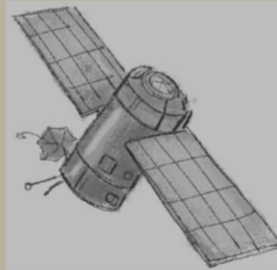


I AM HALF A WORLD AWAY



Dr Drax wanted all the children to move into a special crew house now, opposite the Possibility Building, so that they could get used to living together and to Mr Xanadu being their 'responsible adult'.

Florida got a blue 'crew member' suitcase. I watched her running about the bungalow getting her clothes and toothbrush and stuff together and I had this really strange feeling in my throat. At first I thought maybe it was some sort of gravity-related problem, but that was daft. We don't have gravity problems on Earth.

Then it hit me.

Worry.

I was worried about Florida Kirby.

After all, she was going into space.

Without me.

Who was going to look after her? I'd just got used to being her dad and now she was going away.

I said, 'Are you sure you're going to be all right, Florida?'

She said, 'All right? I'm going to be famous. Like Buzz Lightyear . . .'

'Buzz Aldrin.'

' . . . or Laika the dog. She was just some mongrel, but after she became the first animal in orbit she was the most famous dog ever. They made Laika

chocolate bars, Laika soft toys. She was on postage stamps. They wrote songs about her. And she was just a stray. They don't even know what breed she was really. There she was, wandering the streets of Moscow with two other dogs. The next thing Laika was really famous. And she was only a dog,' she said. 'Imagine what it's going to be like for us – the first kids in space. What's up with you?'

She must have seen me flinch. I was thinking, Laika *died* in space. What if . . .?

'Oh, I know,' said Florida. 'You're jealous because you're not going.'

'Who says so?'

'I say so.'

'Me? Jealous of you!?'

'As if you're not.'

'As if I am.' I was acting like a kid. I know that. It seemed easier than doing the dadly thing and telling her I was worried about her. I kept thinking of her sitting on top of a two-hundred-foot firework blasting into orbit. What kind of dad lets his child do that?

Then I had to take her to the crew quarters. That was the worst bit – watching her walk away. She didn't even look back and wave. She was chatting happily to Samson Two. They looked so tiny as they passed the Possibility Building.

I thought of all the times in my life that I had wanted Florida Digby to go away, and here I was wishing she'd turn around and come running back.

It was a strange, unhappy thing being on my own in the bungalow that night. I sat up on the couch watching telly all night. Sometimes I'd nod off in the middle of *Celebrity Seance* and wake up in the middle of *Celebrity Dental Check*, then nod off again and wake up in a different episode of *Celebrity Seance*. When the first bit of daylight crept into the room I thought, Right, now I'm allowed to have a bacon butty. I couldn't find actual bacon but I did find some thin pink meat-stuff with 'Explodes the Tongue' written on the packet. The explodes thing must've been some kind of warning though, because the minute I put it on the grill it burst into flames and all the smoke

alarms went off. Standing there in the kitchen with greasy smoke billowing round me and sirens wailing in my ears reminded me of home.

Which is probably when I rang my mum.

The phone rang for a surprisingly long time before she answered.

'Hello?' She sounded like she'd never heard a phone ring before.

'Mum, it's me, Liam.'

'Liam? Are you OK?'

'Yeah, I'm great.'

'What are you doing?'

I looked at the timetable for day six at the Lakeland Activity Centre and I said, 'Pond dipping. We went pond dipping and I caught . . .' I lost my place, '. . . a water boatman. That's a big beetle which has seen a steep decline in its population recently.'

'What else?'

'Climbed on the new fifty-foot climbing wall and came down on the ever-popular but very safe aerial runway.'

'That's great, Liam, and you weren't frightened? It hasn't given you nightmares?'

'No.'

'And you're eating OK?'

'Yeah. Food is plain but wholesome, cooked here on the premises. We're expected to help clean up afterwards. It's a team-building activity.'

'And you're sure you're OK?'

'Yeah. Great.'

'Really, really sure?'

'Why d'you keep asking if I'm OK?'

'Because you've just rung me up.'

'I can ring you up, can't I?'

'Liam, it's the middle of the night.'

'Oh.'

'Oh' was the best I could come up with. I put the phone down.

