

stories2connect

JOURNEY TO INDEPENDENCE



CO-CREATED BY
MEL GREEN AND
THE STORIES2CONNECT TEAM



Stories2Connect is a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and led from the University of Central Lancashire. The Stories2Connect team is made up of a group of young researchers with a range of (dis)abilities, supported by Barnardo's charity, academics from three different universities, and a range of students and volunteers who have helped in lots of ways. Drawing on the talents of artists and authors, the team has written, edited, illustrated, animated, narrated, designed, and published the stories. Each story is a product of this collaboration: a fictional account drawing on the experiences of real young people who deal with challenges in their everyday lives.

JOURNEY TO INDEPENDENCE

"Run through your journey with me one more time."

"Seriously, Mum?" I huff. "We've done this 48 times already."

"Sorry love. It's just that it's a big universe out there and, well, you haven't done a trip like this before."

I roll my eyes. Her nerves are making mine worse and I'm trying hard not to let them show.

“Your counsellor said it was really important to rehearse the route.”

“Okay.” I give in. “I’m taking the pod to Alpha Beta. I’m leaving by 08:00 at the latest coz it takes 5 hours to get there and I have to leave plenty of time to find the Super Carrier and that leaves at 15:00.”

“Where are you parking the pod?”

“In bay 106903.”

“And where will the Super Carrier be?”

“In bay H5, South terminal.”

“And how long does it take to walk between the two?”

“About 20 minutes.”

“And how will you know you’ve found the right Super Carrier?”

“Because it’ll say ‘Independence’ on the front and when I scan my cuff it’ll confirm that I have a seat booked on it.”

“And what will you do if you can’t find your seat?”

“Muuuum, they’re numbered. But if I can’t find it then I’ll just ask the conductor where it is.”

“But you’re not to speak to strangers in general though remember. What’s the rule if you absolutely have to?”

“One head good, two heads bad, three heads best,” I chant the mantra taught from nursery.

“And what happens when you get to Independence?”

“Zak and Petra will be waiting at the gate and we’ll go to the youth hostel together to meet the others.”

Mum nods, obviously relieved at this bit.

“You know that if you wait until Friday then I can take you there myself?”

“But I’ll have missed two days of activities. It’ll be like arriving late to a party. If I’m not there at the start then there’s no point going at all.”

Something flits across my mum’s face. She likes that idea very much, even though we’ve discussed this trip on five different occasions with my counsellor and my teacher, and she agrees how important it is that I do it. She would have preferred me to only go as far as Localitia, but everyone knows that Independence is the best moon for adventure activities.

“Okay.” Her face tightens again and she smiles with her lips but not her eyes. “You’d better go and get a good night’s sleep. And make sure your cuff’s fully charged too.”

I press my forehead to hers and rush off to

my bedroom, relieved to finally escape from the interrogation. We have literally been through that 48 times. 49 now. The route was clearly imprinted in my brain by practice run 25, plus it's programmed into the pod and my cuff. What could go wrong?

I pull up the route simulation, just to give my subconscious one last boost. 50. It's a nice round number.

I spend most of the time virtually exploring the Alpha Beta transport hub. Finding my way round that is what I'm most nervous about. It's the size of a small city – pretty much is a small city – and although everything is logically numbered that doesn't mean it won't get confusing. What if I muddle up two numbers and try to park in bay 109603 instead of 106903? I might get the pod stuck

or someone might shout at me. And what if I accidentally go to the North terminal, rather than the South one? If it was just me getting around then it'd be okay, but half a million other beings transit through Alpha Beta every day.

Panic starts to jump in my chest like popping corn in the microwave. I breathe slowly, thinking about the route, just the route, not the 500,000 beings that will be making noise and busyness around me in that unfamiliar environment, making me forget where I need to be and how to get there.

No, no. I won't get confused. I've learnt the building off by heart. I make doubly sure its blueprint is downloaded to my cuff though, and attach the link to the home screen. Then I go to bed.

