

MY PLANET PANDA POP



The school-assembly incident was bad. The Porsche Showroom Incident was like being killed and sent back to Level One with no spare lives. ‘All we wanted,’ said Mum, ‘was for you to learn some social skills.’

‘Social skills?’ said Dad. ‘Well, let’s see – he got a little girl to pose as his daughter, and he persuaded a salesman to lend him a Porsche. He’s got social skills. He’s got TOO MANY social skills. We asked him to learn some and he learned too many. That’s the problem.’

It turned out that Dad was right about visible friends being different from cyberfriends. If someone doesn’t turn up on Warcraft, you can always just

recruit someone else. But when I walked through the New Strand Shopping Centre on Saturday mornings, even though there were thousands of people there, it was really noticeable that none of them was Florida.

Mum got really stressed about the whole thing. ‘Liam,’ she kept saying, ‘what are we going to do with you?’

Dad looked on the Internet for self-help groups for people with unusual problems. About an hour later he came back and said, ‘What about this – popular coastal resort, Tunisia? A hundred and fifty pounds a head.’

‘Tunisia’s a bit far,’ said Mum. ‘I was hoping there’d be a group in the library.’

‘No, I’m talking about a holiday. That’s what we need, isn’t it? The three of us. Go somewhere no one knows us. And just unwind.’

I was completely excited about this. I’d never been abroad before. I spent the whole week reading holiday brochures and even went with Mum and Dad to the travel agent, which was a disaster because when I get completely excited I talk too much. For instance, when Tunisia was mentioned, I said, ‘Yes. Four-star accommodation, all meals AND we could go and see the Sahara Desert!’

Mum said, ‘The Sahara Desert? You are joking. The Sahara Desert is a desert. People get lost in deserts. They starve to death and see mirages and

get eaten alive by ants. Oh no, no, no, no. We're not going to a desert.'

The travel-agent woman said, 'If you did choose the *optional* desert excursion, Mrs Digby, you would be accompanied by our trained local staff in a fully air-conditioned coach. It's a very well-organized trip.'

'No one ever,' said Mum, 'INTENDS to get eaten alive by ants. But Accidents Happen. Especially in the Sahara Desert. What else have you got?'

'Tenerife is already quite warm.'

Although it is politically part of Spain, the island of Tenerife is off the coast of Africa and is therefore hot all the year round. Especially in the south. It's more rainy in the north because of this big pointy mountain in the middle of the island. It's so tall that it has snow on top, even in the summer. It's called Teide. Mum looked interested when I told her all of this. I probably should've stopped just there and not gone on to mention that Teide isn't just an ordinary mountain.

'A volcano!?' said Mum.

'An EXTINCT volcano,' said the woman from the travel agent, very quickly.

'Extinct or dormant?' said Mum, surprising everyone with her unexpected geological knowledge.

'What's the difference?' asked the travel-agent lady.

'The difference,' said Mum, 'between life and death.'

The travel-agent woman held up a brochure for Florida. 'Very popular.' She smiled, without going into detail.

Mum looked at me. I said nothing.

She looked at the travel agent, who just kept smiling.

She looked at Dad. He tried to keep smiling too. But she raised an eyebrow and he just can't cope with that. In the end he admitted, 'Alligators.'

After that there was Turkey (earthquakes), Cyprus (poisonous triggerfish), Italy (the Mafia) and Greece (shipwrecks). Then we were standing outside the shop with Mum taking a deep breath and saying, 'Well, I haven't even gone anywhere and I'm already glad to be home.'

They decided to forget about the holiday and redecorate the kitchen instead. Dad pointed out that a holiday only lasted a week or two whereas a new kitchen would last forever. So instead of going on a well-organized, air-conditioned trip of the Sahara, we went to Nothing But Drainers and looked at granite work surfaces.

'This one's a bit pricey,' said the man, 'but you get what you pay for and this is real Italian granite.'

