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## How It Started

Whenever people hear that when I was fourteen I was a member of the crew of the Spaceship Adventurer, they always say the same thing. They say, "That wasn't the one that—?" and when I say, "Yes—" they say, "Blimey!" And then they say—rather furtively—"Go on. Tell us. What really happened?" As if I'm going to tell someone I've just met something new and different from what I've told everybody all along. Sometimes, if I like them, and if I do tell them some of the things that "really" happened, they look at me disbelievingly. Not that I blame them. It is a pretty extraordinary story. And usually, they say, "You know, you should write a book about it." And so—finally—I am.

The first I heard about the International Youth Space Trip was from my friend Becky. She had seen an item about it on television. Four young people, all from different countries, would be selected to go on a trip to the Moon. There were going to be tests and trials, and then the shortlisted people would have to undergo a year's rigorous training in preparation for the flight. Becky sent off for more information. A big pack arrived, and she brought it into school.

"What d'you reckon? Shall we go in for it?" she said.

“We could,” I said. Secretly I thought she hadn’t a hope. For a start, it said that you had to be outstandingly good at maths and science, which Becky wasn’t. I was, although I say it myself, which made up a bit—though only a bit—for the fact that I was small and thin and freckly, wore specs, and braces on my teeth, and my breasts hadn’t started to develop. The second thing it said was that you had to be physically fit and athletic. This did give Becky pause for thought.

“I’m probably too fat,” she said.

“You could lose weight,” I suggested kindly.

Becky gave me a filthy look. Apparently I was supposed to have said she wasn’t fat.

“Well, we could give it a go,” she decided. “What d’you reckon?”

“Yeah,” I said lightly. “Okay. Be a laugh. Even if we don’t get picked.”

“Well, even if we do, I don’t suppose my mother will let me go—not to the Moon.”

I wasn’t at all sure that my mother would let me go to the Moon either, but I filled in the forms anyway. I knew my dad would be no problem. I would only have to mention scientific exploration, and Dad would be jumping up and down with delight. Dad’s a physicist, he works for CERN, that’s the European Center for Nuclear Research. He’s absolutely brilliant and quite famous, and at that time he was dead worried in case I went all hippie like my older brother Steve. Steve was studying physics at university, but then he went off to India at the end of his first year, and that was that. No more physics. He came

home saying things like, “What moves faster than the speed of light?” and when Dad said, rather testily, “Nothing can move faster than the speed of light,” Steve would smile and say, “Wrong! The mind can move faster than the speed of light.” And he would grin as if he had said something amazingly clever. It drove my dad wild. I mean in our family, we’d grown up reciting that the top speed limit in the universe was 300 million meters, or 186,000 miles per second. Perhaps at this point I should explain that my dad has this theory that British kids were much better at maths than anyone else in Europe before we went metric, so we were taught to be what Dad called “mathematically bilingual,” and to think in pounds and stones and hundred-weights, and feet and yards and miles, as well as kilos and kilometers. And when other kids were playing I-spy on long car journeys, we were converting Metric to Imperial, and Imperial to Metric, and reciting scientific axioms. So you can understand it caused quite a stir when Steve came out with his mad unprovable statement. He and Dad had the most terrible rows, which usually ended with Dad being horribly sarcastic and cutting—“Your mind certainly doesn’t move faster than the speed of light—” and Steve, who was pretending to be super-cool and above everything, losing his temper, and saying he knew Dad thought he was no good. It was awful. I know because we were both staying with Dad in Geneva at the time. With Dad and his new wife, Evie, that is. It certainly didn’t make things any easier with Evie, who’s a scientist too, and dead keen on her career, and not exactly overboard about us. She was even less

keen on us after that holiday, so I was pretty annoyed with Steve. I felt he'd fouled up my plan, which was to go and live with Dad in Geneva.

