

Here is a space of average pet store size. I don't really have the skills to describe it; it's not as big as an acre, but it IS bigger than a square metre, so it's shop size, I guess - sounds perfectly fine to me. A dozen or so budgies in cages hang from the ceiling. They're all about two metres away from each other. That wasn't so bad to explain. Phew! Now let's stop being weird, just this once. In the front of the room, is a checkout. Behind it is a bored looking shopkeeper, who is standing and twiddling his thumbs as if nothing is happening around him. The ghost of Henry the Sneaky Salmon is admiring the birds in the middle of the cage area, and is nodding with respect. The neighbouring ghost of Alan Alan Alan, AKA Triple Alan is staring at Henry with wide eyes and with his mouth open. Alan comments 'I think you've been gawping at budgies enough, don't you?' Henry keeps gazing 'Just another couple of minutes. They're so adorable. Then I'll meet your palindrome gang.'

Alan points to the checkout. 'Hey, look at that!' Henry does so. Henry's dead pet budgie ghost rises from behind the worker and flies to the nearest cage, where it settles down. Unsurprisingly, the mortal doesn't seem to notice the undead bird either, as the stationary ghost flaps his wings with exaggerated movements. Not getting a reaction, the ghost then tweets its head off. As even that gets ignored, the attention seeker gives up trying. Shame. Just a little acknowledgement would be nice. Henry jogs to the ex-bird, dodging the animal homes, and smiling like a maniac 'Tweeting Henry Junior! It's me! Henry!' Alan walks to the two with his hand covering his face with shame. He then comments 'Tweeting Henry Junior?' Henry laughs 'Just call him 'Tweet''. The bird jumps on Henry's shoulder and whispers in his ear, with a high pitched voice 'Hello!' Henry grins as he looks to the floor in concentration 'Isn't this great? I've found my old pet! But speak up, I'm a little deaf.'

The bird whispers again 'Kill all your enemies'. Alan's eyes widen 'Wow... That bird is really... psycho...' Henry's eyes are wider 'I genuinely had no idea you ever understood me...' The bird whispers again 'Kill your enemies so you get salmon to yourself...' Henry sighs 'Sadly I can no longer eat the things. On a lighter note, what have you been doing, recently?' The bird continues 'Just checking out the other budgies. They don't seem to notice me. Either that or they're deliberately ignoring me, which is a possibility.' Henry nods 'Anything else?' The bird replies 'I've tried to find work as an agent in another universe. There's this great book called 'The Danger of Proverbs' that I'm trying to get out there...'

Alan stares blankly, in disbelief. Henry laughs 'You can travel to other universes?' The perched bird flaps his wings with excitement 'Sure! It takes practice, though...' Henry replies 'Can you show me?' The bird disappears in an instant. Henry and Alan look around in a daze, then the bird reappears on Henry's shoulder 'There you go...' Henry replies 'What just happened?' The bird responds 'I've just stopped world war 5 in a universe called 'Prolkertero-ero-ero-ero.' Henry gives a thumbs up 'That's incredible. But how did you get there?' The bird continues 'Dunno. You've just got to feel it.' Alan joins the conversation with clenched fists 'We can travel to other universes later. First we meet the gang!'

The budgie flies then lands on Alan's shoulder, this time. Henry turns to face him as the bird whispers in the other man's ear 'Kill!' Alan face palms 'Get this mental budgie away from me.' Henry replies 'With all due respect, doesn't travelling to other galaxies sound more fun than staring at cool looking numbers?' Alan growls 'No! It

doesn't! Now come with me, now!' The budgie whispers to Alan, again 'You do know how addictive palindromes can be? They're clearly ruining your life. Most people would be dying to travel across countless lightyears. All you seem to care about is getting your next big fix.' Henry nods 'He's go you, there...' Alan goes red 'No, he hasn't! You think birds are cleverer than me? Is that what you're saying??'

Alan shakes and starts to sweat 'Can you see what you're doing to me?? You're driving me mad! I can't take all this nonsense! I can't take you naming your budgie after yourself and adding the word 'Tweeting', I can't take your demented salmon obsession, and I can't take you!!' Henry sighs 'If you can't tolerate my bond with my beloved pet, I think it's best we part ways...' Alan stares through Henry 'You're telling ME to get lost?? Is that what it is?? I can't believe what I'm hearing! I'm trying to show you the good life and YOU'RE telling me I'M in the wrong?? Fine. Go and travel galaxies. I'm sure it will be very exciting for you. You IDIOT!'

