



Planet Earth



by Jonny Zucker
Illustration by Brett Gowlett

Planet Earth

Chapter 1

Stuart Chappell knew it was the Number 47 bus. He knew this because he took it home from school every day. Usually he took it with Marco, but Marco had basketball practice that day, so he'd stayed behind after school. Stuart got off at his usual stop, rounded the corner and arrived outside Number 22, Rite Road.

Home.

What a delight! He'd been looking forward to it all day – all through Maths and Science and Art.

TV, computer games, lying on the sofa, ice cream – in that order.

He reached out and rang the doorbell. Would it be Mum or Dad who answered the door or his annoying older sister, Susie? The latch lifted and a middle-aged woman with frizzy hair and a smattering of freckles stared out at him.



"Yes?" she said, folding her arms.

"Er... where's Mum?" asked Stuart, looking over the woman's shoulder, "or Dad?"

"Is this some sort of joke?" asked the woman, frowning.

Stuart frowned back. "Joke?" he said, checking the number on the door to make sure it definitely was 22 Rite Road. "No, it's no joke; I'd like to get in and watch TV," he said, not unreasonably.

"Well you're not coming in here. I live alone and don't have kids. So if you don't mind."

And with that she slammed the front door shut in Stuart's face.

Stuart reeled back in shock.

He rang the doorbell again.

"Yes?" said the woman, reluctantly answering the door again.

"I think there must be some sort of mistake," said Stuart. "You see, *I* live here. This is my house. I've always lived here. My parents live here. My sister lives here."

"Rubbish!" barked the woman. "I've lived here for seventeen years and I've got a programme on the TV and I'm going back to it."

Slam went the door again.

Stuart stood there for a few seconds unable to move. He looked up and down the street. This definitely was Rite Road. He'd know it in his sleep. Who was this strange woman and where was his family?

Was it that a film production company was making a film and had moved all of the residents out for the day? But if that had been the case surely they'd have told him? Was it some sort of joke his sister was playing on him? He tried her mobile but it was unobtainable.

Feeling very unsettled, he headed next door and rang at Number 24. Mrs Wright was always in. She gave him toffees and let him play with her dog, Bounder. If anyone were in, it would be her.

After a few seconds, a young man holding a yowling baby answered it, looking very hassled and red in the face.



“Is that you, Clara?” he demanded in a slightly desperate voice.

He looked down and saw Stuart. “No free newspapers,” he said in a hassled voice.

“Could I please speak to Mrs Wright?” asked Stuart.

“Mrs who?” snapped the man. “You’ve got the wrong house,” and with that, *he* slammed the door.

Being a determined sort of lad, Stuart tried Numbers 26, 28 and 30 and to his dismay got exactly the same reaction at each one. The people who normally lived there were not only absent; the current residents said they’d never heard of them.

And it was Rite Road, one hundred per cent. No question, Rite Road.

Stuart felt panic slowly rising in his chest. What on earth was going on here? Had everyone been kidnapped and replaced by aliens? This was beyond even the weirdest shows he’d seen on TV, and he’d seen some weird ones.

Wherever he ran, the usual people weren’t there. Dev wasn’t in the newsagent. Mrs Kellaway wasn’t in the baker’s shop. Mr Brown wasn’t in the general store.

It was totally impossible to comprehend. Where could everyone have gone?

In despair, Stuart ran to the old garages behind the closed-down post office. It was always quiet there. He could think. Maybe he’d get some sort of brainwave and work out what was going on.

He started pacing up and down, thinking and thinking and thinking. Come on, Stuart: there must be a reason. There must be a proper explanation. Mr Smith at school always said there was a reasonable explanation for everything, but there was nothing reasonable about this situation.

But at that moment he heard footsteps approaching around the side of the garage. Please, no. He didn’t want to have to interact with another stranger. He’d already had enough to last a lifetime.

But when the figure emerged, Stuart felt the greatest swell of relief he had ever experienced, for standing there before him, looking as dazed and confused as he was, was Marco.