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Opening extract from

George's Cosmic Treasure Hunt

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Lucy & Stephen
HAWKING

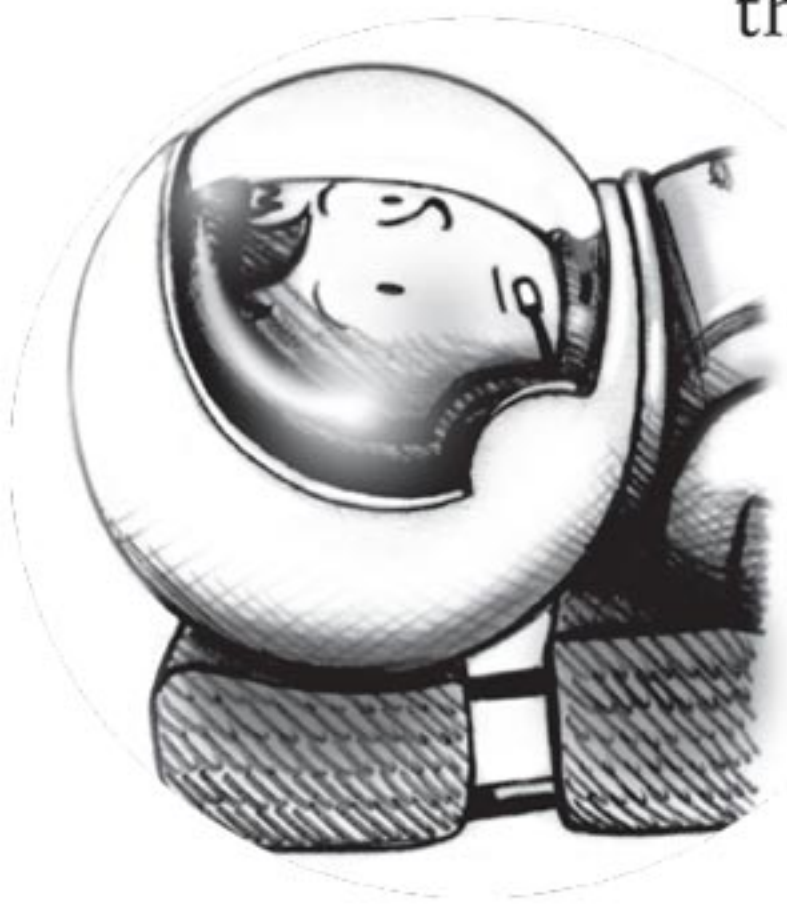
Illustrated by Garry Parsons

DOUBLEDAY

Prologue

'*T minus seven minutes and thirty seconds*,' said a robotic voice. '*Orbiter access arm retracted.*'

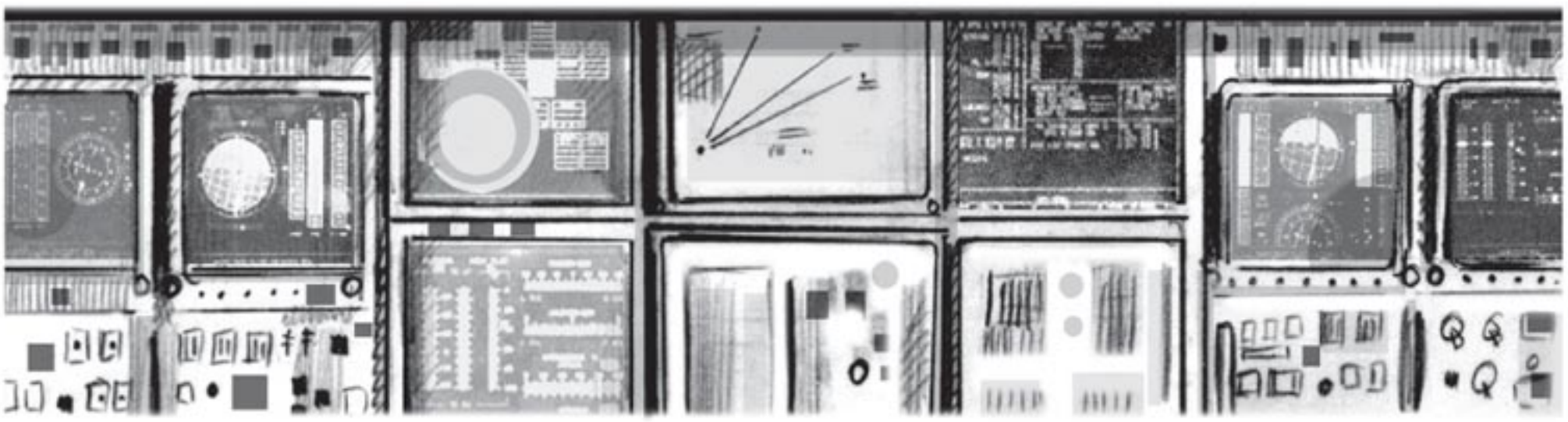
George gulped and shifted his bottom in the Commander's seat on the space shuttle. This, finally, was it. There was no getting off the spaceship now. In just a few short minutes – minutes that were ticking by far faster than the endless ones of the last class at school – he'd be leaving planet Earth behind and flying into the cosmos.



Now that the Orbiter access arm, which formed the bridge between his spacecraft and the outside world, had been taken away, George knew he'd missed his final chance to leave. This was one of the last stages before lift-off. It meant the connecting hatches were closing. And they weren't just closing – they were being *sealed*. Now, even if he hammered on the hatches and begged to be let out, there would

be no one on the other side to hear him. The astronauts were alone with their mighty spacecraft, with just minutes to go before take-off. There was nothing to do now but wait for the countdown to reach zero.

'*T minus six minutes and fifteen seconds. Perform APU pre-start.*' The APUs – the Auxiliary Power Units – helped to steer the shuttle during launch and landing. They were powered by three fuel cells, which had been running for hours already. But this command made the shuttle hum with life, as though the spaceship knew its moment of glory was not far off now.



'*T minus five minutes*,' said the voice. '*Go for APU start.*'

George's stomach quivered with butterflies. Above all things in the Universe, he wanted to fly through space once more. And now here he was, on board a real spaceship with astronauts inside it, waiting on a launch pad for lift-off. It was exciting but scary at the same time. What if he got something wrong? He was in

the Commander's seat, which meant he was in charge of operating the shuttle. Next to him sat his pilot, who was there as the Commander's back-up. 'So, you're all astronauts on some kind of star trek?' he muttered to himself in a silly voice.

'What was that, Commander?' came a voice over George's headset.

'Oh, er, um . . .' said George, who'd forgotten that launch control could hear every word he said. 'Just wondering what aliens might say to us, if we run into any.'

Launch control laughed. 'You be sure to tell them we all said hi.'

'*T minus three minutes and three seconds. Engines to start position.*'

Vroom vroom, thought George to himself. The three engines and the two solid rocket boosters would provide the speed during the first few seconds of lift-off, when the shuttle would be moving at 100 miles per hour before it even cleared the launch tower. It would only take eight and a half minutes to reach a speed of 17,500 miles an hour!

'*T minus two minutes. Close visors.*' George's fingers itched to flip a couple of the thousands of switches in front of him, just to see what would happen, but he didn't dare. In front of him was the joystick that he, the Commander, would use to steer the shuttle once they got into space, and then to dock with the International