

7 DECEMBER 2124

10.12AM

I'm Rufus. I don't
always look like this.
This is my **SURPRISED**
face.



I look surprised right now because while I was eating my
top-secret waffle, I opened an envelope from Great-Uncle
Grumbo. And inside it I saw something unbelievable.

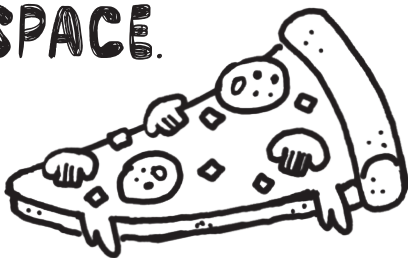
A TICKET!

And not just ANY ticket ...

A ticket for a **TRIP INTO SPACE**.

And not just any trip into space.

A trip into space with ...



The **FIRST** thing you're probably thinking is:

'This will be the best adventure ever.'

The **SECOND** thing you're probably thinking is:

'How much pizza can a boy eat before he explodes?'

The **THIRD** thing you're probably thinking is:

'Is the pizza **REALLY** All-You-Can-Eat?'

And I'm with you on that. But I also can't help thinking there's only **one reason** Great-Uncle Grumbo booked this trip: it's because he wants me as far away from him as possible.

Great-Uncle Grumbo has a face that looks like he's just been pinched. He never wanted me to move in with him. But when my space scientist mum disappeared, I had to live **somewhere**. Has it gone smoothly? In a word: **No**.

Great-Uncle Grumbo thinks that's **MY** fault. But what he doesn't understand is that:

- ★ I never meant to splatter his loungeroom in blobs of camel cheese.
- ★ Or slice up his yoga shorts in Mr Jensen's woodchipper.
- ★ Or use his bathtub as an emergency holding tank for rescued jellyfish.

★ And I never meant to mix concrete into his body butter.

★ **OR** use the water in his vampire lava lamp to put out a toilet fire.

All of this happened by accident. And when I say **by accident**, I mean it was all because of Bunglebot, my robot who never gets things right. **EVER!**

I admit Bunglebot isn't the easiest robot to live with. But living with Great-Uncle Grumbo is no picnic either.

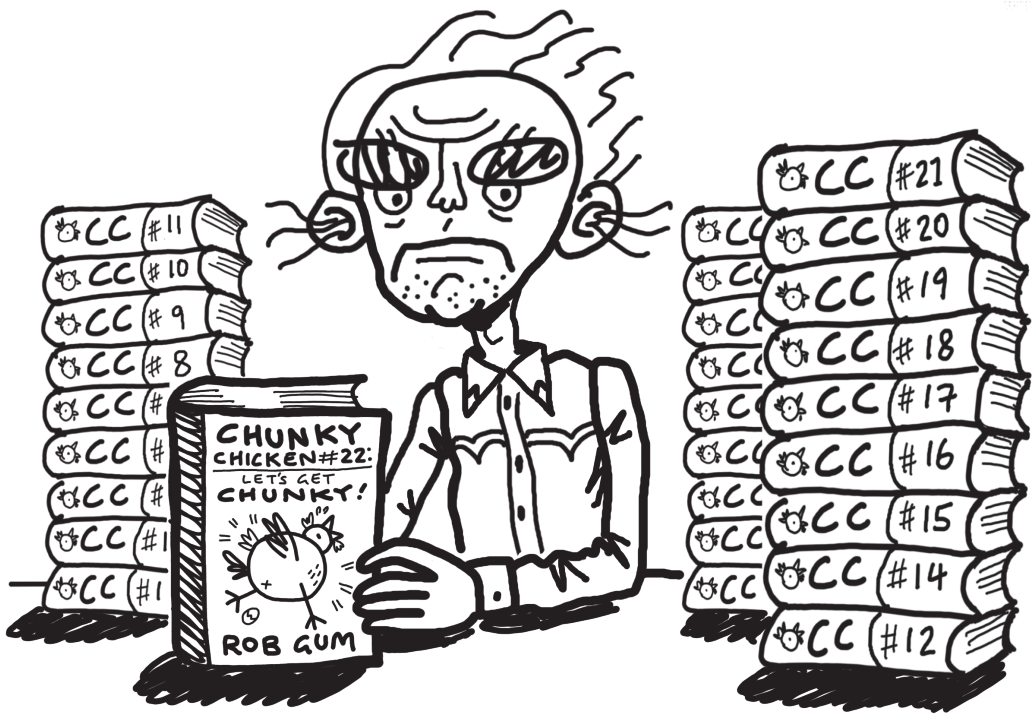
As well as always looking like he's just been pinched, Great-Uncle Grumbo eats his own earwax. And he **burps A LOT**.