It was mostly blue. I remember looking at it, thinking, That's igneous rock. That came from way underground in Italy. That drainer has had a more exciting life than I have.

Dad said, 'What d'you think, Liam?'

'Good. You can't go wrong with igneous. It is igneous, isn't it?'

The man said, 'I don't think so. These are new in today from our supplier in Turin.'

I said, 'It's made of crystallized magma.'

'No, son. This is real Italian granite. It's not made at all.'

'It was made by magma bubbling up from the Earth's mantle millions of years ago. The molten magma cooled in the crust and turned into crystals, then probably sat being squeezed into flat beds for about a billion years until it was dug up by Italians. All that trouble and then it's chopped up and sent to Nothing But Drainers, where my mum will look at it for five minutes and say, "I'm not sure about this colour."'

The man looked at Dad. Dad just shrugged. 'He's in Gifted and Talented. At school. They do all about this kind of thing. Last month it was global warming.'

Mum said, 'He is right though. I'm not sure about this colour.'

Not only was I not allowed to go to Tunisia, I wasn't even allowed to walk home by myself any more. Mum and Dad took to meeting me from school and escorting me home, like a prisoner. They would have banned me from Little Stars too except everyone else had done so much work on *The Big Friendly Giant* that it wouldn't be fair if it had to be cancelled.

Lisa tried to be nice about it. 'You're the star,' she said, 'so you get your own dressing room.' Then she shoved me into this cupboardy thing just behind the stage. There was one chair, no window, a packet of pickled-onion flavour Space Ranger crisps and a blue Panda Pop. Space Rangers are the cheapest crisps that money can buy. They are crisps, but only until you put them in your mouth. The moment they make contact with your tongue they stop being crisps and become soggies. The flavour is sort of optional in that it seems to fall off the crisps and make a powdery sludge at the bottom of the bag, which you can scoop up with your finger if you like. Blue Panda Pops are supposedly raspberry flavoured, but the flavour is irrelevant as they are so fizzy that when you drink them your all senses close down and your brain just shouts, 'FIZZY!' Later on you belch a lot, which is fine if you're playing the BFG, as he's quite a belchy character.

I remember sitting in that cupboard, feeling like the rest of the world had completely vanished and that I was now orbiting the Sun entirely on my own, on a chair. Planet Panda Pop. Sitting in a tiny enclosed space eating strange chemicals. It turns out that Little Stars was outstanding training for astronauts.

During the interval, I just messed about on DraxWorld. At first I checked 'location of phone one' – so I could see where Dad was. He was in the

audience. Then I looked at all the Waterloos in the world, trying to decide on a favourite. I was just tossing up between Waterloo, Sierra Leone, and Waterloo, Trinidad and Tobago, when the phone rang. It was a woman with a very friendly voice saying, ‘Hi, I’m calling on behalf of Drax Communications. We’ve noticed you have a very interesting pattern of use and we’d like to ask you a few questions if you have some minutes.’

I had about two and a half minutes to the beginning of Act Two.

‘Can I just ask you, have you actually been to any of the following places which appear in your recent searches – Waterloo, Sierra Leone?’

‘No.’

‘Waterloo, Siberia?’

‘No.’

‘Waterloo, Belgium?’

‘No.’

‘Do you have any plans to visit these places in the near future?’

‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘all of them. I don’t know how near the future is though.’

‘We also noticed that your recent searches include many theme parks and rides.’

‘Oh. Yes. Alton Towers. Eurodisney. Six Flags. Mountain—’

‘Pretty well all the theme parks in the world, in fact. What is it you like about theme parks?’

‘The Crispy New World feeling you get after you’ve been on a thrill ride. I love that.’

‘So you go on the rides with your children?’

She thought I was a grown-up and she couldn’t even see me! I deepened my voice a bit and said, ‘That’s right. Yeah.’

‘How old is your child?’

‘Eleven.’

