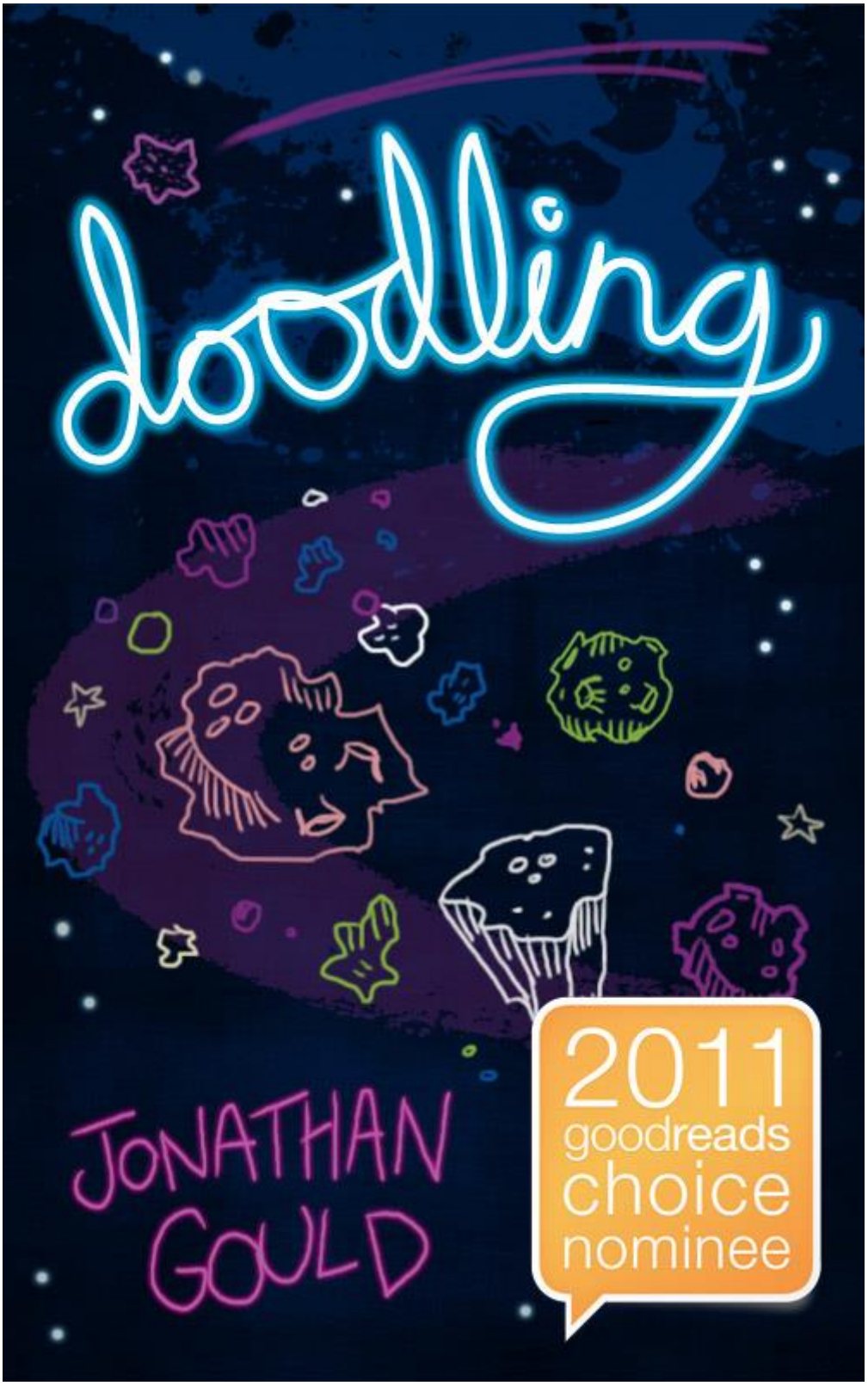
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Falling Off

Neville Lansdowne fell off the world.

Actually, he did not so much fall off as let go. The world had been moving so quickly lately and Neville was finding it almost impossible to keep up.

It hadn't always been that way. There had been a time when keeping up was not a problem; a time when the world was moving at a nice, leisurely speed and, a gentle walk had been sufficient. But then the world began to get faster. Suddenly, Neville found himself jogging, and then running. His cheeks became flushed and his lungs panted and puffed as they struggled to get the air he needed to maintain his pace.

Still faster and faster the world went. Neville's life was like a never-ending hundred metre sprint. There was no way he could keep this going. As his legs turned to jelly and collapsed under him, Neville grasped in desperation for something to hold on to. A tree, a stick, a small crack in the footpath. He dug his fingernails in and gripped tightly as the world dragged him along, his hair flying wildly behind him and his legs kicking loosely at the air. His whole body strained and tears began to well in his eyes as the wind rushed against his face.

Slowly, surely, he could feel his grip loosening, could sense the strength departing from his fingers. He couldn't hold on much longer. Any second now and the strain would be too much. His arms would break. His fingers would be ripped off. His whole body would snap into two. The pain was unbearable. Something had to give.

Neville let go.

For a couple of seconds, he lay, breathing slowly, while the strength flowed back into his body and the feeling returned to his arms. Then he looked up and saw the world spinning away into the darkness of space. Neville was seized with panic. He leapt up and began chasing after the world, trying to catch up with it again so he could get back on board. But he was too slow. Soon the world was nothing but a tiny dot, no bigger than a golf ball.

Neville stopped and watched as the world diminished into a pinhole of blue and then vanished. He was alone. All around him was nothingness. Neville shivered. He wasn't used to such quiet. It felt strange and slightly unnerving. What could it mean? How should he feel? What was he to do?

High above, the lights of the stars twinkled. To his left, a comet flashed past. To his right, a distant supernova flared in a sudden blaze of brightness. It was a beautiful sight; an everlasting silent night.

Neville was overcome by a feeling of peace. No more desperately rushing to keep up. No more frantically clinging on for dear life. Neville didn't need the world anymore. He was free.

As he observed these new surroundings, Neville noticed a stream of lights gliding past. He was standing on the edge of a field of asteroids. Some glowed like small planets while others were no bigger than a teapot. Suddenly, Neville had an idea. He would find himself an asteroid and make it his home. Then he could start again, from scratch, to fashion a new world. A world that would work exactly the way he wanted it to. And once that was done, he could get down to the important business of just being Neville.

Neville scanned the asteroid field, carefully trying to discern which would be the best asteroid to choose. Many of them rushed past like speeding racehorses in an intergalactic derby. Neville didn't want an asteroid that moved fast. He wanted a slow one. One that gave him time to do all the things he wanted to do. Finally, he spotted the right one. It looked to be about the size of a large house and it dawdled sluggishly across the sky like a lazy, sleepwalking pony.

Neville walked quickly towards the asteroid and climbed aboard. It was perfect. Maybe slightly bigger than it had appeared from a distance, but not by too much. There was enough

space to play a football match but no risk of having to run too far to get the ball. It might have been cold and rocky and barren, but after the helter and skelter of his previous life, Neville found it strangely appealing. This was just the place to start creating his new world.

First things first. Neville would need a country and countries need borders. Using his heel, he marked out a series of lines on the dusty surface. A couple of straight lines on one side and a couple of twisty, windy lines on the other. When he was finished, the lines enclosed a space about eighty metres by fifty metres. Outside the lines was foreign territory, distant and unknown. But inside the lines was Neville's country, the place he was proud to call his new home.

Now, onto the next thing. Everyone knows that countries need a name. Neville decided to call his country Bolivia. It was a place he'd always wanted to visit. Now he could finally say that he had.

Having achieved so much in barely a couple of minutes, Neville sat down to consider his position. Here he was, the ruler of his own country. He could do anything he wanted. So what should he do next? Neville thought about all the other things a country needed to have. A capital, a language, a flag. A culture, an economy, a national tree. It seemed like there were an awful lot of decisions he was going to have to make.

Suddenly Neville felt hopelessly out of his depth. This was not how it was meant to be. He didn't want to have to take all of this responsibility. He wanted to be an average guy, to stand back and let somebody else make the big decisions. He was happy to be one of the ruled, not one of the rulers.

Neville knew what he had to do. His country needed a leader, and in this brave new democratic world there was only one way to properly select one. Have an election.

Neville cast a secret ballot, carefully tallied the result and then loudly announced that the new President of Bolivia was the large rock twenty-seven metres to his left. Neville pledged allegiance to the rock and then left it to get on with the difficult matter of running the country while he began creating his new future.

His new future lasted exactly thirty-seven seconds. President Rock? It lacked a certain something. Neville couldn't see it doing any of the things presidents are supposed to do, like attending functions or making speeches or organising policy at both a national and international level. As a head of state, his rock was sadly inadequate.

At that moment, Neville came to a sad realisation. Much as he'd come to love Bolivia and feel comfortable and welcome there, he knew that it was never going to be the sort of world he had hoped it could be. It was time to move on.

After saying a fond farewell to the President, Neville climbed off the asteroid and trudged away into the inky blackness of the universe. In search of a better place for a Neville. In search of somewhere to call his home.

A Toast to You

Neville felt lost and alone as he wandered slowly through the asteroid field, looking for a new place where he could settle down. All around him enormous rocks bounced and bobbed. Some were bright and colourful while others were grey and dull. Some were smooth and round while others were craggy and jagged. One had a flagpole on it…

Neville started, then looked more closely. His eyes were definitely not playing tricks on him. It really was a flagpole with a small makeshift flag on the top, fluttering gently in the solar breeze.

A flagpole on an asteroid! Was it possible? Could this mean what he hoped it would mean? Were there actually other people out here in the asteroid field?

Neville quickened his pace, heading towards the asteroid with the flagpole. The asteroid was a little bigger than his earlier preference and it was moving a little faster than he would have liked, but when you're out on your own in the middle of deep space you really can't be too picky. Besides, the possibility that there were other people out here, other cast-offs from a world that had left them behind, was too exciting to ignore.