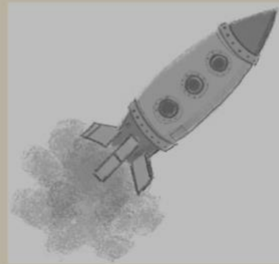
I'd completely forgotten about the time difference. I think that was when it hit me that I was half a world away.

COSMIC

Compared to where Florida was going, I was just around the corner.

I felt really lonely that night. I think it must be the only time I've been in a house on my own at night. And now look – I felt bad on my own in a house. Now I'm on my own in the universe.

IF ANYTHING GOES WRONG . . .



Next morning all the dads – including Eddie Xanadu – had to meet Dr Drax in a bar inside the Dome. Magnificent Desolation, the bar was called. ‘I just have one or two more things for you all to sign,’ said Dr Drax, passing round some forms and also a drinks menu. ‘These are mostly legal waiver forms, saying that you understand the dangers of space flight and you’re giving your children permission to go, so that if anything does go wrong – not that anything will – you as the parents will be responsible.’

I didn’t really want to think about things going wrong so I just concentrated on the drinks menu. I couldn’t believe it when the others all asked for coffees and teas. There were so many drinks to choose from. I spotted something called the Cosmic Quencher, which I had to order because cosmic is my favourite word.

Dr Drax was explaining that the whole mission was Top Secret. ‘If anything goes wrong – not that it will – we will not admit that the mission ever took place. Because of course if anything does go wrong – which it won’t – the bad publicity would close Infinity Park. I’m sure none of you wants that to happen.’

I said, ‘When you say if anything goes wrong, well, what could go wrong exactly?’

‘Oh, you know how people make a fuss,’ said Dr Drax. ‘If someone breaks a toe or gets a headache, then people will say it’s too dangerous. This is our

first attempt. If it doesn't go according to plan, we're not going to say it'll be better next time; we're going to deny it ever happened.' Then she smiled and said, 'You're a man of the world, Mr Digby. You understand.'

I do understand now, by the way. I understand because something did go wrong – so wrong that Dr Drax probably denied that this mission ever took place. Which means no one down there is trying to help us. No one is calling International Rescue, or the X-Men, or whatever. No one is scrambling to a super-fast rocket to come and save us. Because no one knows we're here. No one knew where we were going. And no one knows we didn't get there.

The Cosmic Quencher turned out to be a bucket of coke with two big dollops of ice cream bobbing about in it, decorated with little silver stars and a bunch of sparklers blazing away in the top. I imagined all the others were thinking, I wish I'd ordered one of those instead of my boring coffee. I suppose they might have been thinking, That is not a dadly drink. But I didn't care about that any more.

While we were signing the forms, Eddie Xanadu kept going on about how pleased he was that he had won. 'I never thought I would go into space. Or rather I did. As a child, of course I watched the Apollo missions on television. I thought I was living in the space age. I thought we would ALL be going to space. I was disappointed. Until now. I remember my father took me to see some samples of Moon rock when it first came back . . .' The other dads remembered queuing up to look at Moon rock too. 'And that was also disappointing because it was grey. I expected it to be glowing, like the Moon in the sky.'

All the other dads laughed. Then Samson One said, 'Surely even a child knows that the Moon has no innate luminescence, that it only shines because it reflects the Sun.'

Mr Xanadu shrugged. 'We all make mistakes.' And the other two nodded as if it didn't really matter. But it did really matter! How could they let their kids go into space with someone who didn't know that the Moon had no innate luminescence? Before you go on a quest you make sure you've got all you need: skills, equipment, money, health, magic elixir . . . What did he have? Nothing. He was just a big, grinning, empty-headed troll. And we were entrusting our kids to him. I tried to say nothing. I know politeness is dadly

and yelling is not. I did try not to Engage. I stood and listened quietly while he said, 'The important thing is that the children have decided I am the best dad. And I will BE the best dad, not just to Hasan, but to all of your children, I reassure you.'

Everyone clapped except me. Before I knew what I was doing I was on my feet saying, 'Well, it doesn't reassure me.'

'How can we let our children go into space with a man who doesn't even know that the Moon has no innate luminescence? How can we let our children go into space at all? Space isn't safe. What kind of dad lets their child go into space?'

They all muttered stuff about it being a great opportunity, the opportunity of a lifetime. And Samson One said, 'After all, Dr Drax's own daughter is going.'

'Well,' said Dr Drax, collecting in the forms, 'not this time.'