‘Lovely. Thank you. And one last thing – as a dad, how would you summarize your philosophy of child-rearing?’

‘My what?’

‘What do you want most for your children?’

‘Well . . .’ I don’t remember thinking about it. I just came out with this: ‘I want my children to think of the whole world as their thrill ride.’

‘Oh,’ said the woman. ‘What a beautiful thought.’

And I was thinking, Yes, it is a lovely thought. I wonder where it came from.

‘Thank you, Mr Digby, for talking to me. We’ll be in touch very soon.’

She hung up. In World of Warcraft, when you defeat an enemy you can take their stuff: their money, their armour, things like that. But sometimes it turns out they’ve got something you weren’t expecting – like a magic ability or a bottle of the Elixir of the Mages. And you can feel the extra power surge

through you. That's how I felt at the end of that call. I knew something cosmic was going to happen.

A few minutes later, Lisa knocked on the door, shouting, 'BFG on stage, please!'

As we were walking up to the wings, I got a text. Lisa snarled, 'Turn off your mobile, for goodness sake.'

'In a second.'

'In fact, give it to me.'

'OK, yeah, whatever,' I said with a giant smile. I was smiling because of the text:

You have been selected to take part in a very special competition, with a prize that will make you into a hero in the eyes of your children. Infinity Park is a unique new theme park in China, packed with astonishing, innovative attractions, including the Biggest Thrill Ride in the History of the World – the Rocket. We are offering four fathers and their children the chance to travel to the park, experience the rides and visit local landmarks.

Don't miss your chance to become the Greatest Dad Ever. Call this

secret number tomorrow before midday GMT to find out if you are one of the four lucky winners. Please do not disclose this number to anyone else.

All you have to do is get put through.

I was still smiling after the play was over and everyone had finished clapping. Lisa said I was the friendliest-looking Big Friendly Giant she'd ever seen. Mum said, 'I loved it. You looked so *happy* up there!'

I waited till we were getting into the car and then I showed Dad the text. 'China . . . the Biggest Thrill Ride in the History of the World . . . your chance to become the Greatest Dad Ever.' I got that Crispy New World Feeling just reading it.

I expected Dad to jump up and down with excitement and say, 'Get the suncream, Liam.' Inexplicably he didn't. He shook his head and said, 'No one really wins those things.'

'Well, someone must win them. Otherwise they wouldn't be allowed to advertise them. Of course someone wins them. Come on, it's just a phone call.'

'Yes, a long, long phone call. This is just a trick to get you to spend loads of money calling a premium-rate phone number. And when you do, there's

nothing at the other end except a voice saying, *Please hold*, and playing some nice classical music. And they collect the money for the call.'

'But you've been specially selected.'

'Yeah. Me and ten million others.'

He deleted the message.

We walked home past the shopping centre. I looked up but you couldn't see any stars. I remember thinking, I'll probably never get out of Bootle as long as I live. It's funny to think I am now at this moment further away from Bootle than any other living human.

That night Dad wanted us all to play Monopoly in the new kitchen. Monopoly! Has ANYONE EVER played Monopoly to the end? Don't most people just sort of slip into a kind of boredom coma after a few goes and wake up six months later with a handful of warm hotels? If it had been Risk or Cluedo, that would have been something, but Monopoly!

'Sit down,' he said. 'It'll be nice. All of us together. We haven't played a game for ages.'

I said, 'Monopoly is not a game.'

'Well, here's the dice and here's the board – how is that not a game?'

'It's not a game because NOTHING IS HAPPENING. In Monopoly you

can ask someone else to take your go for you while you go to the toilet and it won't make any difference. Can you imagine asking someone else to take your go in chess, or Risk, or football? I'll tell you what Monopoly is. Monopoly is my life – going round and round the same streets over and over again with not enough money.'

'So,' said Dad, 'you don't want to play then?'

'No, I don't.' I got up. I was going to go and play a few hours of Warcraft.

