

The Songs of Skylarks by Eric Humphrey

“Neil! Quick! Come and take a look at this!”

He walked over and gazed at the screen on the workstation, there in the corner of the living room.

“So – what are we seeing here, dad? Oh... Hey, those guys are flying r/c models!”

He leaned forward: “Gee, that’s a very old film...!”

“Yes. I think it’s one of those ‘There and Then: Pastimes from the Past’ programmes.”

“So, when would this be? What year?”

“I’m not sure. Probably mid-twentieth century.”

“I wonder,” said Neil, “what those guys would say if they could see the models that we - sort of - ‘fly’...”

“They’d be amazed. They’re not even using Viscoms.”

“You mean – they have to be able actually to *see* the model in order to control it?”

“That’s right.”

“Wow! Just how primitive can it get?”

Beyond the curved panoramic windows of our domesticapsule, night was falling. On the walls, behind the spacious furnishings, control panels glowed with reassuring pinpoints of lights. I scanned the displays: everything under control... The communicator chimed softly: “Evening meal will be served at 9p.m., sir, as requested. Menu number 20, for three.”

One of the small domesticlean units purred past us across the blue carpet on yet another vain search for any dust or debris. The cat, quietly snoozing in a large armchair, opened one eye then went back to sleep, having learned long ago by painful experience that the shiny thing humming across the floor was totally inedible...

I smiled: "Well now, just hold on a moment. Suppose I tell you that, way back 'There and Then' I believe some guys actually flew models with no control at all. I think they called it 'Fly-Free' – something like that."

I was surprised by Neil's reaction:

"Really? No control? Gee – well – now, that sounds just great! But – I mean – why? Were there still – what did they call them? – 'poor' guys around, then? Maybe they just couldn't afford radio gear?"

"I don't think that was always the problem. I think maybe they found free-flying models really – somehow, well – fulfilling, satisfying. They could watch something they had built – had created – take-off and fly... circling, climbing away, higher and higher, free as air – no control at all..."

Neil sighed. "Yeah, it all sounds just great, dad, but – just a moment – everything HAS to be in control! It just has to be!"

"Where we are, in this environment, and in the life we live – sure. But, as you know, back 'There and Then' being 'Outside' was normal. There were restrictions and controls, but much more freedom in a physical sense. Those fliers really were fortunate, weren't they? – even without all our hi-tech gadgets and gizmos."

Neil walked slowly to the door, which slid silently open. Suddenly he stopped and turned:

"Dad – you know, that - 'Fly-Free' – whatever you call it – well – I mean: being 'Outside', being 'Free' – it all sounds – great fun..."

"Oh yes, Neil, I'm sure it was."

"But we're not, are we...?"

I guessed what was on his mind...

"Ah – you mean -- actually, we're really not free? - Is that what you're saying? – Well OK, if you put it like that, then – no, I guess

we're not. But this is the only life we know, isn't it? We just have to accept its limitations, Neil..."

He sighed. "Yeah, sure, dad, I know. I accept that. Sorry – but – I just don't feel too great right now. I'll be OK. Don't worry..."

I looked at him for a moment. "Well, I'd say you've not been your usual self for quite some time, Neil. – Oh yes – I've noticed! – So – do you want to talk about it?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'll be OK soon, dad. I don't really know what's wrong..."

My position as Head of Advanced Geological Surveys entitled our family to one of the more spacious domestic capsules. Just along the corridor from the living room, our generous recreation area held the usual array of fitness equipment and also – taking up almost the whole of one wall – the 'CREATE!' facility, a state-of-the-art simulator capable of reproducing an immense range of unique experiences from its memory banks. Seated in the contoured chair, and facing the 180-degree curved screen, the sense of participation – of involvement – was awesome. One was virtually 'there'.

Now, clearly, this habitually lively fifteen-year-old was certainly not his usual self. Time to try to take some action...

"OK, now look, Neil, it's obvious, for some reason you're just – well – not feeling too good, and I guess that right now you're probably not ready to tell me just what might be wrong. So... You know we've just downloaded the programme for those two new 'Starseeker' jets on to the simulator? Well, what say tomorrow we give 'em a real work-out? Get the adrenalin flowing! Sharpen your reactions! Blow away all the cobwebs?"

"Blow away the – what?"

"Forget that...! Now, I've only one meeting tomorrow, and you're well up to date with your college assignments, so – would you perhaps like to do that?"

“Well – OK, dad. Yeah. Fine by me. Should be fun... I guess...”

“I have to say – you don’t seem to be really interested – more as if you’re being polite... Now look: whatever’s troubling you – can we have it out, please?”

He hesitated only for a moment:

“Yeah, OK – but – well – it’s really hard to describe... But... - I’m somehow feeling – somehow kinda... ‘closed in’. – ‘Trapped’. – It’s – it’s like I’m surrounded – trying to escape... - trying to breathe... Aw, it’s all just imagination, dad! I’ll be OK.”

Ah... The problem had just become much clearer.

