

THE LAST MARTIAN

He gazed through the polycarbonate window at the red, rocky landscape, the mountains marching away as far as he could see, majestic and beautiful in their spare purity. In a salmon pink sky, the sun gleamed coldly and occasional dust devils punctuated the emptiness, swirling veils of rose, sweeping across the land.

There was no life here apart from himself. This was Mars and he had been alone for a month now.

“Earth calling G? You wandered off on me there for a minute or two. You OK?”

“Yeah, sorry. I still can’t quite get used to knowing that I’m the only one here, on this whole planet. It’s like some incredible dream.” G took a deep breath, recalling how it had all come about.

He had originally come on this stupendous adventure with a group of companions. A few had been billionaires like himself; the rest, volunteers with specific skills. They had been the pioneers of a new age of exploration, reaching into a pristine world with all its possibilities. The aim to establish a colony, to explore, to further scientific knowledge. Plus the prestige of being the first to actually live on another planet.

It had been thrilling beyond words, setting up the base and all the individual living pods, like a string of pearls spiralling elegantly around the central laboratory area. For a whole year they had worked and wandered the Martian landscape, experiencing and battling the crises and sometimes emergencies of an alien world which was fundamentally hostile to life – deathly cold, almost airless and without surface water.

“Such a pity you couldn’t have continued the TV transmissions” his colleague said ruefully. “They were spectacular. The entire world was hanging onto every second of your lives out there. A massive money-spinner too. Even more so now, with you being alone. A twenty first century Robinson Crusoe. I don’t suppose you would re-consider?”

They had been in constant contact with Earth, to the extent of participating in reality TV, enabling an enthralled audience to experience Mars with them. The greatest celebrities ever!

G said, “I think that would be too much pressure, to know everyone was watching me, especially if things should go badly wrong. It may have been good viewing but it was depressing the way people lapped up the disasters. No, I don’t miss that at all. We had some very bad moments.”

“Well, you had your chance to come home with the others.”

G nodded, remembering.

It had started to go wrong. A fatal accident here, an unexplained illness there, serious problems with food supply. One got lost and was never found. Fear and doubt set in. The ratings grew with every tragedy until he and the other financial backers stopped the transmissions.

It was decided that enough had been learned for the time being and the project would be terminated. The survivors would be collected and returned to Earth.

Except for him. He had chosen and fought to remain. Eventually they had had to give in and accept it.

“I’ve no regrets at all. The whole thing has been such a miraculous adventure right from day one.”

The enterprise had been an extraordinary experience. Not only Mars itself but working alongside his team-mates as an equal, co-operating in the name of science and survival. He had felt himself change. He felt happier, more fulfilled, more peaceful here than he had ever been in his Earth life. There, his whole focus had been on working, striving, amassing his fortune, being someone. Then being the biggest, richest Someone of all. There had come a point when the only way to progress further was to take the step through that door into space.

He was going to continue forward, as planned. He was now the most famous man in the world. Nobody had ever done what he was doing!

“Well then, keep in close touch. Earth cares about you. You’re a hero, you know. Man’s future on Mars may depend on your pioneering spirit.” There was emotion in the voice and face on the screen. “You must have colossal inner strength to do what you are doing. It would scare the shit out of most of us. And on that note” he added, “We’ll call it a day for now. Speak soon.” The contact ended.

G lay back on the reclining chair smiling. Could life be better than this? He played those last words of the transmission back in his mind. He felt on top of the world.

Starting out in life his whole thrust had been about material success. And he had been spectacularly successful through ambition, hard work and a driven ruthlessness. Very soon he had known the intoxication of real power. He had found himself able to indulge his wilder dreams and

then this, his very wildest. His escape from Earthly bounds into a completely new existence, an interplanetary Columbus helping to open up new lands in space. A true Hero's Journey.

And Mars was beautiful. Without any covering green, without the movement of life, it was, even so, stupendously rich in the infinite variation of its dominant colour. It had a stark magnificence and a peace more profound than human had ever felt. He wanted more time to experience it, to merge with it, even. At one time he would have despised and mocked such an idea, and had done, back on Earth. He had felt contempt for the earnest environmentalists and their fears for the despoliation of Mars by the species which had trashed the Earth so thoroughly. He had believed in the right of humans to explore wherever they wished and to use the resources they discovered. After all Mars was a dead planet, there was no life to destroy. It was just rock and dust and ice. There was soil beneath the sand and dust but though it contained all the necessary minerals for plants it was also poisonous to humans. Mars could never be more than it was now, so it was perfect for exploitation. As well as the scientific aspect, the project's financiers had dreamed of creating a resort for the super elite one day.

He was not as sure about all that now. He found, now that he was alone here, this enigmatic planet somehow spoke to him. He had the thought that perhaps the isolation and silence was having a negative effect on his mind, that his sanity may be at risk. Going native.