Oh, and he loves watching videos of people slipping over. His absolute favourite video is called: **'BEST EVER - PEOPLE ACCIDENTALLY SLIPPING OVER ON HOLIDAY - MUST WATCH - LOL - SOOO FUNNY!!!!'**

His absolute number one favourite thing to do is watch that video over and over again while eating his own earwax and burping.

He says this is what gives him the ideas for the children's books he writes.

I know, I know! It sounds **RIDICULOUS**, and almost no one knows this, but Great-Uncle Grumbo is the ★ World's Number 1 Children's Author. ★



Maybe you've heard of the **CHUNKY CHICKEN** series?

underwater sausage factory. One way or another, the chicken always ends up completely featherless, which Great-Uncle Grumbo thinks is hilarious.)



Kids don't love the **CHUNKY CHICKEN** series, but there are no other kids' books. So now you understand why Great-Uncle Grumbo – aka Rob Gum – is the World's Number 1 Children's Author. (Hint: because he's the world's **ONLY** children's author.)

I once asked Great-Uncle Grumbo why he doesn't write using his real name and he said that if he did, he'd have to talk to children.

'And I don't like children,' he added.

I waited for him to say: 'Except for you, of course.'

BUT NOTHING.



Great-Uncle Grumbo never lets me invite anyone over. As he keeps reminding me, I don't have any family left besides him. And none of my friends live here.

I don't even get to go to school because the government banned that too. They don't want kids learning stuff. You probably think that sounds awesome. But after a month stuck with pinched-face Great-Uncle Grumbo in a big, old creaky house that smells of burps, you might change your mind.

It's stinky.

And boring.

And kind of LONELY.



So when I first saw the ad for Bunglebot, I got pretty excited.

It was on the back of an old Chunky Chicken book, which should have been a clue that Bunglebot might not be of the highest quality.

But he was hard to resist because the list of things he could do sounded **SO AWESOME.**

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THE AMAZING BUNGLEBOT

ONLY \$12.99!!

YES! BUNGLEBOT CAN ...

ROLL
ON HIS
OWN!

GRAB
STUFF
WITH HIS
PRONGS!

Make his own head spin around!

GRAB
OTHER STUFF
WITH HIS
PRONGS!

MAKE
HIS OWN HEAD
SPIN AROUND
AGAIN!



I counted my LIFE savings.

\$12.63. **SURELY** MY LIFE
IS WORTH MORE THAN THAT?

It wasn't enough, so I was forced to raid my Emergency Cash Stash.

(That's a hidden vault beneath Great-Uncle Grumbo's armchair cushion. Withdrawals can only be made while he is asleep, and a head torch is advised.)

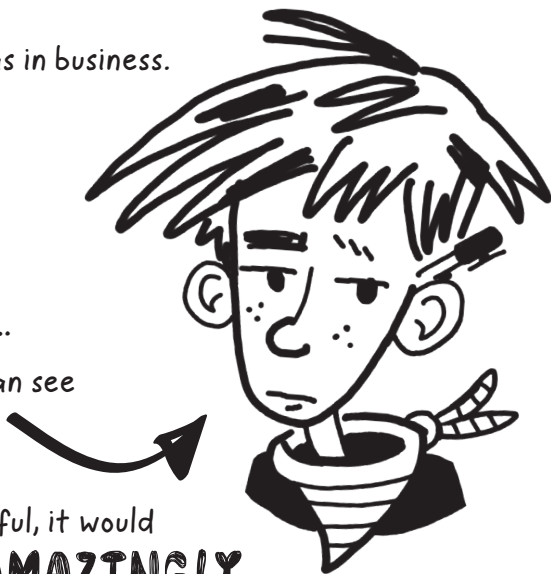
Thirty-six cents later, I was in business.

I couldn't wait to meet

**THE AMAZING
BUNGLEBOT!**

But when he arrived, well ...

here's a flashback so you can see
how my face reacted.



If the ad were more truthful, it would
have called him: **'THE AMAZINGLY
BASIC BUNGLEBOT'**

I've seen TOILETS with more tech!

It took me **WEEKS** to get him working at all. And then I
decided, why stop there?

WHY NOT TURN HIM INTO A
SUPER-BOT

THAT COULD DO **ANYTHING** I WANT?