You see, I wasn't getting on too well with Mum at the time. In fact, since she and Dad split up, I'd been getting on with her very badly. Mainly because of her boyfriend. You know, when I was little and Mum and Dad were still married, I sometimes used to wish they'd get divorced. It seemed like all the most interesting kids had parents who were divorced. But even then I could see that the snag lay in their mums' awful boyfriends. Sometimes I used to think they all had the same awful boyfriend. He was bald and overweight, with gingery curly hair, and I met him everywhere. Sometimes he wore an embroidered waistcoat, and sometimes he wore a suit. I never found out his name, because my friends never called him by name. They always had nicknames for him, like Freak, or Creep, or Bonzo. One time when I was staying at Becky's when her mum was giving a party, I realized that there was more than one of this creature, because three of my friends' mums came, and they each had an identical boyfriend in tow. Then things started to go wrong between my own mum and dad—actually, it's very difficult to imagine why they ever got married in the first place, they're so completely different. Dad's dead logical, he only believes something if you can prove it over and over again in a laboratory, whereas Mum's into painting and poetry, and beads, and quilting, not to mention every wacky idea around. Dad used to laugh at her. "Groovy-organic-New-Age-mysticism" is what he called her stuff. But obviously, it wasn't really a joke,

because when he got the job in Geneva, she decided she wanted to stay in England with Steve and me and Toby, who was only two. And at first I didn't even understand they'd split up. Until I came home and found the identikit boyfriend sitting at our kitchen table, that is.

"Jess, this is Mort," said my mother, going a bit pink. She didn't have to say any more. I knew, because I'd seen him so often before. Really, I mean. It wasn't just that he looked just like Freak and Creep and Bonzo. He was Creep, and he was Becky's mum's ex, which made things very difficult between Becky's mum and mine. And between Mum and me. I was absolutely furious. I wouldn't speak to Mum, and I even wrote to Dad about it—that's when I got the letter explaining that he and Mum weren't just living apart, they'd decided to separate, and telling me about Evie. That made me even more furious.

"You should have told me! Why didn't you tell me?" I yelled at Mum, after I had read the letter. "And why the hell did you have Toby if you were planning to split up—"

"For goodness sake, Jess, you sound just like Granny—"

"Well, why did you?"

"We weren't planning to split up. People don't plan to fall in love—"

"You're not in love with Mort—" I yelled.

"How do you know?"

"You couldn't be. He's dreadful. He's a complete slob—I hate him—"

"That's quite enough," said my mother. Mort was out in the garden, but the french windows were open, and he could hear every word.

Meanwhile, Becky was absolutely delighted. It meant she didn't have to put up with Creep at her house. In fact, the only time she and I had a row was when Creep went back to her mum, and Becky reckoned it was all my fault for being so foul to him. So did my mum. She told me I was a selfish, self-centered little pig, and I'd deprived her of her last chance of happiness. In fact, she was so miserable that she couldn't eat. Fortunately Steve came back from India about then, and he took her along to a Meditation Center. After that, she seemed to calm down a bit. The only trouble was she put pictures all over the house of this old Indian guy dressed in a turban and a lot of coats. She started playing tapes of people chanting, which is what they do at the Meditation Center, and the house smelled of incense all the time. It was dead embarrassing, I can tell you, being in the top science stream at school and having to bring friends home to all that. They all wanted to know who the old guy in all the coats was—apparently he always wore five at a time, which, as far as I was concerned, meant he was definitely off the wall, I mean this was in India and it's hot in India. I tried to be cool about it, and tell them he was an Indian holy man called Shantih Yogi Baba, but they just used to look at me as if I was a bit weird. Then Creep came creeping back, he'd decided he liked my Mum better than Becky's after all—and he wasn't in the least put off by all the incense and pictures and chanting. In fact, he started going to the Meditation Center as well, and the next thing I knew he'd moved in, and Mum was telling me if there was any trouble from me, she was sending me off to live with Dad

in Geneva. Except I knew, because I'd already asked Dad, that that wasn't on.

Anyway, with all this going on, was it any wonder a trip to the Moon seemed like a good way to put in time till I could leave home? So I filled in the forms, and so did Becky, and we sent them off, and, to be quite honest, I forgot all about them. Then one day when I came in from school there was a message on my mum's answering machine.