'Not this time?'

'No. In fact, Shenjian is running a temperature so I've decided to keep her back. It may be just a cold, but it could be measles.'

Shenjian can't go to space today because she's got a temperature. She made it sound like she was going to skip PE.

I said, 'But Shenjian is the professional taikonaut.'

'Really, Mr Digby, there is so little for the crew to do. All the hard work will be done by those brainboxes at DraxControl. You know, in 1969 the Americans landed a man safely on the Moon with less technology than you've got in your Draxphone. The equipment they had then was sticks and stones compared to what I've built here.'

'So it's completely safe?'

'We have a policy here at Draxcom. It's called Massive Overprovision. That means, for instance, that there's ten times as much oxygen on board than they could possibly need. Twice as much fuel. Even the layer of Kevlar on the module is three times thicker than necessary, so it's three times as bullet proof.'

'Bullet proof? Why would it need to be bullet proof? Does the man in the Moon have a shotgun or something?'

'Oh, you know, in case of meteors.'

COSMIC

I hadn't even thought about meteors. I said, 'You know, thinking about it, I don't want my daughter to go into space. It's too dangerous. Yes, it will be a great opportunity, but she can have great opportunities here on Earth where she won't be impacted by meteors.'

'It does you great credit, Mr Digby, that you are so concerned about your daughter.' She was already walking away while she said this, taking Eddie Xanadu with her.

I stood up and almost shouted, 'I'm withdrawing my permission.'

'But legally speaking,' she said, waving one of the forms in the air, 'you've already given your permission. Have a nice day.'

And she closed the door behind her.

YOU DON'T GET EXTRA LIVES IN SPACE



I could barely even finish my Cosmic Quencher. I went over to the Possibility Building to look at the rocket. I thought it would make me feel better to see it, looking so solid with its extra oxygen tanks and its extra bullet proofing. Mr Bean was there, looking up at it too. I said, 'Mr Bean, has anyone ever died on this?'

'On this particular rocket? No. This is what you call an expendable launch vehicle. You're only supposed to use it once. A bit like one of those throw-away razors. You can't really know that an expendable will work until it's already up there – and by then it's too late.'

The thought that they were going to space in a throwaway razor wasn't particularly reassuring. It got worse. 'People do get killed on rockets,' he went on. 'Gus Grissom, he died when Apollo 1 caught fire on the launch pad, along with Ed White and Roger Chaffee.'

'Oh. Right.'

'But that was a long time ago. This is a different kind of rocket. If you're looking for something more recent . . .'

'Well, I'm not looking exactly. I was just asking.'

' . . . the crew of the Columbia shuttle – they all died on re-entry. There were seven of them. The crew of the shuttle Challenger all died on take-off. Seven of them too, all really young.'

I did say then, 'Thanks, I think you've answered my question.' But there was no stopping him.

'And then there was Soyuz 1, when the parachute didn't open. Vladimir Komarov. That was awful. He knew he had no chance. Everyone could hear him talking to his wife on the radio, talking about the kids and, oh—'

'Honestly,' I said, 'that's enough information. Thank you.' I began to walk away.

Mr Bean called after me, 'Going into space isn't like one of those video games. If you die, you don't get any extra lives.'

That's when I decided I was going to go and drag Florida out of the crew quarters and take her home to safety. We could walk home to Bootle, if we had to.

Obviously it would be better to go in a plane, so as I strode across the rocket tramway lines and the bridge over the fire pit I was rehearsing this speech I was going to make to Dr Drax, about how it would be better for everyone if she gave us the air fare. But as I got nearer I could hear shouting and saw a Draxcom personnel vehicle screeching up to the crew quarters. Dr Drax was yelling, and Mr Xanadu was yelling back at her and throwing his bags into the back of the car.

As the car drove away, Dr Drax turned to go back into the house. Then she saw me and she looked really surprised.

'Mr Digby!' she said. 'How did you know? I suppose you guessed. I should've guessed myself, of course.'

I didn't know what she was on about. 'Mr Xanadu,' she said, 'has totally betrayed me.'

It turned out that when Mr Xanadu was cheerily taking all those photographs of the Penultima he wasn't really interested in happy smiling faces. He was taking photos of the flight simulator and the control panels. He'd sent the photographs to a toy company in Shanghai, asking them to build a full-size working replica of it for Hasan.

