Chapter 1

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

When Mae Jemison was a little girl, she dreamed of sailing off into space on a spaceship.

NO ONE IN HER FAMILY WAS AN ASTRONAUT OR TALKED MUCH ABOUT OUTER SPACE, AND YET MAE WAS LIKE A MAGNET, PULLED TO THE VAST WORLD JUST OUTSIDE HER OWN.

Dreaming big was not something a young Black girl from Alabama in the 1960s was encouraged to do. It was better to dream realistically. The civil rights movement was in full swing. It was radical to be Black and to be educated, to vote, or to work even the most run-of-the-mill job. It was not something to be taken for granted, especially if you were a woman of colour who was denied, somehow, even more rights than her fellow men of colour. So when it came to outer space, well, that seemed to be a world reserved for men – and white men at that.

Mae Jemison had a mum and a dad who had good jobs and who worked hard: her dad was a carpenter and her mum taught at a primary school. But she could not find any women who looked like her in the field of space study. Discouraged? Maybe, a little.

Late at night, she would look up at the stars in the sky from her bedroom window, remembering the lullaby her mum used to sing when she was a child: "Twinkle, twinkle, little star... how I wonder what you are."

UP ABOVE THE WORLD SO HIGH, MAE THOUGHT SHE SAW A STAR TWINKLE JUST FOR HER. AS SHE CLOSED HER EYES AND FELL ASLEEP, MAE DREAMED ABOUT A FUTURE WHERE SHE JOINED THE STARS IN SPACE.

Sometimes dreams are dreamed very early on in life, but don't come to fruition until much later. No matter how much Mae loved space, she was only a young girl. As far as she knew, children weren't allowed to go to space. When she told her parents her dreams, they did not

laugh at her or think she was silly. They, like Mae, took her dreams very seriously.

"You are going to have to work very hard," her mother, Dorothy, would tell her. "You are going to have to pay attention in school and always do your homework."

Mae would nod her head. Yes! She would always pay attention in school. She would always do her homework.

"You're going to have to prioritise learning, even outside of the classroom," her father, Charlie, said. "That means always remembering your big dreams and understanding that it takes sacrifices to achieve them."

Mae would nod her head again. Yes! She was willing to do anything for her dreams.

"As long as you believe in yourself, we will always believe in you," her parents told her.

Mae felt safe and loved and supported. These were the important seeds that she needed to plant in order to see her dreams grow.

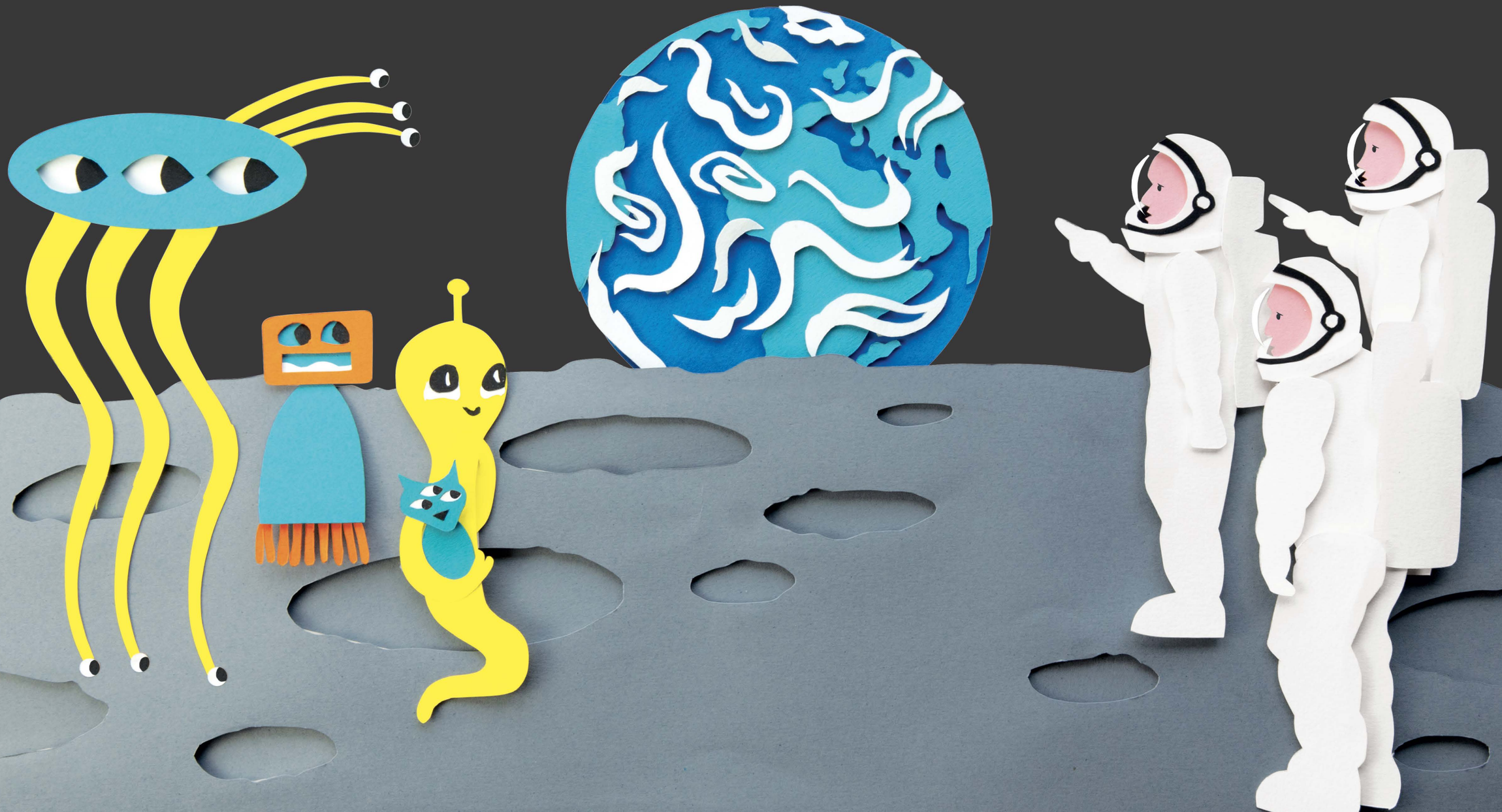
“NEVER BE LIMITED BY OTHER PEOPLE’S LIMITED IMAGINATIONS.”