Mum manages not to cry as I say goodbye and get into the pod at 07:45. I'm nearly sick with excitement as I leave Englin's atmosphere by myself for the first time. I feel like I'm the one actually flying rather than the pod.

An hour into the flight, when the vastness of space has wrapped itself fully around me and I'm feeling very very small and alone I suddenly miss my mum badly. Perhaps she was right? Perhaps I should have waited for her to take me to Independence? This is a huge journey, far far too big for my first trip alone. I go hot and cold and clammy, the phase-changing fabric of my clothes struggling to keep up and maintain an even body temperature. Should I turn the pod around and go home? Would it really be so bad to get to the activity week a couple of

days late? Why hasn't Mum messaged me? Is she okay?

I lift up my cuff. The battery's only half full coz I forgot to charge it last night, like she told me to. I tried to charge it a bit before I left, but it wasn't for very long. Hopefully it'll be enough.

Hey Mum, doing fine. RU OK? Very dark out here, isn't it?

You're doing great, hun. I'm so proud of you. Seen anything interesting yet? xxxx

No, just empty space atm. Gonna have an energy bar soon.

Remember I put a flask of cinnamon choc in for you too. Drink it before it goes cold xxxx

Oooh, I'd forgotten about that. Checking that the autopilot is still definitely on, I delve into my rucksack and pull it out. From the first sip I feel instantly better. I can do this. It's all fine. I'll make it to Independence, no problem.

Thanks Mum, that was lush. Express pod just went past. It was very fast.

Sounds great. Guess you'll see a lot more ships as you get closer to Alpha Beta!

My heart races. There'll be a LOT of ships around near Alpha Beta. What if I crash into them or they crash into me? Although every ship's route should be pre-planned and mapped into the transport mainframe, what if someone forgot?

Will let you know.

I watch vids on my control screen until I'm an hour away from Alpha Beta and the space around me starts to fill with spaceships of every shape and size.

There are so many ships, Mum! Round ones, oval egg ones, long pointed pyramids, flat circles – some that fly horizontally, some vertically.

Nothing square or rectangular though. They wouldn't be very aerodynamic, would they?

Loads of them look like fidget spinners. Which do you think came first – the fidget spinners or the ships?

She doesn't reply.

One looks like a barbell. That's my favourite so far. What's yours?

Still no reply. I start to panic, but force myself to think factually not emotionally, as my counsellor recommended. Personal comms get slowed down massively around Alpha Beta coz of the number of people and ships here. It's just that. Nothing more than that. Her replies will get through when they can.

But I feel very alone right now.

The pod flies into the Pod Park, with pods and people stretching out from me to the horizon. As my pod connects to the parking base, a flood of messages from my mum come through.

Her favourite would be the barbell too.

Alpha Beta is even more amazing than I thought it'd be. There are food stalls selling things I've never heard of or seen. Some I don't want to see ever again though. Eugh! There's incredible 3D artwork, a huge water wall, ponds full of jellyfish and even a petting zoo with baby cantelopes. I take photos of everything.

I reach South H5. It's taken me longer to get here than it was supposed to, but that's okay. There's still half an hour before the Super Carrier leaves. I'm disappointed it's an older model rather than the new SC77 I was hoping for. In fact, it looks as old as me and the destination panel on the front of it isn't working. Is it space-worthy?

I lift my cuff to the boarding panel. It beeps and flashes red. My cheeks start to turn the same colour. I try again. Another red beep.

“Is there a problem?” The two-headed conductor comes over.

“I have a ticket. But it won’t let me on.”

“And where...” he drags out the word like a long note, “are you going?”

“Independence.”

“This carrier is going to Distraction. The one for Independence is now leaving from West A2. Didn’t you see the alteration on the Departures Board?”

The conductor laughs and turns to the next passenger as everything around me and inside me spins. Half an hour until the carrier leaves and it’ll take me about 20 minutes to get to West A2 if I go straight there. I go to my cuff to check the quickest route. Oh no!