"Could Miss Jessica Barron please call Natalie at the International Youth Space Project?"

"What have you been up to?" my mother wanted to know. She had got to the message first.

"Nothing. I'll tell you if anything comes of it," I told her. Then I took the phone into my bedroom, and feeling suddenly rather shaky, I dialed Natalie's number.

"Oh, hi! Jessica!" she said, as if she'd known me all her life. Though if she had, she would have called me Jess like everybody else. "Listen, we really liked your application form. And we've taken up your references, and we'd really like to meet you. Could you come up to Edinburgh next month for the first round of the heats?"

"I should think so," I said, more because I wanted time to think than because I really wanted to go. "What do I have to do?"

"Well, there's a science test. And a maths test. And then there's a physical stamina test. And the medical of course. You don't do the physical stamina unless you pass the medical, because the physical stamina is really very tough."

“No. Right,” I said. I was wondering how I was going to explain a weekend in Edinburgh to Mum, and where I was going to find the fare.

“And if you pass all that we give you some psychological tests to make sure you can cope with the rigors of space travel.”

“Right,” I said again.

“You’ll meet Muriel,” she went on.

“Who?”

“Muriel McPherson. Lady Dumfries. She’s leading the Expedition.”

“Oh. Right.”

“And she’s very keen to meet your parents. I expect they’d like to meet her too.”

“Yeah, I expect so,” I said dubiously.

“Are they pleased you’re applying?”

“My father is,” I said cautiously, though I hadn’t told either of them yet.

“Only it’s really important you have your whole family backing you.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll umm—I’ll umm—”

“So we’ll book you into the Waverley hotel for that weekend. You want us to book a room for your parents too?”

“I’ll let you know about that,” I said. “How much does it cost?”

“Oh don’t worry about that. It’s all on Muriel,” said Natalie. “Okay. Great. Nice talking to you, Jessica. We look forward to meeting you.”

I didn’t even put the receiver down. I just pressed down the cradle of the phone, and as it came up again, I was dialing Becky.



“Hi. Me,” I said when she answered.

“Hiya.”

“Have you had a phone call from Natalie at the IYSP?” I said, casually. Knowing perfectly well she hadn’t.

“Come again?”

“That Space Project. Have you heard from them?”

“No. Have you?”

“Yes. I’ve been selected for the first round of the heats,” I told her. Trying to sound casual, and hating myself for sounding so smug.

“Oh. Well done,” said Becky. There was a sort of edge in her voice, and I knew she was hurt.

“It’s probably ’cuz your surname comes after mine,” I said. “You’ll probably hear from them later in the week.” Really I knew it was because her science just wasn’t up to it.

“What do you have to do?” she asked. And when I told her, she said, “Blimey. I’m glad they didn’t phone me. You’d better get training.”

So I did. I wasn’t too worried about the mental side of things (my last school report had said “Jessica is undoubtedly a brilliant student. What a pity she is so arrogant,”) but I thought I might be a bit puny. So I started to drink lots of milk, and eat masses of cheese. I got up early and went running, I walked the dogs—we had two dogs, one of which, Bessie, the retriever, had the softest ears in the world—I went swimming, and I carried a rucksack full of books up and down the hill outside our home in Wiltshire. I also stopped smoking, with the result that Mum—I’d told her about the Space Project by this time—started to think it was a good thing. Mind you, I

