

COMPLETELY DOOMED



The slightly worrying thing is that I am sort of enjoying this. Being doomed is Not Good. But being weightless is Outstanding. Every time I lean forward I do a perfect somersault. When I stretch my arms in the air I levitate. Back on Earth my only special skills are being above average in maths and height. Up here I've got so many skills I'm practically a Power Ranger.

Then there's the stars.

On Earth, our house is right next to the New Strand Shopping Centre. The multi-storey blots out most of the sky. The only stars I ever really noticed were the ones on the 'It's Your Solar System' glow-in-the-dark mobile I got when I was nine. And the only reason I noticed them was that they kept getting tangled in my hair. Mobiles do not make good presents for persons of above average height.

The stars look different from here. There's a lot more of them, for one thing. Big swirls and knots and clouds of them, so bright they hurt to look at. When you're in it, space looks like the biggest firework display ever – except it's on pause. It looks like freeze-frame fireworks. Even if you're Completely

Doomed, you've got to be impressed.

The only bad thing about the view is that it doesn't include Earth. We haven't seen it since we rolled out of orbit. I said to the others, 'Well, it must be somewhere. We're probably just facing the wrong way. We'll find it. Definitely.' But that didn't seem to calm them down. One of them – Samson Two – drew me a diagram to prove that even if we were facing the wrong way we should still be able to see it. I said, 'So what are you saying? That we've fallen into some magic wormhole and come out on the other side of the universe?'

'Possibly.'

'That the whole Earth just vanished? That it's gone?'

'Possibly.'

They all screamed until they wore themselves out, and then they went to sleep.

At least sleep uses less oxygen.

I have tried to imagine that there's someone on the other end of this phone. Someone unusually quiet. I've also tried to make actual phone calls. I sort of thought the signal might be better up here, being nearer to the satellites. But it doesn't seem to work like that.

MY FAVOURITE GRAVITY



I don't think the world has vanished. But it is worrying not being able to see it. After all, Earth is where I keep all my stuff. Thinking about all my favourite bits – my mum, and my dad, my bedroom, my computer – makes me feel a bit calmer. There's my massive Playmobil Viking ship that takes up half the floor. Or used to take up half the floor. I put it back in its box the day I discovered I'd grown facial hair. I just thought that anyone with a beard – even just a wispy one – is probably too old for Playmobil.

I say *I* discovered the facial hair. To be honest, I never noticed it, because we've got energy-saving light bulbs in the bathroom. It was other people who pointed it out to me, during the Year Six Leavers' Outing to Enchantment Land.

The most famous ride in Enchantment Land is the Cosmic. All the way there, on the coach, everyone kept on about how big it was and how scary. Everyone had a brother or a cousin who had been on it and Never Been the Same Again. In case you don't know, the Cosmic is a kind of metal cage with two seats in. It's attached to the top of a massive crane by kind of big elastic bands. They pull the cage down to the ground with

a chain and fasten it with an electromagnet. You sit inside and then they switch off the magnet. The elastic catapults you into the air and then snaps you back towards the ground again. Then you bounce up and down for a while. It's only frightening for about ten seconds, but for those ten seconds it is so frightening that Ben's cousin's hair supposedly turned completely white. And it goes so fast that Joe's next-door neighbour's stomach came loose and ended up stuck in his own neck and he had to have an operation. Apparently he'll show you the stitches if you ask him.

Despite these obvious drawbacks, everyone said they were going to go on it. Until we got there and discovered there was a height requirement – namely a wooden Martian holding his arm straight out and a speech bubble that said, 'If you can walk under my arm, you can't take the Cosmic.' Everyone could easily walk under the arm. Except me. It only came up to my shoulder. 'OK,' said the man. 'You're on.'

See what I mean about height versus age? It's a height requirement, not an age requirement. Everyone was moaning, saying it wasn't fair and saying how rubbish it was being a kid and how they wished they were grown-ups. That's what they said. In fact, they were all blatantly relieved that they weren't tall enough.

The man said, 'You'll need someone to go on with you. It's two at a time or no ride.'

I looked at Mrs Hayes, our teacher. She shrugged. 'Are you allowed on if you're pregnant?'

'No,' said the man, but you could hardly hear him because everyone was so excited by the news that Mrs Hayes was having a baby.

'No one else?' said the man.

And everyone looked at the responsible parent who had very kindly accompanied our group – namely, my dad. He always comes on these things because he’s a taxi driver, so he can choose what hours he works.

Florida Kirby kept nudging him, ‘Go on, Mr Digby. Go on. My dad’d do it if he was here. My dad’s dead brave.’ She more or less shoved him past the Martian and up the ramp. The man waved us into the cage and fastened us both in. I remember Dad saying, ‘Has anyone ever died on this?’

And the man glared at him. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No one has EVER died on my ride.’

‘Only asking,’ said Dad.

Then the man shut the door of the cage, looked at us through the bars and said, ‘But there’s always a first time.’

If we’d said, ‘Let me out!’ then, it wouldn’t have done any good because straight away this incredibly loud music started up and dry-ice fog came pouring into the cage and lights were bouncing around us. They really believed in a big build-up. Dad gripped my hand and shouted, ‘Don’t be scared, Liam.’ Before I could say, ‘I’m not scared,’ something went BANG and we were rocketing through the air. There’s a horrible crushing feeling, like a big fist squeezing you into a ball. Then at the top it just lets go of you and you feel lighter than air and not scared of anything at all, as though all the fear had been squeezed out of you. The second bounce was nearly as high as the first, but it wasn’t even a bit frightening. We sat there, the two of us, laughing madly while we waited for the elastic to calm down. We bounced five more times.

