

World Inside My Head by Hamish Spiers

“Where are you now?”

I looked at the man sitting in front of me in the little room we shared. Mike Enrique Rodriguez. The first man to fly a mission to Mars, he never set foot on its surface but he completed the first manned orbital survey of the red planet and spent an unprecedented eight months in space to do so. And he did it solo.

It was a remarkable achievement and one that involved considerable risk. At one point the shielding unit failed, exposing Rodriguez to intense levels of solar radiation that would have killed him if he hadn't got it fixed in time – and that was just *one* of the many near disasters. However, despite the myriad of technical challenges he had to overcome and the physical endurance he demonstrated both in surviving his mission and recuperating from it afterwards, it was his mental endurance that impressed so many of his colleagues. And that's what impressed me. I can only imagine the loneliness and sheer boredom he must have faced, confined in a tiny capsule further from home than any explorer in human history. Yet he not only survived with his sanity in one piece, he developed an incredible gift. The freedom to be anywhere he wanted at any time, despite whatever circumstances he found himself in. To have imaginary experiences so vivid that they are as real to him as the tactile experiences of life are for the rest of us. To have the whole world inside his head, in all its infinite wonder.

And today, Rodriguez was attempting to show me a little of his method, providing me with some key with which I could open the doors to the world inside my *own* mind.

“Bennet?” he prompted me again. “Where are you now?”

I gave him an embarrassed grin. “Still here, I'm afraid. I need more time to think.”

Rodriguez nodded encouragingly. “Take your time.”

“Can I close my eyes?” I asked.

He smiled. “Sure. You can close your eyes.”

“It's just that you seem to manage it with your eyes open,” I said.

“Well, I've had more practice,” he replied.

With almost eight months straight of such practice, this was true enough.

“Are *you* somewhere else now?” I asked out of curiosity.

He looked at me with mild surprise then shook his head. “Oh, I'm here in this room at the moment. I thought that might be better for you. But perhaps I could go somewhere else to demonstrate it again.”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” I said, glad to give myself some more time to think about my first destination. “Maybe you could describe the place to me.”

“That's the plan actually,” Rodriguez replied, his eyes still open but appearing now to be focused on something not in the room.

“So *now* you're somewhere else?” I asked.

Rodriguez smiled. “I'm on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro.”

“What's it like?”

“There's a lot of gravel here but the rock underneath is firm enough,” he said. “I like the sound the gravel makes when I slide my foot around. I'm having a rest right now. I've been climbing for a while so I'm a bit tired.”

He actually sounded a little out of breath too, I noticed.

“I'm also not sure if I want to go much farther today,” he added. “It's getting pretty late and the sky's overcast. The wind's picking up a bit too.”

I was curious about this. How Rodriguez perceived the wind could give me some insight as to the methods of his imagination.

“The wind?” I asked. “How do you know it’s windy? Are there scattered clumps of grass blowing around or something like that?”

Rodriguez frowned. “Yeah, there are actually. Clumps of grass.” He shrugged. “I hadn’t noticed them.”

“Then how did you know it was windy?”

“Oh, I can hear it,” Rodriguez replied. “It’s picking up. And I can feel it too.”

Now that really surprised me.

“You can feel it?”

He smiled. “Oh, yeah. It’s nice at the moment. I’m still really hot from all that climbing so it’s refreshing right now but I imagine it’ll feel pretty chilly soon. I’d like to set up a tent.”

“Why don’t you come back here instead?” I suggested, smiling too. “I think I get it now.”

His smile remained but his gaze focused on me once again. “Oh, we’re just getting started, remember?”

I laughed. “Yes. That’s true. Just getting started. By the way, have you ever been to Kilimanjaro before? In real life, I mean.”

“In real life? I haven’t been to half the places I’ve visited.”

“But it sounds so vivid for you.”

He shrugged. “I know what wind sounds like. I know what gravel feels like underfoot. And I’ve seen plenty of pictures of Kilimanjaro over the years. It might be like the real thing and it might not. But it doesn’t matter, you see, because it gets me out of this room or wherever I am. And that’s the beauty of it. *That’s* freedom.”

I sighed. “It sure sounds nice. Okay, I think I’m ready to try now.”

“Close your eyes,” Rodriguez suggested. “It’s easier to start with. And don’t worry about trying to describe the experience yet.”

“You won’t get bored?” I asked him and then, with a little laugh, I shook my head. “Stupid question, isn’t it?”

Rodriguez smiled. “No. I won’t get bored. You go to your place. I’ll go to mine. Maybe go to sleep. Dreaming’s a good way to start.”

“But you can’t really control dreams.”

“Sure you can,” Rodriguez said. “You can wake up from a nightmare. You can try to pick up a lost trail of thought when a dream’s interrupted by an alarm clock. And you can take control within a dream. Haven’t you ever tried it?”

“I haven’t, no,” I admitted.

Rodriguez shrugged. “Oh, well. You can try it now.”

I nodded slowly and leaned back against my headrest, shutting my eyes. “All right.”

Relaxing, I tried to imagine a beach on Hawaii. I pictured that famous scene from the main island, where the beach stretched out underneath Diamond’s Head. I’d never been to Hawaii in real life so it seemed a good place to start. I looked at the beach as if I were looking at a postcard and then I imagined what it would be like to be down on the sand, filling in the details from what I knew of beaches I *had* been on before. The sun glistened down through the palm fronds overhead, creating an effect of dappled light. Dark shade, bright light between the fronds and a pleasant glow where it came through the translucent greens. I don’t know if it was the beach at Diamond’s Head any more. It reminded me of a rain forest somewhere. Perhaps it was somewhere in French Polynesia, some other place I’d seen in a postcard. But it didn’t feel like it. It felt familiar somehow.

