

HUMANS IN SPACE

Second International

YOUTH ART COMPETITION

Be Inspired Be Creative Be Heard



HUMANS IN SPACE



“How will humans use science and technology to explore space, and what mysteries will we uncover?”

The Humans In Space Youth Art Competition encouraged youth (ages 10 - 18) to “Be Inspired, Creative and Heard,” asking them to think about the future of human space flight and to creatively communicate their ideas through their visual, literary, musical or video artwork. By including the next generation in planning the future, the competition aimed to enhance their awareness, interest and support for human space flight.

www.HumansInSpaceArt.org

Table of Contents

I, Curiosity	1
Mouse on Mars.....	3
Space Journey	5
Grains of Moon Dust	7
Legacy.....	11
Limits	13
Curiosity Saga	17
From Earth to the Universe and Beyond.....	19
Back to Home.....	23
"Sweetcorn" on Mars	31
Back Home, to the Stars	37
Star Catcher	43
Inspiration from the Past.....	47
Not One of Ours... ..	55
A New Home.....	63
Reach for the Stars	71
A Planet of Ice.....	79

The following poetry and short stories are in their original format created by the artist.

I, Curiosity

Poetry by

Thomas Mellor

12 years old, United States

Native English Speaker
Age 10-13

I, Curiosity

“Sojourner,” “Spirit,” “Opportunity” and “*Curiosity*,”
Are rovers. We came to Mars with raging velocity.

Our designs copy nature:
A roly-poly, a dragonfly,
And me, a Minecraft cow.
With multiple eyes
Like dragonflies,
Through Mars we plow.

I, *Curiosity*, leave hidden messages
As my wheel impacts,
Writing “JPL” (Jet Propulsion Lab),
My symbol, in my tracks.

All of us have cameras and I am a lab,
With gentle metal hands
Grabbing rocks, pebbles and sands.
Nuclear-powered, all wheeled,
We study elements that are concealed
Evidence of oceans, rivers and volcanoes.
I observe a little pyramid and rock strata,
Then talk to the orbiter who sends the data.

Doing things no other robots can.
We are made by man.
So when our message sends,
It goes to the Earthling friends
Who named me.

I, *Curiosity*, leave hidden messages
As my wheel impacts,
Writing “JPL” (Jet Propulsion Lab),
My Earthlings' symbol, in my tracks.

Mouse on Mars

Poetry by

India Gill

13 years old, United Kingdom

Native English Speaker

Age 10-13

Mouse on Mars

I am a white speck in the sea of red,
I glisten and glow, like a picture in your head.

I run, jump dive and spin,

And I really want to win!!

The race across the sea of red,
You can never imagine sitting in your bed. It
takes courage, bravery and much more,
Your experiences compared to this are poor.

So come and watch the very big race,

Where the dark black sky full of space,

Watches over the big sea of red.

And I am the mouse who got up out of bed. Mouse on Mars

I am a white speck in the sea of red,
I glisten and glow, like a picture in your head.

I run, jump dive and spin,

And I really want to win!!

The race across the sea of red,
You can never imagine sitting in your bed. It
takes courage, bravery and much more, Your
experiences compared to this are poor. So

come and watch the very big race,

Where the dark black sky full of space,

Watches over the big sea of red.

And I am the mouse who got up out of bed

Space Journey

Poetry by

Gulce Demirel

13 years old,
Turkey

Non-Native English Speaker
Age 10-13

SPACE JOURNEY

Stars, sun and moon
Are the reasons of mankind's curiosity
Going there someday
Exploring new places
Are the main passions of them.

Venus, Jupiter; Mars, Neptun
All of them surround us
Are there any other living creatures up there?
Green fields, mountains?

I wish we could see them one day
Learn if there are other creatures besides us
It doesn't matter if it is an animal, a flower or an insect
I wish we could explore all of them one day

If we had a chance to go there someday,
The chance to explore new planets,
New lives,
The future would be brighter
Earth which is not enough for us today,
Will suddenly reach to infinity.
It doesn't matter if we are young, old or child
Let's work together
Let's find a way to go to space.

GÜLCE DEMİREL

Grains of Moon Dust

Poetry by

Aarohan Burma

17 years old, United States

Native English Speaker
Age 14-18

Grains of Moon Dust

I was pacing aimlessly outside the lunar base,
My boots leaving shallow little imprints on the ground,
When a little girl suddenly darted in front of me.
Scooping up some moon dust in her dainty little gloved hands, she asked me,
What is in the dust?

I tried to answer her, but the words drifted aimlessly in my mind,
Because each grain of dust tells a different story.
One grain reverberates in fear from the memory of a violent impact,
Of a crash, of a split, of the formation of a new body somewhere in the deep, dark recesses of the
universe.

Another grain has seen the beauty of growth and wonder,
Watching over the brilliant greens and blues of the Earth,
But that wonder turned to horror as the planet slowly crumbled into nothingness.
Yet another grain tells a story of conquest.

Of the settling of the moon's uncharted territory,
Of the noble ambitions and ignoble machinations of men,
All wanting to stake their claim to the great beyond. But
there are millions of grains yet untouched,
Grains that keep secrets buried deep beneath the surface,
Grains harboring untold stories.

What unspoken secrets lie beneath the surface?

What untold stories are yet to be told?

I was shaken out of my stupor by the little girl,
Who searched for an answer in the glimmer of my visor.
So I told her the only thing I could truthfully tell her,
That every grain of moon dust is a storyteller.

Legacy

Poetry by

Marija Trajanoska

16 years old, Macedonia

Non-Native English Speaker
Age 14-18

Legacy

The sky - at the tip of my fingertips,
the sky - at the end of the world, the
sky with no beginning,
the sky and its cryptic meaning.

Once upon a lonely night
I threw a ball to reach its height,
speak wise words yet unheard when it returns
share all the mysteries that there it learns.

My ball never came back home
and I thought perhaps another
child resides
at the end of the skies,
who wants to play along.

It wasn't fun I must admit;
never fun to lose, is it?
And of this game I didn't know the rules,
since rules are only here on Earth.

And who knows if he wants to play along,
tease me, steal my ball, or sing a song; and
who knows if he is anything like me or
different, smart, intimidating.

As my mind explored
what life beyond ours will hold (besides my ball),
my heart raced fast
doubting if I really wanted to know.

But there is an instinct in me to explore,
an urge to see, an urge to know;
so all scientists and nationalities I invite,
join forces to give humanity the gift to sight
of space unseen before.

Let's exploit our imagination and creative ability,
for to explore is our passion and responsibility,
left from our ancestors and a legacy to our children -
to find my ball,
and everything incredible out there waiting to be known.

Limits

Poetry by

Sara Jovanovska

16 years old, Macedonia

Non-Native English Speaker
Age 14-18

Limits

The countdown begins,

and a girl named Roslyn is asleep in
the dead silence of the night, and is
still too young to know much about
anything.

Twelve, eleven, ten.

But perhaps, in the future, ten years from now
there will be instants
when she will look past the trees and soaring rooftops, and
gaze upon the starlit sky,
and realize how small and limited we
really are.

And then she will discover science;
she will learn it, trust it, and use it, and find that because of it,
these limits that she thinks are a part of her
will begin to wither and break, as time goes on.

Nine, eight, seven.

And perhaps she will decide that her true limit
is set not by the clouds, but by the stars, far above; And
she will yearn to explore further and further, go past all
that is, and find something more.

She will dream of finding life in worlds beyond our own, with
robots, and rockets, and spaceships;
She will dream of travelling distances
that no one has ever dared to before,
and more than anything, she will dream of being limitless.

Six, five, four.

And, perhaps, one day she too will take that
giant leap;
Perhaps she truly will discover a world of novelty

that will, in turn, help us understand our own.

Three, two, one.

She can hear the engine now as it roars
beneath her feet, and finally she knows
infinity is within her reach.

Curiosity Saga

Poetry by

Aditya Om

18 years old, India

Non-Native English Speaker
Age 14-18

I, Curiosity

“Sojourner,” “Spirit,” “Opportunity” and “*Curiosity*,”
Are rovers. We came to Mars with raging velocity.

Our designs copy nature:
A roly-poly, a dragonfly,
And me, a Minecraft cow.
With multiple eyes
Like dragonflies,
Through Mars we plow.

I, *Curiosity*, leave hidden messages
As my wheel impacts,
Writing “JPL” (Jet Propulsion Lab),
My symbol, in my tracks.

All of us have cameras and I am a lab,
With gentle metal hands
Grabbing rocks, pebbles and sands.
Nuclear-powered, all wheeled,
We study elements that are concealed
Evidence of oceans, rivers and volcanoes.
I observe a little pyramid and rock strata,
Then talk to the orbiter who sends the data.

Doing things no other robots can.
We are made by man.
So when our message sends,
It goes to the Earthling friends
Who named me.

I, *Curiosity*, leave hidden messages
As my wheel impacts,
Writing “JPL” (Jet Propulsion Lab),
My Earthlings' symbol, in my tracks.

From Earth to the Universe and Beyond

Poetry by

Debora Gonzalez

14 years old, United States

Non-Native English Speaker
Age 14-18

From Earth to the Universe and Beyond

There is fire burning deep within our hearts,

A fire which will never be exhausted, which will never run out

A fire which will always expand and extent as creeper plants in a fence

It's the intense curiosity found in the human mind

It's what has led us to find, create, and invent

It's what reigns in our dreamers' souls

It's what lets us see the impossible as possible, and the unbelievable as believable.

It's what has led us, the dreamers, to this new era, the era of space exploration and discovery

Oh, how I dream of the day in which our science fiction books will become true

The days when going to our shining Moon, will be like going to Moscow.

The days when going to Mars will be like going to Maryland

Oh, what a precious day when the dreamers' dream will not just be a dream, it will be the reality of our everyday lives

Oh, how I yearn to see the black coal tarmac of an airport that takes us to the moon

Oh, how I yearn to see the luminous vestments of the spacecraft that takes us to the moon

Oh, how I wish that the day comes when we can take our children in vacations to the marvelous Uranus in space explorations

And for our dreams, we're often called crazy dreamers; we're often called obsessive nerds

Yes, maybe that's what we are and we're proud of it

Galileo Galilei was also skeptically rejected and taken as crazy and heretic by the authorities, who later had to admit his success and veracity

We, the dreamers, will fight for these dreams to come true

Our hope of a day in which the space will be conquered

Our desire of knowledge and enthusiasm for the generations to come

We'll let the fire burning in our hearts and souls lead us

Pursuing our thirst of knowledge

Letting imagination flourish

We'll conquer space

We'll explore the Moon

We'll step on Mars

We'll be the first to see with our own eyes asteroids, planets, and burning comets among the stars.

We'll go from Earth to the universe and beyond!

Back to Home.....

A Short Story by

Arundhati Chowdhury

13 years old, India

Non-Native English Speaker

Age 10-13

BACK TO HOME.....

Ruth leaned on the railing, and leaned out. Her blonde hair covered half her face, and her usually sparkling green eyes appeared thoughtful. Ruth Martin France and her parents lived on the outskirts of the Dome no. 58 in the planet of Strofrix. She was 15 years old, but felt like she had aged a thousand years.

At the age of 15, each individual had to go through a “Ceremony”. The contents of this Ceremony kept hidden from any child below 15. Ruth has been one of the last in her class to go through her Ceremony. Daniel Rosario Spain was one of her friends and the first to go through a Ceremony. He had appeared disillusioned and disconcerted after it, and had refused to tell her anything, which Ruth considered as a breach in their friendship.

However, after experiencing the thing for which she waited her whole life, Ruth understood why he did so. It is not lawful to say exactly what happened in the Ceremony, but through a loophole in the law, I can tell you what Ruth came to know of.

A man [whose name cannot be disclosed] had explained everything to her briskly and frankly;-

“Ruth Martin France of Strofrix; today is your Ceremony. Part of the Ceremony is knowing the Ultimate Truth. No – Do not interrupt me..... Nine centuries ago, the human race was based in a planet known as Earth. These “Earthlings” were no different from us in looks, but vastly different in terms of belief, attitude and execution. They dreamt of colonising out space, but could not maintain harmony in their own planet.

“Anyways, the humans sent a squadron of highly developed spaceships into outer space. These “astronauts” were destined to search for a habitable planet and chances of possible extraterrestrial life, over a period of five generations. The children of these elite space-travellers were born on the hi-tech spaceships itself.

“What they encountered, you will learn at school in “Historical Studies”. Now, I come to the reason why they were sent; normal citizens were given the reason that the interstellar trip was merely due to scientific purposes. However, the truth was otherwise. Three World Wars had scarred Earth, and the fourth was looming. World War IV was due to the depleting resources of Earth. The launch was supposedly the last act of desperate cooperation between all the countries. In case you don’t know, countries are partitions of the landmass. Now, we don’t have countries anymore. The whole planet is ONE country, all is one.

“A few decades after the launch, World War IV was declared. Countries formed coalitions quickly. And just as fast, the countries in the same coalitions started fighting amongst themselves. It was a political fiasco. The powerful countries conquered the smaller ones, mercilessly killed the original inhabitants and seized the resources of that country.

“Some as yet ignored countries came out in their true colours and displayed their hidden arsenal of secret nuclear weapons. It was bloody, meaningless, and completely avoidable, if only the countries had used their natural resources wisely in the previous years. World War IV went on for about nine years. The day of 3rd January changed everything. The Spaceships came back after their long voyage in the limitless space, just in time from stopping the human

race from wiping itself out. That day was the first rays of dawn after a very long and hard night.

“The astronauts halted the war, loaded the handful of survivors into the spaceships, and settled in Risata. That is why that planet is known as the First Dominion. Strofrix is the 27th planet to be settled by humans; hence it is named the Twenty-seventh Dominion. Earth is now inhabitable, its atmosphere thick with Radioactive Radiation. Moreover.....”

At this point, Ruth couldn't help but interrupt. “But aren't the domes habitable? Has the radiation seeped inside the domes as well?”

Contrary of Ruth's expectations, the man smiled sadly. “Here's the catch- Earth had no Domes.”

“WHAT?? No.....No Domes?”

“None.”

“That.....That means that they lived in..... The open??”

“Righty.”

“People could go wherever they wanted? They could w\move in the open, without Safety Suits?”

“Correct.”