Sadly for him, Dr Drax also owned the Shanghai toy company.

'They told me everything. He even went to them with an idea to make dolls out of you all – to sell. He was going to call them the Astrokids. Can you imagine? Where do these people get their ideas? At least no harm has been done. Except to Mr Xanadu, of course. He will no longer be the responsible adult accompanying the children into space. That honour will go to the person who came second in the competition. Namely you, Mr Digby.'

'Oh.'

'Give yourself a moment for the news to sink in.'

Somehow it seemed to take more than a moment. Somehow my brain wouldn't work.

She said, 'Mr Digby?'

'You mean, I could go to space?'

I looked over my shoulder. It was nearly a mile away but there was nothing between me and the Possibility Building. It still filled most of the sky. I was standing in its shadow.

'You do know, of course, what those letters say?' Dr Drax pointed at the huge black Chinese letters up the side.

'No.'

'They are the slogan of Infinity Park. They say, "The World is my Thrill Ride."'

'But that's . . .'

'That's what you said to me on the phone that day. That's why I specially selected you. It seemed to sum up everything I was trying to say. You know, Mr Digby, I always knew you'd be the one who'd go to space in the end. You remind me very much of my own father. You have a similar quality. A sort of childlike quality.'

I could hear the other children talking and laughing behind her. I could feel the cool shadow of the rocket on my back. Was it different if I was going too? Was it all right to send my daughter to space if I was going with her? All I had to do was say, 'Thank you,' and I would be riding the rocket.

I took a deep breath and I said, 'Dr Drax, I know you think I'm a responsible adult but I'm not. I'm just a boy. An unusually tall and hairy boy, but a boy.'

I felt better straight away. Like gravity had somehow decreased and I was sort of floating. There. It was all over. No more pretending. No more responsibility. I didn't care what she said to me now.

Dr Drax just smiled. She touched my hand. She said, 'That's exactly what I mean about you. You have the right quality. You feel like a child inside. So did Einstein, all his life. He said he never stopped thinking like a child. That's why he made these great discoveries—'

'No. I don't mean I feel like a child. I mean I'm really not grown up.'

'Perfect. Exactly. Anyone who feels they're all grown up is no use to this project. It's the people who feel they've got nothing left to learn—'

'Exactly. I haven't finished school. I've hardly started.'

'I feel just the same way. The universe is so huge. We've barely glimpsed it. Give me someone who knows they know nothing over someone who thinks he knows everything, any day.'

'But . . .'

'By the way, take good care of Hasan, won't you? It's a hard time for him. He'll be disappointed that his father isn't coming. And upset, because obviously I'm suing Mr Xanadu for every penny he's got.'

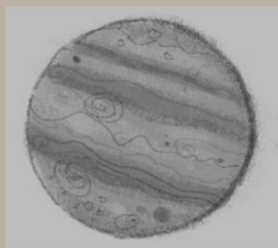
'Oh. Really?'

'Yes. I'm determined to put him in jail for what he did.'

'Right. Was there anything else you wanted to say?' I thought it probably wasn't the best moment to tell her I'd been lying to her for weeks or that I'd tricked her into putting me (aged twelve and a bit) in charge of her rocket (cost \$1 billion).

'In fact,' she said, 'can you sign this while you're here? It's a release form, giving me permission to use your wonderful phrase – "The world is my thrill ride" – on all our publicity. Just there. Thank you. And it only remains for me to say, enjoy the ride.'

THE REAL THING



As we went into the crew quarters, Dr Drax said it was nice that I was going to see my daughter on this particular day. I wasn't sure what she meant. When I got inside the house the place was full of balloons and piles of crumpled-up gift wrapping.

Florida shouted, 'Hi, Daddy! Where's my present?'

I said, 'What present?'

'Oh, stop teasing,' said Florida, grinning at everyone. 'He always remembers my birthday really.'

It was Florida's birthday!? How was I supposed to know that? How did everyone else know?

'Dr Drax told everyone. She knew because it was on the forms. Look what Mr Xanadu got me . . .'

It was a doll – like a Barbie – but it wasn't Barbie. It was Florida in her blue Power Rangers spacesuit. It really looked like her, like she'd been miniaturized by a wicked super mage. When you squeezed it, it said, 'What do you mean, weightless? Am I going to lose weight!?'

'How cool is that?' smiled Florida. I knew right away what it was. It was a prototype of one of his 'Astrokids' dolls.