Only 6% charge. I need 5% to scan my e-ticket for boarding. All my photo taking must have run it down.

I close my eyes and shut the world out. As I lose myself in the darkness, the blueprint of Alpha Beta appears in the centre of my mind. I don't need my cuff to get there. I can trust my memory and work out the route as well as any mapping software. I just need to go back down South arm, on level 3 coz it's quieter, then skirt the central hub clock-wise on level 2 and head down West arm. I'll jog to make sure I get there in time.

My heart leaps up even faster than the jog has raised it when I finally see the sleek new Super Carrier with "Independence" blazing on its destination panel. This two-headed conductor smiles warmly as I scan my cuff to the boarding panel and it lights up green.

“Welcome aboard the SC Achievement!”
he says.

I spot my seat immediately. Number 10, front row, next to the window.

Thanks Mum, I think, then realise I need to get in touch with her properly. I haven’t messaged for over two hours. I don’t want her to worry. Especially when there’s nothing to worry about. I open my rucksack and search through it for my charger. It’s not in the side pocket where it normally is. Perhaps I shoved it into the main section when I was rushing. No, oh no. I suddenly know exactly where it is. Still plugged into the socket in my bedroom from my last minute charging this morning.

I frantically turn out the contents of my rucksack onto the floor anyway, hoping, wishing, that I’m wrong. I’ve never been

without a working cuff. Mum would never let that happen.

“Are you alright?”

I look up to see a three-headed being now occupying the seat next to me, a grey-bearded smile on each of his faces. I’m not sure which one to reply to so I glance from one to the other.

“I’ve lost my cuff charger. Well, not lost. I left it at home. And now my cuff is dead and I need to contact my mum and let her know that I’m okay and I got here okay.”

Three pairs of eyes glance at my wrist as one pair of arms start to open a bag on their knee. “What make of cuff is it? It looks like an Exemplar 4.2.”

“4.4,” I correct him, impressed that he got that close. “It’s a bit bashed. I don’t look after it very carefully.”

“Well, I think this is what you need,”
Beardy unwinds a wire from a tangled ball
of leads and hands it to me. I plug it into the
socket in my arm rest and then into my cuff.

“That’s great. Thank you very much.”

“No problem at all...” Beardy has already
reclined his seat and falls asleep as he draws
the last syllable.

**Hey Mum, I’m on the Achievement. Had a bit of
an adventure, but it’s all fine. Better than fine,
it’s amazing.**

**P.S. I forgot my cuff charger. It’s in my room.
But it’s okay coz the guy in the seat next
to me lent me one. He has three heads so
don’t worry.**

I binge watch a whole series of Doctor How
before the Conductor announces that we’ll

be landing on Independence in five minutes. My neighbour wakes up and waves off my attempt to return his charger.

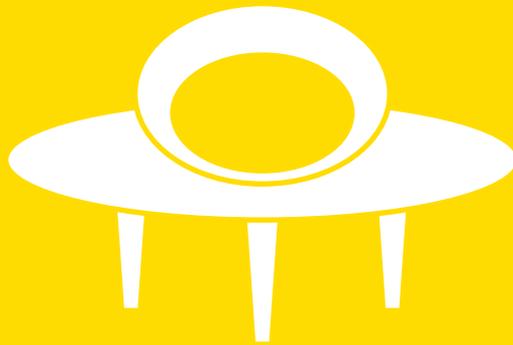
“I have two more of those,” he says. “Keep it for the rest of your travels. I have a feeling this is just the beginning of them.”

The smile I give him just keeps growing as I disembark with the rest of the Achievement’s passengers. As my feet touch the ground, I instantly spot Zak and Petra standing by a huge sign.



**WELCOME TO
INDEPENDENCE**

THE END



Co-created by the Stories2Connect team



In partnership with:



Funded by:



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



For more stories go to:
<http://stories2connect.org/>