Two hours later, Ruth's mind was still reeling. None of the planets, the man explained, was as unique and tailor made or humans as was Earth. Hence, humans had to fend for themselves in other planets. A network of Domes, huge circular structures, sometimes on the ground, or sometimes floating in the air; were established.

Perfect pressure and weather conditions were sustained in a Dome, either due to the unsuitable terrain, or unbefitting atmosphere of the planet. It was almost Science Fiction thinking of a life without Domes. There were a total of 102 Domes on Strofrix, suspended in the abnormally dense atmosphere, all of them linked through long and huge passages. All planets had domes and connecting passages, and rarely the dwellers came out of their respective domes.

Ruth brooded over everything sullenly. It seemed that Earth had everything necessary, yet people had destroyed it. She looked up, the hard glass walls of the dome blurring the view of the night sky.

How would it be like, she wondered, seeing the real sky, not distorted by the glass? How would a real fresh breeze feel like? Would it be similar to the man-made currents of air circulating in Domes? Ruth considered herself lucky to be living near the perimeter of her Dome. She could at least see her planet's landscape, even though she was able to walk on it. Ruth felt very sad. It was like she lost a friend before she even met her.

Ruth gazed at the vents running along the side of the Domes. The vents were in full power, sucking in air from above and forcefully ejecting the air downwards so that the Dome could stay afloat. Dome no. 57 was resting that day, which meant that that the vents were being cleaned and repaired by men. Hence, all the Domes connected to no. 57 were running at full power to keep no. 57, itself and that region of the network suspended. It was no. 58's turn to rest the next day, which meant that Ruth would be relieved of the noise for a day.

“BOO!!”

“Aaarghhh!!!” Ruth shrieked, almost slipping and falling.

She turned around to see a brown haired boy with grey eyes smirking at her. “Daniel!! Darn it, what was the reason for scaring me??” Ruth demanded. The noise from the vents had masked Daniel’s footsteps, obviously. “Gotcha Blondie!!” Daniel laughed shortly, and then sobered. “Happy Ceremony. So..... What do you think?”

Ruth averted her face, and resumed her sad countenance. “It’s horrifying. We.... WE were basically free, weren’t we? There were real trees, making oxygen. We could walk in real ground. There was a natural weather..... And we all just threw it away.”

Daniel nodded absentmindedly. “To get something, we got to sacrifice something. We got scientific development, but we lost our true home.” Daniel frowned, and seemed to make up his mind about something. “Come on.” He started walking, beckoning Ruth to follow him. “I’ll show you something.” Daniel did not go to the Transport Tunnels, or TT, which meant wherever they were going, had to be close. The TT’s were essentially huge tunnels made of the same material of the Dome, except that they were not a foot thick.

The TT’s snaked through the entire Dome, connecting each part. Inside the TT were 2 conveyor belt like moving ramps driven by compressed air. One ramp went slowly, the other fast. If you were in a hurry, just get on the fast track and hop off at your stop. No fares were required, on any ramp. The TT’s were fast, free and reliable. Much better than primitive flying air cars.

Back to Ruth and Daniel; they were walking in the nearly deserted streets of their Dome.

“Look. Here we are.....”

“The library?”

“Yeah, I have something to show you.”

They went inside the library. The library was chiefly a large room with bare walls, and several Circular Receiving Tables, aka Table Servicers. Quite a few were already occupied, so Daniel and Ruth went to a Servicer in the corner of the library, seeking privacy. Daniel kept his palm on the glass top of the Servicer and told Ruth to do so too. “This is classified information. We need to prove that we are fifteen.”

On keeping both their palms, instantly the Servicer whirred to life, lighting up with a blue light. The Servicer scanned their palms; and pictures, information and dates of birth of Daniel and Ruth appeared on the screen. “Accessible. Fifteen? – Check. State your area(s) of interest.” The Servicer droned. “Earth, past and present.” Daniel said confidently. Less than a millisecond later, a holographic image of the books available appeared over the screen of the Servicer, near their faces; bathing their faces in an eerie blue light. Ruth watched intently as Daniel’s free hand expertly flipped the book’s images here and there.

A while after searching through “Earth is Desolate”, by Maria Grimm States, “New 5D illustrated Earth Guide for Researchers”, by Dr. Charlie Nobbs Singapore; Daniel found what he was looking for. “Ages in Earth: Human Civilization Based In Earth till 3042”, by Dr. D.M. Albania. Daniel clicked on the book. Immediately all the other books disappeared and this book enlarged and embedded itself into the screen of the Servicer. Daniel didn’t wait

to read the text; He looked through the pages like he was looking for something. Finally, he sighed, and looking relieved, clicked on an image in page 165 of the book.

A holographic image of a planet came. Daniel twirled and twiddled some dials and knobs on the screen, and looked at Ruth. "I adjusted the image. From level A1, it went to B42."

Ruth looked puzzled. She hated the moments when Daniel used Geek Talk. "Changing the level of an image," Ruth recalled with difficulty, "meant changing the type of holographic representation. Earlier, at level A1, the holo was normal, simply a projection. Now, the holo emits a certain electronic impulse, which influences our nerves..... which means that even though this is in reality a projection, our brain is fooled into believing that it is a solid. That means that..... apparently a "solid representation" of this planet is before us!" Ruth finished excitedly.

"Yes, dumbo," Daniel rolled his eyes, "give some more attention in class, will ya?"

"But isn't changing the level very hard?" Ruth asked warily.

"Oh yes!!" Daniel bragged, "If you don't calculate or adjust the dials correctly, the electronic impulses could affect your brain in various degrees of Seriousness; the least being hallucinating for about a month, and the worst is becoming raving mad." Daniel grinned widely, like it was the funniest thing in the world.

Not that Ruth did not trust Daniel's abilities; nevertheless she touched the "solid" sphere cautiously and retracted her finger instantly. Ruth didn't feel like dancing around in monkey-style, nor like singing and talking to imaginary persons, so she guessed that Daniel's calculations were okay, after all.

Daniel turned a few more dials, and the planet started rotating on its own axis and grew in size till it was a little bigger than their heads. "Now," Daniel declared, turning grave, "back to business. This – This is present Earth." Ruth gasped in terror.

Earth was presently a planet that Space travellers and Marauders would try to get away from as fast as they could. The seas were murky and dark, swirling with several large metal structures, obviously remnants of the World War IV. The land was barren, and dark, ever-present storm-clouds with crackling lightning covered half the land. On the land were several jagged walls and fences. Ruth had a hunch that they were the borders of "countries", built there for security in times of War.

On land were several other metal carcasses, and there were deep mines in the ground, scarring the landscape. Heaps of soil, litter and garbage ruined everything more. On relatively clean patches of ground soared huge towers. Ruth brushed her hand over the land, the caps of mountains pricking her. But something else struck her as out of place.

"The land is....."

"Boiling hot, yeah. There were many reasons why humans were forced to leave Earth; Pollution, depletion of resources, and moreover, Global Warming."

"You.....You mean it is true? But isn't Global warming a myth, told us to scare us from using energy too much?" Ruth spluttered.

"Not at all. It can happen, and it happened to our own home, Earth."

Ruth passed her hand through the “air” or “solid” Earth, and a pop-up note appeared. “CAUTION-” it said, “Atmosphere filled with CO₂, water vapour, chlorofluorocarbons and SO₂, to the point of humans using Oxygen Masks from time to time, elderly people using masks 24x7. Towards the end, near 3042, radioactive radiation seeped into the atmosphere – Radiation Suits, or Safety Suits invented.”

Ruth kept her finger on a triangular landmass jutting out of a larger landmass. “THE REPUBLIC OF INDIA; a country also known as the Land of Festivals and Colours.” - A pop-up proclaimed. “Hey, wait,” Ruth cried, “Isn’t there an Anubhav Ray India in our class?” “Yes. The third name signifies the country our ancestors were from. It’s odd, how the man who conducts Ceremonies said dividing a planet into Countries was absolutely evil, but still we have a third name asserting our country. It’s like we mentally abolish our past, but physically cling to it with both arms.....Look, there’s mine, Spain.” Daniel pointed to a small country in another landmass in the north; jutting out towards the left of the same landmass in which India was located.

In the same region, Daniel pointed out France, Ruth’s home country. A balloon of despair welled inside Ruth. Some centuries ago, her ancestors lived there. And, if only they had not behaved stupidly, then Ruth would be living there too. “Now,” Daniel interjected, breaking into her reverie, “let’s see the real, unexploited Earth.” The holographic image sank back into the book. Daniel tossed few more pages, and tapped another picture.

Early Earth rose out of the Servicer, so unlike the Earth they had just seen; that Ruth did a double take. Earth had pristine blue waters, lush green plains, and snow capped mountains. Fluffy white clouds drifted lazily across, and when Ruth grazed her fingers, the planet seemed of moderate temperature, not hot; not cold. Exactly the temperature maintained in Domes. It was like Earth was a natural Dome itself.

Then, Ruth realized as she turned to Daniel with her eyes full of tears, we try to bring back the essence of home in our Domes: try to bring back what had been forever lost due to the follies of humans. No matter how much we progress, we still yearn for the place where we originated from.

Daniel understood what Ruth was feeling. He nodded, and smiled dejectedly. He grasped her hand reassuringly, “I know.” He whispered.

Ruth inserted these two images into her own Personal Servicer, and programmed it to project them alternately all the time. Ruth’s life changed drastically after that, as everyone’s did after they had their Ceremony. She took care of her Dome better, and started a Campaign in all Domes throughout Strofix, of how to preserve Earth even as Science progressed.

The TT’s became outdated and changed to Tele-transporting Devices; Machines obeyed thought instead of Verbal commands; Dome Scientists found out a new technique to keep Domes floating without the noise and hazards of Vents. Artificial trees were replaced by real, lab-grown living trees. Extinct species’ like dogs, cats, etc were “made” / ”cloned” by replicating their genes, skeletal structures, etc. Re-usable fuel was discarded as a source of Energy. The CO₂ produced by respiration was broken into Carbon and Oxygen. Carbon was used to power things, as it was used as of yore in Earth. All the information of all Circular Receiving Tables in one planet were incorporated into one single device called Source.

Sources were handed out to each and everyone, so information was available to everyone at anytime. The Sources were square tablets of 1 foot sides and 1 inch thickness.

Ruth saw all these advances with her own eyes, and knew that there was more to come. The common ambition for every child was to become a Dome Engineer and oversee the construction of their self-designed Dome. However, Ruth and Daniel had other plans. Daniel became a Space Marauder, in search for a planet similar to Earth. He contacts Ruth once in a while, talking about his adventures. Daniel also promised that he would take Ruth along one time. Daniel also claims that he had found the inklings of a planet quite similar to Earth.

Ruth became a Galaxy renowned Scientist, and she is currently testing a miraculous device that could cleanse Radioactivity from Earth. And, I am happy to say, all of her tests so far have been successful. Thanks to her efforts, the citizen of Strofix laid their feet on their planet for the first time. Her device was also used in several other planets as well. Now, Safety Suits are no longer used, they are happily left out of a list when a family plans to go to a vacation in the open air.

Hello, Captain!! Start preparing the fastest ships you have; the Galactic Cruisers with speeds more than that of light, 'cuz we are going back home, to Mother Earth: after a long, long time..... Onward ho!!!

"Sweetcorn" on Mars

A Short Story by

Hanna Un

13 years old, United States

Native English Speaker
Age 10-13

“Whoosh!” He could distantly hear the wind blowing past his ears and golden hair. Quietly whistling while he worked, he carefully raked his hoe through the tall, gently swaying corn stalks. As soon as the wind had appeared, it died away and the familiar grumbling noise of a faraway dust storm took its place. Checking the clock on his muscular wrist, the strongly built boy dropped his hoe and unraveled the tarp from the edges of the corn field. Dragging it over the vast area of corn field, he secured it at the end and ran into the warehouse before he could become unlucky enough to be stuck outside during the storm.

Sighing, Michael Foreman leaned against the heavy door of the warehouse and took off his jacket. Taking in big gulps of fresh air, he looked out the solar window that turned and showed all angles of the corn field. He murmured, “These dust storms sure do happen frequently on the Red Planet.” When Michael had first come to the rusty planet two months ago, in the space charter bus number 44 with the other high schoolers, he had no idea that winds could get this strong and how severe the dust storms could get. In spite of these frequent storms, business was doing great. He had had no idea that the farming industry would bloom so big, so fast. The unending fields of crops, mostly corn, stretching as far as the eyes could see proved that.

As the winds died down, he walked over to the holographic monitor in the middle of the room. Michael could see that the other workers had returned to the fields, so he slid on his jacket and wrenched open the door to walk outside as well. Remembering his first day, he smiled. When he first stepped onto Mars, he hadn’t thought it was that special. After spending time on this tiny planet, Michael fell in love with the rugged terrain that swirled with many shades of orange and red. The planet itself was beautiful, with a butterscotch terrain that swooped up and down like choppy waves of the sea that left him awestruck. The ground pulsed with light and the Milky Way view from Mars seemed brighter than that of anywhere else.

Pulling back the tarp, Michael quickly got to work pulling up the corn. He thought back to his life before farming on Mars. On Earth, Michael had loved helping out on his father’s farm called ‘Sweetcorn’, but he had always been fascinated with space. When NASA announced a special summer program for high schoolers to participate in an inter galaxy farming course, Michael was one of the first to volunteer, leaving his family’s small farm in Ohio to fly to Mars. NASA created a foolproof underground irrigation system on Mars to make the fertile soil moist, and a protective shield in the mostly carbon dioxide atmosphere for humans to breathe.

Even now, people including Michael were still fascinated by the latest range rover, Curiosity. Its hybrid function allowed it to travel fifty times faster than before and take more close up and immaculate photos. These photos had led to the discovery of fertile soil on the great planet and after years of planning, NASA had come up with the brilliant idea to farm on Mars. Earth had become even more urban, overrun with cities and there was absolutely no more land to cultivate. The idea had worked out wonderfully. Earth received their abundant crops from Mars and also shared them with third world countries. After farmers had successfully started farming and harvesting on Mars, NASA decided to expand the farming industry and invite high schoolers on an intergalaxy farming program over the summer. Already two months had passed and it was almost time to go home.

Chapter 2- Close Call

As Michael thought about this, his smile got bigger and he felt so happy. He was so proud of himself and his fellow students for all that they were doing, it truly was a great experience and he was so glad he got to be part of it. While he was picking the corn to be brought back to the warehouse for washing, the wind picked up again and Michael heard the tarp rustling. With a frown, Michael shaded his eyes with his hand and looked across the surface of the planet. While dust storms were frequent, he had never felt such a strong gust as this one. Before he could move or say anything, he saw something hurtling towards him in the black atmosphere of space.