'What did you get for Florida, Mr Digby?' said Hasan. 'We've been hearing about the time you bought her the pony.'

'Oh really?'

'And also about all the great party games you play. Will you show us a card trick?' said Samson Two. 'They interest me psychologically.'

'Maybe later. Just now I'm going to give Florida her present. In private.'

We went into the kitchen. I said, 'Why didn't you tell me it was your birthday?'

'You're supposed to know. You are my dad, you know.'

'I am NOT your dad. I'm only pretending. Remember?'

'Are you saying you haven't got me a present?'

'I'm going to give you a birthday treat. This is it: I'm going to save your life.' I told her everything – all the stuff about this being a secret mission and Shenjian having the 'measles'.

Florida said, 'Ken Mattingly.'

'What?'

'Ken Mattingly was supposed to go on Apollo 13 but he was pulled off at the last minute – just like Shenjian – because of German measles. And after that everything went wrong and they all nearly died. He suffered terrible guilt feelings for the rest of his life – "My Apollo 13 Guilt Hell".'

'That's it, exactly. They were in Terrible Danger, and we're in Terrible Danger. We've got to get out of here. You thought it was bad when I nearly drove a Porsche. A Porsche goes 170 miles an hour. Do you have any idea how fast the Infinite Possibility goes? We are in trouble.'

'You're my dad – get me out of it.'

'No. That's just it. I'm not your dad. I can't do card tricks. I didn't get you a pony. And I don't call you my little princess.'

'But . . .'

'Ring your real dad.'

'What for?'

'We're in trouble. He can get us out of it. He's a dad. That's what he's for.' I was thinking how simple it all was. Florida would ring her dad. He'd probably go nuts. But, from then on, I would no longer be in charge. I wouldn't have to be a grownup any more.

Florida said her dad was too busy and I should ring my dad instead. I said, 'That wouldn't work. Besides, what can my dad do? He never goes anywhere. Your dad knows about these things. He could be here in minutes. He could—'

'No one can get to China in minutes, Liam. He's not Superman.'

'No. But he is your dad. He won't want his little princess blasting off in a rocket to space, will he? Especially when he finds out the only person who knows anything about flying rockets isn't coming and the so-called responsible adult is twelve years old.'

I gave her my Draxphone. I told her to call. Now. Before it was too late. She fiddled with the phone for a bit and then she said quietly, 'Liam, I haven't got a dad.'

I didn't understand. What she'd just said didn't make any sense. 'What d'you mean?'

'I mean I haven't got a dad. It's just me and Mum and Orlando and Ibiza.'

'But your dad travels the world. That's why he named you after faraway places.'

'We never go anywhere. My dad left just after Orlando was born. I don't know where he is. He had a big row with Mum and never came back. Even when he was there, he never did any of the things I said he did. You know – taking pictures, buying ponies, anything like that. He just used to sit watching the holiday channel. That's where he got our names from.'

This was unexpected. I said, 'OK. Well, if you did have a dad . . . if you had a dad now, he would not let you sit on top of two hundred feet of inflammable fuel. He would not let you be sent up into the air at thousands of miles per hour. He would be very very concerned at the thought of you experiencing 40g. He would be worried if you went on a big ride. And this is not a ride. The point is, this is not a ride. This is the Real Thing.'

Florida looked a bit surprised.

'But, Liam, if I got famous, my dad – wherever he is in the world – he'd see me, wouldn't he? And he'd come back and find me. Or at least he'd know about me, you know? He'd go round telling people he was my dad. He'd be proud of me. That's why I want to be famous. That's why I want to go on the rocket.'

I wasn't sure what to say. I think I was probably quiet for a while because in the end she said, 'Liam? Have you fallen asleep?'

'No. I'm just thinking.' I realized I was all the dad Florida had. It was time to do the right thing, the dadly thing, and give her exactly what she wanted – what we both wanted. There was one of those cardboard party hats on the table – the pointy kind with the tinsel in the top. I found a pair of scissors in the kitchen drawer and started cutting it.

'What're you doing?'

When I finished I held it up for her to see. I'd cut it into a kind of crown. It was a bit rubbish, but it was a crown. 'I thought it would be easier to say this if you were actually dressed for the part.' I put it on her head and said, 'Happy birthday, Princess.'