Neville reached the asteroid and climbed on. Its surface was rough and rocky, save for one large space, about fifty metres square. Neville's heart leapt with joy as he walked onto this space. It had been cleared and flattened out into a sort of plaza; a sure sign of human habitation. The flagpole stood at the far side of the plaza. The flag on the top displayed some sort of silver symbol, roughly rectangular in shape, with two parallel black lines across the top.

As Neville stared at the flag, trying to figure out what the strange symbol represented, he noticed a small group of people coming towards him. They stopped about ten metres away and one of the men, who was obviously the leader, peeled off and approached Neville.

"Greetings friend," said the man, his hand extended in greeting. "I would like to welcome you to our humble home."

"Thank you," replied Neville. "It's nice to meet all of you." He smiled broadly at the rest of the people but none of them said a word. Instead they looked at him intently. Neville felt a strange feeling of expectation, as if these people were waiting for him to say something.

"We, like you, are refugees from the world," continued the man. "We, like you, could no longer handle the pace and the pressure. We, like you, have made the decision to escape the madness and to find here, on our asteroid, a far simpler lifestyle. A lifestyle you are more than welcome to join us in."

"That's awfully friendly of you," said Neville. He looked again at the other people. They stared back at him. Even the leader was now staring at him, a rigid smile fixed to his face. The tension was unbelievable. Neville sensed that these people were looking for some sort of signal, perhaps a message in something he said, but he couldn't imagine what it could be.

Finally, the frustration became too much for the leader of the group. He dropped his smile and looked down at the ground for a second. When he spoke, his voice was soft, quavering with nerves.

"I don't suppose you brought a toaster."

Neville shook his head.

There was a collective sigh from the group. Suddenly, all of the tension had dissipated, to be replaced by an overpowering feeling of disappointment. The other people quickly dispersed, leaving Neville, standing beside their leader, feeling somewhat let down.

"I apologise if our reception seems a bit ungrateful," said the man. "It's just that we don't have any toasters here and, well, we could all really do with a nice hot piece of toast."

"I'm sorry," said Neville. "I didn't think to bring one. It all happened so suddenly."

“That’s all right, you weren’t to know. None of us thought about it when we let go either. Still, we live in hope that someday, somehow, someone will come to us with a toaster, and then we can once again enjoy our breakfast in a civilised fashion. Till then, why don’t you let me show you around.”

Neville thanked the man and began to follow him away from the flattened square. As the man disappeared amongst the rocks at the edge of the square, Neville took one last look up at the flag. Suddenly, he realised what it was supposed to be. Although poorly drawn, it was definitely meant to be some sort of stylised representation of a toaster.

Away from the square, the surface of the asteroid was a labyrinth of weirdly sculpted rock. Neville followed the man along a winding passageway, passing a series of holes carved into the high stone towers. Inside the holes, the shapes of people could be made out, setting up homes in this amazing new world. Presently, the man led Neville to a particularly large hole, a great open door in the rock, and motioned for him to enter. Neville paused for a moment, perturbed somewhat by the strange high pitched chanting he could hear coming from inside the rock. Then, as the man assured him there was nothing to fear, he walked through the door.

Neville found himself in a large cave. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see that he was not alone. All around him, people crouched on the ground, as if at worship. In front there stood a man wearing ceremonial garb, holding a book and chanting and wailing in some sort of indecipherable language. Every so often the chanting would reach a crescendo and the people would leap up off the ground. Then they would crouch back down on the floor again.

The man from the plaza was standing next to Neville. “Welcome to our temple,” he said.

“Who is the man up the front?” asked Neville.

“He is our high priest,” replied the man.

“Why?” asked Neville. “What’s so special about him?”

“He brought to us the Holy Book.” The man indicated the book the priest was reading from.

“The Holy Book? What sort of Holy Book?”

“Do not question. Just listen. Let the wonder of the words enter your soul and fill you with life.”

“But I can’t understand what he’s saying.”

“Listen. Listen hard.”

Neville listened hard and found he was able to understand what the priest was chanting.

“…adjust thermostat if necessary to attain desired degree of darkness. For rye and raisin toast, a lighter setting may be required.”

He squinted, and was just able to make out the title of the Holy Book.

Operating Instructions for the A367 Toasterama.

“Your Holy Book is the instruction manual for a toaster?” cried Neville in disbelief.

“It was in his pocket when he let go of the world,” said the man reverently. “He can’t explain why he had it there but we regard it as a sacred sign.”

Suddenly Neville realised what the people in the room were doing, why they were crouching down and then leaping up. They were toast. This whole ceremony was some sort of ritual imitating the making of toast.

Neville turned on his tail and walked quickly out of the cave. This was as much as he needed to know.

The man from the square hurried after Neville. “Where are you going?” he cried.

“I’m leaving,” retorted Neville.

“But you only just got here.”

“I don’t care. I’m not going to spend the rest of my life living in a world where people worship toasters.” Neville reached the flattened plaza. He hurried to the edge and climbed off

the asteroid. The voice of the man followed after him as he made his way back into the asteroid field.

“But you don’t understand. Our prophecy tells us that some day a toaster will come, and on that day we can all sit and eat toast and jam and crumpets and steaming hot muffins and…”

Neville suppressed a laugh as the man’s voice faded into the distance. Their prophecy was clearly ridiculous. If anyone was desperate enough to make the decision to let go of the world, the last thing on their mind would be what kitchen implements to bring along. Besides, even if someone did bring a toaster, what use would it be? They didn’t have anywhere to plug it in.

As Neville set off again, he suddenly heard a loud whooshing sound. It was the world spinning past again, now moving even faster than when he had let go. If Neville looked closely, he could actually see the people on its surface running to keep up. And even as he watched, a number of people let go and were left lying in its wake. Some of them instantly leapt up and chased after the world. A couple even caught up and grabbed hold again. The others gradually got their bearings and began to wander into the asteroid field. Most of them made a direct line for the asteroid with the large flag flying.

Maybe, just maybe, the prophecy of the Toaster People was about to be fulfilled.

Taking Aim

Neville hurried away from the asteroid of the Toaster People. He looked around, scanning the other asteroids for signs of life. If one of the asteroids had been populated by humans, then surely there must be others. Not everybody that had let go of the world would want to settle in a place where a toaster was the ruling deity. All Neville had to do was find another inhabited asteroid. One occupied by people who were a little more sensible. Then, at last, he could find a home.

As Neville gazed across the great sea of celestial bodies, he couldn't help noticing for the first time how spectacularly awesome the scene before him was. It was like a vast hanging mobile where each individual piece had been specially crafted by a different sculptor. Each asteroid had its own unique shape and glowed with its own unique hue.

But there was one asteroid in particular that caught his attention. Smaller than most of the others, it moved unpredictably across the sky. First it would flit one way. Then suddenly it would stop and veer off in a completely different direction. It was like a small dog that had lost its master and didn't know where to start looking.

Neville was intrigued by this strange asteroid and decided to take a closer look. Approaching it was difficult. Every time he started to get close, the asteroid suddenly darted off at right angles, forcing Neville to quickly brake and change direction, a difficult task in zero gravity.

Finally, Neville made it to the asteroid. He reached out to grip it before it could change its trajectory again, then hauled himself aboard. He sat down for a minute, to get his bearings, and then tried to stand up.

Standing up was not a simple task. Neville felt like a surfer riding a particularly treacherous wave as he staggered and swayed to keep his balance atop the winding, twisting asteroid. He fell down and struggled back to his feet three times before he finally started to get the hang of it. Then he set off to explore this strange new place.

After walking for about a minute, Neville noticed something even odder. A bright orange beach umbrella. He approached the umbrella and saw a girl lying underneath it, on a large rock shaped somewhat like a banana lounge. She was wearing a swimming costume and a pair of dark sunglasses. Presently she spoke.

"Did you bring the sunscreen?" she asked in a fairly expressionless voice.

"No," replied Neville.

For a second there was an awkward silence. Then she spoke again. "I guess I'd better get back into the pool then."

"But there's no pool here," said Neville, somewhat perplexed by the nature of this conversation.

"There isn't?" The girl moved her head from side to side, quickly realising the truth of Neville's observation. "Well that's okay. I can't swim anyway."

"Then why are you wearing a swimming costume?" asked Neville.

"How tall are you?" replied the girl.

"I don't know," said Neville, as it had been a while since he'd last measured himself.

"My uncle is tall," said the girl.

"Oh really?" said Neville.

"His name is Ron and he has a moustache."

"Oh." Neville struggled for something else to say. Fortunately the girl's thoughts had already moved on.

"Maybe I'll go down to the newsagent. Buy myself a book."

"But there's no newsagent here," protested Neville. "We're in the middle of outer space."

Once again the girl made that movement of her head “There isn’t? Well that’s okay. I can’t read anyway.”

“But if you can’t read, why would you want to buy a book?”

“What colour skirt do you think would go better with this swimsuit; red or green?” asked the girl.

“Red,” said Neville without even thinking.

The girl screwed up her face. “I don’t like red.”

“Well then green.”

The girl screwed her face up even more. “I don’t like green either.”

“Then why did you ask me?” exclaimed Neville who was now totally confused.

“Why did the leopard change its sheets?” asked the girl without even missing a beat.

“You mean why did the leopard change its spots,” corrected Neville.

“I don’t know. To get to the other side?”

Neville had finally had enough. “This is a particularly aimless conversation,” he said firmly.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. “This is a particularly aimless asteroid.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Throw a stone at me.”

“Do you deliberately try to not answer any of my questions?” demanded Neville.

“No I mean it,” said the girl. “Throw a stone at me.”

“But I might hurt you.”

“Just do it.”

Neville bent over and looked for a stone to throw. He chose a small pebble because he didn’t want to cause any injuries. Then he took careful aim and threw it softly at the girl. But the girl didn’t even flinch as the stone flew harmlessly away to the side.

“See,” she said.

“But I aimed that stone straight at you,” cried Neville.

“Do you understand now?” said the girl. “Nothing on this asteroid has any aim. Nothing that you say. Nothing that you do. This is the most aimless asteroid in the whole asteroid field.”

Neville looked around. The girl definitely had a point. The way the asteroid twisted and turned through the asteroid field, it seemed to have no idea where it was going to go next. It made Neville dizzy to watch. He looked back at the girl.