“RUN!” he yelled out loud, barely heard over the rushing wind. After ducking under the tarp and huddling to the ground, Michael still heard the fierce roar of noise but he felt or heard no crash. Slowly peeping out over the tarp, a fearful but majestic sight brought him slowly to his feet. Open mouthed, he shuffled over to the end of the row of corn fields and stared at the sky. A meteorite, at least as big as a hovercraft, was hurtling towards another meteor, both shining brightly and glowing with light. He flinched, waiting for the impact of the crash and the shaking of Mars that was likely to occur.

He heard the crash before he saw it. It was a mighty loud noise, as if a car accident was happening in space. Shutting his eyes, Michael gulped, nervous about what would happen to the farmers and Mars. After minutes had passed, he heard the frequent noises of gasping coming over from all over Mars. Peeping one eye open, then another, Michael watched his co-farmers as they all dropped their tools and shuffled over to watch the sky. Following their gaze, he gasped along with the other farmers, all awestruck and mind blown.

The crash of the two meteorites did not cause an accident or something bad to happen in space, but it created a marvelous sight. In the pitch black of space, a bright glow, getting bigger and bigger took the place of the two meteorites. It shined brighter than all the stars in the sky and it looked like a painter had splattered yellow and white glitter onto a black canvas. The beautiful sight gave Michael shivers, knowing this was a once in a lifetime experience.

Even as the glow started to diminish, Michael still could not shake off the feeling of worry and fright. "That was a close call -" he thought as he stumbled over to the warehouse for a well needed drink of water. Taking a long gulp of water, he leaned his hands against the hologram projecting table, and thought of what could've happened. "If those meteors had come only a little bit closer, I could've died..." he thought over and over in his head. "I have to do something about this" Michael said aloud, trying to come up with a plan. After an hour of pacing around the room and coming up with nothing, he decided to call it a night and try to think of something tomorrow.

Chapter 3- Umbrella in the sky

As the last few weeks flew by, Michael could only think about his plan to help make Mars safer. No matter how hard he tried, only impractical ideas came to his head. One day while he was in his small room in the dorms, he was digging through his closet to find an inspiration that could help fuel his thoughts. He came across a picture frame. Peeking at the picture frame, he saw a picture of him as a little boy on his father's farm in the rain. He smiled, reminiscing the good old days as a brilliant idea popped into his head. Staring at the picture frame, he slowly rose to his feet thinking "Why haven't I thought of this before?!" Clutching the picture frame in his hands, he ran out of the doors to the warehouse.

As a month passed and the day to return home came closer and closer, Michael was almost never seen and always in the confinement of the warehouse, making and perfecting his idea to help protect Mars from future disasters. A week before the end of the intergalaxy farming course, Michael emerged from the warehouse, looking scruffy but extremely happy with himself. "Come here and look!" he called to all his curious fellow students who gathered around him.

He reached inside his pocket for a device of some sort, while the other workers watched in wonder as he clicked the large red button in the center of the apparatus. Their mouths dropped in amazement as a large bright blue shield started to form around Mars. Michael released a sigh of

relief as the shield circled around the whole planet and clicked together with a 'ping.' The workers started to excitedly whisper and buzz around very pleased Michael.

Asking for everyone to be quiet and come closer, he started to explain. "Since that dreadfully scary day of the meteor crash last month, I have been working on a project to make sure rocks and meteors won't ever crash into this beloved planet. Inspired by the umbrella, I have created this shield to make sure debris will just bounce off and harmlessly plunge back into space. The scientists of NASA have predicted another meteor crash in approximately thirty seconds so I have been hoping to try out the shield and see if it works." Looking up into the sky, Michael crossed his fingers and waited for the meteor crash to occur.

Just as NASA had predicted, Michael and the fellow workers saw the bright speeding glow of a meteor hurtling towards another meteor right away. All clenching each other's hands in hope, they all watched as the meteors crashed into each other and braced themselves for the impact. They saw the broken bits of meteor flying towards them in space and flinched. Holding his breath, Michael observed the meteor bits as they forcefully hit the blue shield. He let out his breath and pumped his fist in the air as the bits of debris bounced back harmlessly into the dark of space without affecting Mars at all. He could see the growing bright glow of the explosion clearly without the flying bits of meteor and watched as it transformed into a big beautiful ball of luminous color.

Fumbling back to the warehouse before it was too late, he jerked open the door and grabbed the high tech camera that all the farmers had gotten and ran over to where he could see the explosion best. Snapping the shutter over and over again, he took as many pictures as he could. After five minutes, the glow started to diminish, and Michael slid the camera into his pocket, patting it. He couldn't wait to show the pictures to his family back in Ohio. He stared, dumbfounded at the glorious outcome of the meteorite crash. As the glow disappeared for good, Michael felt a large smile emerge on his face. He was overwhelmed with joy and happiness. Now he could finally enjoy these meteorite crashes without the worry or fear of being hurt. Vowing to make the best out of the last week on this marvelous planet, he ran over to his friends as they congratulated him on this amazing invention that would certainly improve living conditions on Mars

Back Home, to the Stars

A Short Story by

Daniel Kazachenko

13 years old, Russian Federation

Non-Native English Speaker
Age 10-13

Back Home, to the Stars!

I woke up sensing somebody's gaze. You know this nasty feeling as if you are not alone in your room. But when I opened my eyes and examined my surroundings I did not find anything unusual: a desk in front of my bed, a computer, a bookcase were hardly visual but right where they should be. At the very moment the moon emerged from behind a cloud and lit up the room with its silver shining. The curtains of an open window rustled in the night wind, and there I saw him. He was sitting on the windowsill gazing at the moon. After a while, perhaps sensing I was looking at him, he turned towards me and said in a low voice:

- Hi!

- A-a-a! – I shouted.

He instantly occurred near me, I did not even notice when, and giving me a scared look whispered quickly:

- Don't shout, people are sleeping, you'll wake them up!

- Who are you? – I asked him whispering. I somehow did not want to sound loudly any more.

- I'm Luth.

For a while we were staring at each other silently. He looked about my age, around fourteen. His hair was a little longer for a male, of some silver colour. He had very pale skin and unordinary eyes of bright green colour. It was not the colour that seemed unusual but the shape of the pupils; they looked like cat's pupils. That was the only originality of his, though; and in the rest he looked like any other teenager.

- What are you doing here, Luth? And how did you get in?!

- The window's open...

- Are you kidding?! It's on the sixth floor!!!

- Oh, keep quiet, why are you always shouting, - he hissed angrily. I was ashamed.

- So, how did you get in? – I repeated quieter. He signed.

- It's quite a weird story. I'm not an earthman. We...

- You are not who? – I interrupted. Luth was shocked. He stood silently for a while and then said in a way our teacher of physics did explaining us the rule twenty times ahead:

- Your planet is Earth. I'm not from your planet. That means I'm not an earthman. Now it was my turn to glare at him shockingly.

- You want to say you're an alien? – I looked at him trying to understand who had gone mad. I did hope it wasn't me.

- I do not want, I'm telling that bluntly.

- Hey, when did you visit your doctor last?

- Do you think I'm crazy? Look! – he stretched his palm where I saw a luminous ball. Taking a closer look I saw a room that reminded of a spaceship control room as it was shown in films. Inside there was a man wearing strange clothes. He was sitting in front of a screen. I thought he was a military man. He looked like Luth, though his hair was a bit longer, up to shoulders. – This is my father, General Lens.

The man turned unexpectedly and looked straight at me. I shuddered hearing his voice:

- What's up, Luth?

- I found him, General.

- Splendid. Don't keep me waiting.

- Yes, Sir.

The ball went out. I looked shockingly at the male in front of me.

- He ordered me to find you and take you to the spaceship, - Luth explained before I could ask a question.

- Me? Why?

- I should only take you to the spaceship. My father himself will explain you why.

- I won't go, - I said in panic. No way! A couple of loonies pretending to be aliens was going to kidnap me!

I tried to scramble on my feet but got myself captured by the blanket and hit all my limbs against the floor. I climbed to my feet and then darted to the door. I struggled to open it but failed because panic did not let me turn the door handle.

Luth was sitting calmly examining me with interest of the entomologist, who had found the rarest kind of *argynnis paphia*. Then he stretched out the hand with something like laser pointer, and... that was all! I died. At least I thought so.

When I came to myself I found we were striding somewhere. To be more precise, I was carried somewhere. On a shoulder. I was not able to see my personal vehicle. All I could see was the edge of an orange T-shirt, legs in blue jeans and sneakers. The clothes were familiar, I was sure I had already seen them on somebody. Luth! I got myself abducted. And now I was being carried to the spaceship. Surely to be experimented. I nearly burst into tears.

- You shouldn't have watched Hollywood films so much, - I heard somewhere from the top.

- What? – I was so much surprised that I stopped pitying myself instantly. Suddenly I felt being cautiously taken down to earth.

- I said you should spend less time in front of TV. Nobody is going to test you.

- You are reading my thoughts!!! – I screamed. Luth grimaced.

- You are thinking too loudly. In fact you are too noisy. Now let's make a halt. We'll wait here.

We found ourselves in the middle of nowhere far from the city, highway or any other signs of human habitation. I had no idea where the city was, but I promised myself to escape when I had an opportunity. If I had an opportunity.

- Don't even think of running away, - Luth said. – Though you may try. In any case you'll fail.

- Why so?

- You're an ordinary teenager, and I'm a high-skilled soldier, - he answered fishing out sleeping bags and a package with food from a rucksack which I did not notice before.

- How's that? – asked I. Luth

looked at me.

- Didn't catch, - he said.

- You're about my age. How can you be a soldier?

- It isn't exactly so. Time on our planet differs from that of yours. We live longer. I look like your age, but in fact I'm twenty-six.

- And...

- Stop talking. Pick some wood and help me to make the fire. I'll answer your questions later.

What a brazen man! Does he think he is my boss? Signing I dragged myself towards the nearest trees. Anyhow it was my chance to escape! There I took a stealthy glance at Luth. He was rummaging his rucksack paying no attention to me. Pretending I was picking dry wood I stepped away from him. Turning back at Luth again and making sure I was not followed I threw the wood away and ran. I raced at breakneck pace turning back constantly. And then I suddenly ploughed into something. Into somebody, to be more exact. Facing the obstacle I nearly howled.

- I warned you, - Luth said calmly.

- How did you do that? – I tried hard not to show him my admiration. – You've been far away!

- It was just an illusion. In fact I was next to you all the time. I knew you'd attempt to run away, - he turned back to our halt. I followed him silently.

Later we were sitting by the fire. I was drinking herbal tea made by Luth, and he was sitting embracing his knees and watching the flames.

- Who are we waiting for, Luth? He faced me unwillingly.

- The crew of the spaceship. They'll be here before dawn.

- What do you need me for?
- My father will tell you.
- Why did you call your father general and sir?
- He is my commander in the army. I call him father only at home.
- Tell me about your planet.
- What exactly do you want to know?
- Well, where it is, how d'you call it, what – hn – people inhabit it.
- Our planet is in Milky Way Galaxy in the constellation you call Alpha Centauri. We call it Trioneya. That means a triple star system.

- You've got three suns, ney?
- Earth speaking, yes. Two main stars, Rigel Kent and Bungula are solar-like stars, Toliman – a red dwarf – is about 1.14 light years from our planet. Our planet's name is Neya. It belongs to Bungula system. We have the same life conditions as Earth: atmosphere, water, animal and vegetation world. People are the same as on Earth, they have two arms, two legs, a body and a head, the same organs. There are male and female.

- How did you get here? It's rather far! You need two days to reach the Moon; I can't imagine how long it takes to get to your planet!

- Our system is about billion and a half years older than Solar system. Our civilization is much more developed than Earth one. We use technology of photon sails to travel within the constellation. Your scientists call it solar sails, though they cannot use it for space travelling so far. But for distant travelling we use technology based on black holes nature. Its huge gravitation can speed up the near objects close to velocity of light. Our scientists were able to create a kind of artificial black hole to speed up spaceships. But such high speed can raise temperature up to million degrees. It can burn a spaceship within a second. To prevent it our scientists use shell cooling system that works like cooling system you use to cool engines of motorcars. This technology allowed us to reach Earth in six years. Any more questions?

- Yes. Where did you learn so much about us?
- You won't believe it, but I went to school...
- Oh, did you? So you were taught our language at your school as well, weren't you?
- No. I learned the language on Earth. We have been living here for five years. We thoroughly studied your political systems, history, modern art, fashion, et cetera. We had to be like you not to attract unnecessary attention. Our target is you. We are not interested in other earthmen.
- Why me? Am I original?
- My father will tell you. Now go to sleep.
- Well...
- No questions till morning. Sleep.

I had nothing to do but obey. Muttering something about nasty aliens I got inside the sleeping bag and fell asleep at once.

I woke up hearing somebody talking near me. Luth was telling something in unknown melodious language. Sometimes a low voice answered him. I opened my eyes and sat. They stopped talking and turned to me. I recognized the-general-from-the-ball in Luth's companion. He looked terrifically powerful. I thought I met a legendary Jedi from *Star Wars*.

- Good morning, Daniel, - the general said quietly.
- G-good morning, - I tried to do my best not to show him my fear. The general slightly smiled.

- You needn't be afraid. We won't do any harm. On the contrary, we are here to protect you.

- Who from? I have no enemies!
- We shall guard you during the space travel to Neya.
- But why should I go there?

- To give you the answer I have to tell you about our state system. Our civilization is several million years older than Earth one. We followed the same stages in our evolution as the earthmen. Thus we had primitive society, slaveholding, religious intolerance, scientific and technological advance, wars, and separation of states. Time passed, and people understood that hate and wars can destroy the planet. All the states united. Peace came to the planet. People do not fight each other. We make our efforts to keep nature balance, invent highest technology, find ways to cure diseases, develop arts.

- If there is peace on your planet, what do you need an army for?

- Army looks after order and guards civilians in space travels.

- And why do you need me?

- The head of the state is President Raymond, your father.

- What? Are you joking? How can it be?