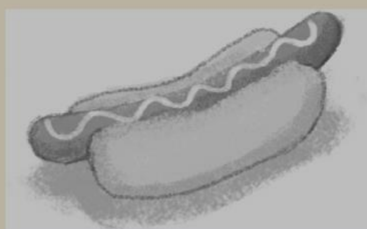
She grinned and said, 'You've still got to get me a proper present.'

'OK. I'll tell you what . . . I'll take you to space.'

We went back in to the others. They were all standing around eating cake. I said, 'All right let's get this party going.'

They all looked blank. They really didn't know any party games. I made them play grandmother's footsteps, musical statues and this game called fish, where everyone has a fish-shaped piece of paper and you race them by blowing on them. This went on for ages because Samson Two developed a very streamlined fish, which Hasan tried to buy off him. And Max blew so hard he more or less asphyxiated himself. And as it happens, I do know some card tricks – Dad used to teach me them sometimes when I went out with him in the cab, if we were waiting a long time on a rank. The other kids were all amazed and amused. Florida said it was her best birthday party ever.

QUEST ORANGE



In World of Warcraft, the quests are all colour-coded. Grey quests involve defeating people with fewer skills than yourself. They're very easy, but you don't gain much experience. Then there are yellow – a bit harder; orange – a lot harder; and red – Certain Death. I decided the best thing was to treat this whole thing as a quest.

Dr Drax definitely gave us the impression that she was sending us on a grey quest. Maybe a bit yellow round the edges. But definitely not orange. And certainly not Certain Death.

For a start, we had loads of back-up. She took us to DraxControl so that we could see for ourselves. It's a massive glass office, with huge plants and a little water feature and dozens of people strolling round in white shirts, talking into headsets, reading their BlackBerries. They certainly looked like they knew what they were doing. 'These are the clever people who will be steering your rocket,' Dr Drax said, 'so you won't have to do a thing. The Infinite Possibility really is just a ride. And DraxControl is like the man in the fairground booth. All you've got to do is be sensible and enjoy the view for a few hours. Oh, and do one simple little thing for me.'

And it did seem a very simple little thing. We had to press some colour-coded buttons in the right order at the right time. That was it.

Because the Infinite Possibility is really a launch vehicle – that's why it's so big. It was carrying something into space. A payload. A completely cosmic payload.

'I'll explain it all to you,' said Dr Drax. 'It's a kind of space minibus. I designed it myself. It's called the Dandelion because it doesn't have engines – just these big silvery sails that catch the solar wind, just like normal sails catch the normal wind, and blow it across space. A spaceship propelled by sunbeams – as quiet and traceless as a dandelion seed. Hence the name.'

She showed us a model. It looked like a high-sided vehicle with lots of windows. Like an ice-cream van. Only with no wheels. And no ice-cream man.

Once it was separated from the Infinite Possibility, the people at DraxControl were going to steer the ice-cream van across space, round the back of the Moon, and back to Earth by remote control. Then it was going to do a lap of the Earth and head back around the Moon. And it was going to keep doing that – one lap of the Earth, one lap of the Moon – in a kind of figure of eight, forever. It had comfortable seats that turned into beds. Dr Drax's plan was that as soon as Infinity Park was opened, people would pay to get into a small rocket, dock with the Dandelion during its Earth orbit and stay on for one lap of the Moon before going back down to Earth.

A sightseeing trip around the Moon in an inter-planetary ice-cream van.

The Dandelion was a kind of massive box just under the living quarters of the Infinite Possibility. All we had to do was shoot up into space, float around for a bit, and then, when Dr Drax said so, press the buttons in the right order – red, orange, green – and that would blow the Dandelion off into its own orbit.

Then DraxControl would bring us back home in the command module.

The buttons are designed to set off a series of small explosive charges – red to separate the Dandelion from the rocket, orange to blow the covers off the Dandelion and green to make its sails pop out.

'We could detonate the charges from the ground,' said Dr Drax, 'but we thought it best to keep it simple.'

What could go wrong?

Well, nothing did go wrong, exactly.

Not with the buttons.

Not with the charges.

COSMIC

Not with the Dandelion.

The thing that went wrong was us.

LAUNCH MINUS 48



Countdown begins forty-eight hours before lift-off.

For the last forty-eight hours we had to stay in the crew quarters and not talk to anyone from outside. It was supposed to be a bonding experience.

