INTO THIN AIR

Also by S. E. Durrant







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It's impossible to look down on Earth from space and not be mesmerised by the fragile beauty of our planet.

Tim Peake



JUST BEFORE MIDNIGHT

Dad walked out of the house last night just before midnight and didn't come back. It was dark for London. There are only two lampposts at the end of our street and one was flickering. He had his red hat pulled down over his ears and was carrying two bags. And he was in a hurry. Normally he takes his time. If there's a moth fluttering under the streetlight, he wants to see it. If a fox is rustling through the bins, he stops to watch. But not last night. Last night he looked nervous. When a car approached, he stepped into a doorway and

waited for it to pass.

Jade climbed down from her bunk and stood beside me.

"What are you looking at, Luna?" she yawned.

I pointed at Dad. He was getting into the car. He threw his bags on to the back seat, started the engine and drove away. When he reached the corner a shooting star flew across the sky and disappeared behind the flats in the distance.

"Maybe he's following the star," said Jade.

"Maybe," I said.

There was no point arguing. She's nearly ten but sometimes it's like she's seven years old. If you cough and a light goes out, she thinks the cough made the light go out and she'll cough again to see if the light goes back on (it doesn't). So, if a meteor flies across the sky just as Dad disappears, well, they must be connected.

Anyway, Jade wasn't going to worry. She climbed back up into her bunk, crawled under her duvet and next thing she was asleep. Maybe most nine-year-olds are like that but I wasn't. I was the chew-your-nails, stomach-churning kind of nine-year-old. I'm calmer now I'm eleven. I'm practising. I want to be an astronaut and astronauts need to be calm in a crisis. Because if something goes wrong, you're on your own, drifting

through space, miles from home.

I stood at the window for ages, waiting for Dad to come back. A horrible feeling washed over me and I didn't like it one bit. Because Dad's been really secretive lately. And really grumpy. He disappears and doesn't say where he's going. And I don't think he's doing something fun like planning Mum's birthday. I think he's doing something he's worried about. And worst of all, I've been horrible to him. So, him driving off at nearly midnight with two bags didn't feel good at all.

Across the road a sliver of light broke through some curtains and a cat pressed its nose to the window. A fox crept down the pavement. I took a deep breath and told myself to calm down. Because even though I didn't know where Dad was going, I knew some things for sure. I knew the moon was circling the Earth and that Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune were orbiting the Sun just as we are. All of us created in a vast cosmic soup. And that made me feel better.

And best of all, I knew the International Space Station was looping around Earth exactly on course, travelling through sixteen sunrises and sixteen sunsets every twenty-four hours. And Mimi, my favourite astronaut, would be fast asleep, tied into her sleeping bag and wearing her blue pyjamas. And in ten days the

space station will pass overhead and me and Dad will go to the park to try to see it. And knowing all that made everything going on here in our little house, in our little street, feel not quite so scary.

Eventually I went back to bed, but my ears were twitching like antennae, waiting for Dad to come home. He didn't. Instead, I heard the rats scrabbling in the attic and water gurgling through the pipes and the floorboards creaking as though a ghost was drifting through the house.

And now daylight's seeping under the curtains and traffic's rolling past the window. I hear Mum downstairs getting ready for work. She opens the front door, closes it behind her and she's gone. And Jade, well, she's still asleep.



Day 1
THURSDAY

06.00 GMT International Space Station

The astronauts are waking up. Mimi, the commander, unstraps herself from her sleeping bag and floats through the station to the dome of windows. Outside, Earth is in darkness, the cities dappled with lights. She watches as a sliver of Sun rises behind the curve of Earth, a gleaming line about to explode into daylight.

Paper planets

I jump out of bed and run into Mum and Dad's room. Sun streams through the window. Mum's pyjamas are bundled on her pillow. Dad's side of the bed hasn't been slept in. The mobile I made hangs from the ceiling, the paper planets shifting slightly. I scan the room in case Dad's hidden somewhere. He isn't, of course. There's only room for a bed and a chest of drawers and a wardrobe. If he was in the wardrobe, the door wouldn't shut. If he was in the chest of drawers he'd have to be dehydrated and folded four times.