Somehow he was coming not to care. Every day the feeling of awe at his surroundings increased. He had begun even to have thoughts about its holiness. If this was psychosis it was seductive. He saw that perhaps the world was about so much more than he had ever realised.

He stood gazing at the landscape. Tomorrow perhaps he would travel to the dune-scape East of here. The dunes were the colour of dark rust, curved by the ceaseless wind. Sometimes you could

see exposed at their base the dark purple-black soil beneath. He hoped to do a trip to the Valles Marineris one day, one of the largest canyons in the solar system. The length of the entire width of the USA. Magnificent. A place for giants.

Night was falling. The Martian day was slightly longer than an Earth day but due to the greater distance from the Sun, the year was twice as long. This distance also meant that less sunlight reached the planet. Gravity was less though which was helpful when you had to wear a heavy suit, though paradoxically it was harder to walk, as normal Earth walking depended on the body using gravity to fall forward between steps.

He looked up expectantly, finding a small pale blue dot, which even now, he still thought of as home. The growing darkness made it visible in the dusty air. Soon the moons would be visible together. Named for the sons of the war god Ares, Phobos rose in the West and Deimos in the East. Fear and Dread would rule the night. He shivered. The Red Planet was something else. Nothing soft, gentle, benevolent here. At worst, a dust storm could cover the entire planet, at wind speeds of over 100mph, viciously scouring everything in its path. A place of superlatives indeed. He loved it.

He sighed. The only thing he longed for was to be able to take off his helmet and truly feel and breathe the rusty air of Mars. To make real contact. Be a real Martian. He admitted to himself that he had come to think of it as his Mars.

But he had to be content. Never ever had there been such a view through any window. He still had so much to know about this place and now he had the time, and nobody to gainsay him.

“Good to hear from you G, it’s been quite a while. We’ve been very worried.”

“No need. I’ve been away. Lots to see. This planet is incredible.”

“You promised to keep in touch with regular reports.”

He said impatiently “I know, but that’s so limiting. I can’t travel any distance if I have to speak to you every second day. I’ve just got back from Olympus Mons. Never seen anything so awe inspiring. I approached from the cliff side and it’s so huge when you are close that it fills the – the sky from - horizon to horizon, like a wall – a wall the size of the world that goes clear into outer space -” He was tripping over his words in his excitement. “And yet, approached from the opposite side, the rise is so gradual you can’t even notice it from a few kilometres away.”

“We know. We’ve seen it from the drone footage.”

“But to see it in the flesh, so to speak, it’s so much more...” he fell silent, discouraged by the disapproval emanating from his interlocutor.

“G. You need to stick to the routine, It’s for your own welfare. We need to keep a check on you. There’s a lot can go wrong. We have to monitor your physical and mental health. In many ways you are the Grand Experiment, even though you pushed it on us.”

“Why does it matter? If anything goes wrong, it would take many months to get to me anyway.”

There was a loud sigh from the other end. “To tell the truth I’m beginning to get worried about your mental state. You don’t even seem to care what happens to you.”

Silence. Then G sighed too. “You can’t know how stupendous this place is and how wonderful it is to have a whole world to explore. I feel like a small boy in Alice’s Wonderland. I just want more and more and more...”

“OK. Well let’s run through the weekly medical checks. You know that the more time you spend outside, the more radiation you are exposed to. And the low gravity has negative effects on the body as well. If you need to come home, we will need plenty of warning.”

Later, tests done and reports exchanged, he settled down for the evening, first going outside to watch the sunset, a tiny sun whose light turned the thin atmosphere blue as it sank low. For a brief time he could feel almost as though he were in a terrestrial desert somewhere in Africa or the States or the wilds of Asia, just to see again that particular colour in the sky. For a moment he did miss Earth. Then he retreated inside to plan his next expedition. He felt an urgent need to cram in as much as possible. He didn’t trust them back on Earth not to find some way to prevent him.

First there was maintenance to do. Keeping all the equipment in good order was vital to his survival. He was no engineer but had learned and been taught enough to perform what was necessary. Water and oxygen systems; ensuring the efficiency of the airlock protecting his living environment from the lethal Martian conditions outside; the plant converting his own wastes into useful nutrients to grow some fresh food. He was supplied with long-life foods aplenty, enough for many years. He spent a pleasant half hour pollinating some of his crops by hand with a fine brush. The habitation pods were now all his territory since his colleagues had gone and he had taken the opportunity to turn them into rooms with distinct uses, as if in a large house back home. It gave him a sense of security and helped to alleviate any boredom with his indoor environment, which even so, could become claustrophobic. It was only the vastness of the landscape outside that prevented a

sense of imprisonment even there, having to live inside a suit and behind a window at all times. Oh to breathe fresh air! But to try would instantly suffocate him and cause his body fluids to boil, so better not.