- Your mother was one of the scientists who landed on Earth fourteen years ago because the spaceship was seriously damaged. Unfortunately practically all the members died in the accident. Only two persons survived: your mother and a radio operator. They had to stay on Earth. So you were born here. They had no hope to return to Neya, and she didn't tell you anything. When communication with the spaceship was lost we didn't know where the accident took place. That's why all search groups returned with no results. About eleven years ago the radio operator was able to send the signal with coordinates to Neya. We started at once. But we've had no signals from them ever since, so we've spent five years on Earth trying to find them. We didn't know they had been killed. But we could find you.

With these words the general stood up and stretched his hand to me.

- It's time to return, Daniel. Back home, to the stars!

Star Catcher

A Short Story by

Nadia Eugene Jo

11 years old, United States

Native English Speaker

Age 10-13

Chapter 1- Five Star Business

The big, noisy crowd was still waiting outside the tightly shut door. They stared at me and other workers emptying huge bags. The entire store was suddenly full of lights, and the automatic doors slowly opened. Customers rushed in like a swarm of bees finding honey and threw at least two shiny stars into their shopping carts. I felt powerful as I took a look at the sign above the containers that read: Fresh new batches of stars delivered every Thursday at 9 am! More people jostled their way in screaming, ¡°Mine, mine!± over and over. As Mr. Milky Way expected, the star catching business was superb.

There were stars everywhere. People had waited outside the stores day and night just for these; it was psychotic. The cash registers were busy with so many customers with even more purchases of stars. On the streets, everyone was carrying stars back to their cars. The radiant light filled the entire city.

The customers informed us that they were using those stars as household pets. The family could play with it just like any other animal, which was an entertaining company. The children used it to snuggle with at night. The various usages for these stars made people want more of them.

The new technology, developed by NASA, converted the light from stars into ultimate resource of not only light, but also electricity and wifi. These stars had their own life spans and unique colors that changed. They jiggled around and, although they could not talk, responded to movement and showed emotions by changing colors. Everyone was amused with this discovery, and they wanted them to be sold everywhere. We simply did not have enough star catchers to meet these demands!

Chapter 2- The Wanted

The star catching business started off as a big group of volunteers. I was interested in this new opportunity, and decided to try it out. We went through a 3-month training course for this job, which included learning and experiencing space technology, zero-gravity training, and spacesuit equipments. Although it was tedious and hard work, it gave me more accomplishments to look forward to. After a review of the course material and being informed about the star catching process, we were hired and started catching stars like crazy!

First, I drifted around in space with bulky spacesuits on, then collecting stars one by one with a specially designed net. Its taut strings captured the stars and held them in place so they could not wiggle out of the net. Then, I put them all into large containers which teleported them back to the Earth, where workers labeled and packaged the stars. It was an amazing job to catch stars. With the growing profit, the company employed more and more workers. As a reward of our hard training and work, the company gave away one star to each of us. I looked at the bright, tiny object that was in my hands and thought of how much these little creatures changed our lives. The stars made everyonej's lives so much easier. Practically every single household depended on them for most of the gadgets that used wifi. We heard about the fun interaction between children and stars; apparently, they were great company. Moms were grateful that they didnj't need to pay electricity bills anymore.

I enjoyed the benefits of owning a star like other customers. Keeping Sagittarius as a pet was a special part of it. Sagittarius constantly moved around the house, trying to explore the different parts. It bumped into one of the sharp corners of the tables, and it started

flickering red and yellow. I figured that changing its color to red was its sign of pain. I walked up and carried it to the couch, then Sagittarius turned blue. I yelled, "OW!" because the star was very hot. I remembered from the training courses that the hottest stars' colors were blue. I made a mental note never to touch Sagittarius when it's blue again.

The alarm rang from my phone. I got up and saw that the company had sent another message to come back and catch stars. More and more stars were caught every day. They were delivered faster than we could blink. As the parts of the space that were "hunted" grew short of stars, our company moved out further to the unexplored space. It wasn't hard to do so because of the rapidly improved space technologies developed by NASA. This included teleporting and faster space vehicle transportations.

Chapter 3- Star Planter

Unfortunately, we soon discovered a fatal fault in the stars. They needed to be replaced with new bodies because of their short lives! Of course, this increased our sales even more, but the problem was about the solar system. More and more stars were taken away, making all the beautiful constellations disappear. People were upset by this situation, which was becoming worse every day.

The entire company soon held a meeting. We discussed how this issue was threatening a lot of elements like the solar system, the natural way of the environment, electricity, and most importantly, the people in the world. We couldn't stop the whole business, because too many people would lose jobs. After some careful consideration, I came up with a brilliant idea: return the stars for recharge.

We hired scientists from NASA to get their consultation. They informed that the stars were losing energy from their time away from the space. With this information, we made a plan to replace stars and recharge them for two months at a time. Using this plan, we set up a new route of returning stars and trading them for new ones.

At first, people were a little confused when we told them that we'd take their stars away, but soon understood after listening to our plan. A few weeks later, the new way had returned the original beauty and condition to the solar system. Every night as I came back on Earth, I looked up at the night sky. It was always sprinkled with myriad of stars glittering and sparkling. As I was staring, I thought of my new job: a star planter.

Inspiration from the Past

A Short Story by

Adelyne Huynh

18 years old, Australia

Native English Speaker

Age 14-18

In another corner of the universe many light years away, a blue sphere exists. Previously referred to by the beings that once inhabited it as 'Earth', the planet is one of many hidden gems of the cosmos.

From a distance it looks small and fragile, feeble even. But at a closer glance, the majestic greyish-white swirls covering its surface hint there is something more to this planet.

Thick, heavy clouds drift across the atmosphere, and the fading haze reveals brown lands surrounded by oceans of liquid water. The barren wastelands are pockmarked by dust-covered remnants of silver and grey structures, evidence of great civilisations that once flourished.

Small creatures, here and there, can be seen frolicking freely, oblivious to the absence of 'humans' – two-legged beings that, in brighter days, used to roam the lands, taking the world into their own hands, moulding it through sheer intelligence and drive.

But even they could not withstand the asteroid's impact.

Though the fated beings were able to foresee it from centuries before, it was an unstoppable force sent from the heavens that left the planet shaking for decades afterwards.

They desperately searched for means of salvation, but to no avail. Their knowledge, despite continually growing by the day, was still too small.

Those beings, along with their innovations and ambitions, were gone from the face of the earth in the space of a week: yet another form of life denied the rights to existence.

.....

It was moving faster than the speed of light.

As it paused every few billion miles, at times to avoid collisions with similarly hurtling objects, or to take full advantage of the surrounding energy on offer, its holographic-like image would almost catch up to it, before being promptly left behind again.

Countless aloof stars and distant galaxies dotted the surrounding expanse of empty space, engulfing the lone traveller in its powerful mixture of silence and splitting noise. It could sense the birth of a nearby star, and the death of another.

The raw beauty of the cosmos had no effect on it, however; it was homesick, and had been homesick for hundreds of years. A vague memory of the time when there was solid ground beneath its body momentarily appeared, before dissipating again.

It was all alone in an alien region of the universe.

After travelling for nigh on a millennium, it was undertaking the last of many missions bestowed upon it, a mission it knew was very important. And it was this knowledge that pushed it onwards, even as its companions were, over the years, destroyed by the unprecedented harsh conditions, or inadvertently veered off-course.

Never did it contemplate stopping.

.....

Monstrous, swirling dark clouds of gas, and blazing light being violently suctioned into a seemingly deep funnel of nothingness, betrayed the location of the wormhole.

It had finally made it.

Focusing its many radiation-shielded camera lenses on the intense destruction taking place before it, it scanned multiple images of the black-hole, seeking confirmation.

A series of muted clicks later, the answer it sought was given: according to its internal database, assembled by a team of technologists during a time long gone, this was the correct destination.

It lingered for a few seconds in the empty space preceding the black-hole's event horizon, acknowledging that its fate was entirely in the hands of the universe, before continuing onwards as instructed, towards the point of no return.

.....

“This is it, buddy. Don't let us down.”

Stepping out of the transcapsule, Edan strode over to the idle smartprobe – one of five robotic probes embedded with the new software developed by a joint collaboration between NASA and USRA – that had been entrusted in the care of his team more than five years ago.

After activating it and examining its external components thoroughly with the use of a scanning device, the young engineer performed a final verification

test on it, tapping into its internal computer database via a wireless silicone pad.

Overlooking a slight mistake in the smartprobe's system was not an option. Edan was aware that this last check-up could mean the difference between success and failure.

Forty minutes later, he rolled up the silicone pad and slipped it into one of the many compartments above his head. The smartprobe made a series of audible clicks and shifted its slight frame to focus its camera lenses on him.

Edan smiled. “Are you ready, Inspire 3?”

The smartprobe swirled its lenses around, and moved its large energy-absorption panels up and down in a manner akin to the underwater movement of fins. Its underside emitted a soft blue light, bathing the translucent stand it was resting on in an ethereal glow.

“Of course you are!” Laughing, Edan took out a cloth to polish the smartprobe's lenses.

“There we go. You look completely brand-new!”

.....

It took a few delayed seconds for Inspire 3 to register what had happened, and determine where it was in relation to spacetime.

The first thing it was recalled was that it had entered a wormhole, and had somehow survived the ordeal. A systematic interior scan revealed that it was still, thankfully, in one piece.

And as was predicted, its current location was a mere two light years away from the closest star: the Sun. After referring to an in-built mathematical model, it was also able to accurately estimate the Earth year.

So far, all had gone to plan. Now there was only one more instruction left for it to heed: “Number 201. Thoroughly investigate Mars and then Earth. If anything is found of particular significance to the future of human beings, leave all information in the SAFE ACCESS area for recovery.”

Thus it set its coordinates for Mars – a different Mars, four billion years from the past.

.....

Edan moved to obtain a clearer view of the Administrator of NASA.

“As you all are aware, on this same Tuesday morning, in the year 2814, there is going to be an asteroid impact which may obliterate life on Earth as we know it. Obviously, this is classified information, and again I remind you to keep it classified.”

“Now we are doing everything we can to avoid this from happening. No matter how many obstacles we face in the process... no many how many missions we fail... we will get there. We won't let what happened to the great dinosaurs happen to us – we can't let this happen. The future of our planet, and the lives of billions, will depend on our actions starting from today.”

A sombre silence swept throughout the large control room.

“Today marks our tenth mission. This mission will most certainly not be our last, but like the ones before it, we must assume that this one will be the

one. We must be meticulous until the very end. We cannot take any chances. I am placing this mission in your care, and will be watching its progress with great interest. Good luck and God's Speed!” Dr. Wright stepped off the platform amidst loud cheers.

Before long, people returned to their working areas, and the noise in the control room was reduced to localised murmurings. Placing a small earpiece attached into his right ear and activating the attached microphone, Edan – as Smartprobe Operations Commander – proceeded to monitor the status of Inspire 3, before moving onto the other four smartprobes.

Through the Flight Director's loop, where each flight controller was connected through a communication thread, a launch status check was initiated.

“...S-O-C?”

Taking a final glance at the five holograms before him, and the transparent tabs that displayed a variety of figures and symbols, Edan replied, “S-O-C is go.”

“Copy S-O-C. Thank you. Alright, let's get them in the air. Inspire launching is now ready to proceed.”

.....

As it approached Mars, Inspire 3 took multiple images of the planet. Within seconds, it had collated enough data to come to the conclusion that this ‘past-Mars’ was very different from ‘present-day-Mars’.

In a way, this planet very much resembled Earth, with its thick swirling clouds wrapped around a backdrop of blue.

Strangely enough, upon closer inspection, Inspire 3 was able to discern multiple gleaming purple objects orbiting ‘past-Mars’, in the same way artificial satellites surrounded Earth in the present day.

The superprobe could also detect irregular patterns of radiation being emitted from the general direction of the planet. To prevent these signals from interfering with its computing system, it self-activated ‘silent mode’.

It was in this way that Inspire 3 avoided detection by the intelligent beings which had inhabited Mars four billion years ago, beings their fellow neighbours from Earth would have referred to as Martians, had they still remained.

.....

Edan had never worked so hard over the next few months. He eventually stopped returning home, finding that sleeping at his working area was much more convenient and less time-consuming.

All five smartprobes were nearing the edge of the solar system, their speed gradually increasing as they approached the heliosphere. If all went to plan, by the time they entered interstellar space their speed should equal, if not outmatch, the speed of light.

As they passed a number of planets and their moons, data was rapidly streamed back to Earth, each Inspire smartprobe providing scientists with information relevant to their unique instructions.

The mission so far had gone remarkably smoothly, mostly due to the automated intelligence of the smartprobes. But Edan knew that he couldn’t rely on their prompt decision-making capabilities alone.

Every now and then, he would flick open the tab that detailed the physical status of each of the smartprobes, even though monitoring their health was the Smartprobe Surgeon’s speciality. Each time he would take particular note of the health of Inspire 3.

“You’re doing great, Inspire 3. You’re doing great.”

Today, Inspire 3 had sent in images of Eris, along with an unexpected image of itself through an extended camera lens. It looked blue and glowing, and seemed to exude a joyful radiance, as if it were embarking on its first holiday.

This image was the highlight of the day, and Edan had an electronic copy attached to the side panel of his working space.

Staring at the photo now, a sudden heaviness of heart made him sigh. If he weren’t surrounded by his colleagues, he believed he may have given into tears there and then.

He only hoped that the smartprobe, with which he had formed a special attachment, would survive for a long while yet.

.....

There was no mistaking it. There was life down there, and Inspire 3 was eager to explore. For the first time in a long time, it was no longer alone.

Through its sensors it could distinguish the larger pockets of heat on the planet. Entering the atmosphere, it was able to simultaneously test the composition of its surrounding environment and manoeuvre its body towards its chosen destination. Although the heavy haze prevented it from relying on visual cues, its sensors would be sufficient in determining its surroundings.

In less than fifteen seconds, Inspire 3 was a mere twenty kilometres from the surface of Mars. As the mist cleared, it was finally able to take its first glimpse of the planet's surface.

The world unfolding before it was unlike anything it had ever seen, and yet strangely familiar at the same time.

Hills and plains blanketed the surface, and a river snaked its way between rigid plants resembling the first trees of the Devonian Period. The zoom feature in the smartprobe's lenses allowed it to detect exotic magenta flowers dotting the grimy red earth. Briefly it descended, expertly landing on the surface of Mars to obtain a specimen, before ascending again.