“Nothing on this asteroid has any aim?”

“Including me. I have no aim.”

“But surely you must have some sort of aim,” protested Neville.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” Neville thought for a moment, trying to figure out how to back his argument up. “It must get terribly boring after a while.”

“Maybe it does,” replied the girl. “I don’t know. It doesn’t really seem to be that important. Not on this asteroid anyway.”

“Then I think it’s time we both got off this asteroid,” said Neville who didn’t like the idea of not having any aim. “Will you come with me?”

“Oh all right, if you insist. Just let me go and get the car keys.”

“But there’s no car here.”

The girl moved her head from side to side. “There isn’t? Well that’s okay. I can’t drive anyway.”

Neville sighed and turned away. She wasn’t going to join him. She was just going to lie around, living her little aimless life on her little aimless asteroid.

He jumped off the asteroid and watched as it zigzagged crazily away. In his heart, he knew that what the girl had said was wrong. It was important to have an aim. What was the point of living if you didn't?

Neville decided there and then that he had better find an aim for himself. But thinking about your life direction while you're standing in the middle of an asteroid field isn't such an easy thing to do. The best way to work out what his aim would be was to get out into the open, so he could concentrate better.

Neville found a nice quiet spot, turned himself around so that he didn't have to look at the asteroids any more, and started to think. What would be a good aim? How could he create a fulfilling life for himself here in the middle of nothingness?

Suddenly, Neville's concentration was broken by a roar. A great whooshing roar, coming from right behind him. He turned to look and then froze in fear. The world was rushing into view again. It surged forward at a crazy speed, spinning wildly and throwing people off in all directions. And it was coming straight for him.

For a couple of seconds, Neville was too terrified to move. Then he collected his wits and began to run as fast as he could. But it was no use. There was no way he could get out of the way in time. The world loomed behind him, larger and larger. He could not possibly outrun it.

Neville closed his eyes and curled himself up, preparing for the shock of impact.

A strong hand grasped his shoulder. In a flash, he was pulled out of the way, just as the world hurtled past. It came so close that Neville could see all of Africa, only millimetres from his nose. He breathed a great sigh of relief, then turned to face his saviour.

It was a girl, about his age and about his height. She had medium length, slightly curly, reddish brown hair, and a serious face which softened slightly as she met his eyes.

"Phew," she said. "That was a close one."

Not So Peachy

Neville stared at the girl who had pulled him out of the way of the world. He could still feel the blast of air rushing past his face and hear the whooshing roar, gradually diminishing now as the world hurried away. Finally, he found his voice again.

"Th-thank you," he managed to stammer.

"It's okay," she replied in her serious voice. "I saw you lying down in front of the world and I thought I'd better do something."

"You saved my life," exclaimed Neville. "What can I do to repay you?"

"Don't worry about it," said the girl quickly. "I did what I had to do."

"Well, I still feel like I owe you something. My name's Neville by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Neville. I'm Helen. Why don't you come this way?"

Neville followed Helen to a small asteroid not far from the edge of the field. He lay down on the soft ground and closed his eyes, waiting for his heart to stop racing and his nerves to stop bouncing and jangling like an extremely agitated marionette.

Soft ground? None of the other asteroids he had visited had soft ground. He opened his eyes and sat up again, and was instantly amazed by his new surroundings.

He was lying on a grassy lawn. All around him were pots full of colourful flowers and at the far end was a small tree. Helen was watering the flowers with a little yellow watering can, but when she noticed that Neville was sitting up again, she walked towards the tree and picked a piece of fruit from it.

"Would you like a peach?" she asked.

Neville nodded eagerly. He accepted the peach and took a big bite. It was delicious. Sweet and juicy, with just that little touch of tartness that a good peach should have.

"Is this your asteroid?" he asked Helen. She nodded.

"It's lovely. Did you plant all of this yourself?"

She nodded again, her face still looking very serious.

"Wow," exclaimed Neville. "This is definitely the nicest asteroid I have ever seen."

"Thank you," said Helen quietly. "Have you been out here for long?"

"Not really," replied Neville. "I've been to a few other asteroids but the people I've met have all been completely mad. In fact you're the first sensible person I've met in this asteroid field."

Helen almost smiled at that. She picked up her watering can and began watering the flowers again. Neville finished the peach and looked around, searching for a rubbish bin to put the pip into. But there didn't seem to be one anywhere.

"Excuse me Helen, what should I do with this pip?"

"Oh just throw it away."

"Throw it away?" Neville was shocked. "But I don't want to litter your lovely asteroid."

"It's a peach pip," said Helen. "If you throw it away, it will grow into a peach tree. And that means even more peaches for us to eat."

Neville was impressed by Helen's logic. He threw the peach pip so that it landed next to the peach tree. Then he lay back again, watching the other asteroids fly past. "Now this is the sort of asteroid a guy could really get used to," he said. "You don't mind if I stay a while do you?"

"Stay as long as you want."

Neville was beginning to like Helen too. He watched her as she moved about the flowers, carefully measuring out a little stream of water for each. She had gone to such an effort to create a little paradise in the middle of a wasteland. And yet, there was something about her that didn't quite fit. Something about the way she didn't seem able to just relax and enjoy her

surroundings. She always looked so serious. Even when she smiled, it seemed like she had a great weight on her shoulders.

Suddenly, Neville was concerned about her. After all, she had helped him out. Maybe he could find some way to return the favour and make her feel better. “Is there something wrong?” he called out to her.

“I’m worried,” she replied.

“About what?”

“About the world.”

“What about the world?”

Helen stopped her watering and sat next to Neville. “It’s moving too fast.”

“But we don’t have to worry about that,” said Neville. “We’re not on the world anymore. It can move as fast as it wants and we can just sit back and watch it.”

“Pick up that peach pip again,” instructed Helen, pointing to where Neville had thrown it.

Oh no, thought Neville. After everything had seemed so good, suddenly it looked like Helen was just as mad as everybody else.

Helen must have been reading Neville’s mind. “I’m not mad,” she insisted. “Just go and pick up the pip.”

Neville did as he was told. He crawled over and picked up the pip. Then he crawled back to Helen.

“Give it to me.”

Neville handed it over. Helen had already picked a few stalks of grass and tied them together to form a sort of string. She looped one end of this string around the pip and knotted it tight. Then she handed the other end to Neville.

“Now stand up and swing it around your head.”

Neville looked at the strange contraption. Then he looked back at Helen. She had insisted that she was not mad but Neville was beginning to have his doubts.

“Just do it,” said Helen in a stern voice.

Neville stood up and began to swing the pip around his head. He felt a little silly, as if he were a pretend cowboy swinging a lasso at a rodeo, but he kept on going anyway.

“Now faster,” ordered Helen.

Neville swung the pip around faster. It began to make a soft whooshing sound as it spun around his head.

“Faster!”

The pip was really racing around Neville’s head now. The whooshing was beginning to get louder and he could feel the strain on his arm as the pip pulled at it.

“Even faster!”

Neville was getting dizzy as the pip hurtled around.

“As fast as you can!” cried Helen.

Neville had almost had enough of this. The pip was going so fast he couldn’t even see it, and his arm was really aching now. But just as he was about to stop, his suspicions about Helen utterly confirmed, something happened.

The grass string snapped. Freed from its restraints, the pip immediately flew away over the lawn. It crashed into one of the flower pots, smashing it into a hundred pieces.

“Oh no!” cried Neville. He raced over to the broken pot but there was nothing he could do. It was completely destroyed.

“I’m so sorry about your flower pot,” he said.

“The pot isn’t important,” said Helen. “But can you see now why I’m so worried?”

For a moment Neville still didn’t know what she meant. Then suddenly it hit him. The pip was the world and the grass string was the sun’s gravitational pull. And if the world kept on getting faster and faster, it would eventually break away from that gravitational pull and fly

off into space. And if anything lay in its way? Neville looked down at the shattered flower pot, instantly realising what it represented. The first thing the world would crash into once it had escaped from its orbit.

He looked back at Helen, totally panic-stricken. She returned his gaze and nodded, resignation in her eyes. At last, Neville managed to speak.

“This asteroid field is doomed!”

Time for Action

Neville didn't want to believe it. The idea that the world would soon break away from its orbit and come hurtling into the asteroid field, destroying everything in its path, was too terrifying to consider.

"Are you sure this is going to happen?" he said.

"Absolutely positive," Helen replied sadly. "I've been watching the world for weeks now. Studying it. Calculating trajectories, velocities."

"But are you really sure? Maybe you made a mistake in your calculations."

"Why don't you check for yourself?" She pointed to a spot on the lawn, just underneath the peach tree. Neville looked and noticed a number of peach pips laid out in an orderly fashion. Helen must have been using them to do her working out. He looked closely at the pips but the complexity of the mathematics defeated him.

"Take my word for it," said Helen in response to Neville's expression of confusion. "I've triple checked every equation. There's no way I could have made a mistake."

Reluctantly, Neville accepted that Helen had to be right. "So how long have we got?" he asked glumly as she stood up and returned to her watering.

Helen looked at her watch. "At the speed the world is currently going, I figure we've got about three and a half hours to go."

"Three and a half hours. Is that all?"

"Trust me," said Helen. "I'm an astrophysicist."

Three and a half hours. Such a tiny amount of time. Neville looked around at the other asteroids as they sailed past, so utterly oblivious to the cruel fate that lay in store.

"But there must be something we can do," he cried.

Helen shook her head. "The world is so big," she said. "And each of these asteroids is so small. There's no way they could survive a collision like that."

Neville looked around at the little world Helen had created and which she was even now tending to so diligently. The perfectly manicured lawn. The magnificently colourful flowers. The peach tree and its treasure of delicious fruit. Suddenly, Neville felt angry. It was so unfair. Helen had gone to such great lengths to make her asteroid a good place to live. Now, in a few hours, there'd be nothing left of it. He wouldn't let that happen. He couldn't let that happen. He was not going to go down without a fight.

Neville stood up, his teeth gritted.

"I don't care how big the world is," he exclaimed. "I'm not going to let it destroy your beautiful garden."

