

1 THE ALIEN CONSPIRACY

It was a warm summer's morning, and it was too hot for the old man to lie on the beach any longer. He sat up rubbed his eyes and looked in the mirror app on his tablet. His creased face and squinty eyes made him look older than his sixty-two years. His thin grey hair, once brown, stuck out like a toilet brush and he had two-days of stubble. A crumpled short-sleeved shirt, knee-length shorts and old, but once expensive sandals completed the depressing image of a man who, once well-cared for, now neglected his appearance.

Tutting to himself, he walked down to the sea, splashed some of the cool Bristol Channel onto his face to wake himself up and returned to the small plot that he had staked out with his towel. The beach was already half-full with young families and more were arriving by the minute. He dried his face, wetted and combed his hair, packed his few things into his duffel bag and trudged up to the road. His back hurt again and his feet were slightly swollen and red from having been exposed to the sun for too long when he was asleep.

'You silly old sod, Michael! Now look what you've gone and done!' he said to himself, although not out loud. He often talked to himself these days, perhaps he always had - he couldn't be bothered to remember, but he was grateful that he hadn't yet got to the stage of voicing his thoughts. 'You should know better than not to allow for the moving shadows at your age...'

'It wasn't my fault... it was the alien abduction... the gamma rays my feet were subjected to when the Greys abducted me...' he countered. A car's horn caused him to realise that he was in the middle of the busy Beach Road. He held up his hand and smiled an apology as he shuffled on to the safety of the opposite pavement.

"That's it!" he exclaimed under his breath, and then thought: 'I was lying in bed with my beautiful wife, when aliens walked through the wall and started to carry her away. "No, don't take her, take me instead!", I pleaded, and blow me down, they did 'n' all... and that's how my feet got burned and my back got hurt. Gamma radiation on the feet and a poorly-placed implant between two of my lower vertebrae'.

He stood outside a coffee shop wanting one to wake himself up fully. "I'm not paying those prices for a coffee!" he said aloud looking at his watch. "I'll walk into town and have one there. The beach will be too hot and too busy for me for at least another five hours".

So, he shuffled on, his back pain slowly easing as it got exercise, although his feet still throbbed. 'At least I'll be safe from abduction in this crowd', he mused as he walked against the tide of people streaming towards the sea. 'I'll be safe for at least a mile... at least an hour... and then I'll duck into Joe's Greasy Spoon. They won't think of looking for me in there either!'

'What are you talking about you dozy old sod? They can track you with the RFID implant in your back!' said his alter ego, Ralph.

'Oh, yes... Ah, but because they misplaced it, my vertebrae have crushed and destroyed it; so it's not working any more!'

'OK, that might work... if you can believe that beings intelligent enough to traverse the universe would misplace an implant...'

'Well, they're only human...'

'You just said they were aliens!'

'Yes, I did didn't I... but I didn't say that they were infallible!'

'No, that's true. So, how many of them got lost coming to Earth?'

'I don't know... they didn't live to tell the tale... they crashed into the Sun,' he chuckled to himself.

'Oh, I give up. I can't have a decent conversation with you!' said his alter ego.

'That cuts both ways', he replied and noticed a woman walking towards him with a worried look on her face as she gave him the once over. "Good morning, madam!" he said to her. "Make sure you put plenty of X Factor sunblock on, the Sun is mighty fierce today". She pursed her lips, looked the other way and hurried on past thinking him to be drunk.

"Oh, well," he muttered, "you sure as Hell can't please everybody, so, you might as well just please yourself".

As he entered the High Street, where the Greasy Spoon was, a jolly, short, student-type woman handed him a glossy brochure. "Support the High Street Traders!" she said with a practised smile as she turned to say the same to another passer-by. He wanted to refuse it, but again just couldn't be bothered, so he entered the café and put it on the window table where he normally sat, fully intending to leave it there for Joe to dispose of when he left.

"Morning, Michael, my good man! Ah's your bum for cracking walnuts today, chiefy? The usual is it? The VIP brunch?" said the tall, good-looking sixty-odd year-old man behind the counter. He was wearing a chef's tall white hat, white jacket, a long white apron over shorts, flip-flops, and a lugubrious smile on his large, sad-looking mouth. His eyes were bright and grey displaying a keen sense of humour.

"Yes, please, Joe. And my bum's fine at the moment, thanks, but I don't know what it'll be like after one of your delectable breakfasts. I can see that you're rushed off to your feet at the moment, but could you put this on charge for me, please?" He handed Joe a seven by five inch tablet.

"Ay... less of that. I was only being friendly! There's always at least one joker in the pack, I'n' there? Anyway, I got a backlog, it'll be about fifteen minutes", he moaned as he took the tablet and walked off.