I smiled. “Well, thanks for that, Neil. OK... So – now I’m ‘in the picture’ as they used to say. So – first things first. Just be assured: all this is not your imagination! You see: there’s actually a name for those feelings you’ve just described, and it’s a condition that’s fairly common, right here in the colony. So – you’re not alone!”

Neil looked up, his expression suddenly brightening: “What? – You mean: other guys could get this? Maybe feel like this?”

“Oh yes! Absolutely!”

The relief on his face was plain to see, and suddenly he smiled – the first real smile I’d seen for so many long days...

Right. Time now to build on this, to take some action that would reinforce his more positive mood.

“So – no ‘Starseekers’ then. They can stay in their hangar! Now, can you think of anything else you’d *really* like to do? I don’t actually have to go to that meeting tomorrow. It’s not important. The day’s ours.”

Neil hesitated for quite a few moments. Then:

“Well- - yeah... there is one thing – but – aw – you’re really gonna laugh now!”

“Try me...”

“Well – I was just wondering – whether we could work together – on the simulator’s memory banks...”

“Why, sure! Great idea! Er – what would we be looking for? You know, you’re the whizz-kid on that incredible set-up! Do I take it you’d like to use the ‘CREATE!’ facility for us to put some programme together?”

“Well – er – that’s it, yeah..... I think...”

“Right! Go on now! What are we about to get involved in?”

He grinned. “You are just not going to believe this, dad.”

“Try me!”

“OK...”

He sighed and took a long deep breath. “Well, I thought – maybe – could we - sort of – try to re-create one of those ‘Fly-Free’ meetings? I guess – well – that would be as near as we’ll ever get to being ‘There’ – I mean, out in the open, surrounded by air, almost...”

“Free?”

“Yeah! That’s it! So that’s what I’d like to try! I just feel that it...well, that it just might help...”

“And you’re absolutely right! It sure would! Brilliant, Neil! OK. - Now let’s think about this...Well, model flying wasn’t perhaps a major, popular activity back ‘There and Then’, but I reckon that between us we can find something to put together. So – that’s what we’ll do tomorrow! Recreation room, early!”

Neil smiled: “*Very* early! I’ll go and tackle another of my college assignments now, dad, so I’ll have a really clear conscience in the morning...!”

Long after Neil had left the room I remained seated, gazing through the curved panoramic windows. The autodimmer began a slow fade-out and I pressed the override button:

“Retain the external view, please...”

“Yes, sir. You have control.”

So often, there would be nothing to see out there, with visibility down to only a few metres. Clouds of grey and red dust would go thundering past in a surging, never-ending blur, driven by an almost perpetual gale.

But tonight, it's clear: a sky blazing with stars, and the Milky Way falling and folding down to the horizon like some colossal coloured bridal veil. A meteor slides silently through the constellation of Orion. Here and there, some bright planet...

One in particular is glowing, low on the horizon, all blue and white like a bauble from some far-off Christmas tree... Very beautiful. Very lonely...

I found myself gazing at it for a long time...

I was just twelve years old when my family took that massive life-changing decision to make the journey to the fast-developing colony. My parents were both eminently qualified for such an exciting challenge, my father being a civil engineer, while my mother taught science and maths. at the local high school.

What do I remember from so long ago and so very far away: back ‘There and Then’...? It’s strange, how distant memories will sometimes burst clear and sharp like some skyrocket’s sparkle against a night sky. Certain experiences, surfacing again, there almost at the limits of effective recall... But I do remember...

There was a – a movement of air – (a ‘breeze’?), a warm gentle drift, into which I reckon you could have launched one of those ‘Free-Flights’ – ah yes! *That* was the name! – and it wouldn’t have come to much harm. The sky was often blue, with gently strolling white

clouds... There were fields, sometimes dry and parched, or all a-glitter after sudden summer rain.

Now the skyrocket of memory explodes again, and in the flash and flare I catch the sound of a swirl of crisp autumn leaves; and across the years see again marching grey banners of distant snow showers gently painting the folds of the far hills in white.

Now the rocket of recall bursts again one final time like a starshell of memories, so tangible, so real...

It's a hazy lazy summer afternoon. Now only a few precious days remain before we must say our last good-byes. I'm lying on my back, deep in a wild-flower meadow, surrounded by the susurration of bees, caressed by the sensuous strokes of air that send the miles of deep green meadow-grass bowing and rippling, and sending the long lines of tall willow trees into a fluttering dance.

From somewhere far, far above, I can hear the songs of skylarks...

I suddenly found myself unable to see anything quite clearly. I pressed the control of the autodimmer.

Sky and horizon slowly faded out. It had been a memorable day, a rare oasis of tranquillity.

And we certainly need every moment of calm that we can get, here on Mars...

I really didn't think we'd much chance of re-creating those models, but our day would not be wasted. I knew exactly how to set the simulated scene...

There would be – a breeze, gently moving the deep green meadow-grass, and rippling the leaves on the willow trees...

Neil and I would perhaps feel suddenly closer to each other than ever before, as we sat together under a clear, wide blue sky and listened to the skylarks' sons...