

# **Mona Lisa's Beard**

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# Chapter One

## Are we going to Mars?

Poots' alarm went off. He rolled over and punched it. It fell onto the floor as he screamed, 'Oowww, that hurt!'

It was a beautiful morning in the South Pole. The sun was shining, not a cloud in the deep blue sky and the temperature was a lovely  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$ . This was just how Poots liked it, at the weekend. However, this was a Friday, a school day, and not any old school day, this was a spelling test day.

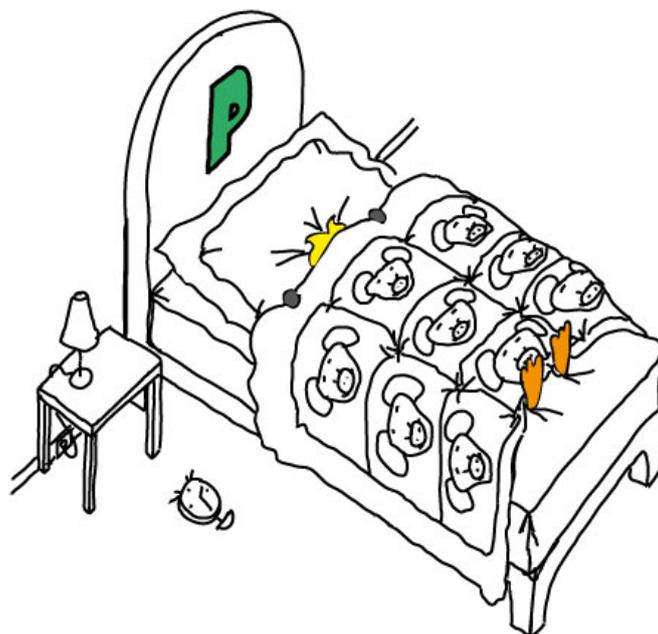
He pulled the duvet over his head and tried to go back to sleep.

'Pooooots, wake up precious,' shouted his mother.

'I am not precious,' Poots shouted back. 'I am unprecious!' 'That told her,' he thought to himself.

'Get up silly head, you will be late for school!'

'I feel sick,' he shouted back. 'Look at how rumbly my tummy is!'



‘Don’t be silly. Punk will be here soon, get up.’

‘I can’t get up, my legs have gone to sleep, and I need to join them.’

‘Poots, if you don’t get up now you won’t get any breakfast.’

This did the trick. Poots shot out of bed like he was being fired from a gun. He washed his face, brushed his teeth and combed his penguin tuft, which he thought was looking very fine that morning.

‘Quick quick,’ he thought. ‘I need to think of my morning rhyme.’

*Poots you are the special one  
Poots you are a god  
With the luck that I deserve  
Breakfast will be cod*

‘Nice,’ he thought to himself.

Poots had to have a daily rhyme. He was not very smart, but he did have a way with rhymes. He came up with a new one each morning, as he could never remember the rhyme he had made up the previous day. Being Poots, they were about Poots and were always very complimentary.

He ran into the kitchen, sat at the breakfast table and gave his mother one of his best smiles.

‘What is for breakfast, dearest mater?’

His mother looked at him in a ‘what are you after’ kind of way.

‘Cod,’ she said.

‘Yeesssss,’ said Poots, punching the air.

‘Poots,’ said his mother, ‘we always have cod.’

‘Oh yeah, so we do,’ he replied. ‘Can I have five fish today please,’ he asked very politely. ‘I am ever so starving, and I haven’t eaten for hours!’

‘No way,’ said his mother. ‘You can have two as normal.’

‘But...’ started Poots.

‘No buts,’ interrupted his mother. ‘You know what happened the last time you had five fish.’

‘But that wasn’t my fault,’ said Poots innocently.

‘My dear,’ replied his mother. ‘You were very ill.’

‘Yes I know, but...’

‘And what happened when you were very ill?’

‘I was a little sick.’

