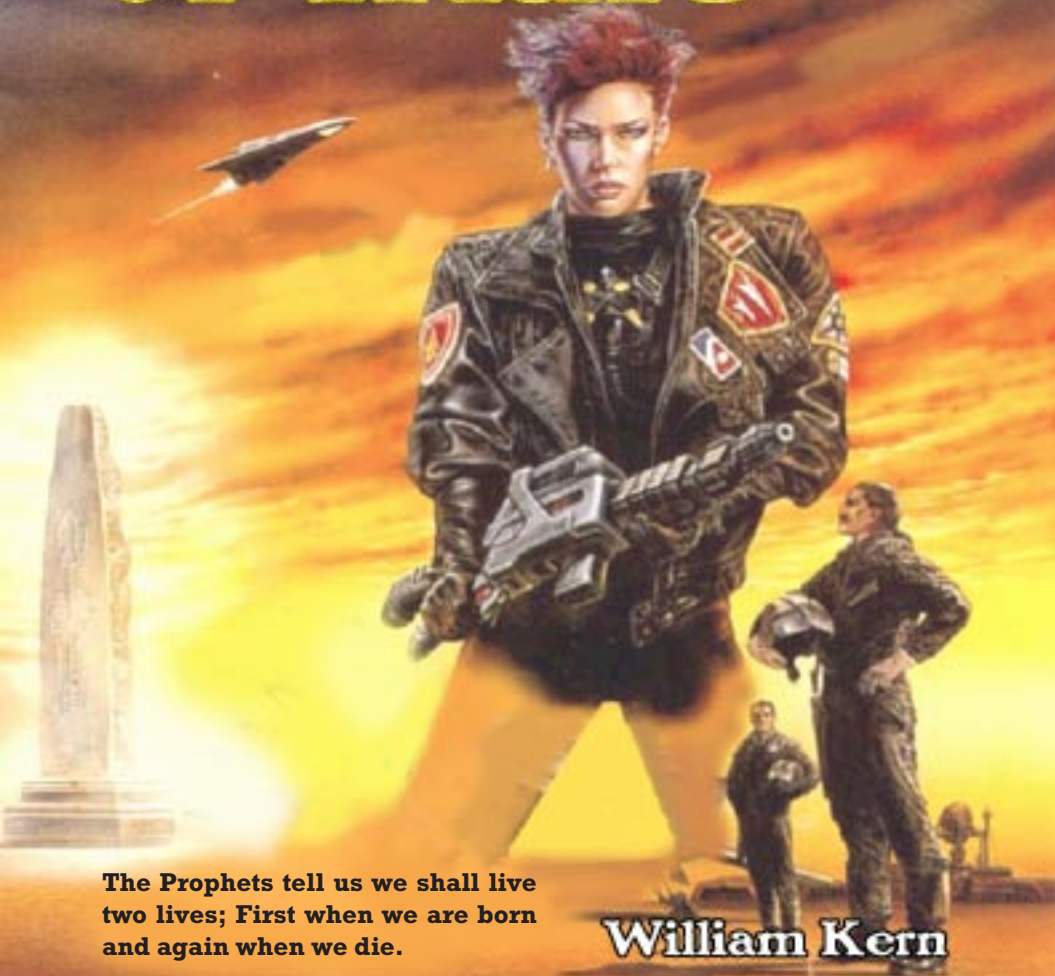


# The Windmills of Mars



**The Prophets tell us we shall live  
two lives; First when we are born  
and again when we die.**

**William Kern**

# The Windmills of Mars

**Behold! I shall reveal a mystery;  
We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed!**

I couldn't remember if those long old gone people had names if any other people have names if I have a name watching the pink cherry blossoms under a cold heavy morning sun bowing its head low. I remember pink petal tongue and quiet curling coyote eyes, dark and soft, and I would laugh and lean in close and she'd smile and goddamn she was so beautiful and I don't remember more than her hand on mine her little hand like she'd break like all the voices and bus engines would break her into tiny pieces but later a thousand years all crammed into one night she was still whole still all there and murmuring against my skin and smiling and she felt so soft and her eyes cut me open like ripe fruit like soft flesh like soft boiled eggs and goddamn goddamn she was so beautiful sometimes I couldn't tell where she ended and the rest of the world began.

# **THE WINDMILLS OF MARS**

The Windmills Of Mars

By

William Kern

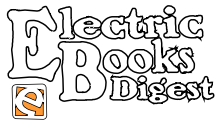
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*“The Windmills of Mars reads like a Philip K. Dick plot rendered by Jack Kerouak. If you enjoy dystopian novels as much as I, you will relish reading this one more than once.”*

August “Auggie” Ousdahl ; Manawa,WI

*“I read it cover to cover in one sitting, then turned to the beginning and read it all again. A great tale!”*

DWP; Tampa, FL

*“I spent most of the holiday weekend reading and didn’t stop reading The Windmills of Mars until I had finished it. It’s a great novel, very visual and thought-provoking, probably even more interesting to me on a personal level, along with your epitaph to your mother and comments in your letter, because I have long wondered about the ‘death experience.’”*