There were no physical sensations. No touch, nor smell. But there was sound and it looked real enough. And then I blanked out.

“Andy?”

I looked at the face peering over me. A face I’d seen thousands of times. Large almond eyes and a wide smile, framed in a curl of shoulder length auburn hair.

I smiled back at my wife. “Hey, Tasha.”

She looked good in that mix of dark shadows and glowing emerald light.

“Are you awake?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, sitting up. “I’m awake. What are you doing here?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, laughing. “We’re on vacation. Tahiti. That’s what you always wanted, isn’t it?”

I sat up. “Yeah. It’s good, isn’t it?”

Tasha nodded. “Yeah.”

“I wish Rodriguez could see this,” I said. “He’s in Africa.”

“What’s he doing there?” Tasha asked.

I frowned. I couldn’t work out *why* I said that, and as a matter of fact I didn’t know who Rodriguez was.

However, Tasha didn’t seem to mind.

She slapped my arm playfully. “Come on. Let’s go for a swim.”

Suddenly, an alarming thought came to me. “Where’s Simon? He’s not in the water by himself, is he?”

“He’s presenting his dissertation on the correlation between military spending and...”

I didn’t hear the rest of the sentence. I couldn’t understand what was going on. Simon *was* presenting a dissertation at the moment. That was true. But I had been so certain that he was only three years old but that couldn’t be right. Both of these things could not be true. At least not at the same time. At some point in time he was a three year old, and that moment existed *somewhere*, but he was a young man now. And he hadn’t lived at home for five years.

Grinning and putting aside the train of thought, I stood up and kissed my wife. Then laughing we ran out from under the palm trees and down the beach to the bluest water I had ever seen. This was a surf beach on the eastern coast of Australia. I remembered it now. We’d had a holiday here when I was a kid.

Tasha laughed as the water splashed against us. I dived underneath and came up in the dazzling light of the day. I was having so much fun that I didn’t feel the passage of time. I was there and Tasha was there and right then it felt as though the whole world had been made for us and us alone.

Oblivious to the crowds of beachgoers around us, I drew her close and leaned towards her, our lips meeting once more.

“So where are you now?” she asked me.

I blinked. “Huh?”

“Where are you now?”

I gradually became aware of the little room again and Rodriguez sitting across from me, smiling encouragingly. And then a sickening sensation took hold of me. I shuddered and blinked back tears.

Rodriguez frowned. “Are you all right?”

I nodded. “Yeah.” I took a calming breath. “I’m all right.”

“What happened?”

“I was with my wife. We were at a beach somewhere and... it was lovely. But...”

Rodriguez looked concerned. “But what?”

I sighed. “My wife’s been dead for twenty years.”

"I'm sorry."

I waved the apology away. "No, it's all right. You didn't know. It's just that for a moment, it felt like she was really here with me and then, like that, she was taken away again."

Rodriguez gazed at me with a pensive expression on his tanned features. "But you saw your wife. You left this room. Time itself."

"I guess I did."

Rodriguez then stood up. "Then, maybe that will do for now."

"But when I woke up, it was all just a dream," I said.

Rodriguez regarded me in silence for a moment. "You saw your wife again," he said at last. "And it felt real to you. So it wasn't *just* a dream now, was it?"

"But the sensations. The warmth of the sun. The water against my skin..."

Rodriguez raised his eyebrows. "They were missing?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"But at the time, did you *know* they were missing?"

"Well, no," I confessed.

"Then it doesn't matter."

"But the sensations are everything," I protested. "That's the whole point. That's what sets your experiences apart from the dreams the rest of us have."

Rodriguez smiled and shook his head. "They're not important. What you did just then, to go back and see the woman you loved and experience those moments together again... that's far more important."

I nodded. And I did understand what he was saying but I was still disheartened.

I looked at him again. "But I was really interested in finding out about the sensations."

Rodriguez sighed. "All right. Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

"There was a little while on the mission where I couldn't stir the air tanks and the carbon dioxide was building up to dangerous levels." Rodriguez stopped and hesitated. "I was dying. And I just lost it. It was a moment of madness. A complete breakdown between the physical and the mental realms and I didn't even know my own name. *That* was how it happened. Now, do *you* really want such a gift?"

I let out a long breath. "No."

"Then be content with the dreams you know," he said. "They're more vivid than you realise." Then he relented and gave me one of his winning smiles. "Come on. Let's go."

He led the way out and we walked down a long corridor to the parking lot outside.

"By the way," I said, "I want to ask you something."

"Sure. What is it?"

"When the radiation shield failed and you were wondering whether or not you could get it repaired in time... you were frightened, right?"

Rodriguez nodded. "Of course."

"What were you thinking about at the time?"

"Dreams," he told me. "The world inside my head. I was worried that if I didn't get the shield back online in time, it was all going to end."

"So you were worried that the *dreams* were going to end but not the reality?"

"Well, the reality was that I was stuck in a tiny metal capsule literally in the middle of nowhere," Rodriguez said. "Whereas the dreams on the other hand... they were precious."

And they were. I could see that now.

And when I went home that night, I decided I would go back to that beach and see Tasha again. In anticipation, I leaned back on my pillow and shut my eyes.