Also, all the food in the fridge and the cupboards was replaced with space food. Little packs with straws sticking out of them, a bit like Capri-Sun but with meat and veg instead of orange juice. We were supposed to eat space food from now on so that we'd get used to it. The packs had some worrying names – for instance 'Saliva Chicken' and 'Pork That Makes You Eat Your Own Hand'.

Samson Two said it was probably a problem with the translation. 'Maybe "Saliva Chicken" means "Mouthwatering Chicken",' he said. 'And perhaps

"Pork That Makes You Eat Your Own Hand" is just finger-licking good.'

'Maybe,' said Florida, 'but I think I'll stick to ice cream.'

'Me too,' said everyone else. So we just sat there sucking on space ice cream (two flavours – Raspberry Like a Breeze on a Lake, or Banana Divided) and practising the colour-coded button-pressing on the computers.

During the night there was a clanging sound, like the lid had fallen off the sky or something. Everyone ran into the living room. When I got there they were all huddled together. I was going to get into the huddle too when Sam-

son Two said, 'What is it?' And I realized they were all waiting for me to sort it out.

Hasan said, 'Is it bears?'

'Bears? Why would it be bears? Wait here and I'll go and look.'

I opened the front door, thinking, What if it *is* bears? I couldn't see any. Or smell anything. I could hear a noise though – a slow, monotonous rumble. But I couldn't see anything except the Possibility Building. Then I realized the building had changed shape. I stood and watched for a while before understanding what was going on.

They were moving the rocket.

Very very slowly it was trundling out on its tracks, out in the desert, about three miles away. It was moving along the rails to the launch site. You could barely see anything happening, but if you looked away and looked back, you could see a bit more of the rocket had shouldered out of the building. It was like watching the minute hand on a clock. The others all crowded round me and I said, 'Come on. Let's get some sleep. It's just the rocket. Nothing to be scared of.'

I was thinking, That is so much scarier than bears.

'I want my dad,' said Samson Two.

I knew just how he felt.

Next morning there was a pile of presents waiting for us on the dining table – some rubbery pencil-casey-type things called Personal Inflight Packs and five of the latest Draxcom games consoles (they're called Wristations). We'd had a visit from Space Santa. Wristations are quietly cosmic, by the way. They're basically Game Boys that fit on your wrist, but instead of having some squinty little screen, they project the game on to the wall, like in the cinema, so you can have it as big as you like. They all came loaded with Orbiter IV, Stone Age Boneheads and Surfing Eskimos. Except mine, which had Professional Golfer and a test-your-own-cholesterol kit.

There was a note from Dr Drax explaining that we could pack whatever we wanted in the Personal Inflight Packs (PiPs for short) to take as personal

luggage on the trip. We could take anything we liked as long as it fitted in the PiP.

Two minutes later there was a Wristation territorial dispute. Hasan and Max were playing Orbiter IV together on one wall and Samson Two was using another whole wall to play Stone Age Boneheads. So there was nowhere for Florida to play. I started by suggesting that Florida and Samson Two play Boneheads together, using the two-player option, but that suggestion led to immediate off-screen violence. In the end, I told Samson Two to stand nearer the wall to make the projection smaller.

He said, 'No.'

Everyone stared at me.

It was a test of Dadness.

What was I supposed to do? Beg him? Threaten him? Shove him?

If I couldn't control them here in the living room, what would it be like in orbit?

I moved the couch into the centre of the room. I checked that it was lined up with the middle of the wall. Then, without even looking at him, I said, 'Samson Two, sit down here,' and that's all I said. I did try to make it sound like I expected immediate obedience. Then I held my breath. Samson Two didn't look away from the wall. And he didn't say anything. But he did move forward and around the couch. Then he sat down and carried on playing. His game had shrunk to half-size now and there was loads of room for Florida to play. I said, 'Now move right to that end, Samson. And Florida, you sit at this end.' Which they both did.

Hasan and Max weren't even looking at me now. I'd passed the test.

But what if Samson Two had just carried on saying no?

I decided then and there to pack *Talk to Your Teen* in my PiP. It was really too big. I had to squeeze it in, bit by bit. And as I was nudging the rubber sides over the book's spine, I noticed all the dad things on it – the two overlapping tea stains, like a figure eight, the phone number written in biro, the petrol receipts. It was my dad's book. *My dad*. I wished he'd turn up now, like he did when I got into that Porsche. I wished he'd turn up and shout, 'Stop!'