L. Walsh; Damariscotta, MA

*“A strange book. You can begin reading on any page and it will carry you into a part of the story. I take (Windmills) with me everywhere, particularly when I travel. Sadly, I’ve worn the cover off.”*

J. E. K.; Phoenix, Arizona

*“There are a dozen or more unusual stories all centered about this one enigmatic character and all woven into a compelling common theme. The Windmills of Mars is certainly the most visually descriptive book I’ve ever read. But the book isn’t about death; it is, rather, about rebirth and the antihero’s haunting memories of his previous life (which include, of course, his previous death). This is the only book I’ve ever read more than once.”*

Jan de Voort; Battle Creek, Michigan

*“I was a little put off by the run-together sentences until I realized I was listening to an infant becoming aware of life and sentience, then I was captured by the story and the characters. I felt as if I were there, as if it were me experiencing the dream. Spooky.”*

C. Finke; Vincennes, Indiana

*“I’ve read Windmills at least twenty times. I loaned my first copy to my girlfriend and she won’t give it back. I think she has also read it several times. I’d like to order another copy. I’d like to see del Toro make this into a movie, and I would also welcome it as an ebook I can read on my Kindle.”*

T. W. T.; Bronx, New York

Author's note:

The discarded debris of the past lies upon the frayed carpets of our minds until we find the courage to sweep it away.

I don't want people for one second to think Richard's story is my own disguised. It was always meant to be a work of fiction, even if it is based loosely on real events in either my own life or the lives of others. There is no real message as such; it is just about all the strange and invisible and largely unexplained things that happen in anyone's life: grappling with our own enigmatic windmills, vague memories of past lives, out-of-control present lives, and thoughts and hopes for something better in a future life.

Everything that happens in this tale happens in 10 months, from the time a boy is born dead to the time he is revived and is taken home from hospital to the time he receives his "soul" ten months later. This is birth and death and rebirth as remembered by a breach-born infant. I'm not saying everything happened to me personally, but it's stuff I know all about.

My life is much more interesting and happy than anything I describe in *The Windmills of Mars*. I can't say the manuscript is based on anything I've done or I'd ruin my life and destroy my reputation and the reputations of many people I love and cherish. All I'll say is that it's a personal voyage through the world of dreams and memories because that's what I know about. I grew up with the dream of death and rebirth and retelling it here has enabled me to get rid of a lot of rubbish in my life but, while the telling has exorcised many long suppressed demons, it has awakened legions more.

This is a tale of three interwoven lives lived by a single entity in a cosmic second.

William Clifford: Kern — 2012

They say in hell is an Eternal Fire,  
Yet, it does not burn all sinners alike.



# THE WINDMILLS OF MARS

## PROLOGUE

*“Time is the substance from which I am made. Time is a river which carries me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger, it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.”*

—Jorge Louis Borges

### HOW BRIGHTLY WE BURN

Stretch sensually. Inhale. Exhale. Settle into exquisite dreams that don't exist when we manage to untangle our minds in the morning.

How brightly we burn in our time. How brightly! But was the Architect who struck this fire so derisive as to extinguish the flame forever at the final trembling exhalation?

The heavens burn with the fires of a billion stars that, one by one, explode into darkness. As above, so below, we are admonished. Inhale. Exhale. Burn. Oxidize.

Oh, how brightly we might burn if we could but believe we might burn forever. How brightly! And might we not? The mighty kings of old believed that, once their fire faded here, they became stars of the heavens. And once the fire of their star failed in heaven, they became again men of Earth.

Can it be so?

There is just this much fire. The Architect can hold it all in one hand and it wouldn't weigh an ounce.

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Every star, embraced by a zillion cubic miles of blackness will burn brightly for an appointed time and die.

Inhale. Exhale. Burn. Die.

Hug the pillow and tug the comforter over your shoulders. Settle into the senseless dreams that confound us so when we manage to untangle our tangled thoughts in the morning.

Morning. How brightly it burns! Light streams through an open window; the fire of a single star just this far from exploding into a trillion shards of darkness. But, how brightly it burns in its time. Oh, how brightly!

*What is the speed of darkness?*

The trees shed their burning autumn coats of many colors, drop them to the ground in rustling heaps, there to vanish, and slumber through the silent winter of gloom. Will we sleep as well in our own silent winters, I wonder.

Inhale. Exhale. Sleep. Burn.

The mystery of our self-extinguishing fire lies in the force it doesn't use; its ability to find its way to the far side of the Architect's multiverse while, with irresolute ambivalence, unable to comprehend the Architect's complex formula—that stultifying equation of zeros to the billionth power—a part of us simply stands sullenly and watches the fire explode into darkness.

Yet, how brightly we burn in our time!

Can it be by accident alone that we are here, wherever it is that we have fallen? Can it be that our fire made its way across light years of elsewhere only to discover the portal opened upon little more than a murky swamp?

One cell creature, burning brightly with a fire it could not feel, could not understand. Inhale. Exhale. Eat and be eaten. Burn and Die. Swim or sink. Transform. Transmogrify. Transmigrate. Transmutate. Trance... .