— Mae Jemison

"I WAS REALLY IRRITATED THAT THERE WERE NO WOMEN ASTRONAUTS AND THERE WERE NO PEOPLE OF COLOUR.

I THOUGHT, WHAT IF ALIENS RUN INTO THIS CREW – THEY'RE GOING TO THINK THOSE ARE THE ONLY PEOPLE ON EARTH. I THOUGHT IT WAS UNREASONABLE NOT TO HAVE EVERYONE REPRESENTED."

– Mae Jemison



It looked like something she might want to do, too.

Her parents looked at each other warily. “I thought you wanted to be a scientist?” her mum said between bites of food. “Please pass the pepper, Mae.”

Mae handed her mother the pepper.

“I do. I want to do both, I think. I don’t know. I love both science and dancing.” Mae sat thoughtfully, looking down at her food. “Can people do both things?”

“YOU MEAN,” MAE’S DAD ASKED, “CAN YOU BE BOTH A SCIENTIST AND A DANCER?”

“Yes,” Mae said. “I guess what I want to know is: do you think I can be both?”

This was a tough question for Mae’s parents to answer. They did not want to be the ones in charge of choosing Mae’s destiny, and they had always promised to be supportive no matter what or who she chose to be. After a brief pause, Mae’s mum nodded her head.

“Yes,” she told her daughter. “I think – actually, I know – you can be both. But it’s important to remember that you can always dance if you’re a doctor, but you can’t doctor if you’re a dancer.”

This made sense to Mae. It helped her to prioritise her goals and dreams.

She never did get the lead role in *West Side Story* at school. But she did get to be a principal dancer.

IT DIDN’T MATTER TO MAE, AS LONG AS SHE WAS ALWAYS SPENDING HER TIME DOING THE THINGS SHE LOVED.

Mae was scheduled to be in space for eight days, a little over one week. Wow! That would be a really nice relaxing holiday, except she wasn't going to the beach. What was Mae doing up in space for eight days?

Let's take a look.

According to her own documentation of her space travel, Mae was a mission specialist who worked on investigations of bone cell research experiments. She also carried out experiments dealing with motion sickness – including the motion sickness experienced by the crew and herself. Now that's science.

Inside the space shuttle, Mae slept in a sleeping bag – just like you would if you were camping in the woods or sleeping over at a friend's house. But Mae's sleeping bag was strapped to the wall! This helped keep her from floating around and bumping into things while she was sleeping. Kind of funny, right? When she needed to use the bathroom, she would use a tube that would suck away body waste like a vacuum. It sounds pretty crazy, but astronauts are trained for crazy, since space is very different to being on Planet Earth. Aboard the shuttle there are lots of computers, servers and workstations. After all, Mae and her fellow astronauts aren't taking a holiday in space; they're working on research projects to bring back after their mission and further space exploration for generations to come.

It was hard work for Mae and for her colleagues to complete all of their research, but we all know how it feels to achieve your dreams... it often doesn't feel like work at all.

On her only space mission, Mae spent 190 hours, 30 minutes and 23 seconds in space. She didn't take one single second for granted.

SHE ONCE SAID, "PEOPLE ALWAYS THINK OF TECHNOLOGY AS SOMETHING HAVING SILICON IN IT. BUT A PENCIL IS TECHNOLOGY. ANY LANGUAGE IS TECHNOLOGY. TECHNOLOGY IS A TOOL WE USE TO ACCOMPLISH A PARTICULAR TASK."

STS-47
Mission: Spacelab-J
Space Shuttle: *Endeavour*
Launch Weight: 117,334.82 kilograms
Launched: September 12, 1992, 10:23:00 a.m. EDT
Mission Duration: 7 days, 22 hours, 30 minutes, 23 seconds
Miles Travelled: 3.3 million