don't think she thought I had a snowball's chance in hell of actually going. And neither did I, when I saw the competition. When I got to Edinburgh, there were all these kids milling round the hotel. I should think that eighty percent of them were boys, and another eighty percent—though not the same eighty percent—wore specs, and they were all terribly well-read about space travel, and they talked about wave-particle effects over the cornflakes and the orange juice, and when they got on to the toast they discussed whether the quantum logic of microscopic particles could be applied to the macro world of ships and sealing wax. It was a bit of a change from school. At school people got at me for being clever. They used to call me Superbrain, and I would pretend not to care, because in some ways it was quite a compliment. But a lot of the time I was bored. The girls talked about boys all the time, and the boys talked about football, and no one admitted to being interested in ideas, never ever. And here I was at lunch discussing whether the universe started with a Big Bang, and was it expanding, or stable, or contracting, and would it disintegrate or would it collapse in on itself . . . and explaining to a little guy called Lenny, who looked like Woody Allen, that my problem had always been that neither of these ideas made sense to me, because I couldn't conceive of an infinitely dense, solid mass that isn't inside the space it's going to explode out into. And instead of putting me down, like Dad did, Lenny said that if you stopped thinking of space as a fixed thing, and started thinking of it as fluid, it made more sense. Then he confided how his problems came when he started

thinking about time. The minute anyone said “beginning” to him, he would think, “What happened before?”

Moving about among all this intellectual speculation was Lady Dumfries, or Mad Muriel MacPherson. The space project was her brainchild. Muriel was huge, a great battleship of a woman, who was very grand, and who talked in a loud voice, and called everybody “darling.” In her youth she was supposed to have been a great beauty, with hundreds of men in love with her, but she had become so bulky and bossy that now men ran for cover whenever they saw her coming. Muriel had led an adventurous life. She had been one of the first women in England to get her pilot’s license, and she had flown all the way to Australia in an old crate of an airplane in the days when that was thought barely possible. She had also sailed round the world all on her own in a yacht, traveled among the Bedouin tribes in the deserts of North Africa, and ridden all the way to India on a bicycle. Somewhere in the middle of her adventures she had married Lord Dumfries—some people said for his money, for he had been very dull and very rich. Now that he was dead—and she had had to wait a long time for his money, for he had lived to be ninety-nine—she was fabulously wealthy. She had four daughters, with whom she got on very badly. I could never understand this, but Mum thought maybe it was because Muriel was always leaving them behind to go off on adventures. Or maybe because she had forced them down too many cliff-faces when they were little. She had first had the idea of funding the moonshot when she got into conversation with a Saudi Arabian astronaut on

a plane, on the way to visit one of her daughters in Palm Springs—“just the sort of bloody boring place she would live, darling—” and her first idea had been to take all nine of her grandchildren up with her. But not one of their mothers would allow them to go. Muriel was affronted, but not deterred. She had commissioned the building of a brand-new spaceship by this time, a replica of Apollo 11, which was the first mission to land men on the Moon, and there were drawings and models of it in the foyer of the hotel. She had also been in touch with NASA, the space research people in America, and the European Space Project, and persuaded them both to back her. Actually, I think they were thrilled. Space travel is expensive, and there hadn't been too many manned space flights since the Apollo missions, especially after Challenger blew up on take-off in the eighties. And it isn't every day that someone comes along and offers to pay for a moonshot out of their own pocket.

As pilot, NASA had assigned a guy called Doug Pinto. He was a colonel in the American army, and he looked exactly how you expect an astronaut to look: a very short haircut (not that he had much hair left); a thick neck; a strong jaw; steely blue eyes; and a body kept in trim by endless workouts. He had been part of the whole moonshot organization, back in America in the sixties. He knew all those early astronauts: Borman and Anders and Aldrin and Armstrong and Collins. He'd trained with them. He'd even been scheduled to fly with some of their teams, but somehow something had always gone wrong for poor old Doug, and in the end he'd never gone anywhere except

the simulator. I think this was why he always seemed dour and unhappy. He hadn't fulfilled his great ambition. Until he'd met up with mad Muriel, this time staying at a fancy hotel in Houston, Texas, and lo and behold, at the age of fifty-five he was going to get his wish. If you think fifty-five is rather old to be piloting a moonshot with four kids on board, spare a thought for Mad Muriel, who was already in training to be co-pilot. She was over seventy.