Neville's sudden burst of enthusiasm could not drag Helen away from her watering. "That's very noble of you Neville," she said. "But I don't see what the two of us can do against the whole world."

Neville didn't see how he could argue with Helen. It seemed like such an awfully difficult problem for two people to solve. But then he suddenly realized something.

"But don't you see, Helen," he cried. "It isn't just the two of us. There are lots of other people here in this asteroid field. If we got them all together, I'm sure we could think of something."

"You've got to be joking."

"Why not?" said Neville, slightly crestfallen.

"That lot out there?" Helen pointed dismissively towards the other asteroids. "You said it yourself. They're all completely mad."

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that." Neville sat down again. Helen had instantly picked the major flaw in his plan. For a second he thought about it, struggling to come up with an idea that might overcome this weakness. Unable to, he leapt back to his feet anyway.

“So what if they’re all completely mad,” he cried. “That’s not going to stop me. Hey, do you know what I’m going to do?”

“What?”

“I’m going to organise a forum.”

“A forum?” For a second Helen actually seemed interested in Neville’s plan.

“Yes, a forum,” he declared. “I’m going to gather everyone together. Everyone in the asteroid field. Then we’re all going to put our heads together until we’ve found a solution to this problem.”

“Or we’ve all been smashed into a million little pieces.”

“You’re not helping me, Helen,” said Neville.

“I’m sorry, Neville,” she replied. “It’s just that the thought of that bunch of nincompoops putting their heads together is a little bit frightening. But you’re right. It isn’t half as frightening as having an enormous planet come smashing into your front lawn. Maybe it isn’t such a bad idea.”

“That’s more like it,” cried Neville. “I know we can do it. We’d better get started straight away. First we’ll need to figure out a good place to hold it.”

Neville looked quickly around. He didn’t want to bring everybody to Helen’s asteroid. The idea of all of those people trampling over her garden seemed completely wrong. They would have to find somewhere else. Then he had it.

“The asteroid of the Toaster People! It’s the perfect place. There’s a big cleared space underneath the flagpole. That’s where we can have the forum.”

“Yeah, and some toast and crumpets too,” muttered Helen.

“Come on Helen, there’s no time to be sarcastic,” admonished Neville. “We’ve only got three and a half hours to go. We have to go and tell the others about the forum as quickly as possible.”

“What do you mean ‘we’?”

“Aren’t you coming with me?”

“I’d like to Neville. I really would. But I can’t leave my asteroid.”

“Why not?”

“Because my garden will die.”

“But if we don’t stop the world, it will die anyway. I need you to help me Helen.”

Helen pointed at the lawn and the flowers and the peach tree. “You see all of this, Neville. I created it myself. But an asteroid is not a good place for a garden. It took everything I had to get it started and it takes constant attention to keep it growing. If I leave it, even for a couple of minutes, it will all die. And once it’s gone, I don’t think I could ever get it back again. So I could go with you Neville, and maybe we could stop the world and save this asteroid, but for what purpose? There won’t be anything left to save.”

Neville looked closely at the garden. He could see that Helen was right. Almost immediately after she had finished watering each flower, it would begin to wilt and fade. There was no other option. He would have to do it all himself.

“All right, Helen,” he said. “It’s time I was off. I’m going to start organising the forum. And don’t you worry about anything. We’re going to save your garden.” Neville turned and climbed off the asteroid.

“Good luck, Neville,” Helen called after him. “I know you can do it.”

Her words gave Neville the courage he needed as he set out on his mission. As he strode purposefully back into the asteroid field, he realised that at last he’d found an aim for himself. It was an aim that would not be easy to fulfil but it was a good aim. A brave and noble aim.

He was going to save the asteroid field from the world.

Being Flagged

As Neville walked away from Helen's asteroid and back into the asteroid field, he was a man with a mission. He had to organise his forum as quickly as possible. He had to speak to the people in the asteroid field and convince them of the danger of the situation, then hope that together they could devise a plan that might stop the world before it crashed into the asteroid field.

First things first. He needed to organise the location of the forum. Neville scanned the asteroid field, looking for the asteroid of the Toaster People. It should be easy to find. The lone flagpole clearly set it aside from all the other asteroids. But Neville still couldn't see it. He looked up and down and wandered around in circles trying to figure out where it had gotten to. But there was no asteroid with a lone flagpole anywhere. There was one asteroid that had lots of flagpoles but no asteroid with just one flagpole.

An asteroid with lots of flagpoles? That was odd. He'd never noticed that one before. Neville took a closer look. On each flagpole a small flag flew, displaying some sort of cryptic object. And beneath each flagpole there was a cleared area, a little like a town square. Neville looked closely at the objects on the flags, utterly unable to figure out what they represented. But then, as the asteroid rotated, more flags came into view. And one of them filled Neville with a comforting feeling of familiarity.

It was the toaster flag, fluttering somewhat forlornly on its pole. And the cleared plaza it fluttered over was slightly larger then the cleared plazas below the other flags. There was no doubt about it. This had to be the asteroid of the Toaster People. And yet something odd had happened in the time since he had left. Could it be that their prophecy had actually come to pass?

As Neville climbed onto the asteroid and walked into the plaza, he was surprised that this time there was no greeting party. The whole place seemed strangely quiet. Neville began walking down the windy path towards the cave of worship. He looked closely in each of the holes in the rock as he passed but was unable to spot any signs of life. Even at the entrance to the cave of worship there was no chanting to be heard. The whole community seemed to have vanished.

Neville walked into the cave. It was empty. Devoid of worshippers, it seemed much smaller. Then Neville noticed that there was something different. Standing proudly on a small rock platform in the middle of the room, gleaming and sparkling in the darkness, was a toaster. The prophecy had indeed come to be. But where were the Toaster people? Why were they not enjoying their toast and crumpets and steaming hot English muffins?

Neville knew he would have to go out and find where the people had gone. But, as he was about to leave, he suddenly noticed that the cave wasn't empty. A man was sitting underneath the toaster with his head bowed and his shoulders slumped. It was the former Leader of the Toaster People.

"Hey," called Neville.

The man looked up. "I see you have returned again," he muttered tonelessly.

"Where have all the people gone?" asked Neville urgently.

The man waved his hand in the direction of the cave entrance. "All around," he replied. "They have left me."

Neville knew he didn't have much time to waste but he couldn't help wondering what had happened here. "I see your prophecy came true," he said.

"Indeed it has," said the Toaster Leader. "But it brings me no joy."

"What happened?" wondered Neville. "Where are all the others?"

The Toaster Leader shook his head sadly. "Come with me," he said and he led Neville out of the cave. Together they climbed up to the top of the crag above the cave. Here they had a

clear view over the rest of the asteroid and the multitude of flags that waved above it. The Toaster Leader pointed to the nearest flag.

"Do you see what's on that flag?"

Neville squinted, trying to work out what the object was supposed to be, but was unable to. It looked like some sort of strange, white creature with a jumble of bizarrely shaped arms and legs.

"I can't figure it out," he replied.

"It's a food processor," said the Leader, as if it should have been obvious.

Neville looked again. Knowing what it was supposed to be, he could now recognise the object. Each of the arms and legs was really one of the food processor's attachments.

"And that one there?" The Leader pointed to another flag, just beyond the first one.

Once again, Neville found it difficult to discern. It was a squat, flat object with a gaping jaw, a little like an elongated giant clam. He shook his head.

"That's a sandwich maker. And what about that one?" Again he pointed to another flag, slightly to the right of the first two.

Neville was now starting to get the hang of this. As he looked at the object it began to take shape. He could actually figure out what it was supposed to be.

"It's a blender," he cried, pleased at finally getting one right.

"Actually, it's a milkshake maker," said the Toaster Leader. "But I think you're starting to get the gist of what's going on here."

Neville was getting it all right. As he gazed across the sea of flags, each one began to become clear. There were juicers and steamers and rice cookers and espresso makers. Any sort of kitchen appliance you could think of was crudely displayed. And while Neville's eyes roamed from flag to flag, the leader of the Toaster People related his sorry story.

When the toaster had first arrived there had been much rejoicing. But soon after, a deep emptiness seemed to fall over the people. With their prophecy fulfilled they now had nothing left to pray for. There was clearly only one solution to such a problem. They would need to find another object to take the place of the toaster. But this was where the troubles really began, for they were unable to reach agreement on the item of choice. Once it became obvious that a consensus could not be found, the people had instead divided up into a multitude of different groups, each one praying for the arrival of a different appliance.

As the leader of the Toaster People finished his story, Neville found that he was able to hear the faint sounds of a multitude of different chants; the rituals of the various groups in imitation of their appliances of choice. Rituals imitating electric frying pans. Rituals imitating water purifiers. Neville shuddered as a particular flag caught his eye. He didn't want to think about the ritual the popcorn maker people would be using to imitate their chosen gadget.

Looking past the flags, Neville suddenly noticed the world rush past in the distant background. Instantly, he was reminded of the purpose of his mission. He grabbed hold of the Toaster Leader by the shoulders.

"We have to hurry," he cried. "We don't have much time."

"Much time for what?" asked the Leader, sounding confused.

"I need to use your plaza. We're going to have a forum to stop the world."

"A forum to stop the world? What are you talking about?"

Neville quickly explained the crisis they faced. As he did so, the Leader began to pale.

"But that's terrible," he cried. "What can we do to stop it?"

Neville went on to describe his idea for a forum. "Gather all the people on this asteroid into your plaza," he said. "Then maybe together we can find a solution. But we have to do it quickly."

The Toaster Leader nodded and hurried off in the direction of the Food Processor People, obviously pleased that he was back in a position where he could wield some authority again.

Neville jumped off the crag and began running away from the asteroid. But as he did, he allowed himself one last look at the flags flying above the asteroid surface and the poorly rendered objects on each.

These people didn’t really need blenders and mixers and all those other silly gadgets. The one thing these people really needed was a decent flag maker.

Join the Party

Neville began to pick up his pace as he hurried away from the asteroid of the Toaster People. He still had one more asteroid to find. The little aimless one that zipped around the sky in all directions at once. He wanted to invite the Aimless Girl to the forum as well.