The bird whispers in Alan's ear a further time 'I think your agitated state is because of palindrome withdrawal, not Henry's annoying personality...' Henry sounds concerned 'Do you think the budgie is right, maybe?' Alan snarls 'I don't need palindromes, palindromes need ME.' Henry smiles for a split second then composes himself. He talks with a serious tone 'And how does that work, exactly?' Alan replies 'You just don't understand what it means to be a ghost yet. You're a ghost newbie. I'm not, and I'm right!!' Henry sighs 'If you're so ok with being away from exceptional numbers, how about we relax in this shop some more?' Alan stamps his foot 'NO! Just no! OK???' Henry mutters 'You don't seem like a healthy person to me.'

The budgie flies around the room with joy. The other ghosts stare, as the bird tweets loudly '1223334444333221'. Alan gives a heart laugh 'That was great! I like that budgie of yours, Henry!' Henry's eyes light up 'That palindrome was incredible! I love the way you get one number one, and two number twos and such. Very inventive!' Alan rubs his chin 'You know... I think that bird of yours could become part of our little group... Ask it if it can do any better...' The bird continues flying, full of life '1212321234321232121!' Alan is strangely calm 'That was an unusually complex number, you know?' Henry keeps his eyes on the creature 'He surely didn't think of that on the spot??' Alan replies 'Even if he didn't, that's a fairly long one to remember... This sounds silly, but he could end up being the leader of our gang...'

The bird flies to Henry and lands on his shoulder, again. Henry asks it a question 'Junior... Why the change?' The animal is cool 'Maybe a few of the numbers won't hurt, TOO much... Space travel can get a little dull... 88832145654123888'. Alan rubs his chin 'THAT'S what I'm looking for. The eights were I nice touch. I wasn't expecting them.' The bird continues 'I'm very strong, you know? If you give me a can of spray paint, I'll be able to move it around by nudging it, and I'll be able to press on the button, too... You can get undead spray paint cans, right?' Alan smiles 'You can get cans!' He then frowns 'Only joking, I just wanted to say two cans in the same sentence. I'm sorry to say our fate is to either say palindromes or look at them. BUT, I could easily listen to your palindromes all day, bird friend!'

The bird looks down to the floor 'All that concentration... All that creativity, and for what? So I can say numbers? Am I supposed to be happy?' Henry sheds a tear 'Chin up... You just have to learn to use your imagination. I'm sure with practice you

could come up with one of the longest symmetrical numbers in the whole of Charltonham. England, even.' Alan stamps his foot 'Dammit, the bird was right! What's the point of being mere observers??' Henry face-palms 'Can't you see what's happening to us? We're completely all over the place! This isn't normal! I bet even YOU don't know what you're going to do next! And God knows what the budgie will do! We need to pull ourselves together!' For the sake of variety, the budgie lands on Alan, again.

Alan presses his hands on his chest, hard and makes pained faces 'Oh no... I'm having a heart attack!' Henry sighs 'Oh come on. How can you be having a heart attack? What's going to happen to you? Are you going to end up double dead?' Alan nods as he gasps 'Right... E-exactly... Only S-SUPER ghosts will be able... to see... me... soon!' Henry breathes slowly and deeply 'Copy me. You'll be fine.' Alan does so. He then does one last massive inhalation and sneezes snot everywhere. Henry and the bird look unhappy as they wipe/shake the nose juice off. Amazingly the bird remains on Alan's shoulder. That's loyalty. Alan chuckles 'Oh. Just needed a sneeze. All better now.' Henry tuts 'Let's just get out of here. We can travel the country. The world. The universe and beyond! Who knows how great things will be??'

Alan gives a thumbs up 'Yes. You're right. But I'm not the leader of the gang, the budgie is. We do what he says.' The bird comments 'Leaving this shop sounds like a good start...' Alan smiles. The trio walk to the exit and leave. The bird remains 'shoulder-loyal' to coin a phrase. No, that won't catch on. I don't care, though. When outside in the sun, the first thing they do is stare at the building they left, whilst standing on the welcome mat/welcome pavement. It's just an ordinary brick shop with nothing but a door, but some carefree soul has graffitied '648241142846' on it. Henry comments 'You have to admire the beauty of that number. It sure has a wide variety of digits in it, but at the same time, he wasn't showing off...' The trio walks backwards as Alan comments 'Yeah, we definitely need to step back to fully appreciate this one...'

Now in front of them is a completely quiet road as well. On the left and right of the shop are perfectly straight bushes that go on for ages. Very Charltonham. The budgie comments, casually '7513298046408923157'. Alan gives a genuinely amazed slow hand clap 'Oh. My. God. I never thought I'd see the day where someone so effortlessly came up with a palindrome featuring ALL the numbers from zero to nine.' Henry shakes his head in disbelief 'Makes you wonder what he could do when he REALLY puts his mind to it!' The budgie is still cool 'Let's go. This is only the beginning of something very special...' The budgie flaps his wings, restlessly 'But we need another great number soon!...'