Before it, an intricate network of dome-shaped city roofs gleamed like a multitude of gems, signifying civilisation.

Halting its ascent and moving across the Martian sky, Inspire 3 proceeded to approach the city.

.....

They had made it! Edan's heart was wildly thumping from pure adrenaline; surely the taste of success, and the thought that they may be on the verge of breaking frontiers, was the greatest feeling in the world.

Although communication between Earth and the smartprobes was no longer possible, the fact that they had made it to interstellar space was more than enough.

Search probes had already been dispatched to the SAFE ACCESS area on the Moon. Whether they found anything or not was another matter. Even so, those waiting in the control room back on Earth would be hopeful til the very end.

.....

Before long, the smartprobe realised it was not alone in the sky.

A colossal spacecraft, covered in forever-changing symbols, was rising from the centre of the Martian city.

After a while, Inspire 3 observed a second spacecraft ascend in a similar manner to the first. It made sure to recording the events occurring before it.

Venturing closer to the city centre, it watched on as an endless stream of winged creatures, with a physiology strikingly similar to those of human beings, entered openings in a third spacecraft.

In a split second, Inspire 3 made the decision to attach itself to the exterior of the third spacecraft, as the large unit rose from the ground and proceeded to escort its passengers away from Mars, into outer space.

.....

There was something down there.

After locating the SAFE ACCESS area, the search probes had drilled a minute hole into the surface of the Moon with the use of a powerful, fine laser.

Shining a light into the hole, the lead search probe could discern a slight blue gleam. Relaying this discovery to its companions, it gave the command for excavations to proceed.

After hours of painstaking work, the probes carefully extracted the worn object from its grave.

A large proportion of the smartprobe had disintegrated over time; nevertheless, its major structural features were still intact due to the highly preservative and durable material used in its production.

The lead search probe promptly disassembled the front of the smartprobe, removing from it a small microchip, before reassembling it again.

It then issued the command to return back home, carrying with it the remains of Inspire 3.

.....

Back on Earth, news of the smartprobe circulated around the NASA Headquarters.

Edan could not believe it. He was already in the control room when the search probes discovered the body of Inspire 3, and was one of the first to gain access to the classified files derived from the smartprobe's collection of images and footages, alongside other obtained data. There was also a strange purple flower stored in one of its compartments, which had already been dispatched for testing.

Living beings on Mars in the past, and their attempts to search for a new home...? It was truly overwhelming.

Over the next few days, Edan experienced a range of emotions. As others around him began to plan and speculate over their search for the exoplanet that, according to Inspire 3, saved the lives of the Martians billions of years ago, he mourned over the death of Inspire 3 and mulled over its remains for hours on end.

Eventually though, he found strength in Inspire 3's courageous venture into the unknown and as the importance of Inspire 3's discovery hit home, his spirits lifted.

“There's hope for the future now, for all of us! You did it, buddy!”

.....

And so the search for the exoplanet began.

In a decade, humans will have discovered its exact location

In fifty years, they will have visited it more than once, and made contact with the many different beings inhabiting it.

By the end of the century, they will have saved their people, and much of their own planet.

Inspire 3 inspired us all.

Not One of Ours...

A Short Story by

Prannoiy Chandran

16 years old, Singapore

Non-Native English Speaker

Age 14-18

“NOT ONE OF OURS...”

He adjusted the lever slightly. A few hundred miles above his head, the huge orbital mirror adjusted itself by a few centimeters, and the computer registered this movement. He made some final calibrations, and then turned away from the control panels.

“Done with your mirror, Greg?” his partner asked.

“I’m done, Lenny, we can go back now” Gregory Mills answered. He started packing up their equipment. Their job there was done.

Meanwhile, Leonard Stark readied the rover that had been assigned to them for driving around on their assignments. They piled the equipment into the back, and settled into the front seat, Greg taking the driver’s seat. He turned the vehicle around to head back to the Biosphere, but Lenny nudged him.

“We finished ahead of schedule,” Lenny said. “I’m sure we can afford to explore for a while”.

Greg hesitated, but decided to give in to his younger and more adventurous partner. Besides, he too wanted to explore this desolate rock they were in.

They had both grown up listening to news broadcasts about the progress of the colonization of Mars. The terraforming of the Red Planet was supposed to take decades to complete, and even now, it was still in its early stages. Greg and Lenny had met in university while studying engineering and they had both applied to be part of the Mars colony upon their graduation.

And now, here they were, having left Earth just a few months ago on a large ship that had carried, besides engineers, biologists, doctors and even civilians who had volunteered to become a part of the first human extra-terrestrial colony. The journey had been very quick, thanks to the hyper-drive in the ship’s engine. Faster-than-light technology was being hailed as a technological miracle that would make humanity a truly interstellar species.

On Mars, Greg and Lenny were in charge of setting-up and repairing the various machines that helped to terraform the planet. They had just finished recalibrating two of the orbital mirrors that redirected the Sun’s rays at the polar ice caps, causing them to thaw and release liquid water. The poles were maddeningly cold, even worse than on Earth; both of them were wearing thick protective suits. It still boggled their minds that they were on another planet, and so they relished any opportunities they had to simply drive around and enjoy the sight of the looming cliffs and the red soil. They made sure not to wander too much, though; fuel was a precious resource, like just about every other resource. Raw minerals were being mined from nearby asteroids, but everything

was still regulated. After all, using resources with abandon had been the mistake that had forced humanity out of Earth in the first place.

“Look!” Lenny exclaimed, pointing at the sky. A streak of exhaust was making its way through the atmosphere.

“CFC rockets” Greg said. “They release CFCs into the atmosphere to thicken it. They were banned back on Earth, but here, they’re actually necessary”.

Terraforming technology had been present on the planet for years now, as the environment was progressively synthesized to make it slightly more bearable for human life. The terraforming programme was based on years of innovation and hypothesizing that had taken place on Earth. For example, they drove past factories situated far away from the colony, which existed for the purpose of releasing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere to thicken it. Also, every batch of new colonists had a sizeable number of biologists, who were responsible for introducing new kinds of plants into the Martian soil, which was being made increasingly fertile due to liquid water released from ice. Right now, only mosses and lichens could be found growing there, but the plan was to have massive forests one day to provide oxygen.

“Look” Lenny exclaimed again. Greg turned to where he was pointing...and nearly crashed the Mars rover into a nearby rock.

“Careful!” Lenny yelled. Greg stomped on the brakes, and stared in disbelief at the tire tracks in the sand. They were not from any Mars rover; the rovers left much bigger tracks than that. These were thinner, and had odd grooves.

“Where did those come from?” Lenny wondered aloud. As engineers, the two men knew every single kind of machine on the planet at the moment. Most of the terraforming machines were stationary, and the trucks used to transport them to different locations had massive wheels. No way could it have been one of them. And rovers were out of the question, too.

“We should check this out” Greg said, and started the rover, driving in the direction of the tracks.

After a few minutes, their communicator crackled to life. The stern voice of Director of Engineering, Dr. Norman Forster came over the communicator.

“I first assumed the two of you were simply going for a short drive. But you’ve driven for miles now. What are the two of you up to? You think there’s a lot of fuel here?” he demanded.

“Director” Greg explained. “We saw some odd tire tracks, and we are checking them out”.

“Odd tire tracks?”

“I think a photo would be better” Lenny said. He used the rover’s rear-facing camera to take a photo of the tracks, making sure he included the tracks left by the rover for comparison, and transmitted it back to base. After a few seconds, Dr. Forster came back on line. “Where did those tracks come from?” he almost shouted. He tended to be overbearing when something was uncertain. After all, he had the headache of coordinating the entire Engineering Department on Mars.

Greg winced. “That’s what we are trying to find out”.

“Very well. But make it quick”.

“Thank you, sir”.

The tracks went on for about a mile more. Then Greg sat forward in the seat and squinted. He could see a shape in the distance; it appeared to be stationary. More importantly, the tracks led straight to it. Their culprit was right ahead. He slowed the rover, and drove towards the object cautiously.

When they came close enough, both men frowned in confusion. This was unlike anything they had seen before. The object was spherical, with tire-treads, like the ones found on tanks, except these were much smaller. From the dirt accumulated on them, it looked like this vehicle had been driving over rather rocky surfaces. What looked like a periscope protruded from the top of the gleaming blue body, and it was pointing towards a large boulder. As the two men watched in fascination, a small tube emitted a red beam of laser at the boulder, causing small pieces of rock to fall down. The laser retracted, and a robotic arm took its place. It picked up the boulders, and the two of them were struck by how life-like the hand was; the fingers moved with such flexibility. As it worked, various buttons on the body lit up, and the probe emitted a low hum, barely audible.

Surrounded by massive boulders and cliffs, and with red sand everywhere, the mark of a planet still largely untamed by man, all that desolation, this was a truly bizarre sight.

“What exactly is that?” Greg whispered, bewildered.

“I know NASA had a couple of space probes which explored Mars many years back,” Lenny whispered back. “Unmanned exploration, before they sent the first colonists. Think it was called *Viking*. That’s the closest I can think of, because its collecting rock samples, just like the probes did. But they haven’t had that since the first colonists. We

don't have any space probes exploring Mars now. A few in Alpha Centauri, but not here!"

"We should take a photo," Greg suggested.

His hands were moving to the camera button, when the periscope abruptly swiveled around to face them. They covered behind the windshield, hoping the probe wouldn't target them with its laser. Greg slowly moved his hands to the controls for the frontfacing camera and started taking pictures. The probe moved closer to them, and for a few seconds, the two terrified engineers found themselves staring into the lens of the periscope. Then, there was a flash of light, like a camera taking a snapshot.

The Biosphere was a marvel of modern engineering. A huge glass dome which was home to the three hundred or so Mars colonists, it had taken nearly two years to build, using materials shipped from Earth and from nearby asteroids. Fresh supplies were delivered weekly. The top of the dome was covered in solar panels. Mars did not get as much sunlight as Earth, but every effort had to be made to save energy. Besides, green energy had become dominant in Earth now; thought the planet was on its way to desertion. Energy also came from fusion reactors built nearby.

Inside the Biosphere, colonists milled about, performing their various duties, or simply relaxing. It was a busy place, with homes and labs, and people who had specific missions and objectives to meet. There was a lot of experimentation going on to pave way for large-scale colonization, and different Departments ran the whole operation. There were also designated leisure areas where families could spend time and scientists could catch up with friends after a long day at work. It was a busy, but overall, rather pleasant place. Trees grew in plots of soil brought from Earth to provide oxygen. Inside the safety of the dome, the colonists could move around freely. But they were not allowed to go outside without wearing orange protective suits and specialized helmets. Mars was still a long way from being suitable for large-scale human population.

The Mars rover drove through the main street, and stopped in the parking lot next to a huge lab. Greg and Lenny climbed out entered the building. They headed straight for the Control Room.

The cavernous room was always a mass of activity. Everybody was busy, either running around or monitoring the terraforming on one of the several computers. Dr. Forster was standing at the front of the room, looking intently at the largest screen in the room, a massive holographic screen, which displayed data on all the terraforming machinery currently on the planet. He was a large man, bespectacled, and one of the loudest people in the colony. He appeared to be directing the technician operating the screen to

display the schematics for each machine. As usual, everyone in the room could hear his instructions, even if they were meant for only one person. He turned when Greg and Lenny entered the room.

"You boys look flustered," he observed. Neither of them replied.

The Director frowned. "Well? What did you find?"

"Err..." Lenny said, scratching his head, "I can't really remember".

"Can't *REMEMBER*?" the Director yelled, and everyone winced. "Is this some kind of a joke? I authorized the two of you to use extra fuel to follow those tracks, and now you tell me *you can't remember*? You want to be deported back to Earth, Stark? I heard the air there is getting worse everyday. Perhaps that will wake you up!" Lenny hung his head in shame. Dr. Forster turned to Greg, hands on his hips. "Mills? Anything?"

Greg tried to shake off the cloud of confusion in his mind, uncomfortably aware that all eyes in the room were turned to him. A hush had descended on the Control Room.

"Well, I remember following some strange tracks, and then driving back to the Biosphere, but in between, everything's hazy. I can't explain it".

The Director threw up his hands in disgust. "My most promising engineers, and now you are either drunk, or have selective amnesia. Did you at least bring the memory card of your rover's cameras? It could tell us something".

"I have it" Lenny said, rummaging in his pocket, and pulling out the memory card which he handed to the Director.

The card was inserted into the main supercomputer, and the contents were displayed on the holographic screen. The technician enlarged one of the photos. Everyone's attention was transfixed on the screen, which was displaying a high-resolution photo of a sphere with wheels and a periscope.

"What is that?" Lenny wondered aloud. He could not remember seeing such a thing before.

"Looks like a space probe" Greg said. He was vexed, too.

Dr. Forster turned to the rest of the room. "Can anybody explain this?" he demanded, gesticulating at the screen. "Anyone sent out a probe without clearance? I've never even seen this design before!"

Everyone shook their heads, with several saying "Not one of ours". More photos were displayed one by one, displaying the bizarre piece of machinery, and the tension was rising with each photo. Nobody could offer any explanation on how this probe happened

to be on Mars. Greg and Lenny could not offer any explanation, either. They were still trying to remember what they had seen during that period which of time which was missing in their memories.

“Look at that boulder” one of the engineers said, pointing. “In the background of the photo. The hole looks like it was made by a laser, and there some pebbles around it. We could try to find that”.

Dr. Forster cleared his throat, and all eyes turned to him. He spoke calmly, but the apprehension in his voice was unmistakable. “Mills, Stark, follow me. We are going to follow those tracks and find that boulder”. He mentioned a few more people he wanted to follow him.

The group promptly left the building and for the parking lot. A bulky man in a security uniform sidled up next to them, carrying a large rifle.

“What’s that for?” Dr. Forster asked.

“Security” the man replied. “I’m in charge of making sure you come back in one piece”.

“This is a scientific expedition, no weapons”, Dr. Forster snapped. “You think we’re going to run into armed aliens on something?”

“You don’t *know* for sure what you’re up against...well, your loss,” the security officer muttered darkly before walking back to the lab.

Lenny moved towards the Director. “Maybe we should bring him along” he whispered. The Director snorted derisively. “You’re that scared of a space probe?”

“We don’t know *what* it is, or *what* it did to our minds, so-”

“Just get in the rover, and show us where you saw it, Mr. Stark. If we find it and it attacks, we simply drive away”, the Director sighed.