I go to the bathroom and clean my teeth. Dad's toothbrush is gone! I feel a bit sick. You don't take your toothbrush if you're just going out for a few hours.

I get dressed and give Jade a prod.

"Get up," I say.

She groans.

"OK, OK, Luna."

I run downstairs. Dad's shoes are missing from the hall, his bobbly slippers are flung in the corner. There's a little computer desk under the stairs. The computer's there but the shelf above is emptier. The box of maps is gone. And Dad's red hat isn't on the peg

because he's wearing it somewhere. And that somewhere isn't here.

I'm hoping Mum's left one of her notes on the kitchen counter. They say things like *Happy Birthday!* or *Don't forget your homework!!* or *Fish and chips tonight* (that hasn't happened for a while). And sometimes (also not for a while) *Love you* from Mum to Dad with a little scribble from Dad saying, *Love you too* (and another from Jade saying *STOP IT WILL YOU!*). Today, though, there's nothing. No note. Worry ricochets round my brain.

I make packed lunches for me and Jade – two cheese sandwiches, peach yoghurts (not my favourite) and a packet of crisps each. Then I pour two bowls of cornflakes and count prime numbers to stop the questions swirling round my head. It doesn't work. My thoughts sound like this.

Where's Dad gone?
3,271
Why didn't he leave a note?
3,299
Have he and Mum fallen out?
3,301
Did I upset him?
3,307

You're fun

Jade takes ages to come down. She always does. She loves standing in front of the mirror, looking at her wonderful self. Not checking her clothes though, I can tell you that. Her jumper's on back to front and her skirt's inside out. She looks like she got dressed in the dark.

She sits at the table, pours milk into her cereal and slurps it down. Then she has another bowl.

"We're writing stories today," she says, "and planting sunflowers."

"Great," I say.

"And we're planning our class assembly."

"Mm," I say.

Thoughts loop round my brain like hamsters stuck in a wheel.

3,313, 3,319. What's Dad doing? Why did he take his toothbrush? Why did he take two bags?

Jade looks at me and sticks out her tongue.

3,323

"You're fun, Luna," she says.

Oi!

It's the beginning of April and the sun's bouncing off car

windscreens. The sky's completely blue. Jade clatters along on her skateboard while I walk behind. I should feel happy but I'm not happy at all. Everything feels wrong. It's like a tornado rolled through the street while we were sleeping, shook everything up and put it back not quite in the right place. And I'm the only one who can see the difference. The street looks scruffier, smaller, sadder.

The car isn't there. Dad hasn't been back. Usually, it's parked outside and he walks to work. Jade circles round to me, worry sliding across her face.

"Didn't Dad come back last night?" she says.

I shake my head.

"Oh well," she says. "We're going camping, remember. He'll be back soon."

She skids away, nearly bouncing off a parked blue van. The man inside rolls down the window and sticks out his head. He's eating a sandwich out of a paper bag. Crumbs stick to his beard.

"Oi!" he shouts. "Watch yourself, will you!"

Jade cruises up to his window.

"Sorree," she says.

She does an ollie on her board then takes a bow.

The man stares at her, his face locked somewhere between boredom and annoyance. He shakes the bag out

of the window. Crumbs fall on to the kerb. If there were birds hopping around, they'd be happy. But there aren't any birds. There's just concrete and cigarette butts and tiny green shoots pushing through the cracks at the edge of the road.

Jade shrugs and then she's gone, swerving round groups of teenagers and schoolchildren and parents pushing buggies, managing to be cool to some people and extremely annoying to others. Especially the adults (and me). I wish I was more like her.

Bees to honey

Jade glides into the playground and a crowd of kids run towards her, like bees to honey. Casey's waiting at the school gate. He's throwing a water bottle into the air and catching it.