Tiniest of things seen only under a microscope, burn-

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ing with defiant fire, seeking the dry land, reaching for the wide, imperious sky, streaming one by one into the vast burning forest, coiling and gleaming one upon the other in shafts of light until they are lost in the greening shade. Wind and rain did not perplex them. Scudding clouds borne by burning air, hurrying shadows beneath, did not perplex them.

Is that what we were? Have we come so far from the dim shadows of the forest that we can no longer remember how brightly we burned there; storm and dust forgotten, the corroded wheels of time all broken and laid aside?

Or were we never that? Were we more? (Why can't we remember?) Or Less? Or nothing at all even now? Was there always only the Architect's Fire burning brightly in the immortal furnace? (And why can't we remember?)

We have sprinkled the flame with holy water; not to make the great flame greater, but to make the greater flame less in a vain attempt to comprehend it. The failing light tenders no terror within us. Our understanding fails proportionally to the fading glow. It seems natural to let go the fragrance of the Architect. (Why can't we remember what It smelled like?)

Alpha and Omega brightly burning.

From those to whom fire is given much is expected. Inhale (but remember to turn away from the smoke). Exhale (but remember to cover your mouth). Lean toward the light (but remember to shade your eyes). Don't look too deeply into the past lest you discover there something you wish not to know.

Keep the faith. Remember the covenant. Hands off! Don't touch! Mustn't pry off the lid to see what's inside. Ix-nay, Pandora. Taboo. It's either something dreadful or it's nothing at all. In either case, we lose a little more of the fire.

Believing without a shred of empirical evidence, is what

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faith is. And, so, we leave the lid untouched. The fire fades and we pretend not to notice. Each day the depth of our vision is diminished. Darkly through the glass we see the veil is coarse and heavy; woof and warp tightly loomed.

Dimly we perceive that it is a dream, a phantasm of troubled minds like a disease we have caught from others somewhere along the way, singing hosannas in a dimly lit room smelling of candle wax and spilled sacramental wine.

Men of dark cloth seeking fame and acclaim on the quick roads to glory bid us to leap headlong into the baptismal pool if we dare and, once in, we wonder if we should get out while we still can.

But can we?

Little do we understand that water extinguishes fire when we are coaxed into the crystal pool. Little do we understand the words uttered darkly that we will emerge different, changed from what we were when we plunged thoughtlessly into its unknown depths. What life was left beneath its rippling tides?

How much of the Original Fire was quenched there? And what did we become when again we set our feet upon dry land? We understand the significance of immersion only later: Now we must believe what the men of dark cloth believe or to hell with us!

Why do men of dark cloth believe they can improve the Lux Aeterna by dousing it with holy water? What was the true meaning of their words when they told us that, once we were bathed in that divine water, we would not seek the empty world again? What was so wrong with the Fire and the World that they had to minimize it so?

Simple hopes and dreams of humankind are skewered on the barbs of reasonable doubt. Is it a dream? And are we brave enough to face the pale rider waiting just beyond the reach of the snarling watchdogs? Are we brave enough to

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leave the wane, unhappy ghosts of departed friends and lovers to whatever fate awaits them, our old, blind hands groping for some small joy that does not vex our minds?

One door closes; another opens, said the men of dark cloth. They saved the secret door for last and jealously kept it for themselves. History will damn their death-cold lies and expose them for the cruel mad demagogues they are.

Is it but a dream that wounds our hearts day upon day, lifetime upon lifetime, defying reason, dashing the hopes of believers and skeptics alike?

Unfathomable mystery, this one unquestioned Miracle, encompassing every attribute of the Architect, power within itself, the whole greater than any part, omnipresent and in its own light higher and wider than heaven. It is more than we can even imagine, this incorporeal being, who, in the infinity of space, perceives all things as One.

We struggle toward the Light, seeking everywhere the true commandments, the eternal power that binds everything into the One.

And find it not.

And so we invent the dream, the myth, the Miracle to sustain us in our anguish at having not discovered the endless joy; gathering here only a shell, there a pebble, here a fragment of bone, there a parched page of scripture, turning them one by one and expecting to find a message inscribed on the bottom: *Made By God*.

And while our attention is diverted thus, the whole truth flees from us into the vastness of the cosmos.

We are like bandits, leading two lives in a vain attempt to hide our true selves from the never-sleeping eyes of a fearful warden, the gatekeeper and the celestial accountant who knows our name, age and every sin the men of dark cloth insist we have committed.

Men of the dark cloth have made of us wildeyed sorcer-

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ers seeking to sweep away the cobwebs of their ancient sophistry to wage war against Chaos. They point at us with trembling, frightened fingers and mock us as madmen who will inherit nothing less than the everlasting Fire.

That which we thought was light is merely the shadow of something we cannot see. That which we believe is life is but a desolate mirage that will desert us at the final hour to leave us the poorer for our trust. What can it mean? The throbbing anthill with its thousand eyes, the terrible sky with its billion lights, all to be dimmed and crushed under the scourge of the lasting Fire. What does it mean?