'It's always an anticlimax,' said Mum, 'when you're in a play or something and then it ends.'

'You don't want to play a little game of Monopoly with your real live mum and dad?' said Dad. 'But you'll play all night with your invisible Warcraft friends.'

'I haven't got any real live friends left, have I?'

'Maybe you would have if you weren't always coaxing them into illegal situations involving high-powered sports cars.'

'Oh now,' said Mum, 'he isn't ALWAYS doing that. He only did it once.'

'And isn't once enough?!'

They were still discussing this when I logged into Azeroth and summoned my guild – the Wanderlust Warriors.

We were crossing the Blasted Lands with a caravan of traders when the door

opened and Dad looked in. ‘Listen,’ he said, ‘I’m sorry about earlier. If you don’t want to play Monopoly, that’s fine. I’ll play Warcraft.’

‘Oh. Thanks. But it doesn’t really work like that.’

‘How does it work then?’

So I tried to explain Warcraft to Dad, but honestly – where do you begin? He didn’t even know what an avatar was.

I said, ‘Like when we play Monopoly and you are always the Top Hat? Well, it’s like that, only more complicated. That’s me on the screen, look, that elf.’

He squinted at the screen. There were hundreds of avatars across the vast desert of the Blasted Lands. I showed him which one was mine and I introduced him to all my other guild members. We’re mostly very heavily armed night elves. I think he was impressed.

‘You see,’ I said, ‘in Monopoly, you get as much money as you can, right. And that’s it. In here you have to get money. And health. And experience. And skills. And then . . . you use them. For a quest.’

‘What kind of quest?’

‘Well, there’s all kinds. Some of them are dangerous and complicated and some are simple. And you meet hazards and monsters. Sometimes serious monsters – so you run away or get help. And sometimes trivial monsters – so you fight them. And if you complete the quest, you gain experience and new

skills and maybe some strength and wealth. So then you can level up . . .’

‘What?’

‘See, I’m a Level Forty elf, but what I want to be is a Level Seventy elf. Then I can Engage with really serious monsters. When you Engage, that’s called an Instance. We’re having a bit of an Instance right now with this dragon.’

The dragon had ambushed us, but the Wanderlust Warriors stood their ground and fought like a well-oiled machine. Soon the dragon was dead. So were two of my Warriors, but that was OK because I’ve got healing powers. I brought them back to life and we looted the dragon’s hoard.

That’s what was happening in my head. Of course, to Dad it just looked like I was sitting there clicking the mouse so fast it sounded like castanets.

‘Cosmic!’ I yelled. ‘Look what we found: Elixir of the Mages. If you use that just before an Instance, it doubles your brain power.’

‘This,’ said Dad, ‘is not a game. This is a career.’

‘But it’s good on here because people just accept you for what you are.’

‘Namely an elf with magical healing powers. Is that what you really are, Liam?’

‘No, but in-game, if I have experience and strength and stuff, I can go out on quests and do things. In-life, you can look like a grown-up and shave like a grown-up and be Gifted and Talented and everything, and you’ve still got to

sit in a class full of kids who call you “freak” and “Wolverine” and stuff.’

Dad nodded his head like it all made sense to him. Then he got my profile up so he could have a proper look at my avatar.

‘It says here he’s shorter than average.’

‘If you’re short you get extra agility. Plus you can sneak up on people.’

Dad said, ‘A shorter-than-average magical being with lots of friends. Well . . . that’s a very nice avatar. Goodnight.’

I did offer to tell him something about the history of Azeroth and who the Horde were and about the Alliance, but he said, ‘That’s enough for one night, thanks all the same. You get back to your quest. Don’t stay up too late – you’ve got school.’

It was only when he’d gone that I noticed he’d left his phone on my desk. And only when I picked it up that I remembered that my phone was a clone of his. So the number he’d deleted from my inbox should still be there in his. It was. I copied it back into my phone.