"You all right?" he says.

"My dad went out last night," I say, "and he didn't come back. He took two bags and his toothbrush."

"Strange," says Casey.

He isn't really paying attention. He throws the bottle higher. It spins two times and he catches it just before it hits the pavement. It's like the bottle was travelling at normal speed and he's moving in slow motion but he

still catches it. He's the most relaxed person I know. You could tell him the sky's about to fall in and he'd say, hang on a moment I've got to do my shoes up.

"I'm a bit worried," I say.

"What did your mum say?" says Casey.

"She went to work before I could ask her. And anyway, I've got to see Miss Kamara after school about that cheating thing. Dad said he'd try to be there. What if he's not back?"

(Long story: Miss Kamara is our new teacher. She started this week but already she thinks I cheated at maths. She spoke to Dad in the playground yesterday. Short story: I didn't cheat at maths.)

"Just explain you're a genius," says Casey. "They're not going to suspend you for being good at maths, are they?"

"I dunno," I say.

I have a horrible feeling I'm not sure about anything any more.

Joys of spring

Miss Kamara isn't in. I have to stop myself doing a little dance. I really don't want to talk to her about maths on my own. I want Dad to speak to her with me. Instead,

we've got Mr O'Connell, who usually teaches Year 4. Mr O'Connell tells lots of jokes and jumps around and forgets who he's talking to. He's wearing a green jumper with a strand of wool hanging off the cuff. Every now and then he pulls the wool and it unravels a bit more.

Mr O'Connell is completely different from Miss Kamara, who's very still. She always looks like she's watching little white clouds bobbing above a hillside and not standing in front of a classroom of eleven-year-olds scraping their chairs, picking their noses (Yasmine). Mr O'Connell is like one of those wind-up toys you can't switch off.

"You might think I'm full of the joys of spring," he says, "but actually I'm full of the joys of education."

Eugh. He's embarrassing though. Casey pretends to throw up.

Flickering

Elliot grabs the seat next to me in the canteen. He always does this. It's annoying. He usually wants my food. He opens his lunchbox. There's nothing in it.

"Umph," he says. "Can we share, Luna?"

I feel sorry for him. I can't help it. I give him the peach yoghurt. He drinks it out of the pot, slurping his tongue

round it revoltingly.

Then he says, "Any chance of a sandwich?"

I give him a sandwich and eat the crisps really quickly. His eyes keep flickering towards me. It feels like trying to eat chips on a beach while a seagull circles overhead. Not relaxing. In the end I tip a few crisps into the yoghurt pot for him so I can enjoy what's left.

Then I say, "Why do you keep forgetting your lunch?"

"My mum forgets to make it," he says.

"You should make your own," I say. "That way you know you've got some."

Elliot shrugs.

"You might want to try that tomorrow," I say. "Try making your own."

He nods blankly. He's not eating any more. He's staring at the canteen window as if the most interesting thing in the world is pressed against the glass.

Nines

Mr O'Connell's tied the loose wool on his jumper into a knot so it can't unravel any more. Somebody probably told him he's going to lose his sleeve. He draws a nine on the whiteboard and puts a smiley face in the circle.

"Nines are fascinating," he says. "Take a number

from one to ten, multiply it by 9 and the answer will add up to 9."

He writes on the board.

"9 x 2 = 18 and the 1 and 8 add up to 9. Next 9 x 3 = 27 and the 2 and 7 add up to 9. And," he says, "so on, all the way up to 9 x 10 = 90."

"Have you been teaching infants?" says Yasmine.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because we're not six, you know. We're Year 6."

She said it meanly but Mr O'Connell doesn't flinch.

"We'll do statistics tomorrow, Yasmine," he says. "Would that be more to your liking?"

Yasmine pouts. It won't be to her liking. She'd prefer not to do maths at all. I know that because she always wants to copy my answers. Which, weirdly, is why I'm in trouble when probably she should be the one in trouble.