Neville scanned his eyes around the asteroid field, searching for the aimless asteroid. By now there couldn't be much time left. Whenever he looked back towards the sun, Neville could see the world rushing around it, whirring furiously like an out of control spinning top. An out of control spinning top that weighed about…Neville didn't know exactly how much the world weighed but he had a feeling it was somewhere in the range of several million something-or-others. And when that several million something-or-others came crashing into the asteroid field…Neville didn't want to think about what would happen next.

Neville kept on looking but he still couldn't see the aimless asteroid. He began rushing around, desperately searching for all he was worth. But it was no use. The strange little asteroid was nowhere in sight. Panic began to set in. Neville was running around in circles, going faster and faster. If he kept this up, it wouldn't be long before he lost control and flew off at right angles himself. The whole mission was doomed. He'd never be able to save the asteroid field…

Thump! Neville ran into something hard. An asteroid, lying right in his path, but he hadn't even seen it. Neville rubbed his nose where it had been hit and then stopped to look at this asteroid. It was no wonder he hadn't noticed it. It was the least interesting asteroid in the whole asteroid field.

It was a totally uninteresting size, neither too big nor too small. It was a totally uninteresting shape, neither too round nor too jagged. It was a totally uninteresting sort of browny-grey colour. And it moved across the sky at a totally uninteresting speed, neither too fast nor too slow.

Neville decided it would be a good idea to stop on the asteroid for a minute or too, until his aching nose stopped throbbing. He climbed on board and then stood, looking with total disinterest at the surface. On his left was a dull flat plain. On his right was an incredibly boring range of hills. And directly in front of him were a couple of the least interesting craters he could ever have imagined.

At least the pain in his nose was easing now. Neville prepared himself to walk away from this utterly uninviting asteroid when a sudden noise caught his attention. He paused mid step, his ears peeled. There could be no doubt about it. It was the sound of human voices. He climbed over a little rise and there he saw a man dressed in a tuxedo and holding one of those party horns that stretch out when you blow into them, and a woman wearing a little black cocktail dress and carrying a big bottle of champagne in one hand and some streamers in the other.

Neville couldn't believe his luck. He might not have been able to find the aimless asteroid but instead he'd discovered an extra couple of people he could invite to the forum.

The moment the man and woman saw Neville, they both leapt up in the air.

"Happy New Year!" they cried. The man blew on the party horn while the woman threw the streamers towards Neville and then took a big swig of champagne.

"Come and join our celebration," called the man to Neville.

"I don't really have much time," said Neville. "And besides, I didn't know it was New Year's Day."

"Well it is here," replied the woman. "Have some champagne." She handed the bottle to Neville.

Neville held the bottle up to his lips and took a sip. Then he spat it out in disgust.

"There's no champagne in here. It's just rocks and dust," he cried.

“Spoilsport!” cried the man.
“Party pooper!” cried the woman.
“But this isn’t a proper party,” protested Neville, handing the bottle back to the man. “You don’t have any real champagne.”
“Let’s not let him ruin our party,” said the woman to the man.
“You’re right, dear,” he replied. “So what comes next?”
“Easter, I think.”
“Fabulous.”
Neville watched in bemusement as the man refilled the bottle with dust from the asteroid surface while the woman took more streamers from out of an enormous hamper that sat on the ground behind her. Then they both jumped up in the air again.
“Happy Easter,” they cried. The man took a swig from the champagne bottle while the woman threw the streamers at Neville.
“Here, have an Easter egg.” The man took some dust and rolled it into an egg shape. Then he handed it to Neville who watched as it ran through his fingers and fell to the ground.
“That’s not a proper Easter egg,” he said in disappointment.
“Spoilsport!” cried the man.
“Party pooper!” cried the woman.
“What is going on here?” demanded Neville.
“We’re trying to celebrate Easter,” replied the man.
“But a minute ago you were trying to celebrate New Year. Things don’t go that quickly.”
“We just like to celebrate,” said the woman. “Is there anything wrong with that?”
“I don’t know,” said Neville. “It just seems rather silly.”
“Look,” said the man. “We live on the least interesting asteroid in the whole asteroid field. We need to have something to make life more interesting.”
“That’s why we like to have lots of parties and celebrations,” continued the woman.
“But drinking dust out of champagne bottles?” asked Neville.
The woman shrugged. “You get used to it after a while,” she said, a little sadly.
“And at least you don’t feel so bad the next day,” said the man. “You’re welcome to stay and help us celebrate,” he added. “It’s my birthday coming up.”
“Your birthday,” protested the woman. “It was your birthday last time.”
“Okay, it can be your birthday then,” said the man.
Neville decided this had gone on long enough. He had a mission, and it was time to get on with it.
“The world is going to crash into the asteroid field,” he blurted out.
“How jolly,” said the man.
“I’d better go and get my video camera,” said the woman.
“No, we can’t let it happen,” cried Neville.
“Spoilsport!” cried the man.
“Video pooper!” cried the woman.
“I don’t think you understand,” said Neville, speaking slowly to try to keep himself from just grabbing the couple by their collars and dragging them away. “If we let this happen, you won’t be able to have any more parties or celebrations.”
“No more parties or celebrations?” cried the couple in dismay.
“Absolutely none,” confirmed Neville.
“No more Christmas or Easter?” asked the woman.
Neville shook his head.
“No more Chinese New Year or Yom Kippur?” asked the man.
Neville shook his head again.
“No more Venezuelan Alpaca Milking Festival?” asked the woman.

“Definitely not,” replied Neville, although he’d never heard of such a festival and had a strong feeling that she’d just made it up.

“But that’s awful,” said the man. “You must not let it happen.”

“It’s all right,” said Neville. “I’ve got a plan. We’re going to have a forum to work out how to stop the world. And you’re both invited.”

The man and the woman both blushed.

“That’s such an honour,” said the man. “When do we need to get our RSVPs in by?”

“I’ve never been to a forum before,” said the woman and then she paused, as if deep in thought.

“What is it?” asked Neville, hoping that she had suddenly had a brilliant brainwave.

“I’m just wondering if this dress is appropriate,” she said after a moment.

“Yes, what is the dress code?” inquired the man. “Is it a black tie forum or merely a formal forum?”

“It really doesn’t matter,” said Neville. “Just follow me. We don’t have any time to waste.”

As Neville led the man and woman away from their asteroid, against all odds he began to feel a little more confident. This strange Party Couple could actually be made to see sense. There might really be some hope after all.

The Party Woman stopped. “We’ve left the streamers behind,” she cried in horror.

She made Neville wait while her partner went back to retrieve those particularly important items. Neville shook his head as he watched the Party Man returning, lugging the enormous hamper on his back.

Suddenly, he didn’t feel quite so confident after all.

On Your Bike

Neville and the Party Couple made a peculiar threesome as they hurried through the asteroid field looking for the aimless asteroid. It was not an easy task. Neville had to keep one eye ahead, searching for the aimless asteroid, while he had to keep one eye behind to make sure the Party Couple were still following. It seemed like every few minutes they had to stop to make a toast, do a dance or just throw some streamers at a passing meteor shower.

But amazingly, after a couple of minutes of looking, Neville spotted the aimless asteroid. There it was directly ahead of them, zipping up and down and in and out like some complicated yoyo trick.

"We have to get that asteroid," Neville said to the Party Couple.

They all sped off in pursuit, but the aimless asteroid was too hard to catch. Just when it seemed that the three of them had it cornered, it would suddenly change direction and dart away, like a cunning fox evading three hunting dogs. After a few minutes of fruitless chasing, the aimless asteroid had completely disappeared again.

"Come on," called Neville. "We have to find that asteroid again."

"We're all puffed out," said the Party Man. "We need to rest."

"But we don't have time," protested Neville.

"I can't even breathe," said the Party Woman, and she demonstrated by trying to blow, unsuccessfully, into her party horn. "Can't we just stop for a minute?"

"All right. Just for a minute," agreed Neville.

The three of them walked wearily over to the nearest asteroid and sat down.

Neville stretched out his legs. It felt good to rest, even if only for a couple of minutes. There was still time to find the aimless asteroid, and it would be easier to catch if they all had fresh legs.

Suddenly there was a loud whirring noise, coming from directly behind him. Neville dived out of the way, just in time, as three people on bicycles rode right over the spot where he had been sitting.

People on bicycles! Neville couldn't believe it. Here were yet more people he could invite to the forum.

He looked down at the ground where the bicycles had ridden. A track had been marked out on the dusty asteroid surface. Clearly, this was a bicycle race. All Neville had to do was get them to stop and then he could convince them to join him.

By now, Neville could hear the whirring again. He stood up and jumped onto the track, waving his arms as the bicycles raced towards him. But the riders on the bikes showed no signs of slowing down. As they rushed directly at him, Neville was forced to jump off the tracks again to avoid being hit.

This was proving to be harder than Neville had anticipated. These Cyclists were obviously not ready to finish their race yet. Neville had to think of a way to get them to stop. As they rode past again and again, Neville tried shouting and jumping and yelling out, "stop, stop!" at the top of his voice. But nothing he did would make the Cyclists stop their race.

Then Neville had a brainwave. There was one really sure way to get a race to end.

He crawled back onto the track and drew his finger across it. In front of this line he wrote out the word "Finish" in the dust. Then he hurried out of the way as the Cyclists appeared again.

The Cyclists raced towards the finish line. They all crossed it at exactly the same time and then pulled their bikes to a stop. The Party Couple, who had by now also stood up, cheered with delight for the end of the race.

"I won, I won!" cried one of the Cyclists.

"No you didn't," said a second of them. "I won."

“You’re both wrong,” said the third. “I was clearly the winner.”

“Actually I think it was a three way tie,” said Neville.

“A three way tie?” the first Cyclist exclaimed.

“Well that’s no good,” said the second Cyclist. “We’ll need to have a re-race.”

“Can you start us off, please?” said the third Cyclist to the Party Man.

“With pleasure,” replied the Party Man. “On your mark. Get set. Go!”

Before Neville had a chance to say anything, the Cyclists had begun riding again. Neville called out for them to stop, but when they wouldn’t he bent down and drew another finish line on the ground. The Cyclists rode past the finish line in unison, and then braked their bikes.