So I did.

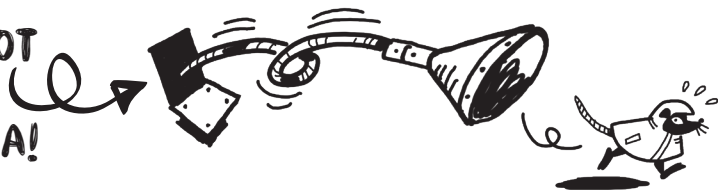


Activate
**BUNGLEBOT
HELICOPTER
BLADES!**



Activate **BUNGLEBOT
SAUSAGE SLING!**

Activate
**BUNGLEBOT
BAT
UMBRELLA!**



Okay, so it's possible that my robotics skills were **NOT QUITE** as good as I thought they were. But in my defence, there was no one to ask. And there are no science books to read up on it. Not since science was ... you guessed it ... **banned by the government.**

If you're not from Earth, there's something I need to explain. Right now, Earth is being run by a powerful family called

THE THROWBACKERS.



Their leader, **GENERAL RELUCTANCE**, thinks progress has gone too far. He says modern ways have made things **worse**, not better. So they've started banning stuff: science, gadgets, school past Grade Four, almost all books, and even movies. (Which is why I secretly make my own!)

It's why Bunglebot was so basic in the first place – because The Throwbackers won't let kids have ANY high-tech stuff.

My mum, before she went missing, said she thought The Throwbackers were dangerous. She said what they really want to do is to make us all dumber so that we are easier to control.

I don't know about that. What I ~~DO~~ know is that as a result of Bunglebot not working as well as he could have, things between Great-Uncle Grumbo and me are not perfect.

Another word to describe our relationship would be: **'AWFUL'**.

Two more words would be: **'TOTALLY TERRIBLE'**.

And a whole sentence to describe our relationship would be:

'RUFUS, I AM GOING TO SEND YOU ON A TRIP INTO DEEP, DARK SPACE AND I HOPE TO HIGH HEAVEN YOU NEVER COME BACK!'

I'm not **TOTALLY** sure he meant that part about never coming back. But a while ago I looked up the facts on space travel and there's actually quite a large chance I **WON'T** ever come back. A 29.3 per cent chance to be exact.

While I was finding out that fact, I came across a lot of other facts. Facts I wish I didn't find. Facts like ...

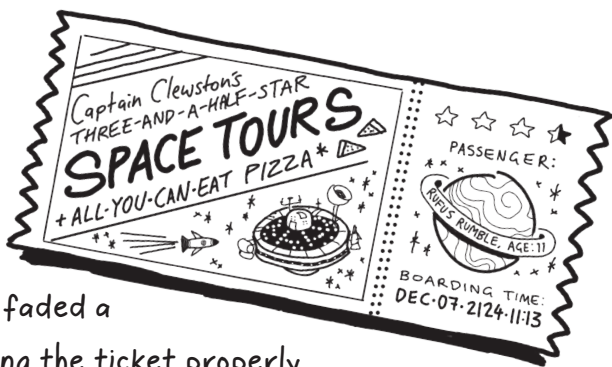
THE TOP TEN ABSOLUTE **WORST** THINGS THAT CAN HAPPEN TO YOU IN SPACE

10. Stuck in Moon Crater
9. Stuck in Airlock
8. Stuck in Rocket Booster
7. Stuck Due to Unexpected Space Tornado
6. Stuck in Martian Mud-Bath After Falling Asleep
5. Stuck to Spacecraft Roof, Floor, Wall or Toilet
4. Stuck in Endless Space-Maze
3. Stuck on Comet Heading Who Knows Where
2. Stuck to Something Sticky, Then Coming Unstuck Suddenly and Whizzing Off Who Knows Where
1. Stuck on Cork Board in Alien's Astronaut Collection

I know. There really are a surprising amount of ways to get stuck in space.

Even so, if 29.3 per cent of space-travellers never come back, that still leaves a survival rate of over 70 per cent. Which isn't too bad. If I can just avoid getting stuck in something, I should be fine. Right?

10.13AM



My surprised face has faded a bit now while I'm reading the ticket properly.