"Yes, please," she says.

Palindrome

Ten minutes before the bell goes Mr O'Connell says, "If any of you can do the following sum I have a prize for you to share."

"What sort of prize?" says Tyrese.

"Something edible," says Mr O'Connell. "All you need to do is add up all the numbers from 1 to 100."

The numbers form a line in my brain and pair up, one from each end. So, 1 and 100 makes 101. And 2 and 99 makes 101. And so on until I've got 50 lots of 101. And that makes 5,050. All around me kids are writing down 1 to 100 in a long sum. Their writing's getting smaller and smaller. Yasmine's run out of page and is writing on her arm. I put up my hand.

"5,050," I say.

Mr O'Connell looks surprised.

"That's the answer," I say. "5,050."

"Well done," says Mr O'Connell. "Now, let's try something you haven't done before."

I want to explain I haven't done that one before but I don't. Everyone's glaring at me. It's embarrassing.

"We'll try a numerical palindrome," says Mr O'Connell. "A palindrome is the same written backwards or forwards. Give me the next date that can be written as a palindrome."

Everyone's looking at him blankly. The answer flashes in my head, waiting for me to pay it some attention.

"Here's a clue," says Mr O'Connell. "The last date that was a palindrome was 22nd February 2022."

He writes it on the whiteboard: 22 02 2022.

"You see?" he says. "The numbers read the same

from either end."

The answer's drumming on my skull now. I think about writing it on a bit of paper and passing it to someone but that's the sort of thing that got me into trouble last time. Instead, I try to send it telepathically to Casey. I know it won't work but I try anyway.

Third of February 2030, Third of February 2030

Casey's gazing at his watch. (He does that a lot.) Nothing's going in. In fact, it looks like nothing's going on in his brain at all. I try again.

03 02 2030, 03 02 2030, 03 02 2030

The bell goes.

"Oh well," says Mr O'Connell. "Not to worry. You can try again tomorrow. The answer is 03 02 2030."

He writes it on the whiteboard.

As we walk out of the classroom, Casey says to Mr O'Connell, "What's the prize?"

"Biscuits," he says.

"It sounds like statistics," says Casey.

"So it does," says Mr O'Connell.

Home already

Dad doesn't come in after school. I wish he had, even though Miss Kamara isn't here. I want to know he's

OK. And I embarrassed myself in class so I feel rubbish. Casey walks home with me while Jade races ahead.

When we get to our house he says, "Stop worrying about your dad, Luna. He's probably home already."

Dad isn't home already. Nothing's changed since this morning. His hat and shoes are gone. The kettle hasn't been boiled. I wash this morning's cereal bowls while Jade plays outside. Then I watch her through the window. She's talking to Rita, making a fuss of Rita's little dog, Mouse. Rita's retired. She and Mouse used to come into our café. She called him Mouse because he's a terrier and terriers are mouse catchers. It's not the best name. Not everyone likes to think there's a mouse under the table.

Jade's showing Rita how to do a heelflip on her skateboard. Mouse is pulling at his lead but neither of them notice – Jade's too busy showing off and Rita's too busy being impressed. Eventually, Mouse gives up and poos on the pavement. Jade jumps off her board. Rita grimaces. Then she scoops the poo into a bag and sets off down the pavement with Mouse at her side.

"Yuk," says Jade when she comes inside. "Did you see that?"

I nod.

We make toast, finish the butter and scrape the jam

out of the jar. Then we do our homework. Jade's writing something for her class assembly. She's going to talk about skateboarding. I'm thinking about palindromes. I'm stuck on one. I write it down. Five times.

"Why are you writing *Dad*?" says Jade.

"It's a palindrome – you can write it backwards or forwards."

"Like poop," she says.

Butterflies into a rainbow

Mum looks tired. She puts a paper bag on the table. We don't need to look inside. It's always croissants, never chocolate cake. If there are croissants left over at the Coffee Mill she brings them home. Croissants go hard after a while so you can't sell them. Chocolate cake lasts longer.

