

## 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 Samson 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

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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!'

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