**'CAPTAIN CLEWSTON'S
THREE-AND-A-HALF-STAR
SPACE TOURS'** it says in big gold writing.

There's a picture of a rocket whizzing towards something that looks like a waffle* but which might be a spaceship.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

*Just so you know, I see waffles almost everywhere. Even when they aren't there. Great-Uncle Grumbo knows how much I love them so he's banned me from having ANY waffles. What he doesn't know is that while he's munching HIS waffles, usually right after he's finished watching a video of people slipping over, I sneak under the table and collect all the crumbs. After about a month, and with a bit of careful gluing, there are enough crumbs to make my own waffle. Does my top-secret waffle look delicious? No. Is it better than no waffle at all? Yes. But only just.



XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

On the ticket, near the thing that is probably a spaceship and not a waffle, is a planet – maybe Saturn – and written across the planet's rings are the words:

**PASSENGER:
RUFUS RUMBLE. AGE: 11.**

Then I see something that makes my heart skip a beat. The departure date ... **IT'S TODAY!**

In fact, the space tour starts an hour from **RIGHT NOW!** I'm trying not to freak out, but I need to get packing.

I start by sticking the rest of my top-secret waffle into the pocket of my shorts. (It fits well because I made the pocket especially for this exact purpose.)

Phew! Now that I've got the essentials covered, I feel more relaxed. But what else do I need?

I flip the ticket over and spot some writing on the back.

'WHAT TO BRING AND WHAT NOT TO BRING ON YOUR UPCOMING SPACE ADVENTURE!'

But there's a problem. Those words take up almost the whole back of the ticket. If I squint, I can tell that underneath them is some tiny writing.

D-U-C is all I can make out.

Should I be bringing a duck? Or maybe **NOT** bringing a duck? I can't tell. It's way, **WAY** too small to read.

This is a job for Bunglebot.

I know I added a **MAGNIFYING FEATURE** to him a few weeks back. But which button was it?

Not that one.

DEFINITELY not that one.



Has to be this one then!

Oh, nuggets. If you're ever going to modify a Bunglebot, here are **THREE** important tips:

1. **DO NOT** add a catapult arm made from a tent peg mallet.

2. If you **DO** add a catapult arm made from a tent peg mallet, make sure you remember **WHICH BUTTON** makes it work.

3. If you DO add a catapult arm made from a tent peg mallet, and you DO forget which button makes it work, MAKE SURE Bunglebot isn't next to anything that can get squashed easily.

Like Great-Uncle Grumbo's collection of frog sculptures, made from his own TOENAIL CLIPPINGS.



10.23AM

Normally ten minutes after an 'incident', Great-Uncle Grumbo calms down a bit.

That's what happened after the 'Jellyfish+Bathtub Incident'. Also the 'Yoga Shorts+Woodchipper Incident'. And the 'Concrete+Body Butter Incident'.

Not this time.

The 'Mallet+Frog Sculpture Incident' upsets Great-Uncle Grumbo so much that he wants me out of his house. **NOW!** HE DOESN'T EVEN SAY GOODBYE. He just empties the entire contents of my top drawer into my backpack and boots me out the door onto the lawn.

I want to yell something at Great-Uncle Grumbo. Something smart that makes him realise he's not as great as he thinks he is. He's staring at me from the porch. It's like he's daring me to speak. But I can't think of anything.

HURRY UP, I say to myself. *What about something about his BURPING? Or something about him EATING EARWAX? Or something about him being an AWFUL WEIRDO who makes sculptures from toenail clippings?*

Great-Uncle Grumbo is still waiting. My mouth is open, but nothing's coming out.

Then, with a final furious glare, he slams the door.

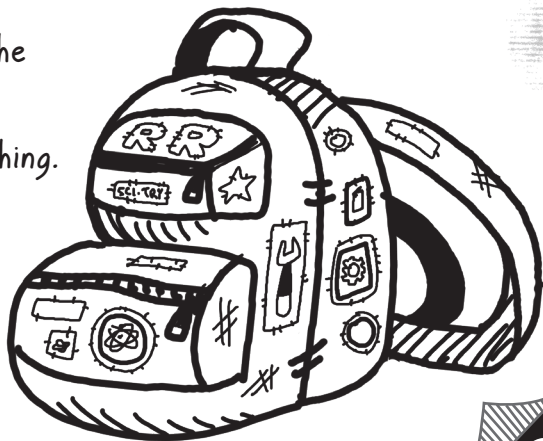
My shoulders sag. It's too late, but finally I get some words out.

'Chunky Chicken is ... just ... um ... really ...

CRUMMY!

Way to go, Rufus, I say to myself. Nailed it.

Feeling downcast, I look at the backpack at my feet. And suddenly I remember something. I unzip the backpack. Inside are lots of underpants and odd socks.