Chores done, and through the viewing window he saw that Phobos had risen in the East, somewhat smaller than the full moon on Earth. Deimos could be seen too, but visible more as an extra bright star. Otherwise the intense blackness was punctuated by a million million glittering diamonds strewn thickly upon the night sky. Later he would put on his suit purely to stand out in the night and gaze at that be-jewelled spectacle, perhaps for a full hour, lost in the starry universe.

But right now he wanted to make plans for his next exploration. His aim was to travel further each time. The distances here were vast without any means of rapid travel as on Earth. Even so, ground-breaking technology had provided him with – a caravan. Actually it was a vehicle/living space/laboratory combo, pressurised and with breathable air and powered for long distances by nuclear fission. He had to make stops but that was OK. It was like a very extreme camping trip.

He would have loved to go up to the top of Olympus Mons, which would have been possible via the gradual slope side, though it would have taken some time as the volcano's footprint was the size of Arizona. However the view would likely be disappointing due to the dust in the air and he would have to return the way he had come unless he wanted to do a spectacular death dive in his vehicle off the top of the three- times- the- height- of- Everest cliff, in a final 'Thelma and Louise' gesture. He grinned to himself at the picture this suggested.

He had decided to visit the three huge volcanoes that sat on the map of the Tharsis Rise like a row of pimples. They were about twice the distance of his last drive, beyond Olympus, and were themselves each the height of Everest. Ultimately he hoped, in the future, to progress further in that

direction to the far western end of the Valles Marineris. What he could do with a plane or a helicopter! But the atmosphere was far too thin. He was reduced (almost) to the state of the early men of Earth, when it took many months to venture long distances. Though there was a benefit of travelling this way. You really saw and experienced the terrain.

But Mars was a quite different kettle of fish, because it was inhospitable to man and everything you needed for the trip (including air to breathe) had to be taken with you. To forget something could easily mean death. Likewise if you forgot to perform some chore back at base. It could mean arriving home to a place that could no longer support you. It made him realise just what a paradise Earth was, so fecund with life and plenty, even these days, when that life had become so depleted.

He knew he took a huge risk each time he went away for long periods but what was the point of being here otherwise? Inside himself he knew he would never go home. He would explore Mars until his time ran out. It was his greatest desire.

He had nobody on his home planet who truly cared for him or whom he missed. The Red Planet was now his everything.

Tomorrow he would do a little wandering, not too far. He had some favourite places. The myriad movements of wind, the delicate colours of sand and dust against the dark rocks, constantly created and re-formed new patterns on the terrain. They mesmerised him.

He could keep them happy back at Mission Control with a few weeks of their precious reports before he did another solo leap into the unknown, and radio silence.

“Morning G, how’d you sleep?”

“”Not bad. Some funny dreams. Martians, in fact. They sent a deputation. They were long and thin with large heads and big eyes. And yellow. But peaceful and wanting me to do something, I never found out what.”

“O-K, well, we’ll run it past the psychs, just in case. Any plans for today?”

“Just another little drive around, not far. North, I think. The flat plains. It makes you feel you could drive off the edge of the world. What news from your end?” He was not really interested, they felt so remote from him that their existence had become meaningless. He didn’t need them.

“Well, something that will interest you. Your arch-rival, shall we say, has come up with a new plan for your adopted home planet. A big plan. My guess, between you and me, is that he is feeling left out. He is regretting coming back to Earth, especially as you stayed and became the hero. I think he’s forgotten how much Mars was beginning to creep him out. The idea is that he will attempt to nuke the Poles to melt the ice and therefore flood the lowlands and warm the planet. He talks of building an underground city in a cliff if that fails. It’s all quite unrealistic, but it’s got him back in the news and the game, as far as the public believe. They are still intensely interested in you, of course. Who wouldn’t be.” He added, “I don’t know how you can cope with knowing how far away you are and how alone. It gives me nightmares sometimes – especially when you go off for weeks and we don’t know what’s happened to you.”

G said gruffly, “You can’t understand how wonderful this is for me. You don’t need to worry so much. I feel as though I was born for this.”

“Relieved to hear it, and find it incomprehensible at the same time.. Anyway, I don’t think you are in danger of being nuked and flooded and having a mall to visit any time soon. NASA though, has some ideas that may prove to be more realistic. As always, it depends on funding, and also,” he said, “how your health holds up. You’re our guinea pig. You know that four years is the max you can be there, with the radiation etc. You are in your second year now. And, if I may say, you are not exactly being sensible.”

G was silent. He did not want to be reminded of cold facts. In his imagination he was going to be here for ever.