Lenny walked away unhappily, and sat down next to Greg.

The boulder was just as they had left it, with a hole blasted in the centre, and some leftover clumps of rock at the base. They crowded around it, trying to gather any clues, but there were none. Greg and Lenny still could not jog their memories. They stood around, frustrated. What had happened to their memories?

“Let’s follow these tracks”, Dr. Forster said, pointing at tracks leading away from the boulder.

The piled back into the rovers, and followed the fresh tracks, with Greg and Lenny taking the lead. While they followed the tracks, Dr. Forster took out his communicator to ask the other department Directors if they knew anything about an unmanned space probe on the planet. When they all answered in the negative, he opened communications with Earth, and also found out that none of the national or private space agencies had sent out an unmanned probe to Mars.

After a few minutes, they reached a cave formed by jagged rocks. The tracks led into the cave. They disembarked, and cautiously entered the cave.

The place was dark, but a low hum reverberated along the walls. One engineer turned on a small torchlight, and the group moved slowly through the cave, feeling the walls to stay on track.

They turned around a bend, and Greg, who was in front, suddenly came to an abrupt stop. There were muffled cries as everyone bumped into each other.

“Mills”, Dr. Forster said, sounding annoyed, as he made his way next to Greg. “What’s the meaning of –?”

He broke off, his jaw dropping. Around him, everyone gasped or cried out in astonishment.

They were facing a huge chasm, which had been converted into an underground silo, by...God knew what. The chasm was bathed in harsh lighting from massive lamps embedded into the ceiling of the cave, and the floor was covered in machinery of all shapes and sizes. There were spheres with tire treads, triangular machines with flashing lights and many other kinds of machines they had never seen before. Small, cube-shaped objects flew around the room. None of them could figure out what was allowing these to fly. They had never seen this kind of technology before.

Dr. Norman Forster turned around to look at his team. He was no longer the authoritative Director of Engineering. He looked terrified.

“This...” he broke off and swallowed. “This...is not from us. None of our departments could have been responsible for this. The people back on Earth couldn’t have done this. I honestly don’t know what we have just stumbled on”.

One of the flying cubes suddenly swiveled in mid-air and flew towards them, as if it had sensed their presence. They tried to move away, but it was difficult in the narrow space.

There was a lens on the cube, which focused on them. Everyone stared into the lens, not daring to move.

Then, there was a flash of light, like a camera taking a snapshot.

A New Home

A Short Story by

Frances Narain

18 years old, United States

Native English Speaker

Age 14-18

A New Home

Home; such a strange concept. Home can be defined as a dwelling place, or rather an emotional bond between yourself and an environment. I remember the day I came here, the day I left the place I had known as home. That place is now over 62.1 million kilometers away, no distance you could travel by automobile. I suppose it is truly remarkable to live in the Martian colonies, especially after all of the challenges we have faced. The information brought back to earth from the robotic investigation launched in 2018 gave scientists a new understanding of mars and it's potential. This gave way to the first mission carrying humans to mars, which landed here in 2047.

In the years following, space travel became faster and more efficient due to advances sparked by ideas of Harold White that were originally proposed in 1994 by Mexican physicist Miguel Alcubierre. These new technologies lead to increased traffic from both Russian and United States spacecraft. After several voyages to the red planet, a decision had been made to create a small colony on the surface. Several nations cooperated to begin planning for this feat of science and engineering, for once the world seemed to come together and agree.

Several years ago, the transition from fossil fuels to nuclear power was completed. Initially, the Martian colony was developed as a station to bury nuclear waste transported from earth. These voyages became necessary as people had started becoming increasingly more uneasy about nuclear waste. That is where I came in; a nuclear engineer with a doctorate in planetary sciences.

The day I made the journey from earth to mars is one I will never forget. I sometimes cannot help but smile when I think of myself so cautiously boarding the shuttle. I was very quiet and very intimidated. It was high school all over again; me the nerd and everyone else on the craft were the type of jocks who could probably throw me to mars if they wanted to. I tried to conceal myself behind my notebook attempting to dodge their condescending stares. I finally found my seat, 37A, though clearly worn due to the fact funds were short and they had been recycled from airplanes, I was pleased to have a window seat. I sunk into the faux leather chair and tried to battle my claustrophobia. Aside from my nervousness, I chuckled to myself in pity for whichever one of the engineers who would be sitting next to me, for I cannot travel more than a few blocks by taxi without becoming extremely sick.

My humor was suddenly stifled as a tall young man in a plaid shirt and Bermuda shorts mumbled a few words to me.

"Would you please repeat that, sir?" I asked

"Is this 37B?" He smiled and pushed his glasses up on his nose.

I was shocked, thoughts raced through my mind. Words jumbled together or would not come out so I nodded furiously. I was embarrassed to say the least, and pressed my forehead against the window to try and avoid eye contact. I slowly turned my head to face forward once again. I occasionally glanced at him through my peripheral vision and noticed a small Star Trek lapel pin on his collar. Instantly I became more comfortable around him and sat back in my chair instead of sitting crouched into a ball.

"Prepare for takeoff." the commanders' voice rang clear over the intercom.

The last time I had flown was many years ago sitting next to my parents smiling at them excited for the journey ahead. Caught up in the nostalgia I smiled up at the young man next to me and he gave me a confused look. I quickly looked away and buried my face in my hands.

The rocket engines turned on and we began to lift off the ground. The speed increased steadily and the journey had officially begun. The sheer pleasure of exploration quickly wore off as the nausea set in. I shuffled through my jacket pockets searching for my prescription medication but could not seem to locate the small orange pills. I tilted my head back, closed my eyes, and began to breathe deeply. My effort was to no avail as I could feel my stomach churning. There were two options here; continue to act cool and try to psych myself out of it or to empty out my satchel. It appeared that trying to mentally stop myself was not going to work, so I began pouring papers and miscellaneous knick-knacks out of my little blue bag. Along with the heap of things tumbling out of my bag fell two tiny orange pills. The relief was unsurpassable as I quickly gulped them down.

When I regained my composure I glanced around at the mess I created in the fuss. The man beside me was either appalled or completely hysterical, I couldn't tell. Doodles and equations littered the floor below me. Using my hands to shovel the mess back into the bag, I noticed that papers were not only all over my area of the floor, but his as well. I tried to use my foot to grip the papers and pull them back to me without him noticing, but after a few minutes of me floundering around in a pointless attempt to gather them, he bent down and scooped them up placing them onto my lap.

I looked back out the window to see the earth slowly moving away from us, we had not passed through the atmosphere quite yet, but already, earth seemed so far away. Cars no longer looked like ants, to compare size they were more like amoeba. I pressed my cheek up against the window in an attempt to look upwards to the boundless space we would soon be entering. I could see the man next to me trying to see out the window as well so I leaned back and used my sleeve to wipe the smear from my face off the thick glass-like material.

"This is so amazing, don't you think?" He asked in a soft charismatic tone.

"It really does." I replied, "So do you know where you are going to be stationed when we arrive?"

"I am relatively certain I will be working in the nuclear lab. What about yourself?"

"The same area I believe, so if we are going to be coworkers I suppose I should know your name."

"Leland, and you?"

"Chandra, like the x-ray observatory."

A loud snoring noise interrupted our short conversation. I could not help but smile as Leland explained that the one to blame for the noise was his younger brother. His brother, Gerrard was a chemical engineer who recently graduated college with a PhD. We continued to chat until a dense white gas began to flow through the vents and the seats reclined. Training had prepared me for this, but I still started to panic. Even with the new technologies enabled on this craft, the flight time would still be roughly sixty-three earth

days, so it was procedure to knock out the passengers with a gas that virtually froze the human body for an allotted period of time. This gas operated by slowing the heart rate and keeping our bodies in a type of sleep paralysis until we neared the destination.

The time went by quickly in a dream state where reality became meaningless and my mind was filled with everything and nothing at the same time. I dreamed of home. I dreamed of those brisk fall evenings where the golden leaves would give a satisfying crunch as I stepped on top of them in my burgundy suede boots. I dreamed of discovering the secrets of the red planet. I dreamed of listening to low budget Christmas specials on the television while drinking thick hot chocolate out of my Stephen Hawking mug and watching the three marshmallows bob up and down in the cup.

Slowly the dreams began to fade to black and I opened my eyes for the first time in a little under two months. It seemed like I was hallucinating, I could blink, but the rest of my body would not move. I was supposed to be prepared for this, I passed the tests back on earth, but this was nothing like expected. I closed my eyes and tried to relax as much as possible. After a few minutes I could start to feel my fingers again. I remember I was dreadfully hungry; I would have eaten literally anything. I was concerned that I was the only one who had woken up, but I began to hear a series of grunts and yawns coming from the head of the shuttle. I was now able to move the majority of my body. The air was stale, and other than the occasional cough, I have never experienced such utter silence. A series of noises began to sound, different scents were periodically released through the vents to stimulate olfactory senses, and lights would pulse as a series of alarms to wake any remaining sleepers.

The chairs began to fold back into a right angle and I could smell the starchy bitter smell of sourdough bread. As Leland stretched to wake up, he bumped my arm causing excruciating pain as if my entire body was bruised. I rolled up my sleeve to reveal that, in fact, much of my skin was discolored. Luckily an attendant was passing by at the moment and she went to the back to get some cream for my arms. Apparently this happened frequently due to being too stressed at the beginning of the sleep period causing blood to slow down too quickly. When she returned, I was given a small sponge ball and was told to periodically squeeze and release it to get blood flowing through my limbs once again.

I turned toward the chilled glass window and could catch a glimpse of Mars in the distance. It contrasted like an uncut ruby against the flowing black silk of space. The blue marble we had flown from was now beyond out of sight by the naked eye from where I was positioned. The remainder of the flight would be tedious, but nonetheless, I was thrilled to be on this craft floating weightless through the dark abyss of the universe.

The loud screeches of pneumatics roared through the cabin as a sign we were arriving close to the docking station in orbit around the planet. The station was unique; rather than being brought from earth, it was built on mars. As an added bonus it had been the world's largest collaborative effort since the dawn of mankind. Any country that valued science was a part of it in one way or another. Both my mother and father worked for NASA at the time, my father an engineer and my mother a physicist. Though they had an opportunity to live on mars, they wanted to stay on earth, and I have always resented that.

Previously a small red dot, Mars now took up most of the view. Docking was a difficult process; precision was assisted by magnets in the front of the ship attracted to ones in the station itself. It was like a round of bumper cars, knocking into each other many times before it could pass and lock in place. Once the ship was secured, a slow applause began to circulate through the cabin until it became a roaring chant. This was the first time in history this many people had been sent to Mars at one time and was cause for celebration. What was once the background of science fiction and fairy tales had become reality. Passengers were unloaded in groups determined by the station they would be working in on the surface.

The massive set of three doors unfolded sending out a burst of refreshing cool air into the ship. I began gathering my belongings hurriedly and stood up. I immediately sat back down because the muscles in my legs felt as if they had turned to mush. I rubbed them rapidly and wiggled my brittle toes around inside my boots before making an attempt to walk again. I used the seat in front of me for stability as I stood up the second time. The whole time, Leland was laughing hysterically. I gave him a spiteful glare as I swung my bag over my shoulder. Leland leaned over his chair and smiled at Gerrard who was fully enveloped in a game of Tetris.

"Time to go already?" He smirked as he turned off his game and slipped it into his pocket.

The three of us were joined up with the others in our team; Andrew, Marie, Stephen, and Carl. Andrew was a tall, heavyset man who appeared to be around the age of 27. His large thick-framed glasses consistently slid down his narrow pointed nose. He stood with his arms folded condescendingly and stood proudly in a manner asserting his place as the alpha male. Marie seemed to be shy; her raven black hair was tied neatly into a bun. She was Asian in ethnicity and avoided eye contact with us as much as possible. Stephen seemed to be quite amused at the way Andrew acted and had the perfect balance of responsibility and animation. His wavy blonde hair was matted from the voyage and he could not stay still. He smiled as he periodically shifted his weight from foot to foot occasionally bobbing in place. Carl was calm. His dark skin was covered in goose bumps though he held a jacket in his arms. It seemed like he was ignoring us all, I think he was just trying to focus on what lies ahead of us.

The time came when we were escorted off the ship in an orderly fashion. The step down was a moment of pure ecstasy. The floor shifted from a dark navy carpet soiled with dirt to an immaculate white tile floor. Everything in the station was pure white. It reminded me of snowboarding without goggles, it was blinding beyond belief. We were then told to stand still on a small red X as UV rods rotated around us killing stray bacteria that could have come from Earth. The glowing purple tubes danced around us humming and completing their jobs.

We boarded the white shuttle that would take us to the surface with haste as excitement flooded our minds. The inside of the shuttle resembled a monorail. A loud voice boomed over the speakers telling us to hold onto the chrome bars in the center of the craft very tightly.

"They always tell you to hold on but you really won't fall." Gerard chuckled as he leaned against the wall. The thrusters began to push us forward and the force knocked Gerard over setting off a chain of laughter.

When we arrived to the base of the dome holding the colony, we pulled into a sort of garage while the door shut tightly behind us, and the door in front of us opened. The sound created by the massive weight of the door being propelled open was similar to the sound of a world war siren.

After we stepped off the craft onto the red Martian dirt, a small vehicle drove up to take us to our living quarters. The temperature was cool, not surprisingly because mars is significantly colder than the coldest parts of earth. This was counteracted by the fact our colony was under a large glass-like dome, which held in the heat of the sun.

Our living quarters resembled a hospital with small little rooms lined up adjacent to one another in a narrow hallway. Each group was designated to one hallway and a shared common room. I shuffled my feet along the terra cotta colored floor up to my room and placed my finger on the recognition panel. The door creaked open to reveal my new home. It smelled like a hotel, fresh and inviting. The last thing I remember was flopping down on the bed and closing my eyes.

I woke up to a pink sky outside my window, so foreign, not at all like the blue one I was used to. As soon as I woke up, I could tell something was wrong; something just did not feel right. I sat up and combed back my hair into a long ponytail before going out into the hall to see if anyone else was awake. I opened my door and began walking to the sound of voices coming from the common room. As I turned to close the door behind me, Andrew ran past me. He looked worried and my heart turned violently inside my chest. I briskly continued to move towards the common room hoping I would find an answer.