‘You were a little sick on your form teacher!’

‘It was Punk’s fault! I was OK until he mentioned frogs. He knows I hate frogs. So he should have got detention not me!’ Poots added in his grumpy voice.

The ‘Punk’ that Poots had tried to blame was another young penguin and just happened to be Poots’ best friend. He lived down the road in Chillville. One could say that Punk was the brains behind the friendship, but given Poots was a penguin of very little brains, this was a statement hardly worth making.

He ate his fish in 10 seconds and looked up smiling at his mother.

‘I am ready for my fish now,’ he said, holding out his clean plate.

‘Nice try, but I am not that stupid,’ his mother replied with a large smile on her face.

Just then Punk came into the kitchen.

‘Morning Mrs Poots,’ said Punk brightly. ‘Lovely morning.’

‘Hello Punk, do you want anything to eat?’

‘No thanks Mrs P, just had some fish cereal. What’s up with you, sour face?’ he asked Poots.

‘I have a tummy ache, I am only allowed two fish for breakfast and it’s spelling test day,’ Poots replied, almost in tears.

‘Cheer up grumpy butt. We get to hear where we are going on our school trip today.’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Poots. ‘I hope it’s somewhere nice like...’ He thought for a moment, and then said, ‘Mars.’

His mother and Punk looked at him, and both said, ‘Mars?’

‘Yeeahhhh, it has free fish, lots of beaches and televisions the size of houses.’

Punk tried not to laugh. ‘Where did you hear that?’

‘Barney told me. He said he went there last Christmas and had a ripping time.’

‘Yeah, let’s hope we can go to Mars,’ Punk said, sniggering.

‘Or the centre of the Earth,’ continued Poots. ‘It’s made of fish and chocolate.’

‘Don’t tell me,’ said his mother. ‘Barney told you that.’

‘No,’ said Poots, looking at his mother in surprise. ‘Billie told me.’

‘Go to school and learn something useful,’ said his mother.

‘I know everything already,’ replied Poots, looking a little disappointed that his mother didn’t already realise that fact.

‘What is eight add eight?’ asked Punk.

‘That’s not fair,’ replied Poots. ‘That’s a hard one.’ He thought for a moment and then replied, ‘Does the answer have a monkey in it?’

Now... Poots was a very likeable young penguin, but he was not very smart. In fact, he was a few billion plankton short of a whale’s breakfast.

‘Let’s go, genius,’ said Punk.

‘I haven’t got jeans on, stupid,’ replied Poots.

‘Bye dear,’ said Mrs Poots, kissing Poots on the forehead. ‘Bye Punk, send my love to your family.’

‘Will do Mrs P,’ said Punk, skipping out of the house.

Just outside the penguins met up with the other members of the Snow Falls gang, as they called themselves, Barney and Billie Jelly.

‘Hello you two,’ said Punk.

‘Hello little penguins,’ replied Barney. ‘How’s it tufting?’

‘Tufty thank you, oh large and flabby polar bear,’ replied Poots.

‘Watch it Pootsie,’ snorted Barney. ‘It’s not too early for some penguin smishing.’

‘Ha,’ said Poots. ‘You know that you couldn’t catch me, having to drag that huge bottom of yours around.’

‘That’s enough,’ said Billie, who always had to act as the peacemaker. ‘Come on, I want to find out where we are going on our school trip.’ As normal, the young octopus was the voice of reason, and the four friends then ran off in the direction of the Snow Falls Elementary School. They were the last into the classroom, Poots being at the back of the group with a large smile on his face.

‘Morning Mrs BOO,’ he said.

‘That is Mrs Bowl-Of-Onions to you, Pootle,’ replied his form teacher. ‘Go and sit down please.’

‘OK Miss,’ he replied, and headed to his seat next to Punk at the back of the class.

‘I hate it when she calls me Pootle,’ Poots whispered to Punk.

‘But that's your name.’

