’ said Melvyn, in a mumble. ‘I’ll just give them the money. It’s not worth fighting for it.’

‘Very wise,’ said Big Mac. He loomed over them like a troll. He had tiny black eyes and a nose like a squashed satsuma.

‘No.’

There it was again. The word coming out of Alexander’s mouth without him meaning to say anything.

Big Mac swivelled and gave Alexander his black-eyed stare. Alexander felt his knees turn to jelly.

‘What?’ Big Mac had fat fingers like pink sausages. He was squeezing them into a fist.

‘I said no. You can’t have his dinner money.’

Big Mac looked surprised for a couple of seconds, and then let out a giggle that would have been cute if it had come from a three-year-old. From a boy the size of a small bus, it was most unsettling.

‘What are you, anyway?’ he managed to say after he’d got his breath back. ‘I don’t even know your name. At least everyone knows who Mummy’s Boy here is. But you, you’re virtually invisible.’

The trouble with Big Mac was that he wasn’t as stupid as he looked (or sounded). What he’d said was exactly what Alexander most feared about himself – that he was a nonentity, a nothing. When he’d said ‘No’ to Big Mac earlier, it had come out of nowhere. It was as if he were a ventriloquist’s dummy, speaking someone else’s lines. But now a sea of rage and frustration boiled up inside him, and the words that followed were a surfer riding the wave.

‘My name’s Alexander, and you can’t have Melvyn’s dinner money and you can’t have mine. Now get lost, you squeaky-voiced fat baby, before I throw you out.’

It was the single bravest thing Alexander had ever done. Admittedly, there wasn’t much competition. The second bravest thing was probably when he got a splinter and didn’t cry too loudly while his mum pried it out with a needle.

If Alexander thought that his brave words would intimidate Big Mac, he was to be disappointed.

‘Excellent,’ Big Mac said. ‘I haven’t had an excuse to thump anyone for ages.’ He held his sausagey fingers up in front of his face. ‘Poor little guys,’ he said sweetly. ‘Been feeling all left out? I’ve been neglecting you, haven’t I? Well, time to play.’

Then Big Mac pulled back his fist, ready to deliver the sort of thump that would knock out a tractor. Alexander considered ducking, but the trouble is that anyone who has to think about ducking has already been hit.

That Alexander *wasn’t* was due to the fact that at that very moment Mr Van arrived, dragged along by Felicity.

‘Good to see you here, Donald,’ he said loudly. ‘Always nice to have new members of the chess club. Why don’t you play me, and we can see what sort of standard you are, eh?’

Big Mac's fat fist was stuck in the air, looking faintly ridiculous. He stared at it for a moment, then scratched his head. 'I was just going, sir,' he replied squeakily. 'I'll see you later,' he said menacingly, looking at Alexander.

Then he and his sidekicks sloped off.

'Thanks,' said Melvyn, looking at his friend strangely.

Alexander shook his head and shrugged his shoulders, as if to indicate that he had no explanation for what had just occurred. He spent the rest of the day feeling puzzled and slightly scared. But nothing else unusual happened - on that day, at least.

CHAPTER 3

UNCLE OTTO

ALEXANDER WASN'T SURE what was going on to begin with. In his dream, the blobby monster that was chasing him suddenly stopped, opened its horrible toothless mouth and started singing the theme from *Neighbours*.

Alexander woke up.

Must change that stupid ring tone, he thought to himself as he answered his mobile.

'Hello?' he said sleepily.

'ALEXANDER, ALEX, LEXIE LEX, EX.'

'What . . . ? Who . . . ? Oh, hello.'

Alexander realized it was his uncle Otto, the mad scientist.

Uncle Otto wasn't really Alexander's uncle, he wasn't really called Otto, and he wasn't really a scientist, although he was probably mad. Uncle Otto was related to Alexander in some very obscure way that nobody in his family quite understood, involving second cousins, a secret marriage, an adoption, a long prison sentence, a divorce, and a baby found on a doorstep with a note pinned to its blanket saying: *Plese luk aftor me or I'll probibbly dye*.

Uncle Otto was originally called Kevin, and for a long time he worked in a supermarket, eventually becoming assistant deputy manager of his local Tesco. He seemed happy enough, walking around the aisles, making sure that there were enough tins of baked beans and dog food, and that they didn't get mixed up, and he became very good at fixing the tills when they jammed, which was once every fifteen minutes.

But about five years before the events related here, he had climbed on top of the milk cabinet and declared to the world that he was no longer an assistant deputy manager of Tesco but a scientist, doing ground-breaking work on the origins of the universe. He added that semi-skimmed milk was Satan's wee-wee and that eating yogurt made you blind.

Strangely, Tesco decided that they didn't particularly want him working for them any more, and from that day on he was free to dedicate himself to scientific research. He changed his name to Otto because, as he put it, 'It's a good name for a scientist.'

Alexander's mum and dad were the only members of the family who stayed in touch with Otto (or Kevin). Once a month they would go round to his small flat and make sure he was OK. Usually, Uncle Otto wasn't OK, at least as far as Alexander's mum and dad were concerned. Sometimes he would have built a sort of den in his living room made of silver-foil takeaway food cartons.

'Their mind rays can't penetrate the foil,' he explained.

Sometimes he would speak his sentences backwards. Or, in his own words, *Backwards sentences his speak would he sometimes*. Because that way, he told Alexander in a confiding tone, 'Saying I'm what understand can't they.'

He never got round to saying exactly who 'they' were - although, as we'll find out, that eventually became quite clear to Alexander.

Whatever the rest of his family thought, Alexander loved his uncle Otto. During their visits he would sit entranced listening to Otto's ideas about the universe. The great scientist had a telescope set up in his loft, looking out through the skylight. He claimed it was the most powerful telescope in private hands, although Alexander was sure he'd seen the same model for sale in Argos for £49.99, including a free book to help you identify the stars. Alexander would look through it into the night sky, but all he

could ever see was smudges and splotches, and not the moons, planets, galaxies and alien spacefleets Uncle Otto claimed were there.

Back to that phone call.

Alexander checked his alarm clock. It was 4.30 a.m.

‘Do you realize what time—’

‘They’re coming for me!’ Uncle Otto sounded pretty intense.

Alexander had invented his own scale for working out what sort of mood Uncle Otto was going to be in. The mildest, least insane Otto was just ‘batty’. From there the scale went through ‘fruitcake’ to ‘bananas’, ‘loop-the-loop’, ‘mad as a monkey on a trike’, all the way up to ‘screaming loony’.

Now, Alexander reckoned that Uncle Otto was about halfway between loop-the-loop and monkey on a trike.

‘Who’s coming for you?’ he asked sleepily.

‘Can’t explain now. Come round right away.’

‘But, Uncle Kevin – I mean, Otto, it’s the middle of the night . . .’

‘Who cares about the time? Don’t you realize the future of the planet is at stake?’

‘How? What do you mean?’

‘I can’t explain over the phone. They monitor all communications. I can’t block them.’

‘I can’t come round now. My mum . . . she’ll go crazy.’

Uncle Otto started screaming at the top of his voice: ‘BUT THEY’RE COMING. THEY’RE COMING NOW! THEY’RE COMING TO EAT US. IT’S ALL DOWN TO YOU AND ME. WE’RE THE ONLY ONES WHO CAN SAVE HUMANITY!’

‘OK, OK. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.’

That calmed Uncle Otto down, and he stopped screaming.

Alexander got up and pulled on his jeans and jumper over his pyjamas. He looked out of his window. The first glimmerings of dawn were lighting the edges of the world. A massive yawn bubbled up from somewhere around his