Birth, the manifesting of intelligence into flesh on earth, is nothing more than the beginning of death. Life! We dare not let it languish! We dare not indulge in Passion's Despair! Birth and life and death are driven to their final night before Time's merciless and unforgiving scythe and all the while the chapel bell peals a mournful tocsin. Who could have dreamed it, and what does it mean?

The tools we have forged outlast the men who use them, and what does it mean? How strange that inanimate things should outlast us. What in the world does it mean? This tiny grain of sand that bears us relentlessly about the sun in trails of electric mist will one day burn in the fire that gives it life, and none living shall outlast it. How brightly shall it burn! And what does it mean?

The Great pyramids have outlasted their builders by sixty centuries. The words of the prophets have prevailed twenty centuries after they were spoken. What does it mean? Why did they bother to tell us at all?

Those who follow the Architect's Law say we have no need to know. It is enough to simply believe it has meaning after all. I am troubled by their veiled words and decrees. It seems unreasonable to simply believe. Shall I not learn, one day, that heaven is nothing more than a middling dream,

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without substance, without promise?

Men of dark cloth, convinced that if they remove their hands from the Light it will dim and fade and flicker and fail forever—as if their hands alone sustain that Fire—stand stoically, eyes glazed and fixed upon some distant horizon we cannot discern, and recite their rote message: “It is enough to simply believe. How can you doubt His power from whom all blessings flow? World without end. Amen. Amen.”

And, Oh, their words trouble me greatly for they raise more questions to be answered, but are answered not by any of them. By their incompleteness, they have stolen my faith that, once, even Despair was powerless to destroy.

Is it but a dream in the mind of a fitful sleeper? What will happen when it awakens? Have we gone astray from the Light, from Truth, from the path that leads to Completion? How shall we now return to the crumbling walls that sheltered us from the lie when the walls are no more to be found and the lie is greater than truth ever was?

Forgive. Forget.

We forgive and forget and, in forgetting, remember but vaguely how brightly we once burned. Through all the abyssal depths of space we are blown as dust motes by a cold, dark wind we cannot feel, driven by a music we cannot hear while Hope creeps about our feet like a hungry cat.

Gods of gold. Gods of clay. Not one to lend an ear to misery and discontent. Cold crucified arms outstretched to embrace cold silence, cold air, empty room. There is no fire in the image there on the altar. It is the bleakness of the fathomless sea; ice of the barren Arctic. Its color is fair but the fire was not struck in the image and it cannot, does not, will not, hear our lament.

If the Architect is anything at all, it is indifferent. It has other stars to spawn, other bones to pick. It yawns and settles into a mad dream of tomorrow, shrugging off today, uncon-

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cerned how slightly we burn. How slightly these days. How slightly.

Here now! What is that millennial beast who trudges drunkenly toward Jerusalem to be born, its hour come 'round at last? How brightly it burns in its time!

See how brightly it burns! It moves like fire within fire there before me, its deathless torch arching madly above, exalting all weakness to power, whispering with such faith that even the elect must be deceived.

How brightly it burns, Promethean fire all around, scorning all before it. "*Take this splendor into the New Age I shall command,*" it wails. "*Carry it into the land I dare not tread.*"

How brightly burns the torch as, passed from hand to hand along the timeless corridor, it transforms the dull to keen, mean to gentle, lumbering to swift.

But it is the wizard behind the curtain, blinding all with parlor tricks only slightly more seductive than those whose torch is failing in the long desolate hallway behind. It is a thief in the night, beckoning all who would follow to become kings among men, gods among the profane; higher, taller, stronger, wiser, infinitely illuminated.

And see how brightly it burns. How lovely the flame, promising comfort and succor to all who would yield to its promises.

Ah-ah! Hands off! Do not touch for this, too, is forbidden. Mustn't pry off the lid to see what is inside for fear of everlasting death in, of all things, the ever consuming fire. And so that lid, as well, remains unprized.

We are led by first one steed and then the next and it is forbidden to ask the name or destination of any. Heaven or Hell? *Quo Vadis*, Horsemen of the Apocalypse?

No, no! Do not ask. It is forbidden. It will be enough to simply believe.

Needle point of fire in the ruined abyss below; remote,



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minute, sends a subtler message to those who care to listen, holds more significance to those who dare to see than all the darkness that seeks to blot it out, yet cannot dash the passions of a lifetime.

I think, therefore am I?

How brightly we burn in our time and when the fire is gone so, too, all memory of this world we leave behind; our souls in our mouths, tasting of dampened ash.

From that lonely depth comes the Eternal voice, into the gulf beneath whence all the fire had vanished, scudding like a ship before the gale, while all around surges the mighty sea-sound of sighing rushes, one vast ebb and flow of peace, beyond earth's pain, so calm, so quiet it seems the wet nurse song, the deep soft breathing of the universal fire into the rekindled mind of man.

As I listen, that sweet voice becomes an invocation moving like fire in light among the thoughts of heaven, transforming the mortal self-soul flame into immortal consciousness.

Is there not one among us who can translate to music this long dark fight for truth? Is there not one among us to touch with beauty this long battle for the light, to grant some small victory for the spirit of man?