"Where did Dad go last night?" says Jade.

"He went to see Nan," says Mum.

"Why?" I say.

Mum fills the kettle, pours the boiling water into a saucepan and drops in some pasta. Her face is hidden in a cloud of steam.

"Nan took a bit of a turn," she says. "She needed reassuring. You know how muddled she gets."

My worries flutter away like butterflies into a rainbow. He's gone to see Nan in Dorset. Of course he has. Nan's losing her memory. She lives in a nursing home called Rose Court and sometimes the only person who can comfort her is Dad. I imagine them sitting together in the conservatory, Dad holding Nan's hand and wondering if she remembers who he is.

Mum sieves the pasta, stirs in some pesto, ladles it on to three plates and sits down with us.

"Come on," she says. "Eat. Nan's fine and Dad will be home soon."

"Shall we ring him?" I say.

"No, leave him be," says Mum. "He'll be back soon."

"Are you sure?" Jade says.

Mum takes a deep breath. It's the sort of breath that says, *Be careful or I'll start breathing fire*.

"I'm sure," she says. "Now, tell me about your days."

We don't want her to breathe fire all over us (this involves shouting) so Jade tells us about two kids who joined her class today.

"They finish each other's sentences," she says. "At break everyone was asking them questions and one would start the answer and the other would finish it off. And guess what? They're twins! They look different and they sound different but their brains are exactly the

same. In fact, they've got one brain in two heads. They even breathe at the same time."

"Really?" I say. "Same lungs too?"

It's a typical Jade story. She always exaggerates.

"Yes," she says.

She's glaring at me.

And then she makes us act it out. Me and Mum are the twins and Jade's the teacher. She asks us questions and the person she points at has to talk. We get in such a muddle it's really funny. We can't do it though. We definitely have separate brains in separate heads telling us separate things.

I tell Mum and Jade about Mr O'Connell and his unravelling jumper and Mum tells us about a pigeon that flew into the café and landed on the chocolate cake.

"You could have brought the cake home," says Jade. "We wouldn't have minded."

"Actually," Mum says, "the manager took it into the kitchen and tidied it up."

"Tidied it up!" Jade snorts. "What does that mean?"

"Well, you know," says Mum. "Dug out the footprints and smoothed them over."

Me and Jade shudder. I suppose we'd like to know if a pigeon had been standing on our cake. It wouldn't stop us eating it though.

Separate brains

Mum's watching the news, squashed on the sofa between me and Jade. She looks worried. Just like Dad actually. It'll be good when he's back. At least they can worry together.

On the news a group of people are watching sewage bubble out of a pipe and run down to the sea.

"Gross," says Jade. "Stop watching that."

Mum picks up the control and switches off the TV. Jade climbs on to her lap. She's going to have to stop doing that soon. She's nearly as big as Mum.

Then we all sit there, gazing at a blank screen. Each thinking our own separate thoughts in our own separate brains.

Change a light bulb

A sliver of moon hangs in the sky. Jade's asleep in her bunk and I can hear Mum padding around downstairs. I think of the space station wheeling around Earth while Mimi drinks hot chocolate out of a vacuum pack and looks at the stars.

I imagine Dad listening to Nan talking about cabbage (she doesn't like cabbage) or thinking he's the caretaker

come to change a light bulb (this happened last time) and I feel annoyed with myself for worrying. I've got to pull myself together. Everything's OK.

I get into bed. I'm going to be nice when Dad's back, even though he's grumpy. I just miss him, that's all. Even when he's here I miss him.



Day 2
FRIDAY

08.00 GMT International Space Station

Mimi has cleaned the air filters and disinfected the surfaces. She wipes the space station windows then presses her face to the glass and peers out at Earth. The Sun is rising over Australia, a huge pink continent washed with light.

Centre of the Universe

Mum and Dad used to have a café. It was called the Centre of the Universe, even though it was really small