

So Long And Thanks For All The Pancakes

By Peter Brooks

The control room of the starship Heart of Gold, whiter than the whitest white and currently spotted about with various lifeforms in the process of being unconscious, was quiet save for the sound of Zaphod snoring.

To be exact it was Zaphod's second head that was doing the snoring. The first head had a large sock in its mouth, placed there by an irate Trillian when it started snoring first; she couldn't find a second sock to put in the mouth of the accessory head, and Marvin, the Paranoid Android, had made such a fuss when she asked him to look for one that she decided it was simpler to stuff cheese from the mousetraps into her ears.

Arthur stirred as he slowly rose from the depths of a really peculiar dream in which he was back on the Earth before it had been destroyed, but this time he was Prince Charles and he seemed to spend all his time being nice to plants.

Arthur opened his eyes, and saw a plant. "Hello" he said. "You're looking particularly ..er.. green today."

"Thank you" said the plant, "I've been taking lessons."

Arthur's eyes opened wider, since although he had become accustomed to experiencing three amazingly amazing things before breakfast ever since leaving the Earth with Ford Prefect, talking plants were still a little too amazing to be handled without a cup of tea first.

"I need a cup of tea," said Arthur, and the plant began to cry.

"My late uncle was a tea bush" it sobbed, and Arthur resolved to stop airing his thoughts out loud.

"Marvin!" called Arthur. Perhaps the android could make him a cup of tea, and something to eat. Clanking and clunking, Marvin shuffled into view.

"Yes? What is it?" asked Marvin. "You know I'm not going to like whatever it is you're going to ask me. I never like whatever it is you're going to ask me."

"I was just wondering," said Arthur, but he was cut off by the abrupt awakening of Zaphod, who said curtly "I wouldn't do that if I were you. In fact, Earth man, I wouldn't do that even if I wasn't you. Wondering can get you into some sticky situations."

"What I was wondering - before I was so rudely interrupted" and here Arthur glared at Zaphod, "What I was wondering was whether I could get a good cup of tea and maybe a pancake or two."

"Heyyyy" said Zaphod, lifting his sunglasses on both his heads. "Pancakes. Amazingly amazing idea, Earth man. Marvin, rustle us up some pancakes, like pronto. Whatever they are."

Marvin groaned. "Oh dear, I know I'm not going to like this. What sort of pancakes do you want? Not that I really want to know, you understand."

"Just ordinary pancakes" replied Arthur, "the kind we used to have on Earth on Pancake Day, before the Vogons destroyed the planet."

"I have over one hundred thousand recipes for pancakes - which one do you want?" asked Marvin, his intonation sounding more and more depressed.

"Whatever one uses three fresh eggs, a pint of milk, eight ounces of plain flour and a pinch of salt, cooked in extra virgin olive oil" said Arthur, slightly testily. This was turning out to be more complex than he thought, but then everything about his life these days was turning out to be more complex than he thought.

Marvin sighed. "I knew I wasn't going to like this" he groaned, "I've never heard of that one. You'll have to tell me how to do it" and he began shuffling and clanking towards the kitchen.

At this point Ford awoke. It wasn't any particular sound that aroused him, but his life revolved around lists and deep in his slumber he'd heard a list, and his subconscious tapped the elbow of his semi-conscious and told it to get its act together, which it did.

"Did I hear someone give out a list?" he asked eagerly, as he pulled his master copy of the HitchHiker's Guide to Recipes out of its plain brown holster with the friendly lettering "Don't Picnic" arranged carefully in a staggered pattern on the flap.

"Earth man is going to give us a lesson in Gordon Blue" smirked Zaphod, as he shook Trillian awake. "We're cooking - let's go" he motioned to her, but she shook her head in puzzlement. Zaphod reached forward and with two hands pulled the cheese out of her ears. His third arm sneaked forward and stuck two fingers up her nose, but Zaphod tapped the wayward arm warningly and it retreated. "German engineering," he scoffed, "Give me the Japanese any day, as long as they don't use Ford's designs and Firestone's rubber."

"What?" asked Trillian. "We're going to get something to eat - pancakes, Earth style" responded Zaphod. "Ooh, goodie - I haven't had any decent food since we left Islington" said Trillian and jumped up from the large white couch on which she had been sleeping.

The trio followed Arthur and Marvin towards the spotlessly white kitchen. Marvin groaned. "Oh, no. One of those doors again. I can't stand their insincerity." The door, as if on cue, spoke in an artificially bright voice. "Good day to you. It will be my pleasure to open for you. I genuinely hope that you will enjoy the gourmet offerings to be found within and that your day will be the pleasanter for it. Have a nice day!" and it swished open using the special swishing noise that all doors use when they don't have doorknobs and hinges.

It sounded as though Marvin blew an electronic raspberry as he walked through, but a clue was provided by the sudden movement of Zaphod's third arm as its hand waved in the air behind him. No one noticed.

The air conditioning system sprang into life with a chirpy "Hello! It will be my pleasure to remove from the atmosphere any and all unpleasant odors and

particles that might otherwise cause you discomfort" at which point Trillian sniffed the air and looked accusingly at Arthur.