That which neither eyes nor self-soul can see seems doomed to defeat and is yet unconquerable, streaming through countless time nearer to the stars once exclusively claimed by the blind, blood-emboldened Caliphs of old.

This is the most we believe: the consciousness of man, released from the soul-self at death, might once more burn in heaven.

We catch the fire from those who went before, the bearers of the torch, whether of the lie or of the truth, who could not see the goal toward which they strained. We catch their fire and carry it only a little way nearer the veil. But there

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must be others who wait for it; those who will carry it onward, perhaps endlessly without reward.

Is there no epic ballad for those who strove for light but could not dream even of the victory they longed so to win? No ballad for the prisoners of the lie who handed on the torch from age to age; who, step by step, drove back the night and grappled, year on year, for one more glimpse among the stars of Sovereign Fire? No paeon for those who, searching inward, saw the flame dissolving into a new abyss, and strove to build and to rebuild our squandered world?

Dreamers of dreams are all faded now, grist for the mill of heaven. The rusted wheels complain and slow in their orbits. Time is ending, the wheels of heaven grinding to a halt. The appointed time seems nearer than ever before, darkly foretold by dreaming men of dark cloth.

Builders of our hope, the healers and binders of wounds, who, while tyrants drench the world with blood can, in the faint, small crackle of a flickering hearth, grapple with death like Heracles to save one frightened, wounded child; knowing, even as they do, that the children are doomed for there is no one to kiss their sunward lifted faces, no beneficent eye to adore them.

And what does it all mean?

Is there no song to touch this living universe with ultimate light, the glimmer of that great fire which over our ruined altars yet shall break in pure light to deliver us from greater terror than even Lucifer knew?

In the gloom of waxen tapers the dreamer lifts up his eyes to whatever gods might listen, pointing to the skies through the wilderness of Time and Space while the quivering organ rends the darkness.

But the dreamer finds no lamp unto his feet, no Balm in Gilead, no guide to lead him forward toward the splendor from which (he was told) he sprang; to which (he was prom-

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ised) he would return.

The truth he seeks lies at his fingertips, unexplored, ignored while the dumb half-circle of the choir inhales deeply, awaiting the prompt for the first note, each voice jealous only of the voice beside it.

In the chapel vault chanted hymns ring on the heavy air while luckless errant kneeling monks and pious nuns imprisoned there sing their vespers orisons; inhaling, exhaling, burning in their appointed time and dying without so much as wondering why or what it all means, or to whom they vow allegiance. They give no voice to that and are mute.

By what name shall we conjure the Messiah to restore us to faith, to bring us into heaven and show us the way to Light and Truth? Adad, Marduk, Adonis, Aesclepius, Apollo, Dionysus, Heracles, Zeus, Alcides, Attis, Baal, Buddha, Krishna, Hermes, Hesus, Horus, Osiris, Serapis, Indra, Ieo, Issa, Jupiter, Jove, Mithra, Wodin, Prometheus, Quetzalcoatl, Salivahana, Tammuz, Thor, Zoroaster?

To whom do these gods answer; to whom do they grant favor?

Is it a dream that in those dark dominions beyond this mortal coil we shall find life everlasting? Is the light we behold in our eyes alone? Could the Djinn conjured by Aladdin while rubbing that old patina-stained lamp promise less? Is that promise, like the sun-fractured rainbow, a mirage held together by falling mists? The certainty of the universe and the spirit of man are destroyed for want of proof, and what does it all mean?

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*Our human nature could not be  
Content with rest like this,  
And even bliss could cloy, if we  
Had nothing else but bliss.  
Great Nature's hand, in every plan,  
Had laid in wise design,  
But what design, or use, is in  
This theory of thine?  
If, when our earth-career is done,  
All conscious life must cease,  
And we drift on, and on, and on,  
In endless, dreamy peace;  
If Heaven is but a mystic spell,  
Whose glowing visions thrall,  
Why should we have a life beyond?  
Why have a Heaven at all?  
A Thought of Heaven  
—Madge Morris; 1881*

## THE WINDMILLS OF MARS

The goal of life is not a peaceful death; nor an instant entrance into heaven as an abode where the pious shall eternally live; nor is it the ultimate satisfying of a God of extreme justice; the "eye for an eye" God of the fear-stricken men of dark cloth.

One purpose alone persuades us, like the Navigator's star lighting the path of the mariner on life's troublesome sea: the attainment of the understanding through which is revealed to our consciousness the real and the unreal; the eternal substance of Truth.

There can be no other purpose in the pursuit of either religion or philosophy or politics than this. Unceasing rites and ceremonies of contemplation; renunciation; prayers; fasting; penance; devotion; service; adoration; or isolation, cannot insure the attainment of Truth.

There will be no bartering; no assurance of reward for good conduct. It is not as though one would say, "Ah, ah, my child, if thou wouldst purchase Truth thou shalt follow this recipe and none other."

There is no golden promise of speedy entrance into Light, nor any exact rules, or laws or equations by virtue of which Truth is attained. Nor yet any specific time to serve before that final illumination.