Anyway, these two moved among us that weekend, talking to us, testing us. I got on well with them both: Doug, because I could hack the science, and Muriel because I like poetry, which turned out to be one of her great passions. Of course, being liked by Doug and Muriel wasn't the end of the story. There were only four places on the moonshot, and hundreds of brainbox kids competing. It was a bit like that TV show, the *Krypton Factor*, with millions of tests to judge IQ, and co-ordination, and how fast you could think on your feet, and how well you could co-operate with other people.

The youngest of all the competitors was Mikey, and he was only six. He was American, and he was a child genius. I know because first he told me in a smug sort of way, and then his mother did. He had an IQ of 290, and he had passed the equivalent of A-level maths and physics, and got admitted to Harvard University, but they wouldn't let him come till he was twelve. I thought he was a complete pill as a matter of fact. When he wasn't showing off about how fast he could do long division in his head, he was crying 'cuz he'd lost his teddy bear. His mother was dead impressed when she found out who my father was.

“Say, if you and Mikey both get picked for this mission, will you promise to look after him for me?” she asked me.

“‘Course,” I said. It seemed like a safe enough promise. I mean statistically it was most unlikely we would both get picked. And statistics aside, I couldn’t believe a) they would pick me (I was too normal) or b) they would send a six-year-old child up in a spacecraft. Even if he was a genius, which I doubted. But I had my work cut out keeping one step ahead of Mikey’s mum, who thought I was a nice girl, a sort of super-intelligent babysitter for her super-intelligent baby, and who kept appearing just when it was most inconvenient.

Like when I was moving in on this boy I really fancied. His name was Rashid, and he was Egyptian, and dead good-looking. Mean and moody, like a swarthy James Dean. He didn’t wear specs—so I kept mine in my pocket, which was one reason why I couldn’t always spot him, and also why Mikey and his mum kept creeping up on me. Trouble was, Rashid hadn’t even noticed me. He was too busy following this beautiful blonde Russian girl called Tatiana. Then my luck changed. Rashid and I were drawn as partners for the third day of tests. Now he’ll notice me, I thought. Because I kept getting questions I could answer. Then towards the end of the day, we had to sit either side of a table. There were computer screens in the middle, one for each of us, and they flashed up different colored shapes and told us we had to agree jointly on the sequence. It seemed dead easy, but quite soon we were arguing. He would say, “A blue circle,” and I would say,

“No that comes next,” and he would say, “No it doesn’t a yellow crescent comes next.” (He spoke very good English.) “You mean a green crescent?” I said. “No, a yellow crescent.” As this went on I decided he must be dyslexic. And color-blind. Then I had an idea. “How do we know we’re both being shown the same shapes in the same sequence?” I said.

Bingo. We were into bonus points. Most of the other couples were coming to blows because it never occurred to them that the machine might be giving them different information. Me, I was really pleased with myself. This’ll make him sit up and notice me, I thought.

Not a bit of it. First he went round telling everyone that he was the one who had sussed the machine. And then he spent the evening in one of the alcoves in the coffee bar with his arm round Tatiana, who was crying because she thought she had scored so low. I went to bed absolutely furious—with him for falling for her helpless little girl act, and with myself for fancying such an arrogant twit. It wasn’t even as if she *had* done badly. She was absolutely brilliant, Tatiana, as well as beautiful. She just pretended to be vague and clueless, so that all the boys would think she needed rescuing. I tell you, with braces and no breasts, I hadn’t a hope.

It made me even more determined to do well though. And I did. In fact it was quite extraordinary. I kept passing tests. It even turned out I had a specially suitable heart for space travel, something about it had an extra beat, which is something a lot of athletes have, and means you’ve got a lot of stamina. And to cut a long story short,

first I was shortlisted, and then I went off with fourteen other people—including Lenny, and Rashid and Mikey, and Tatiana—on the training course based in Muriel's huge house high up on the moors in southern Scotland. Actually, this part wasn't really a training course at all. It was just more of the weeding out process. By this time I had decided I really did want to go to the Moon. I was absolutely determined I was going to be one of those picked to go. Mum knew it. And she wasn't too keen. On the other hand, Mort and she were planning to get married, and I think she was quite pleased to have me out of the way for a bit.