Arthur bristled. "It wasn't me" he snapped. "I haven't even had anything to eat yet. Ford?" "Don't look at me" shrugged Ford, "I haven't eaten since forever. It must have been Marvin."

Arthur looked quizzically at Marvin. "Can an android break wind?" he asked. Marvin groaned. "Do you want me to do that before or after we cook the pancakes?" he asked drearily, and then added "Don't bother. I know you don't really want to know. It's just one of those things you ask at parties when you can't think of anything better to say. Don't mind me." He paused. "I have a feeling the stove is going to annoy me just like the doors do. It's so depressing."

The stove awoke with a start. "Say there, folks, you caught me napping. It will be my pleasure to cook everything exactly the way you like it, or my name isn't Belling Model 97 Super Plus Dream Hob."

Arthur looked around. Everything was so white it was almost blinding. "Where can I get some eggs, milk, plain flour, salt and extra virgin olive oil - oh, and some granulated sugar?" he asked Marvin. "What? In that order?" replied Marvin, as if he had just been handed some herculean task. "No, not particularly" answered Arthur, who was beginning to think that perhaps he was the one with the herculean task.

"Suppose I tell you what I want, since you probably know this place like the back of your ..er.. hand, and I'll cook?" suggested Arthur to Marvin. "It's all the same to me" droned Marvin, "I won't notice any difference. Brain the size of a planet, and they ask me if I can cook pancakes."

"And make tea" Arthur reminded him. "What kind of tea?" asked Marvin. "I have even more recipes for tea - oolong, lapsang souchong, Earl Grey, English breakfast, Darjeeling, Assam, Ceylon, Orange Pekoe. . ."

"Forget the tea for now" interrupted Arthur, exasperation creeping into his voice. "Let's just concentrate on the pancakes. See if you can rustle up a food blender and a medium size non-stick frying pan. A spatula and a shallow ladle wouldn't come amiss, either."

Marvin clanked over to what looked like a blank wall, stretched out his arm and part of the wall opened to reveal what looked remarkably like a Krups blender, a medium size non-stick frying pan, a spatula and a shallow ladle.

"How did you do that?" asked Arthur incredulously. Trillian provided the answer. "This is the Heart of Gold, remember? The only starship powered by an infinite improbability drive. Things happen here that aren't impossible - just very, very unlikely." Arthur blinked and shook his head.

"OK" he said to Marvin, "Let's put the ingredients together. How about three eggs?" Marvin groaned again. "I have several thousand types of egg - which would you like? Quail, duck, goose, crocodile, pheasant, ostrich, duck-billed platypus, chicken. . .". "Chicken is fine" interrupted Arthur. "What kind of chicken?" asked Marvin. "Rhode Island Red, Cornish, Bantam, capon, broiler. . ."

"Look, just three chicken's eggs, grade AA - nothing fancy, OK?" snapped Arthur, who was beginning to wonder if he was ever going to see a pancake this side of the millennium. "Also," he went on, "I'll need eight ounces of plain white flour, a pint of cow's milk - skimmed will do - a pinch of salt - No Salt is OK - some extra virgin olive oil and some granulated sugar."

Marvin clanked to another part of the wall, waved his arm, and the wall opened to reveal a collection of precisely the ingredients Arthur had listed, along with a small plate.

Arthur walked over, took each egg in turn and broke it onto the plate, sniffed it and then tipped it into the blender. Then he took the milk, the flour and the salt and put them into the blender, placed the lid on top and looked for the lead to plug it in. "Everything is self-contained" explained Trillian, "Just push the button and it'll work fine."

Arthur did as she suggested, and the blender whirred into life, mixing the contents for about a minute. Trillian put the pan on the stove's largest hot plate, and turned the dial to medium-high. "Is that about right?" she asked Arthur. "Looks good to me" he answered as he added a tablespoon of oil to the already warming pan.

Once the oil was hot enough to emit a little smoke, he scooped up a ladle full of mixture, poured the liquid into the sizzling pan, and then deftly tilted it so that the pancake mix spread evenly over the whole surface. "It takes about a minute or two for it to brown, and then we turn it over with the spatula and cook the other side until it seems brown enough, and then we put it on a plate, sprinkle it with sugar - maybe some lemon juice if you like - and eat it while it's still hot." He beamed with pride at Ford and Zaphod as his culinary concoction began to take form, pancake after pancake - a dozen in all.

Trillian leaped on each one as it was cooked, added sugar and folded it several times, and then pushed it ravenously into her mouth. Soon there was no mixture left - and no pancakes either. She had scoffed the lot. Arthur looked a little miffed. "Hey," he protested, "You didn't leave any for me. Now I'll have to do it all over again" and he turned to Marvin. "I know, I know," moaned Marvin. "You want everything all over again. It's so depressing I can't even bear to think about it" and he clanked towards the wall.

Zaphod turned to Ford and muttered "I fancy some real food. How does roast Arcturan Megadonkey with all the trimmings sound to you?" Ford licked his lips and replied under his breath "Better than pancakes, any day."

The End