"I am persuaded," said Paul the Apostle and adherent to Mithraism, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God."

For whom and of whom did he believe he was speaking?

Interpreted in the light of cosmic consciousness, we begin to understand that we might know and experience that boundless, deathless, perfect, satisfying, complete and all-embracing love which is the goal of immortality, which

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is the only speakable attribute of the Architect.

The things for which we sigh are the things we can never reach. We hold so carelessly and lightly the treasures that might lead us from the darkness.

We contemplate an unknowable future or dwell on scenes of the grim and faded past rather than live in the present which so quickly hastens from us.

The prizes for which we toil, so seemingly tempting to-day, prove to be, when pressed to our breasts, but worthless illusions. We grasp at shadows that spring unbidden from the deep wells of our minds, then flit from us as swiftly as fireflies, while that which casts the shadow stands in our way unsought.

And we wonder, and wonder, what was it that shivered at the edges of our eyes, never dreaming that if we shift our gaze but a little we might find it.

We feel Truth trembling at the edges of our memory, stray glimmers of thought near the rim of our understanding. We look and find it not; deep shadows pass like cadres of murmuring priests between.

And what meaning has it?

Let free the Fire of Heaven! Give each child union with that Fire within each life, the flame not to be found until, searching deeper through the inward-opening door, each child alone meets the unknowable and eternal Light, if it is to be found at all.

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*“Where the profane drink, all fountains are poisoned.  
Are the profane also necessary for life?  
Are poisoned fountains necessary, and stinking fires,  
And filthy dreams, and mealworms in the bread?”*  
Thus Spake Zarathustra

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.....  
Men of dark cloth close their eyes and minds, and hold their noses and beg for power. They trip us in the darkness, mock us with their scolding eyes and change their story, making it all the more difficult to comprehend, all the more unbelievable. Nowhere in their scriptures are the words "immortal" and "soul" used together. Why have they deceived us?

They pluck the mystery of life from the pages of their sermons and quench the only lights that might have saved us. Their clever words of art kill the song in our hearts and our laughter fades. Even our dreams grow old.

Flesh is weak and blood is thicker than water. Truth will out and thoughts like angels come and go. Eyes dimmed by age that once through the deep soul gazed, see not. Ears foiled by two thousand years of contradiction no longer hear. Tired, withered hands grope for love and come away with nothing.

We nod fitfully in our nightmarish sleep and claw at the empty air before us. Our fingers come back twisted and thin, our dreams but dust in the barren fields of our minds. We dream things dreamed of long ago when we were children, in distant days when dreams were trifling but were all we needed.

And what does it portend?

The threadbare fabric of the cosmos is rent by the fires of Vulcan's forge and still we burn. With dark, smouldering eyes and naked limbs, reciting endlessly the old lie, "Death Shall Have No Dominion," we go down into the crumbling earth, cold and dark and smelling of decay and worms.

And, *there*, shall burn no more.

Though we be as dust, is the Architect mindful of us? If so, why so? If not, why not?

Can we do nothing in life that the fire will not erase in



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the end? Is all that we behold no more than electric impulses on the brain, flimsy threads that bind a boundless cosmos of imagination into an unknowable something we call First Cause to hide our ignorance?

And what does it mean in any event?

What does it matter?

Stretch sensuously. Breathe deeply. In that pure realm whose darkness is our peace we settle into the nightmares that persist even if we manage to untangle our tangled minds in the morning.

The dark veil has again fallen across the far fields of space, our Captain is dead, the precious cargoes of our lives are heaped, wasted and rotting, in the hold, and the astro-labe is wrecked with the salt of twenty centuries.

Orion winks wickedly above, the forbidden fruit that so troubled Eden is gnarled and mouldy as hoarfrost, the Miracle is found to be, at best, a mirage, and Aladdin's lamp is lost forever.

How close we all come to dying, trapped in these little moments, these little unrelated vignettes, unaware of why we are here, oblivious of the journey, unconcerned about the destination. How close we come to dying before the reaper swoops down like the wrath of God to wipe out everything. How hopelessly flawed we are that we are unable to see it or understand it or convey it to others.

## **THE WINDMILLS OF MARS**

## THE WINDMILLS OF MARS



# The Windmills of Mars

**“Inappropriate, useless man, what magic do you imagine will come into the air when you die?”**

\* \* \* \* \*

I’m sleeping on a bed of nails with one foot in the fire. Some days when you wake up, you think you’re the same person who went to sleep in your bed the night before. You aren’t. You can never be the same person today as yesterday; tomorrow as today. You can’t go back and you can’t go on because the god of fire with breath like turpentine won’t stop chasing you. I’m lost and, oh, god, oh, god, momma, I’m afraid you’ll never find me again.

Sloth-eyed dumpster girls slink in the alley below my window; black crocodiles yawning, smiling, leaning on the wall and looking up at me waving me down for a trick. I

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think one is pregnant and her baby will live just long enough to smother in the garbage dumpster down there in the black night with the hungry rats. She's selling herself for smokes and wine to the roughnecks from the docks or the rosy-cheeked school boys from the other side of town who climb on her for two minutes then beat the hell out of her for five so they won't have to pay for their sin, like beating her stupid washes away the dirt.