SOME KIND OF LOVELY



At launch minus six I was still insanely hoping that Dad would actually turn up. Especially at launch minus six, to be honest. Because at launch minus five they were going to do the spray-on Power Rangers spacesuit thing.

The thing about the spray-on spacesuits is that you have to have a bald chest before they put the stuff on you. So, if you're a dad, you have to have your chest waxed. That means they pour warm wax all over you and then rip it off with strips of cloth. When the wax comes off it pulls all your chest hairs out with it.

At launch minus five my dad still hadn't come and I was screaming in pain and looking at a piece of wax covered in curly hairs that had been pulled out by the root.

'There,' said Dr Drax. 'The agony of re-entry will be nothing after that.'

Apparently women do it to their own legs, and they don't even get to go to space afterwards!

After that they sprayed on my spacesuit – it felt warm and tickly – and I was allowed to go back into the living quarters and wait for it to dry.

When I got there, Mr Bean was waiting for me. He shook my hand and wished me well. 'You take care of yourself now,' he said.

I said, 'I thought *you* were going to be taking care of us. I thought all *we* had to do was enjoy the view.'

He laughed. Then he said, 'Since you mentioned the view, there was something I wanted to tell you. You got your PiPs, right?'

'Yes.'

'Think hard about what you put in there. It could be your most important piece of safety equipment.'

'What? More important than our spacesuits?'

'Maybe. You see, the thing about space is—'

I said, '—it's full of dead people. You already told me.'

'Space is somewhere else. D'you see? It's not just far away. It's a different kind of place. It can get a hold of you.'

'Are you saying, "You'll like it when you get there"?''

He smiled. 'My mother used to say that. Did yours?' He looked out of the window. Even though it was daylight, you could still see the Moon, pale but huge, like a big balloon. He said, 'Did you ever hear of Ed White? First American to spacewalk. A long time ago now – 1965. First American to open a door into space, to dangle from a wire and look down at the Earth and see the whole planet roll by beneath him. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

'Everything he knew and didn't know. His friends, enemies, places he'd been, places he'd never go, all just sitting there in his field of vision. When it was time to go back inside he couldn't tear himself away. He was like, Ah, let me stay a little while, why don't you? And, Isn't that America? Oh no, it's Africa. And . . . you know. The command pilot – Jim McDivitt – he had to bawl him out somewhat to bring him back to his senses. Do you see what I'm saying?'

I said, 'Not really.'

Florida had just arrived in her Power Rangers get-up. She said we were supposed to keep moving around to check for fissures and flaws.

Mr Bean went on. 'I'm talking about how to stay in one piece. Try to get hold of the things that are important, the good and true things about your life. Up there is some kind of lovely. And maybe you need to have something in your heart, you know, something even more lovely. To help you find your way home. Otherwise maybe you could be beguiled.'

'Beguiled?'

'I think that would be the word. I'll say goodnight.'

'Goodnight, Mr Bean.'

He smiled and said, 'Call me Alan.'

Just as he was about to go out the door, Florida shouted, 'Wait! Alan Bean? Apollo 12, 1969? That is cosmic.'

It was the first time she'd ever used my word. There probably isn't any other word for being able to touch someone who has walked on Another World.

'Wow!' said Florida. 'An Apollo astronaut? That makes you dead famous, doesn't it? I mean, you had ticker-tape parades and went to all these parties, and you were on telly all over the world.'

'I wasn't on telly so much, actually. I broke the television camera. When we landed on the Moon, I accidentally pointed the camera at the Sun and burned it out. Imagine that – we went all the way to the Moon and didn't get any holiday footage. So . . . not on telly as much as some! What I remember is being on the Moon. I remember every second. Every stone. Every star we saw. Sometimes it feels like I never really came back.'

He shrugged. 'But I did come back,' he said, 'and you remember that. Where you're going – it seems far away and dangerous. But you will come back.'

Which is more or less exactly what my dad said to me on my first day at Waterloo High.

As soon as Alan had gone I wedged my old phone into the PiP, because it had pictures of home on it. And Dad's St Christopher statue. It wouldn't have fitted if it hadn't been a bit broken.

Florida said, 'What're you taking that for?'

I said, 'Why? What're you taking?'

She said, 'Haribo, mostly.'