‘I know, but she should call me Poots like everybody else. It sounds much cooler than Pootle. I can't believe my parents named me after their favourite Flump. (Note to reader: ask your parents about the Flumps!)

Mrs Bowl-Of-Onions was the friends’ long-suffering form teacher. She had known the penguins since they had first started at the Snow Falls Elementary School, so had grown used to their ways. Being a very kindly Antarctic fur seal, she always said that she had a soft spot for the young penguins. But when pushed, she admitted that it was a spot in the middle of the Indian Ocean, so really more wet than soft.

‘Good morning class,’ said Mrs BOO.

‘Good morning Mrs Bowl-Of-Onions,’ the class replied in unison.

‘I know that we should be having a spelling test today, but...’

Poots stood up, raised his hand and interrupted, ‘I thought the test was tomorrow Miss, and my dog ate my words and...’

‘Pootle, Pootle, please sit down, we are not having the test today. And by the way, tomorrow is Saturday so there is no school, and I know for a fact that you don’t have a dog.’

A very broad smile spread across Poots’ face, even though he had been busted. No spelling test, maybe this was going to turn out to be a good day after all.

‘Are you sure we don’t have time for the spelling test Miss?’ asked Billie, who as usual had learned all of her words.

The rest of the class looked horrified, especially Poots, who thought about throwing something at her. He tried to pick up his desk but found it was too heavy. This was no great surprise as it was attached to the seat he was sitting on.

‘If you will all please let me finish,’ continued Mrs BOO in a very loud teacher voice. ‘I thought instead of the spelling test we could talk about our school trip next month.’

There was a small cheer from the class, except Poots, who let out a triumphant ‘Yesssss.... let’s do it’. Which made the class laugh, but brought a scowl from Mrs BOO.

‘We will be going to Paris,’ announced Mrs BOO.

This time there was a massive cheer from the whole class.

Poots climbed onto his desk and started to do his cool School Trip dance, until he was told to get down by Mrs BOO or stay at home when everybody else went on the trip.

Poots had a dance for all occasions, and was very keen to showcase his moves. He was a chubby penguin, but he could move like ‘a rubber ballerina’, as he put it.

Amongst all the chatter of the class, Poots put up his hand.

‘Yes Pootle,’ said Mrs BOO.

‘Is Paris near Mars?’

Some of the class sniggered, some didn’t notice as they were talking excitedly with their friends. Punk put his head in his hands.

‘No Pootle, it is in France,’ replied Mrs BOO with a straight face, as she was used to his strange questions. ‘Do you know where France is?’

The class went quiet and turned to look at the struggling penguin and waited for his answer with great anticipation.

He thought for a moment and then said, ‘Is it far far away?’

‘Yes it is Pootle,’ replied Mrs BOO.

‘Nailed it,’ Poots shouted and punched the air with joy. It was not a great answer, but he very rarely heard Mrs BOO say yes to anything, so this was a real result.

‘Paris is the capital of France, which is one of the largest countries in Europe. It is a very beautiful city with lots of fantastic buildings, history and culture,’ said Mrs BOO. ‘We shall be studying the country, city and language over the next five weeks so that we are able to make the most of our time there.’

‘Are there any sweetshops?’ asked Barney.

‘There are lots of sweetshops for those well-behaved students who follow instructions and don’t get into any trouble,’ replied Mrs BOO. Punk thought that she was looking at the four friends as she said this. He just smiled whilst pulling his friend back into his chair.

‘I was going to do a “lots of sweet shops” dance on my desk,’ said Poots.

‘I know,’ replied Punk. ‘Sit down.’

He sat down in a bit of a huff. He was a bit disappointed that he had already missed two opportunities to show off his moves to the class.

Not much work was done during the rest of the day. The class were far too excited about their trip. Mrs BOO eventually let everybody out early after giving up trying to teach them anything. There was a loud cheer as the class was dismissed for the weekend, and everybody ran off to tell their parents about their trip to France.

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