I wonder why she doesn't go back to Ohio or wherever the hell she came from and have her baby there so I don't have to think about it. Go back to school or something, get a real job and live in a real house and send her kid to church on Sunday. It's better than getting screwed and beaten stupid behind a stinking dumpster, face down in the garbage.

Rusty nails beneath my spine tearing my flesh and my life is leaking away onto the sweaty sheet. I'm not awake but I'm not asleep, either. I'm in between somewhere. When is the phone going to ring? When will a voice tell me where to go, what to do, what not to do, when to come home?

Nothing works while you're waiting. You can't make a comeback if you've never been anywhere. Look in the mirror and you'll know why you always go to bed alone. Thoughts like angels come and go.

My legs are killing me. I need to get up and walk around for a while. Five more minutes, maybe, and I'll get up and walk around.

I'm too good for this. I should be doing something else. If I could do something else, what would I do? I can't think of anything. I'm hopeless. You can't think of anything when you're trying to think of something. It has to come like a bolt of lightning when your mind is turned off, when you're not trying so hard to think of something.

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It makes no sense, but that's the way it is.

A spider is building a trapnet in the corner of the ceiling. It will have plenty of prey, that's for sure. There are more cockroaches here than at the city dump. The foul odor of rotting garbage drifts into the room. I want to puke.

Truth is laying under my tongue so quietly that I don't even know it is there and I start speaking it out all over myself and I touch it with the tips of my fingers because this is me, who I really am, and it is a me that is so strange that a fearful surprise trembles in the space between the left and right lobes like a bloody wartime story that won't go away. I am the spider. The spider is me. Hiding in a silent, secret corner of the world, waiting for something to crawl into my life.

Shadows and lights move across the filthy walls and ceiling as magcars stop in the alley below. Voices murmur. Feet shuffle, doors open, close. The cars glidehum away. I can see it all in my mind without looking. I've watched it for a month, maybe, or longer.

Sometimes I feel lonely watching these things, staring down on the poured together landscape of cars and people and asphalt as it slithers like a snake across the glass of the bus windows. Sometimes I walk the streets for hours then I come back to the claustrophobic room and sleep the rest of the day away then I get up and do it all again. It makes me wonder if a god of vengeance and hate is watching over me. It makes me wonder if this is all just the smell and taste of my insanity.

I once loved a omen who was colder than a Montana snowstorm but goddamn she was beautiful. She stole everything I had and ran away with another guy. Then he killed her and ran away with everything she stole. He was sen-

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tenced to life without parole.

Sometimes victories are in the little things.

Why is the whiskey bottle empty? I can't remember having drunk it all.

When will the phone ring? When will it ring?

Lately, I find I can't remember the names of people I served with in the Navy. I can see their faces like they are in little frames on the mantle, but their names are gone. I've always thought if I could remember my comrades, they would live forever but if I forgot their names they would be dead.

Looks like most of them are dead.

Once in awhile, when my mind is not trying so hard, a name will spill out of its pigeonhole and I'll say it aloud, even if it is the middle of the night, and I'll smile, sometimes I'll laugh, like I've done something really magical.

Sleeping mind is really more awake than waking mind, I suspect.

Then I can go back to sleep although it may take me an hour or so to stop congratulating myself.

Stupid.

While I am berating myself, the phone rings and my life changes forever. In a month or two I may be back in a room like this one but, right now, I'm on the move. Goodbye, little alley cats. I can't save you now, not that I ever intended to try. You made the bed you're sleeping in. Bed of nails with one foot in the fire, foul stench wafting on the heavy night air.

I lay on the bed in my clothes, knowing I'm sleeping here for the last time, knowing tomorrow I'll take my one footlocker to look for another cache of lost treasure and just before I fall asleep I imagine a fantasy about a red-haired

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girl with electric green eyes.

She couldn't know it because we have never met, but I've been in love with her all my life. And I think she died before I was born. I don't know why I think of her; it's just something stuck in my head.

**The prophets tell us we shall live two lives;  
First when we are born and again when we die.**

This is San Diego, Twelfth Federal District, two hundred and first day of the year 2054. Tomorrow the rats can have this dump; I'll be on my way to Mars. Six days before my twenty-ninth birthday. One year, three months, one week and two days after I told the Navy to piss up a rope but who's counting?

Richard Carroll Constable, I say when the spaceport inspector asks my name. I shove my hand under the code reader and it scans the rice grain size implant in the web between my right thumb and forefinger. The Inspector nods, waves me on. I drag my footlocker to the baggage conveyor, lift it on and watch it disappear behind a stainless steel wall.

I get on a turbolifter launch with forty other passengers, most of them hard rock miners, and it whisks us upward toward the loading platform of FSS Intrepid CTS-111, the huge disk craft idling at Alpha Station fifty miles above Earth. Intrepid is the ship that will carry us to Mars. She's a beauty.