Once again the Party Couple cheered, while the Cyclists each claimed that they were the winner.

“None of you is the winner,” insisted Neville.

“Then we must have a re-re-race,” cried the first Cyclist. “Please start us off again.”

“On your mark. Get set. Go,” said the Party Man before Neville could stop him.

The Cyclists took off again. Neville quickly drew a third finish line and the Cyclists pulled to a halt again.

“Stop doing that,” said the first Cyclist.

“I need to talk to you,” said Neville.

“Can’t it wait until after our race is finished?” asked the second Cyclist.

“How long is that going to take?” Neville wanted to know.

“Until we find a winner,” explained the third Cyclist. “Now start us off, please.”

The Party Man started again. “On your mark. Get set—”

But this time Neville was ready. “How do you know when you’ve found a winner?” he asked before the Party Man could finish.

“It’s very simple,” said the first Cyclist. “We have a winner when one of us is clearly in front. As long as that someone is me.”

“No, no, no,” cried the second Cyclist. “We would have to keep going if you were in front. We can’t finish until I’m the one in front.”

“You’re all wrong,” exclaimed the third Cyclist. “The only way this race can be completed is if I’m the one in front.”

“So you’re saying that this race will finish when one of you is clearly in front, but that if this happens it won’t be finished because the other two won’t accept it unless they’re the one in front,” said Neville.

The Cyclists consulted for a moment. Then they turned back to Neville.

“That’s pretty much the way it is,” said the first Cyclist.

“It’s just that none of us wants to be the loser,” explained the second Cyclist.

“A loser is the worst thing that anyone can be,” added the third Cyclist. “So start us off, now.”

The Party Man tried again. “On your mark. Get set—”

“Why can’t you all be winners?” interrupted Neville quickly.

The three Cyclists all shook their heads furiously. “No, no, no. There can only be one winner.”

“So this race is going to go on forever,” muttered Neville in frustration.

“If that’s how long it takes to find our winner, then so be it,” said the first Cyclist. “Now can you please start us off again?”

The Party Man tried for a third time. “On your mark. Get set—”

“No wait,” cried Neville, realising he’d finally figured out the right way to play this. “I know another way for this race to end. The world will come crashing into this asteroid and break it into tiny smithereens. And then you’ll never get to find out who the winner is.”

“But this is terrible,” moaned the first Cyclist. “We have to know who the winner is. We have to finish our race.”

“Well you won’t be able to,” said Neville. “And do you know what that means? You’ll all be losers.”

The Cyclists were utterly devastated by this piece of news. They sobbed and groaned and gnashed their teeth. For a moment, Neville began to think he’d actually gone too far and driven them over the edge.

“It’s all right, it doesn’t have to happen like that,” he called out in as soothing a voice as he could. “I’ve got a plan to save the asteroid field,” and he went on to explain about the forum to the three Cyclists.

“So all you have to do is pause your race, just for a little while. And then, after we’ve stopped the world, you can go straight back to trying to find a winner again.”

This prospect seemed to cheer the Cyclists up enormously.

“Let’s get the forum started as quickly as possible,” said the first Cyclist.

“Jump onto our bikes,” said the second Cyclist. “We’ll ride you back to the asteroid of the Toaster People.”

Neville and the Party Man and Woman got onto the back of each of the bicycles. Then the three of them began riding back through the asteroid field.

“Wait a minute,” Neville cried out after a while. “We have to…” But then he stopped.

“What is it?” asked the first Cyclist, whose bike Neville was riding on.

“It doesn’t matter,” replied Neville. He was going to say that they still had to find the aimless asteroid, but then he realised that there wasn’t any more time. Besides, now that he’d been able to find some other people for the forum, it wouldn’t so bad if the Aimless Girl wasn’t there. The best thing for them to do was get back to the asteroid of the Toaster People as quickly as possible.

It was time for the forum to begin.

Out of Forum

When Neville, the Party Couple and the Cyclists arrived back at the asteroid of the Toaster People, Neville was extremely pleased to see that their Leader had followed his instructions perfectly. Both sides of the little plaza were now crowded with people.

As the bikes set down in the middle of the plaza, Neville was almost deafened by the noise. It seemed that a strange degree of animosity had developed between the crowds on either side of the plaza, and it didn't take him long to figure out why.

In front of the crowd on the left side of the plaza, a series of shiny household appliances were proudly displayed. However, in front of the crowd on the right side of the plaza, there were no such appliances. Obviously, the groups on the left were those whose prophecies had come to pass while the groups on the right were those whose prophecies had yet to be fulfilled. Now, not surprisingly, a great rivalry had built up between the groups as they sat, shouting at each other and waving their flags, like rival supporters at a football match.

Neville held his hands up in the air and called out for quiet. At first, it was difficult to attract the attention of the yelling, chanting crowd. But after a couple of minutes, and with the assistance of their Leader, he was able to get them to pay attention.

"Thank you very much for coming," said Neville. He tried to make his voice as loud and assertive as he could but couldn't help feeling that out here in the depth of space it actually sounded quite weak and puny. Still there was nothing left to do but go on. "I think that without any further ado we should begin this forum."

"Good thinking," said the Party Man. "Let's start with some hors d'oeuvres."

"There's no time," replied Neville quickly.

"Oh come on," the Party Woman protested. "I'm sure we can quickly whip something up with this automatic canapé maker," and as she held up the little electric gadget, the crowd of people sitting behind it whooped loudly in appreciation.

"There is no time for hors d'oeuvres," repeated Neville. "We have to get down to business, straight away."

"Spoilsport," cried the Party Man.

"Forum pooper," cried the Party Woman.

Choosing to ignore them, Neville continued straight on. "Does anyone have any thoughts about how we can get this forum started?"

"I know an excellent way to start it off," said the first Cyclist.

"Fantastic. What is it?" asked Neville.

"On your mark. Get set. Go," cried the first Cyclist.

Immediately the other two Cyclists leapt onto their bikes and did a lap of the plaza. But when they saw that the first Cyclist hadn't joined them, they quickly stopped again.

"Sorry," said the second Cyclist sheepishly.

"Force of habit," explained the third Cyclist.

By now Neville was starting to get quite frustrated.

"Doesn't anyone have any ideas about how we can stop the world from smashing into this asteroid field?" he cried.

From the left side of the plaza there was a mighty roar.

Neville couldn't believe it. The Toaster People really had been busy. Was it possible that they had already been able to find a solution to this dilemma?

"How can we do it?" he asked, excitedly.

Another roar rose up from the left side as each of the groups pointed to their particular appliance. It took a second for Neville to figure out what they were actually saying, but when he did he couldn't help feeling just a little disappointed.

Each one of these groups was insisting that their device was the one that would stop the world. The Spaghetti Maker People were certain that their spaghetti maker was the answer, while the Espresso Machine People proclaimed loudly that a good strong cup of coffee was all that was needed. The Waffle Iron People held strongly to the belief that their waffle iron could do it, while the Juicer People just knew that a glass of fresh fruit juice would solve everything.

And, if this wasn't bad enough, another roar now rose up from the right side of the plaza. These people were crying out that the people on the left didn't know what they were talking about, and that none of their appliances were good for anything. And while Neville couldn't help agreeing with them, their contributions were really not all that helpful to him. They were obviously just resentful of the fact that because their prophecies hadn't come true, they didn't have any appliances of their own to offer.

As the people returned to their shouting and chanting and flag waving, Neville, once again had to jump up and down and wave his arms around to get them to pay attention.

"Please, listen to me," he pleaded. "Your little devices are not going to be any use against the might of the world. We're going to need something a lot stronger. Come on everybody. Think as hard as you can."

"I'm sorry," said the Leader of the Toaster people. "It's just that it's so hard to think clearly without a nice hot piece of toast to start the day."

"Will a rock cake do instead?" asked the Party Woman.

"Maybe," replied the Leader. "If it's done just right."

"What a fine idea," said the Party Man. "Rock cakes all round. Then we'll all be able to do some really clear thinking."

The Party Couple bent down and began collecting rocks from the asteroid surface. The Party Woman offered one to Neville but he brushed it away in annoyance.

"You don't understand," he called out to the gathering. "Rock cakes aren't going to help us. We have to come up with an idea right now."

"Perhaps you need to offer a prize," suggested the first Cyclist.

"What do you mean?" asked Neville.

"Very simple," the first Cyclist explained. "The first one to come up with a good idea is the winner."

"Now that's a good idea," said Neville, feeling a faint touch of relief that at last someone had done a teeny bit of thinking.

"I win, I win," cried the first Cyclist in delight.

"Not fair," protested the second Cyclist.

"We didn't have time to think," cried the third Cyclist. "We demand a re-think."

"Losers, losers," taunted the first Cyclist.

"There are no winners and no losers," cried Neville. "We're all in this together."

But even as he spoke, he knew his words were meaningless. The rest of the crowd had already taken sides. The group on the left were calling out, "Losers, losers," to the group on the right. Their opponents on the right retaliated by chanting, "Not fair, not fair," and, "We demand a re-think."

Suddenly the world rushed past. It was now moving so quickly that all Neville could see was a streak, like a fluorescent band of blue and green pasted across the sky. Surely, their time was almost up. The world must be close to reaching maximum velocity, that point when it would finally escape from its orbit and came hurtling into the asteroid field.

Neville's head dropped. He had failed. The whole forum was disintegrating into chaos. But what did he expect? There had never really been any chance that they were going to find a way to stop the world. The whole exercise had been futile from the start.

Neville looked at the other people on the asteroid. The Party Couple, dancing wildly around the plaza, handing out rocks and drinking dust out of a champagne bottle. The Cyclists riding around on their bicycles, each desperately trying to claim the title of winner. And the crowds on either side of the square, chanting and yelling and hurling insults at each other. Did it really matter if the world came crashing into this scene? Would it be a great loss if any of these people were smashed into tiny pieces?

But then Neville remembered Helen sitting on her little asteroid, tending her little garden. He thought about how she was relying on him to stop the world. And he remembered how she had saved his own life. Neville couldn't let her down now. He had to come up with an idea and he had to come up with it now.