My heart **SKIPS A BEAT.**

What if the thing I'd been hiding from Great-Uncle Grumbo isn't here?

I plunge my hand in and my fingers scabble through the socks until, at last, I find the one I'm looking for.

It's a red-striped sock – a bit ragged, nothing special.

But inside it is a **ROCK** my mum gave me.

I slide it out carefully and the sunlight hits it for a moment. It's a crystal, about as long as a barbeque sausage but thicker. An eerie green glow comes from deep inside.



I think back to the night I first saw that glow. Mum had woken me up and put the rock in my hand. It felt as cold as a shard of ice, and the way it gleamed made it seem precious or dangerous. Or both.



'Where did you get it?' I asked her, unable to take my eyes off its shimmering surface.

'On one of my space missions,' she whispered. Something in her voice made me feel uneasy.

'Rufus, you need to promise me you'll keep it safe and never show anyone.'

'Okay,' I said. 'But why? Is it ... **MAGIC** or something?'



She gave a small smile. 'You ask a lot of questions, Rufus Rumble.'

I thought that was a strange thing to say. After all, she'd always taught me to do **JUST** that: **ASK QUESTIONS.**

Mum made me hide the rock in the red-striped sock in my top drawer. As she got up to leave my bedroom, I remember the moonlight shining through her wild red hair. 'Promise me something else, Rufus Rumble,' she had said. '**PROMISE ME YOU'LL ALWAYS GO FORWARD.**'

I never found out what she meant by that. Because the very next day, Mum went missing.

They found her ride-on lawnmower still running in our front yard. Her boots were still on the pedals, but there was no sign of her.

Since it happened, I've been known as:



 'THAT **WEIRD KID** WHOSE MUM
DISAPPEARED AND WHO THEN HAD TO MOVE IN WITH
HIS HORRIBLE, BURPY GREAT-UNCLE GRUMBO'.



There are better nicknames out there. And catchier. I'd prefer something tough like 'wheels' or 'Knuckles'.

Anyway. Making sure Great-Uncle Grumbo isn't watching, I tuck the rock back into my backpack. As I'm doing that I hear his voice from inside.

**'... AND TAKE THAT CURSED
MACHINE WITH YOU!'**

Bunglebot comes flying out the window. He lands next to me on the lawn.

'... KICK HIM OUT OVER THE SECTOR 6 SPACE-DUMP,' Great-Uncle Grumbo screeches. 'HE'LL BE RIGHT AT HOME!'

'Don't listen to him, Bunglebot,' I say, brushing a toenail clipping off his mallet. I'm not sure if I'm allowed to take a robot on the space trip with me, but there's no way I'm leaving Bunglebot behind. So I hide him under a layer of underpants and socks deep inside the backpack.

I put the backpack on and take a deep breath. But instead of walking confidently out of the front gate, I just stand there.

I stare at the sky, imagining all the strange planets swirling out there.



I'm just a KID, I think. I shouldn't be going into space by myself! It's dark. And big. And full of things with rubbery tentacles and mouths in weird places.

I try to push the fear away. 'This will be the best adventure we've ever had, Bunglebot,' I say. But I'm not feeling as excited as I sound.

If only Mum were coming, I say to myself. She's visited more galaxies than almost anyone. Speaks 16 space languages. Once piloted a Spirit Cruiser through the Orion Belt during a space inferno. Another time she camped out on a meteor. She always says you never forget your first space sunset.

Mum had always promised me that one day, when I was ready, we'd go to space together.

But now she's not here. Who knows where she is. Or if she's even still alive.

I look back at Great-Uncle Grumbo's house. Maybe he's cooled

off from the 'Mallet+Frog Sculpture Incident' now. Maybe I could just sneak back in and not say anything.

'So which is it?' I ask Bunglebot. 'Going back to Great-Uncle Grumbo? Or being blasted into space with a 29.3 per cent chance of never coming back?'

From inside I hear Great-Uncle Grumbo

GURP.

'Humby-floot!' Bunglebot says from inside the backpack, his voice muffled by layers of underpants.

'You're right,' I say, closing the gate to Great-Uncle Grumbo's house. 'We can't pass up a chance at All-You-Can-Eat Pizza.'

I don't tell Bunglebot this, but actually, it's not just the pizza I'm thinking about.

I'm also thinking about the last thing my mum said.

'ALWAYS GO FORWARD.'

*WHAT IF Mum's up there in space somewhere?
And WHAT IF she needs my help?*