Leland and Gerard turned to me as I walked in; my smile quickly faded as I saw their white expressionless faces. Marie motioned for me to come over and sit by her. As I sunk into the tweed couch, she placed her hand on my shoulder.

"Do you want to hear the good news or the bad news?" She sighed.

I couldn't say anything. Words wouldn't come out. I was petrified. She went on to explain how scientists on earth were so consumed with the mission at hand they had failed to keep watch for deadly asteroids. Asteroid 1999 RQ36 was thought to have nearly no chance of hitting earth, but it, and several others trailing close behind it were set to impact earth causing essentially an apocalypse. The good news referred to the fact we, the Martian colony, would not be affected. Earth however would never be the same. Earth had no protection whatsoever; the probability of surviving was exponentially small.

Andrew had been running outside to observe what was occurring via the telescopes in our laboratory. I sprung up and did the same followed by my coworkers. I peered through the small scope facing toward earth. The asteroid was visible, a frightening mass of rock hurdling toward what used to be home. Time seemed to stand still and my skin was quaking with fear. I cannot describe the surrealism of it all; everything was silent. So dreadfully eerie, the utter silence was enough that I could hear the heartbeats of those around me. The air weighed as heavily as lead pushing down on

my shoulders and bringing me to my knees. The sheer helplessness I felt was enough to bring forth tears.

If earth were destroyed, would that mean I served no purpose here on mars? Or rather, would it mean that by some glorious move of fate, I was spared from the destiny facing the rest of my species. All contact would be, most likely, permanently severed between here and earth.

Leland gripped my shoulder in an attempt to reassure me. The asteroid plunged ever deeper into earths' atmosphere until it disappeared from our view. Moments later, a horrifyingly spectacular wave of light beamed across earth stretching out into the darkness of space. Shock waves of debris scattered throughout earth as many smaller chunks of rock pelted the earth. The earth was hit with such velocity dust and ash plumes rose past the atmosphere. Our small colony was all that remained of the space program. The damage was immeasurable as of now, but to say the least, the outcome did not look good. We could very well be the last of our kind. We had to carry on our mission in the name of science. For the memory of what was, and the hope of what would be, for the better of us all.

Reach for the Stars

A Short Story by

Sheron Lin

14 years old, United States

Native English Speaker

Age 14-18

A man was sitting on a bench in the auditorium, his back to the wall and his eyes closed as if in contemplation or meditation. His hair was gray, but not quite dull. It shined as if there had been silver strands of silk woven into his scalp, ever reflecting the dim incandescent bulbs that shone from the far reaching ceiling above. No one sat beside him, perhaps out of fear or the general crowd psyche that pervaded too many minds—if someone is already alone, by all means *let* them be alone.

Not that he minded, of course. The old man preferred silence, a welcome alternative to the chaotic onslaught of flurries and hurries he could still remember as clear as daylight. His head was resting on the cushion behind the seat. The auditorium was crowded with enthusiastic youth groups and schools that had come to tour a new astronomy exhibit. He didn't care much for the noise, but if that was what comfort came with, he was fine with anything.

Just as his hands had rested atop his stomach and his minded drifted away to sleep, he was awoken by the sharp sound of a young voice.

“Excuse me.”

At first, he hesitated. Perhaps if he ignored the youngster he would run away to find another amusement. And yet there was something in his voice that seemed to almost plead of attention. The old man lifted his arms in a stretch, sighed, and took a glance at the lad in front of him.

A pair of inquisitive eyes looked up. Eyes he recognized.

“Mama! Look!”

The wide-eyed boy pointed to the screen in front of him. The thin plasma screen displayed an image of the International Space Station, along with the current crew of astronauts working away on repairs. A monotone announcer was declaring the latest renovations taking place to an unhearing audience.

A thin, fair-skinned lady in a plain white canvas apron sighed and smiled as her son ran up to tug on her dress. “Yes, I know. NASA's hard at work.”

“Not just NASA. Russia, China, Japan—it's like the whole world's working away,” he informed her. “And guess what, they've even got this kitchen for freeze dried food—made in vacuums—and a whole gym decked out with treadmills and equipment. Did you know these guys spend more time exercising than anything?”

“Well, I'd sure like to visit the ISS someday,” his mother mused.

“Mom,” the boy suddenly asked. “Do you think I can ever become an astronaut?”

His mother was taken aback by the question. Nevertheless, she humored him, “Kenny, you can do anything you want. Reach for the stars.”

“Then I guess I'll invite you up there when NASA hires me,” he said with such a degree of determination that made his mother laugh.

He smiled at her tinkling voice.

“I’m sorry young man, could you kindly repeat that,” the old man asked. “My ears aren’t what they used to be.”

The boy wasted no time. “Are you one of the scientists?”

“What if I was?” inquired the old man.

The boy flashed a look of impatience, but it was so quickly replaced with his passive expression of curiosity that the man couldn’t be sure if he had only imagined it.

“What would you like to ask?” the old man replied.

“No, no, no! You’ve got it all wrong!” the boy admonished his mother.

She sat by him around their glass kitchen table, covered with scratches from years of wear. Her hair lay limp upon her scalp, empty shadows where there had once been vitality. Her eyes were equally dull, peering at him with only the slightest stringency. “Don’t talk back to me,” she scolded him, but with a tinge of weariness.

Her son recognized this. “Mom, you don’t get it. This is a once in a lifetime chance.”

He stood up, as if doing so might prove his point further. “Open your eyes! This is not what I want to do with my life. Maybe you were okay with living in a tiny little apartment, making barely enough to pay the rent, and having to wear the same clothes year after year while everyone else in the civilized world’s going off buying iPads and smart phones. That isn’t my life, though. Didn’t you used to tell me I could do anything I wanted?”

“It’s not safe, though. How can you trust that these people are going to be able to keep you safe? Who knows, they could be trying to take advantage of us. Having you heard enough stories about companies binding kids to contracts that they can never escape? Aren’t there enough instances of—,” his mother fought back.

“Reach for the stars. You used to tell me I could reach for the stars. Follow my dreams, like you did when you moved here with Dad,” he interrupted. Tears were beginning to glisten at the corners of his eyes but he bit them back.

“Kenny, it’s not that I don’t want you to do what you want with your life. I just worry for your safety. Running away with these academy people—it’s just too good to be true. How can a company like NASA possibly provide a full scholarship, no less, to one of the world’s premiere training institutes? I just have a bad feeling about this.” His mother rubbed her eyes.

“Mom, you still don’t understand,” he said, quickly losing his patience. “It was submitted through our middle school as a project. Winners compete nationally. All I need is a chance. There’s nothing to lose—it’ll only be for a week and I could go to college. Isn’t that what you always wanted?”

“I can’t let you leave. It’s too early. Your work, school...” she trailed off.

“School can wait. I know I want to do this. This is my only chance to become an astronaut. I know I can make this work,” the boy pleaded.

The mother looked at him carefully. “Kenny—.”

“Don’t call me Kenny,” he said bluntly. Turning on his heels, he stomped away.

Only when her son had left the kitchen, secured away in his locked bedroom as he always was after a fight, did the mother look up. Her eyes fell on the letterhead for his invitation to the Air Force Academy. She picked it up and began to tuck it into her apron. Suddenly, she stopped in her tracks and, with a sigh, trudged upstairs to meet her son.

“It’s just a simple astronomy question. I was doing research for a school project,” he said in a blur of words that the old man could barely comprehend.

“Well, then, let’s have it.”

“We need to have several opinions for this poll we were conducting. Anyway, what do you feel is most important for aspiring astronauts?” he giddily asked, before catching himself and regaining his composure.

The old man raised his eyebrow, but made no other movement. “Well, from what I know, get good grades, sleep a lot, and stay healthy.”

The boy rolled his eyes. “No, I meant up in space. What do you guys need to do to train the astronauts?”

“Well, why didn’t you say that earlier?” the old man laughed. “As far as I know, training is basically getting your body in tip top condition. Strong muscles, endurance, all of the stuff you youngsters these days don’t seem to need to much of. Just look at you, big boned and all.”

The boy self-consciously looked about himself. “Anything else?”

The old man glanced about, searching for an unnamed entity. “There are some other things...”

“Mom! You should’ve seen me! I was amazing!”

The young man enthusiastically relayed his stories to his mother over the phone. She made no noise other than the occasional chuckle or, “Yes, yes, very good.” In other words, as far as he was concerned, she was soaking up every detail of his adventures.

He couldn't have been more excited in his life than he was the first day at the Academy. Donned in his freshly pressed uniform, he'd watched with awe at the rows of students congregating on the campus grounds, rushing to classes, or simply tossing around a Frisbee. Most of all, he was fascinated by the professors and their enthusiasm for astronomy and physics. Never before in his life had he heard such passion when regarding space flight and black matter.

And, as were most things in life, the dominoes quickly fell. The first four years he had spent as an undergrad passed by too fast for him to count—there had been too much going on. No time was left to chat with his mother or anyone else who wasn't immediately on his mind. In a few more years he was graduating with his master's degree and plucked straight from college as a candidate to the Johnson Space Center—the training center for all American astronauts. It had been euphoria for almost months afterwards.

This past week had been spent testing out the various equipment as part of his orientation to the program. Since he was still considerably younger than most of his colleagues, his strength was still prominent in the tests, a welcome bonus.

“I was like nothing you've ever seen before. Literally. I had the floor, Mom, especially during that centrifugal force machine.” He didn't find it strange to be talking to his mother when his friends were on their lunch break, but he did find it a bit awkward how he tended to talk with her with the same informality he'd always done. It just felt a little out of place, now that he was a professional, technically speaking.

“I'm proud of you, Kenny,” his mother replied.

He winced at her use of his pet name. “Mom, could you please stop call me that. It's been, what?, ten years since I last asked? Is it so much to say—.”

“Fine. I'm proud of you, Ken,” his mother corrected.

Although he was glad his mother had listened to his opinion for once, he was a bit set back by her dryness. “You don't have to be like that, Mom,” he plainly said.

What that a snuffle he heard on the other end? He brushed it off, figuring it was just some static.

“Hey, Ken, coming for lunch?” one of his friends called.

“Yeah, I'll be right there!” he answered.

“Mom, I've got to go. Love you.”

“Love you more.”

“Tests? I thought I was all the machinery,” the boy said wonderingly. “Centrifuges, zero-G aircrafts, flight training...”

“Nope, you’ve got to have the right mindset. After all, you’ll be out in the great unknown for months, with no one but your cabin mates for company,” the old man pointed out.

The boy whistled. “Wow. I guess it would be a bit claustrophobic out there, especially when you can’t see your family anymore.”

The man thought about this. Then he remembered. “It’s not quite like that.”

Call me when you’re up there. I’d like to see the ISS someday.

Even though he’s complied with his wife’s insistent urge to keep contact up in orbit, the man had trouble making a call to his mother. Perhaps it was just that, knowing that his face would be broadcast around the world instantaneously, he found it a bit unsettling to still be a mama’s boy. He didn’t need another excuse for his cabin mates to make up jokes.

“Mission Control, do you read me?” his colleague was speaker into the microphone that would send their voices the millions of miles down to earth.

He peered through the tiny window at the view of the planet he knew so well. There was something distinctly uplifting about being aboard a space craft, and being able to witness such an astonishing sight. The earth looked peculiar to his eyes, vulnerable, and so lonely in the wild expanse of space. Long, lazy clouds drifted over its surface, and the continents looked like tiny specks of paint on a tiny marble that might fit into a boy’s pocket. It certainly didn’t appear to be the great big world he grew up knowing.

It was insane how much further they’d gone in the few year he’d been part of NASA. Not only had his close friends taken part on missions to Mars and beyond, but science had improved technology to the point that it was possible to colonize other planets. Even more exciting was the search for new, inhabitable planets. There were already a dozen or so Goldilocks out in faraway galaxies, and rovers had been sent out after them at incredibly high speeds they’d only recently been able to achieve. It was scary to think of all of the universe alongside his own little planet. You couldn’t help but feel insignificant.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?” another colleague drifted by.

Ken peered behind him. “Yeah. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

They both gazed through the window at the sight a while longer. This was one of the rare sessions when they had just finished up washing and had a tiny lapse of time in which they could slow down and appreciate the little time they had to spend so high above the world.

“If there was one person you could take up here, who would it be?” his colleague suddenly asked.

Ken couldn’t find his words. “I—I’m not really sure. You?”

He looked at the earth for a few seconds longer before answered. “My mother. Definitely.”

“Really? Why?”

“It’s not that I don’t love my family—they’re amazing and just about the best thing that’s ever happened to me, even better than this mission. But it’s just that she’s always been there for me. Even when I was growing up, she’d support me. Tell me stories. Encourage me to follow me dreams,” he reminisced. “You?”

Ken faltered. “Um, yeah. Right.”

He peered down at the earth with new thoughts running through his mind.

The boy was busy writing down the answers. His hands worked quickly, as if he was always moving. His eyebrows were perpetually scrunched in thought, and his eyes held a faraway look like he had a million thoughts running through his mind at once, each of them cancelling the others out.

The old man rubbed together his hands, callused from a lifetime of physical work. He couldn’t remember a day when he’d been perfectly carefree as a child. He could see that this boy was a lot like him—ambitious and willing to learn. He hoped the best for his future.

Finally satisfied, the boy looked up once more. “And I have one more question. How do most astronauts feel when they come back to earth?”

The old man opened his mouth, but found the answer hard to procure.

“Is there something wrong?”

“No, just...Actually, it really varies. There are two types of homecomings—luckies and unluckies...”

The man sat by the stack of photographs, unable to lift out anymore, but not because they were stuck together or too fragile to tear. Years spent perfecting his fine motor skills prevented any such accidents from occurring. Instead, he feared he would ruin them another way.

His face was streaked with tears. Although his wife had wanted to comfort her, he’d refused. He made sure she and the kids were out of the house, gone to a party at a family friend’s, before coming down here. The basement was where he’d instructed the movers to place the belongings. All of the dusty old toys, photographs, even his old school essays were all kept in a neat little box.

It had come as a shock more than anything. Since he had hardly even communicated with his mother after leaving for the final stages of his training, he’d assumed nothing had been wrong. Clutching his head, his body wracking with sobs, he forced himself to face the truth. She’d done nothing wrong. And yet his mother was gone.