Neville sat down, almost overcome with despair. If only ideas weren't so difficult to find. If only you could catch them, like you caught a fish. You could just cast a net into your head, then pull it out and find an idea swimming around inside.

Neville leapt up and raised his arms in the air. He took a deep breath and then shouted as loudly as he had ever shouted in all his life.

"Everybody listen to me. I've got an idea."

Casting a Net

The moment Neville finished yelling out that he had an idea, the crowd stopped what they were doing and turned to face him. Neville quickly began to explain his idea but, suddenly faced with the full attention of the crowd, he couldn't help getting this niggly feeling that maybe his plan wasn't so brilliant after all.

"What we need to do is build a gigantic net. A net so big that it stretches across the sky. A net so vast that we can catch the world inside it, just like catching a fish."

Neville finished talking. Suddenly, he didn't feel strong and bold and confident at all. Suddenly, his whole plan sounded like the silliest thing he'd ever heard.

The Party Woman was the first person to break the silence.

"That's a great idea," she said. "We can use our streamers."

This was the last thing Neville needed to hear. The Party Woman's comment only confirmed how totally ridiculous his plan really was.

"Don't be stupid," he said. "You can't catch the world in a net made of streamers."

"These are very strong streamers," said the Party Woman.

"They're made of a solid alloy of lead and reinforced steel," confirmed the Party Man as he tossed a couple towards Neville.

"But they're so light," said Neville, catching the streamers as they floated gently down to the ground. "They feel just like normal streamers."

"That's because there's no gravity out here in space, silly," explained the Party Woman.

"If you wanted to pick up one of these streamers back on earth, you'd need a 60 foot crane," added the Party Man.

"But why would anyone want streamers made of lead and reinforced steel?" asked Neville in amazement.

"In the last week," said the Party Woman, "we've celebrated fifty-seven Christmases, eighty-four New Years and two hundred and nine birthdays."

"We need streamers that are built to last," said the Party Man.

All of a sudden Neville was starting to feel a bit more confident. A giant net made of lead and reinforced steel sounded like exactly the sort of thing you could catch the world in.

"All right, so our plan is beginning to take shape," he said. "We build a net out of the Party Couple's streamers. Then we move it out of the asteroid field and cast it in front of the world. Does anybody have any suggestions on how we can do that?"

From the left side of the plaza there was another great roar as the crowd, once again, insisted that their appliances would be able to solve the problem. And, in response, there was also a roar from the right side for no other reason than to disagree with the people on the left side.

Neville was starting to get extremely frustrated by the lack of help he was getting from the crowd. All they ever wanted to do was argue with each other. They didn't have anything useful to offer. Once again, it was up to Neville to find an answer.

But how are you supposed to move a giant net made of lead and reinforced steel through space? You couldn't just push it. You would need some sort of motor.

Motor!

Neville was wrong. The crowd did have something useful to offer.

"I've got it," he cried. "We can use your appliances. We can use their motors to drive the net into the world's path."

The crowd on the left whooped with delight to discover that their appliances did have some use after all. The crowd on the right whooped with delight as well. They may have felt a bit left out by all of this but they had finally begun to realise that being saved from getting smashed into little pieces was not such a bad thing after all.

Of course, by this time, Neville had discovered another weakness in his plan. A problem he'd noticed the first time he'd visited this asteroid.

"Everybody, stop cheering and listen to me," he cried. "We've still got one more thing to sort out." Having regained the attention of the forum, Neville explained. "It's all very well using the motors to drive the net but what will we use to drive the motors? There's no electricity out here in space."

This was a tough one. Nobody seemed to have any clear idea. The Toaster People fiddled and toyed with their currently lifeless and inoperative appliances. The Party Couple tossed their streamers in the air. The Cyclists wheeled around on their bikes, the lights from their headlamps playing over the rocks and craters of the asteroid surface.

"Where are those lights coming from?" asked Neville suddenly, pointing at the bicycles.

"There's a generator on each of these bikes," observed the Leader of the Toaster People. "When you pedal the bike, it produces electricity. That's what's powering the headlamps."

"That's it," cried Neville. "We attach the motors to the bicycles. Then, when we pedal the bicycles, the generators will provide electricity for the motors to drive the net out into the path of the world."

Neville lifted up two streamers and tied them together.

"All right, everybody," he said. "Let's start tying streamers together. We've got to make the biggest, strongest net in the whole universe."

The crowd surged forward, racing towards the Party Couple, who in response began taking streamers out of their hamper and tossing them about. The Toaster People started tying the streamers together, doing their best to get that net built as quickly as possible.

Neville watched excitedly as the net began to take shape. But it didn't take long for that sinking feeling to set in again. Underneath all that enthusiasm, very little progress was being made. After several minutes had passed, the net was still barely wide enough to capture a small comet, let alone anything as big as the world. It was rapidly becoming obvious that there was no way they could get the whole thing constructed in the short time they had left.

Devastation overcame Neville. It had all seemed so close. For a moment, it looked as if he would actually be able to achieve his aim of stopping the world. But now reality was finally sinking in. Neville looked back towards the Toaster People, still frantically adding more streamers to the net. Then he looked out at the asteroid field. It seemed so sad. In a few minutes, all of this would be destroyed.

Neville scanned his eyes across the field, observing all the different types of asteroids for the last time. The big ones and the small ones. The dull ones and the brightly coloured ones. The fast ones and the slow ones. Even that strange little one that darted aimlessly around the sky, going this way and that way and all around the place.

Ideas are amazing things. After the number that Neville had had in quick succession, you would have thought there couldn't be any more left. But the sight of the aimless asteroid, rushing around in its zig-zaggy way, was enough for one final idea to come leaping out. He grabbed a streamer and called out at the top of his lungs.

"Okay everybody, change of plan. Half of you, I need you to join streamers together, end-to-end. We have to make the longest single streamer we can mange. The rest of you, follow me."

The Toaster People leapt into action. Half of them immediately began joining streamers onto the end of the one Neville held. Once a decent length had been established, Neville signalled to the others.

"After that asteroid," he roared, pointing at the aimless asteroid.

In one great mass the people jumped off their asteroid and rushed after the aimless asteroid.

The aimless asteroid didn’t stand a chance. Against three people it had had no trouble getting away. But now that it was being chased by hundreds of people, there was nowhere for it to go. In a matter of seconds it was surrounded and trapped. The Toaster People held onto it firmly, making it easy for Neville to climb aboard.

Neville found the Aimless Girl, sitting on her banana lounge shaped rock, and he held out the end of the streamer to her.

“Can you please hold onto this?” he asked.

“Why?” asked the Aimless Girl.

What could Neville say in reply? How could he convince the Aimless Girl of the severity of the situation without being trapped in another one of her aimless conversations? Neville didn’t even have time to think about a clever response. He just said the first words that came into his head.

“No reason.”

This was good enough for the Aimless Girl. She grinned and took hold of the end of the streamer.

Neville jumped off her asteroid and then watched in satisfaction as it zoomed erratically through the sky, dragging the streamer along in its wake. His plan had worked perfectly. As the aimless asteroid twisted and turned, the streamer twisted and turned behind it, catching onto other asteroids and quickly tangling and winding about itself. In what seemed like no time at all, a vast interlocking web of streamer began to fill the sky. Like a shuttle passing through a gigantic loom, the aimless asteroid wove a mighty net for Neville. Now only two questions remained.

Was it big enough to surround the world? And was it strong enough to stop it in its tracks?

To Catch the World

Now the net was ready, there were only a few things left to do. First, the motors from all of the appliances were removed; thirty motors in all, which Neville split up into three groups of ten. Then, leftover streamers were used to attach each of these groups of motors to the edges of the net, making sure they were as far away from each other as possible. Finally, the Toaster People's Leader, who just happened to have an honours degree in electrical engineering, connected the motors to the generators on each of the bicycles. At last, everything was in place. It was time to try and catch the world.

Neville signalled for the Cyclists to get on their bikes. The first two quickly obeyed but the third was reluctant.

"I stubbed my toe," he complained, "while chasing after the aimless asteroid."

"Is there anyone else here who can ride this bicycle?" Neville called out to the crowd.

The silence that greeted him could have burst an eardrum.

There was no other choice. Neville would have to ride the third bicycle himself.

Neville sat on the bike. Then all three of them began to ride. As the wheels started to revolve, the generators began to spin, sending electrical currents down the wires and into the motors. The motors in turn began to throb and hum. Their rotors spun and their pistons pumped.

At first, nothing happened. Neville called for the others to ride faster. Furiously, he pushed his legs up and down. Suddenly, he felt a jolt. The net had moved, just a little bit.

"Come on," he cried. "We can do this."

Again, Neville felt a jolt, and then another one. He could tell that the net was shifting, but he could also feel the drag from behind as that massive mesh of lead and steel resisted the pull of the motors. It seemed that they would not have the power to do anything more than tug the net a couple of metres. Neville grimaced and pushed on the pedals with all his might, and then it happened. The drag at last gave way. And in one graceful, sweeping movement, the whole of the mighty net swept into motion.

Like contestants in an intergalactic velodrome, Neville and the Cyclists rode like fury, towing the enormous net through the asteroid field. Out of the corner of his eye, Neville couldn't help noticing Helen on her asteroid, standing in the middle of the lawn holding her watering can. She waved to him and he waved back and gave her a thumbs-up for good luck. Then he returned his attention to the task at hand, more determined than ever for his plan to succeed.

By now, they were reaching the edge of the asteroid field. Like a vast interstellar butterfly, the net swung away from the other asteroids and out into open space. It was time for the last frantic run, to get the net into position before the world finally escaped from its orbit and went flying off into the asteroid field.

It was clear that their time had almost run out. Before them, the path of the world around the sun was marked out by a glowing green doughnut. Somewhere within that doughnut the world was spinning and turning, but exactly where he could not tell. The world was now moving so quickly that it couldn't actually be seen. But it could definitely be heard. The roar of the world was like the sound of a hundred rock bands all playing at the same time, only much, much louder.