“So, if you could try to spend less time out there – I know it’s hard for you, but just remember that if you don’t you may well be forced to return to Earth much earlier than you’d hoped.”

And who is going to force me, G thought. Good luck with that. You’ll have to find me first.

His day was spent driving into the flat vastness of the Northern plains of lava flows, first laid down billions of years ago and covering 40% of Mars. Dust and sand moved constantly in the wind forming ephemeral shapes. The predominant colour was a rich butterscotch. Iron oxide dust hung in the air and the hugeness of the horizons confused him. After some time of looking at this, his eyes and mind began to play tricks. He kept thinking he saw objects or movements out of the corner of his eye, to find nothing when he looked directly. He recalled that they had lost one of their number out this way, back when he had had company. She had never been found. She had left her vehicle and disappeared. It was a strange hypnotic landscape. It made you feel so small and insignificant and disorientated.

He decided not to go further. It made him feel odd, remembering that rather pleasant young woman with her red hair and mass of freckles, now forever a part of Mars, somewhere unknown. It had cast a shadow over him today. He turned around for the drive back.

Later that night, a dust storm howled and battered the habitation pods. He lay on his bed listening to the roaring of the wind and the hiss of sand. In the morning he activated the mechanism for clearing the accumulated sand drifts from the base. The air was tawny with still suspended dust. It was not possible to see very far and he decided to stay inside for a day or so and focus on preparations for the journey, and his vegetable garden.

That night he had another dream about the Martians. They had surrounded him and gently held him in their spindly yellow arms. He had realised he was naked but was unconcerned. It felt natural and free. He had experienced a sense of deep peace which affected him so strongly that he had awoken. He thought he would not report this one to Mission Control. He didn't need them making a fuss.

The following day he decided to walk instead of drive for a change. It meant he would not go far but he had an urge to get closer to the landscape. He would walk awhile to a rocky outcrop and just sit and look and listen quietly, no machine noises, just Martian sounds.

It was an effort but at last he got there. He looked about him. Nothing moved today. After the storm the air was motionless but the fine suspended dust remained. He sat. There were no sounds apart from his own breathing. He wished the Martians were real. It had felt so good to be with them in his dream. He had been alone here so long now he had forgotten how warm it could make you feel to be in company.

The next week on one of his reports back to Earth he made a joke about looking for Martians. It didn't go down well.

“G, here's how it is. We've been discussing you and we all think it's time you came home. Enough is enough. There's an underlying sense that putting men on Mars has been done and that ultimately perhaps there isn't much point. It's risky and expensive and there's not much benefit in colonising. We have enough samples for the science guys to be going on with for a long time to come. It came as a big surprise to us,” he said, “but NASA has actually had a complete change of heart on this. They believe we have bigger and more urgent challenges here to be dealt with. Mars was a novelty and it's time to move on. Nobody wants to spend the money now. And your state of mind is concerning everyone. Mars isn't made for life. Your body is holding out pretty well so far but psychologically the isolation and disconnection from a natural Earth environment is clearly affecting you. Don't try to deny it, it's very noticeable.”

G felt his rage building. “What nonsense. You can't make me. I'm coping just fine.”

“Saving the Earth is the big one now G. Come back and help.”

“Fine. You can have my money, but I'm staying here.”

“You'll die there, G”

“I know, and I don't care.”

There was a long silence. G found he was breathing heavily.

He heard a muttered “He’s crazy” from the other end.

Suddenly he had had enough. He leaned forward and cut the connection to Earth. He slammed his fist down on the console table. Mars was his! How dare they tell him what to do!

There was one consolation. It was clear that Mars would remain in its state of innocence. The relief was overwhelming. They would probably feel they had to come and get him, though. That could take at least a year from now with the organisation of a rescue and a nine month travel time. By the time they were likely to arrive, he would have maybe eighteen months of health left. He could do a lot in this next year, make a lot of preparations. And then... a one way adventure into the great and endless wastelands to see how far he could get. A journey to the ends of the planet. He would keep a journal. Maybe one day it would be found.

He had much to do. How good to know they were too far away to touch him! He would make no more reports. Let them come. They would never find him.

In his dream that night, the Martians came again and crowded round, embracing him. He looked into their strange eyes and saw himself reflected – too short, too pale and his body too thick. They gave him something to drink – a red tangy liquid with an oily texture. He drained the vessel.

He awoke feeling calm and refreshed. He imagined the mayhem at Mission Control over yesterday’s conversation and the media frenzy when the news of his defection eventually came out. Yes, he had defected. He was Martian now.

He had a feeling that one of these days the other Martians would come in reality to accept him into their midst as one of them. A little later, as he sat on a rock out of sight of base camp, there seemed to be yellow flickerings at the edge of his vision. He smiled.

It would not be long.