When he'd come back, there had been celebrations. He'd invited his entire extended family to a homecoming feast. When his mother failed to RSVP or even arrive, he'd been more than a little annoyed. Never could he have imagined that she'd passed on, alone in bed, with no one by her side.

They'd cleaned out the house fast enough, but what was most unsettling was how everything she'd kept was still here. He figured she'd forgotten about him when they parted ways. As he sifted through the old childhood works, strange medleys of memories were called up.

Suddenly, he found something he thought he'd lost forever. Turning the thin sheet of lined notebook paper over and over in his hands, he stared, shocked.

"Mommy and me," the paper read. It showed a childish drawing of a space shuttle, with two people holding hands, and the moon underneath.

"Reach for the stars," he whispered, before a salty drop slipped from his eye and stained the thin sheet of paper.

"So that's it?" the old man asked.

"Yep, thanks for your help." The boy began to leave, packing his notebook away.

"Wait, one last question," he called. Inquisitively, the boy looked back.

The old man asked, "How did you know I was an astronaut?" His eyes were twinkling.

"I kind of guessed. You looked familiar," the boy admitted.

He laughed. "Just remember something. Reach for the stars."

"Is that a proverb or what?" the boy asked.

"Just something someone told me a long time ago."

The old man watched him scamper away, remembering a boy from the past.

A Planet of Ice

A Short Story by

Hera Wettergren

15 years old, Sweden

Non-Native English Speaker

Age 14-18

The cold hit Ariadne like a giant wave, forcing the breath out of her lungs and leaving her gasping for air inside the helmet. She checked the digital thermometer strapped to her wrist. 112 Kelvin. Taking a moment to mentally convert the numbers to the Celsius system used in Taurus Province, she reached the conclusion that the temperature was just above -160 degrees. And this was supposed to be the equator.

Behind her, her mother exited the spacecraft, looking very peculiar in a protective suit and helmet. ‘Nice view’, she commented into the helmet mike.

Ariadne groaned inwardly. Typical for her mother to pick the only positive thing in their surroundings to comment upon. Not that it wasn’t true. The view was truly formidable. The dominating feature was the huge, looming form of Jupiter in the sky, looking almost as though it were about to come crashing down into the glacier. Some distance away were the much smaller Io and Ganymede, both looking remarkably cold and grey. She had been told that the former would light up like a beacon during its more violent volcanic eruptions.

Then there was the sun; tiny in the distance. Ariadne realized that she could actually look straight into it, although not for a very long time. She thought wistfully of the Mars sun, which had at times been known to raise the temperature of the planet to 20 degrees Celsius, without any artificial help. It was unbelievable that this cold, pale dot was actually the very same star.

Beneath this celestial display, the European glaciers stretched out in every direction. Icy winds formed small tornadoes of ice and dust. There were no mountains or valleys; nature had not provided Europa’s surface with any variation to the endless ice. Every landmark in sight had been crafted by human hands: An antenna a couple of kilometres away, the huge cupola housing Europa’s only town and the smaller one containing the fishing area, and a scientific laboratory situated a good distance away from the cupolas, in case an explosion or similar accident should occur.

A few paces away from where Ariadne stood was a black, sleek vehicle, looking almost like a tiny copy of the enormous spacecraft beside it. She waited until her father had emerged from the craft as well, then began to make her way towards the vehicle. This was remarkably easy; Europa might be the sixth biggest moon in the solar system, but it was still just that: a moon, with a gravity to match its size. She could have jumped several feet into the air if she wished to.

The family entered the sleek vehicle through a double set of airtight doors (this being a figurative term, since there was no real “air” in Europa’s atmosphere),

and were immediately met by a short, corpulent man dressed in a suit similar to theirs.

‘Mr and Mrs Stewart’, he exclaimed, hurrying forth to shake their hands, ‘I’m Joe Roberts, governor of Europa. Do feel free to take off your helmets. I can’t say how *delighted* I am to meet you. And your daughter, of course’ he added, nodding in Ariadne’s direction. ‘Arianna, is it?’

‘Ariadne’, she corrected lifting the heavy helmet off her head. ‘It’s an old Greek name.’

‘How absolutely *delightful*. Now, do feel free to place your helmets on the table, but I advise you to leave the suits on until we enter the cupola. We never know when we might need to exit the craft quickly, and we wouldn’t want to freeze, would we?’

Or get fried by the radiation, Ariadne thought. *Don’t forget that*. She rubbed her temples, trying to get rid of the ache building up inside her head. Joe Roberts seemed to have the annoying habit of repeating the same words all over again.

‘We’re all so delighted to have you here’, the governor continued. ‘Goodness knows we’re in need of more doctors. And a surgeon, too’, he added, nodding in the direction of Alice Stewart. ‘So far we have had to rely on androids, if you will believe it.’

The vehicle was furnished like a modern living room, complete with a holographic screen and a bowl of fruit on the coffee table, the latter indicating considerable wealth. Ariadne sat back in an armchair and closed her eyes, shutting out the conversation. She had agreed to move to Europa when her parents had suggested it, but she was beginning to regret her lack of protest. This was one of the times when she wondered if her parents weren’t too adventurous for their own good.

Both born and raised in Scotland, Donald and Alice Stewart had married at a young age and been among the first people to emigrate from Earth to Mars who weren’t either astronauts, scientists or extremely rich. By doing this they had escaped the terrible plague that had struck the Earth a few years later and wiped out over 50 per cent of its human population before disappearing as swiftly as it had arrived. Of the five billion people who had survived, approximately one and a half had already moved to their red neighbour, and the governments of Earth decided to move the entire population of the planet to Mars in the next twenty-five of their years. Those nations that hadn’t already formed unions with their neighbours did so, and the SSC (Solar System Council, consisting of representatives from all countries) handed each union a piece of land on Mars to

divide between its nations. Needless to say, it was a chaotic business, and the SSC worked day and night to prevent a fourth world war, this time expanding beyond the boundaries of Earth.

Partly because of this, but mostly because they were both adventurous by nature and believed ten Mars years to be more than enough time spent in a single place, the Stewart couple had decided to leave their home in future United Republic of Great Britain (which was located within Taurus Province, owned by the European Union) and had sought permission to move to the only other inhabited planet in the Solar System: Jupiter's moon Europa. Being doctors, they had been welcomed into the small, scientific community, governed directly by the SSC, with open arms.

Ariadne consoled herself with the fact that her time on Europa would at least be brief. Cupola Town had a school, but she'd outgrow it before long, and attend one of the huge spaceship boarding schools that crisscrossed the Solar System loaded with students from both Earth and Mars; and a few from Europa as well, though they were a clear minority.

She left her armchair in favour of the great front window once the vehicle drew near the cupola, curious in spite of herself. She had seen pictures and 3D blueprints of Cupola Town, but that wasn't the same thing as seeing the place with her own eyes.

The outer gates of the cupola opened to allow the vehicle into a small, sealed chamber. Once the gates had closed a similar pair slid open in front of them, and the sleek, teardrop-shaped craft passed through them into the town.

Like in any other town, there were houses, shops, offices and warehouses along the streets, but at least half of the buildings of Cupola Town were actually greenhouses, filled with various trees and other plants. These were treasured more as sources of food than ones of oxygen; Europa's atmosphere contained a fair amount of the gas, split apart from the hydrogen in the water molecules of the glacier ice by the radiation emitted by Jupiter, and needed only heating up before it could be breathed.

The vehicle came to a halt in front of a small, pretty house looking as though it had been transported directly from the 21st Century. The Stewart family exited the vehicle along with Joe Roberts, studying their surroundings. The temperature was pleasant enough, and fresh oxygen filled Ariadne's lungs with every breath she took. Far above them towered the semi-translucent roof of the cupola, and through it she thought she could just make out the outline of Jupiter.

‘Here you are then, Mr and Mrs Stewart’, said Joe Roberts, nodding in the direction of the house. ‘I hope you will find it to your liking. Your belongings should arrive from the craft any moment now, so no doubt you will be busy for quite a while, but I would be *delighted* if you would all join me for dinner in, shall we say, five Earth hours?’

He gave them directions to his house and then re-entered the black vehicle, leaving the family to explore their new home.

The time passed quickly for Ariadne and her parents as they worked to create a nice atmosphere in the house, furnishing the empty rooms and installing various technical devices with the help of August, the small and rather rusty android that had belonged to the Stewarts since before Ariadne’s birth.

At Alice’s insistence, they watched the headlines of the Solar System News on the recently installed holo-screen before leaving for dinner with the governor. It was vital they know what was going on out there, especially now, when they had moved to such an isolated place.

The newsreader spoke Mandarin, but there were subtitles in English. Tomorrow it would be the opposite. If you didn’t speak either language you could use a translating device, but these were rarely needed. Whichever your native language, you had to master at least one of the two major ones as well, or you wouldn’t last long anywhere. English being her first language, Ariadne had studied Mandarin since kindergarten and spoke it almost as well, although she much preferred the English alphabet.

After assuring themselves that there was as yet no war raging in the System, the Stewart family left their new home and walked the short distance to the governor’s house. The cupola served as protection from both cold and radiation, allowing them to dress as they pleased, and of the three, Alice cut the most striking figure, dressed according to latest Mars fashion in a fur coat and hat. They were pretty, but naturally they were fakes; Mars had no fauna to speak of, and though there was animal life on Earth it was by no means plentiful enough for it to be legal to produce garments with fur attachments, or even to eat any meat that wasn’t artificially produced in a laboratory.

Dinner at the Roberts’ was a grand affair, with several other guests, though the Stewarts were the ones of honour. However, there were no other children or youths, and Ariadne soon found herself drowning in boredom.

‘Perhaps you would like to go exploring the town?’ Joe Roberts suggested once the final course had been finished, seeming to notice her discomfort.

‘There are several other youngsters in town, and I’m sure they’d be *delighted* to meet you. They seem to enjoy venturing outside at this time of the evening.’

Ariadne gladly seized upon the opportunity, thanking the governor before leaving the table. The street outside appeared deserted, but she could hear voices in the distance and began to make her way towards them.

Suddenly, a door opened to her left and a boy and a girl who looked to be about her age stepped out. They were dressed in protective suits, carrying helmets beneath their arms.

‘Hi’, the boy said catching sight of Ariadne. ‘Are you visiting the planet?’

‘No, my parents and I just moved here’, Ariadne replied, not really surprised that she had been recognised as a stranger. This was the sort of town where everybody knew everybody.

‘Oh, you’re that Martian, aren’t you? The doctors’ daughter?’ said the boy, stepping forward to shake Ariadne’s hand. ‘I’m Mike, and this is Chrissie’, meaning the girl, who had chin length blond hair and huge blue eyes that had a dreamy look about them.

‘Ariadne’, said Ariadne.

‘We were just stepping out for a walk, maybe to the fishing area. Want to come along?’

Ariadne glanced at the suits suspiciously. ‘You mean *outside* the cupola?’

Mike laughed at her expression, shaking back his auburn curls. ‘When you live here, you venture outside all the time’, he said. ‘You’ll get used to it, after a while.’ Then his smile turned teasing. ‘Of course, if you don’t dare, Chrissie and I can always show you the town instead.’

It was the right thing to say. Ariadne wasn’t going to let this redheaded boy and his silent, dreamy companion think she was a coward.

‘I’ll go get my suit’, she said.

The temperature outside the cupola had risen half a Kelvin. Not that the change was noticeable. Indeed, Ariadne felt even colder than she had earlier, and she tugged nervously at her suit to make sure it didn’t have any tears. She needn’t have worried, however. These suits were made of more or less the same material as the cupolas themselves and made to withstand most any natural force, except extreme heat.

‘Where on Mars are you from?’ Mike inquired as they began to make their way towards the fishing area.

‘Taurus Province, future UR’, Ariadne replied into her mike, feeling a small wave of home-sickness for the place she hadn’t seen for months.

Mike nodded. ‘I’m from Ireland, myself’, he said. ‘Real Ireland, not the future place. My mum and moved here a couple of years after my dad died, as soon as they stopped the quarantine. She’s a fisherman’, he added.

Ariadne didn’t have to ask how Mike’s father had died. All of her friends on Mars who hadn’t been born there had lost a parent, sibling or other relative during the plague on Earth. She shuddered involuntarily.

‘I was born here on Europa’, Chrissie said, speaking for the first time. She had a quiet, lofty voice. ‘I was the first child ever to be, and I’ve never left the planet.’

Ariadne halted, shocked. ‘*Never?*’ she repeated, staring at Chrissie in disbelief. It wouldn’t have been a big thing if this had been Mars or Earth. Ariadne herself had never left Mars before coming here. But Mars had a real civilisation, a natural climate in which humans could survive and an artificial one that was really comfortable. Mars wasn’t bathed in radiation and it had a community which consisted of more than the 200 people that inhabited this isolated moon.

Chrissie smiled a small smile at Ariadne’s expression. ‘People tend to react that way when I tell them’ she said. ‘They say Europa is a godforsaken place that was never meant for humans. But isn’t the same true about Mars?’

‘No’, Ariadne protested. ‘Or yes, it might have been in the beginning, but Mars has changed since then.’

‘*We* have changed it’, corrected Mike. But we don’t belong there, not really. We were meant for Earth and no other planet.’

‘Meant by who?’ said Ariadne sceptically.

Mike shrugged. ‘God? Nature? Does it matter? The point is that we had a planet that suited our needs perfectly, and we destroyed it completely. So what do we do? We occupy another planet, one that isn’t as perfect but not destroyed by humans either, and we alter it to suit our demands. But didn’t you see the news earlier? About how those little life forms on Mars are not as indifferent to our invasion as we first thought? Well, I say that’s just the first step. We’ll destroy Mars just as we destroyed Earth, and then what?’

‘That’s when we die’, said Chrissie simply.

They walked along for a while in silence.

‘You know, you guys have a funny way of making me feel welcome’, Ariadne said eventually.

Mike gave a short laugh. 'These are plain facts, Martian. Get used to them. Besides, they should put your other problems into perspective. Make you appreciate life more.' He waved a hand vaguely at their surroundings.

Ariadne considered this a moment, then snorted, sending a stream of static through the mike to the others. 'Right then', she said. 'Show me what to appreciate. If the human race is heading straight towards destruction we might as well have some fun on the way.'

A huge grin spread across Mike's face, and even Chrissie's mouth turned up at the corners.

'Your word is our law, Martian', Mike said, making an exaggerated bow. 'Where would you like to start?'

Hera Wettergren 2012