Neville waved his hands furiously forward. If this was the Olympics, they would definitely have broken all world cycling records by now. Closer and closer they got to the great glowing band within which the world was spinning so madly. Neville suddenly felt a great surge of hope. They were going to do it. They were actually going to do it. All they had to do was dive down into that doughnut, and place themselves right in the path of the world.

And then it happened. The moment everybody in the asteroid field had been dreading. The moment when the world reached maximum speed and the gravitational pull of the sun could no longer hold it in its orbit.

Out from the middle of its glowing green circle, the world emerged. It rushed through the sky, making straight for the asteroid field. For a horrifying second Neville could see it heading directly for them. And then, a second later, he saw something even more horrifying.

The world wasn't heading directly for them. It was veering off to the side. It was going to race past them, way off to the right.

"Change direction!" screamed Neville. "Change direction!"

His voice might have been drowned out by the roar of the world but the other Cyclists had realised the same thing. All three of them swung their handlebars hard to the right, sending the net flying off at right angles.

Now the race was on. The world was hurtling towards the asteroid field. And Neville and the Cyclists were on a desperate intercept course. Their aim was to get the net directly between the world and the asteroid field, so they could cut the world off before its devastating impact. But would they get there in time? No matter how quickly they pedalled, the world was moving far, far faster. For every metre they covered, the world was covering hundreds of miles. Closer and closer, harder and harder they pushed. They were almost there, but so was the world. They could already feel its atmosphere blowing in their hair. It was almost onto them, almost past them. One last hopeless lunge, their final hope. The whole of the asteroid field's final hope.

Thump!!!!!!!!!!

They had made it. With a thud like a thousand earthquakes, the world came crashing into the net. The impact sent Neville flying off his seat. In desperation he reached out and managed to just grab hold of the handlebars. For a couple of seconds he found himself being pulled through space, holding on for dear life. Then, somehow, he was able to pull himself back onto the seat.

He looked around. Space was flying past. The world might have been caught in the net but that hadn't stopped it. It was still racing towards the asteroid field, dragging the net along with it. He looked for the other Cyclists. One had been thrown clear off his bike but the other had managed to remain seated. Now there was only one thing left to do.

Neville put his feet on the pedals and rode. He rode like he'd never ridden before, faster even than on that last crazy dash to intercept the world. And the other Cyclist rode too. Pointing their bikes in the opposite direction, they tried with all their might to put a brake on the world before it reached the asteroid field.

But despite their best efforts, the world didn't seem to be slowing. In his rear view mirror Neville could see the asteroid field looming larger and larger. He pedalled harder. His legs began to ache and throb. His rotating feet were a blur of motion.

And it was working. For the first time, Neville could feel the world starting to slow, just a little. But it hardly seemed to make any difference. The asteroid field was now so close and the world was still moving so quickly. Already, Neville could see defined features on the nearest asteroid; a strange geometric marking on its surface and a large, protruding rock.

With a shock, Neville realised that the first asteroid they were going to hit was his old home. The geometric marking was the border of Bolivia and the large rock was its President. But President Rock was powerless to prevent the impending collision. Crash!! The little asteroid disintegrated on contact.

Neville held back a tear and kept on pedalling. Thanks to his exertions, there was now a definite reduction in the speed the world was travelling. But it still didn't seem enough. Even now the world was plunging into the asteroid field. A second asteroid was smashed into smithereens and then a third. A fourth asteroid appeared in their path. As it got closer, Neville

could distinctly make out its features. He saw the carefully tended lawn and the peach tree. He saw the flowers and their brightly coloured pots. It was Helen's asteroid.

Neville gritted his teeth. This wasn't going to happen. He wasn't going to let it happen. Even though his legs felt like tissue paper, he kept on pedalling. The world was moving quite slowly now, just drifting through the sky, but would it stop in time? Helen's asteroid was getting closer and closer. He could see the petals on the flowers and the leaves on the peach tree. And he could see Helen staring up at the world, panic written all over her face.

Neville pushed on. He couldn't feel his legs anymore but somehow he willed them to go around. Behind him, he could see Helen crouched down on the ground, her hands raised to shield her head from the shock of impact. Neville covered his eyes. He couldn't stand to see what was about to happen.

And then, with a screech like a massive locomotive pulling into a station, the world heaved to a stop.

Getting Back On

Neville sat on his bicycle, too scared to take his hands away from his eyes. Had they stopped the world in time? Had Helen been saved? Or had he been too late? Had the world, in its final movements, collided with her asteroid? The world was so massive that even as it ground to a halt, it would still have pulverised the tiny little ball of rock.

Neville would probably have spent the rest of his life like that if not for the fact that he suddenly heard a voice:

"It's all right Neville. You can look now."

The voice was Helen's. Relief washed over Neville as he opened his eyes and then gasped at what he saw.

The world was floating just above Helen's asteroid. It was so close that the tip of Mt Everest was brushing up against the peach tree. Neville had managed to stop the world right in the nick of time. A fraction of a second later and Helen and her asteroid would have been done for.

Neville climbed off the bike and walked over to the asteroid where Helen ran up and gave him a big hug.

"You did it, Neville," she exclaimed. "You stopped the world and saved the asteroid field."

Neville didn't know what to say. He felt so good that he had been able to help Helen. But after a second she let go of him.

"There's just one more thing we need to fix," she said.

"What's that?" asked Neville.

She pointed up to the world. "We have to get it moving again."

"Moving again?" gasped Neville. "After everything we've done to get it to stop?"

"You did a great job, Neville," said Helen. "And I'm very grateful. But we can't leave the world here. The world can't just stand still."

"Why not?"

"Because if the world stands still, nothing will ever be achieved. No one will make anything or do anything. Life will just be static and dull. And besides, if the world stays here, my peach tree will freeze."

Neville looked at the tree. Already the cold air from the world's highest mountain was causing the fruit to shrivel.

"Well what should I do?" he asked.

"Give it a push," suggested Helen.

Neville walked across to where the peach tree stood. He reached up and placed his hand on the tip of Mt Everest. Then he gave it a little push. Immediately, the world began to move away. It slowly slid out of the asteroid field and then began to fall back into space. Within a couple of minutes, it had once again been trapped by the gravitational pull of the sun and was back in orbit. But not a mad, out of control orbit like before. This was a nice gentle orbit. One that would never place the asteroid field under any sort of threat again.

In silence, Neville and Helen watched the world slowly revolving around the sun. Then they gradually began to realise that the silence was being broken.

"Sounds like someone is having a party," said Helen.

Helen was right. Neville could clearly hear the sounds of cheering and singing coming from the asteroid of the Toaster People.

"You'd better go, Neville," added Helen. "I think you're probably going to be the guest of honour."

Neville told Helen he'd be back soon. Then he hurried over to the asteroid of the Toaster People.

As soon as they saw him, all of the people gave a huge roar.

“Three cheers for Neville! Hip hip hooray. Hip hip hooray. Hip hip hooray.”

Neville was proud to accept the congratulations from everyone. He even took the bottle of champagne when it was offered and was surprised to find that this time the dust actually tasted pretty good. Then he looked around in amazement at the celebrations around him.

The Party Couple had spared no expense in organising a grand affair, turning the plaza into a dance floor and decorating it with brightly coloured streamers scavenged from the net. There were hors d’oeuvres aplenty and the dancing went on for hours. Even the aimless asteroid got involved in the fun, leading everybody on a massive conga line that snaked and twisted all the way through the asteroid field.

After the party was over, Neville returned to Helen’s asteroid. He lay on the lawn and watched as she moved from flower to flower, diligently pouring a small stream of water onto each one. After a while, she stopped and looked at him.

“So, what are you going to do now?” she asked.

Neville took a while to reply. After finally achieving his aim, he had already made up his mind about what he needed to do. But he felt a bit funny telling Helen what it was.

“I’ve actually decided to go back to the world.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” replied Neville. “I know it sounds strange after everything that’s happened. But the reason I let go of the world was because it was moving so fast I couldn’t keep up anymore. Now it isn’t moving so quickly I really feel that I need to go back. This asteroid field is very beautiful and I’m sad to leave it. But the world is my home. It’s where I belong.”

Helen nodded. “I understand. But I’ll miss you. And everyone here in the asteroid field will always remember what you did.”

So Neville Lansdowne got back on the world.

But it was a different world to the one he had let go of. It was a slower world, a gentler world. There was no more rushing, no more frantically racing to keep up. Suddenly people were smiling. They were happy again. And now that Neville could take the time to relax, he began to notice things he hadn’t noticed for ages. The vivid green of the leaves on the trees. The music of laughter. The cool wetness of the rain on a warm summer evening.

It was good to be home.

But Neville never forgot the asteroid field. And every so often, when he felt that he needed a break, he would jump off the world and come back for a visit. Sometimes, he would bring a notepad and pen along, and stroll from asteroid to asteroid, recording the amazing sights on offer. Then, when he’d had enough of strolling, he liked to catch up with his old friends. He might enjoy a nice hot piece of toast with the Toaster People or sip champagne with the Party Couple. He would watch the Cyclists as they continued on their seemingly never ending race or just sit and chat about nothing in particular with the Aimless Girl.

But he would always end each visit with a stop on his favourite asteroid of all. In the peace of her little garden, he would enjoy one of Helen’s peaches, and then lie back and sketch the asteroids as they passed across the sky.

Sometimes, Helen would take a rest from her watering and come and sit beside him.

“What are you drawing?” she would ask.

“Oh, nothing much,” Neville would reply. “Just doodling.”

Also available from Jonathan Gould

Novellas

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Jonathan Gould has lived in Melbourne, Australia all his life, except when he hasn't. He has written comedy sketches for both the theatre and radio, as well as several published children's books for the educational market.

He likes to refer to his stories as dag-lit because they don't easily fit into recognisable genres (dag is Australian slang for a person who is unfashionable and doesn't follow the crowd - but in an amusing and fun way). You might think of them as comic fantasies, or modern fairytales for the young and the young-at-heart.

Over the years, his writing has been compared to Douglas Adams, Monty Python, A.A. Milne, Lewis Carroll, the Goons and even Enid Blyton (in a good way).

You can connect with him, and follow his random thoughts and scribblings, at:

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