When we got off I was tingling all over and everything around me looked sort of more in focus than usual. Everything was crisper and brighter. The boys were all

hanging around the wooden Martian, shouting and yelling and cheering. The girls were still hanging round Mrs Hayes asking her about the baby. I realized we'd only been up there about two minutes.

Florida Kirby said, 'Are you going to be sick?'

'No.'

'Julie Johnson was sick on the Ghost Train.'

She seemed to think that if I knew this, I might agree to be sick, just to fit in. Florida Kirby is obsessed with two things – celebrities and being sick. Give her a sick celebrity and she's in heaven.

I said, 'That. Was. Golden. Can we do it again?'

Dad said, 'Not with me, you can't.'

'But . . .'

'Liam, what you've just had was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. And now you've had it.'

He went off to play on the Hook-a-Duck. Wayne Ogunsiji was with him, and the two of them got into this profound conversation about Liverpool's defence. Dad said they were weak at the back. Wayne said they were solid at the back but they couldn't really distribute properly. Every now and then I'd see the cage of the Cosmic shoot up over the tops of the other rides, twisting and turning, like a moon shot from a cannon and part of me thought, I've done that. And the rest of me thought, I've got to do it again.

When it was time to leave, Mrs Hayes marched us off to this special exit they've got just for school parties. I carried on watching for one last glimpse of the Cosmic.

I must've drifted a bit out of the line, because when I tried to walk through the gate the security man said, 'Could you stand aside a moment, sir?' I stood aside and watched

everyone else leaving.

When Dad went by he was so busy mentally managing Liverpool FC with Wayne Ogunsiji he didn't even glance at me. As soon as Dad'd gone through, the security guard closed the door and said to me, 'The main exit's over there, mate. This is schoolkids only.'

He thought I was a grown-up!

People always think I'm older than I am but no one had taken me for an actual grown-up before. I could've said, 'I *am* a schoolkid. Please let me out,' OR I could've said nothing, and seized the opportunity to have another go on the Cosmic. So I did have two options but somehow, in my head, they dwindled down to one.

I went straight back to the Cosmic.

The man in charge spotted me hanging around and said, 'Didn't your mate like it?'

'My mate?' I realized he was talking about my dad.

'You know, you can do me a favour if you like. Help me plug the gaps.'

'What gaps?'

'Well, I like to keep the ride busy. It doesn't look too tempting, the cage just standing there. A lot of people chicken out at the last minute. I like to have someone who can step in from time to time.'

I said, 'Sure,' in a grown-up kind of voice and stood by the cage.

That afternoon I did the Cosmic with a boy whose mum was too scared to take him, a teenager who was doing it for a dare, someone whose girlfriend was too fat for the seat, and four others. Eight goes in all. The man said I must have a highly developed centre of gravity. Every single time, I got

the same Crispy New World feeling. It never wore off.

According to the man, the Cosmic generates 4g on the way up. 'That's four times the gravitational force exerted by the Earth. 4g is enough to make you appreciate how comfy normal gravity is. I used to have it set at 5g, but people kept passing out, which wasn't good for business. You do have to feel sorry for anyone who lives on a high-gravity planet all the time. That must be really hard work.'

Afterwards the man bought some hot dogs and chips and we ate them in the cage, dangling gently from a piece of elastic high above the fair. You could see all the rides laid out like a model village, and sometimes a seagull went right past us. Finally, I spotted Dad walking quickly past the Fun House. I shouted, 'Taxi!!!! Taxi!!!!' which usually works.

He looked everywhere but up. It was ages before he saw me.

I suppose if you're looking for me now, Dad, you're doing the same thing. Looking everywhere but up, in space. It was a laugh watching you then. But when we got back to the ground you weren't amused.

'Where the hell have you been? We counted you out of the exit. People swore they saw you on the bus. We were halfway to Bootle before we realized you weren't with us.'

'I've been here. I was here the whole time. Wasn't I, mister?'

'Yeah,' said the man in charge. 'And what's your problem anyway, mate?'

'I'm not your mate. I'm his dad.'

'You look a bit young to be his dad.'

'He's eleven.'

'What?'

‘He’s just unusually tall.’

‘It’s not his height; it’s his beard.’

That was the first mention of the Premature Facial Hair.

And Dad said, ‘Liam. Coach.’

Everyone cheered and clapped when I finally got on the coach. I sat by the window and tried to get a look at my new facial hair reflected in the glass. I could just make out little wisps of brown candyfloss. I said, ‘How did they get there? D’you think the extra gravity might have squeezed them out of my face?’

Randomly, this made Dad really furious. ‘Liam – blah blah – looking for you for the past two hours – blah blah. Had every taxi driver in the county looking for you. Reported your magical disappearance from a moving bus . . .’

‘I wasn’t on the bus.’

‘. . . your magical disappearance from a moving bus to the police.’

‘No!’

‘And then I find you cheerfully waving and eating chips on a fairground ride. How d’you think I feel about that?’

‘Happy that I’m alive?’

He glared at me and said, ‘Possibly. In some remote and noble corner of my heart, yes. But mostly no.’

I said, ‘I’m sorry.’

Then he said, ‘You should know better, a big lad like you.’

That’s the thing about parents. If you go missing, they worry that you might be dead. Then when they find you, they want to kill you.

Dad was furious because while he'd been worrying himself sick I hadn't been worried at all. Why wasn't I worried? Because I knew he'd come back for me. I never thought for a minute he wouldn't. When you're a kid you think your dad can do anything.

It's different now. If you ask me now if I think Dad is going to pop up at the controls of this rocket, two hundred thousand miles above the surface of the Earth, and fly us back to Bootle, I'd say – probably not.

I suppose that means I'm not a kid any more.