If you haven't launched into earth orbit from a dead standstill in a turbolifter launch, you haven't missed anything. I thought I was going to lose my breakfast, sparse as it might have been, but I kept swallowing and choking until the inertial system kicked in and we felt the mag gravity again. The miners all made jokes and laughed nervously

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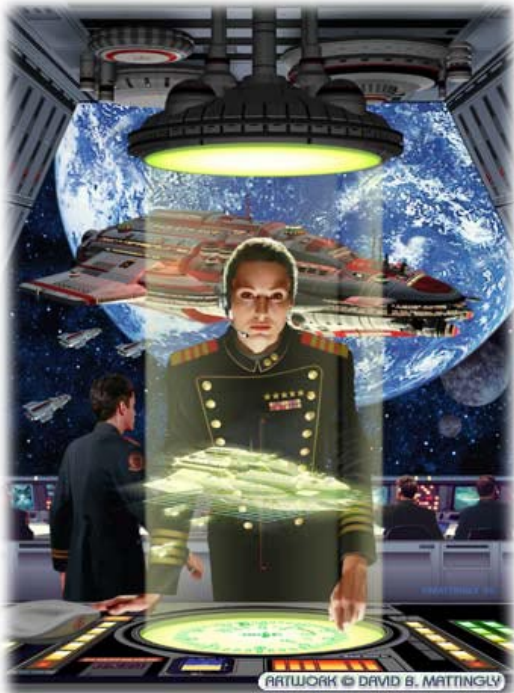
about who was going to puke all over the deck first. I said nothing, just pressed down into the launch chaise and sucked air because I thought I'd be the one to do it.

It is no better even when we board the Intrepid because the ships idle at reduced gravity to make cargo loading faster and lighter.

I ride sick along the maglev tube to the berthing compartment, aching in my gut and wishing I hadn't agreed to go to Mars in the first place. I know I will never get over the space sickness. Bile chokes me for two hours and the ship is finally loaded with passengers and cargo and the mag gravity kicks in and a whole new round of nausea washes over me. Let's go, let's go is all I can think.

The trip, they said, would take two hundred and fifty days and the price you pay for the ticket determines whether or not you get to hibernate. Looks like I'll be awake all the way to Mars.

I'm in a room with three other men; all miners from the look of them. They don't



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say much until they stow their gear then one tells a story about a kid who got tore to pieces last night in the basement of a tenement row, caught sniffing paint or something and those brassface police are saying it was some other kid who wanted his dope that killed him but the Hillside whores said something else, said he was chewed up by a feral dog and the hoodoo woman who came to sprinkle charms around the pool of blood told the brassface cops that she saw a murder like that before and it was haunts who stowed away on a big cargo transport returning from the copper mines on Mars that did it.

Before the crawlers that built Marina City rolled over their holy places and crushed them all into the dirt the haunts were quiet but now their ghosts are crazy come out of their graves and killing everything in sight or the Marsgods are cutting out their revenge from human skin. The miner couldn't say whether she's right or not but claims he's seen enough misery on this pavement that you can believe it and this thing doesn't seem one bit different.

He falls silent and his chums ponder it mute, nodding and humming until the bosun pipes away the special launch detail and warns all passengers to buckle up for the jump out of Earth orbit.

Two hundred and fifty days on the run to Mars is no picnic. I eat when I have to just to keep from starving but it always makes me sick so I stay in the chaise as much as I can.

I'm sleeping awake most of the time and pulling monsters out of my half awake dreams and laying them out on the pillow beside me like some kid with stuffed animals up against him in the night so I drag myself from the chaise and wander around the dark passageways not awake but

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not asleep and uncertainty and fear like an old bloodsucking vampire claw at my throat and I can hear a crazy young mother and her infants screaming and wailing their long voices somewhere down the corridor but I get tired of that yelling against those cold steel bulkheads and find myself back in the chaise with images of the red haired goddess with green fire eyes and a sweet cherry kiss mouth in some wide meadow smelling of lilacs and lavender.

The miner they call Crank says he'd been to Mars four times before this and swore the strangest things happen there. One time, he says, one of the colony whores birthed a girlchild on the slab of concrete where the miners parked their gliders. The one-armed earthdaddy was laid out with a pick in his hand and a hole in his chest red and bloody as his newborn baby girl and that earthwhore mother was loving her as much as she could before the brassface police came and took the girlkid from between her breasts on that hard bloodstained concrete slab parking lot, forced the omen back to the alleys and mean street corners of Seekingtown, left the girlkid in the care of a witchomen and forgot her. She was born blind, was the child, so the witchomen made charms and fetchums to hang on her neck and named her Shenandoah but everyone soon began to call her Shannon Doe. When she turned nine the child said she gave a Marsgod the best fetchum the witchomen had made her and in return it gave her its eyes. Crank says he actually met the girl on his last tour. Little bitty thing. She was around nineteen or twenty years alive then.

It seems incredible but I believe him. I've heard other people say things about Mars, like it is a different reality, disconnected from our reality, and I believe things like that can happen.

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So Shannon Doe, she is now a red Marsgod with concrete pavement and Mars dust in her bloodskin, wandering Mars cityscapes and blossoming between neon glass and vanishing like smoke on a windy autumn earthday, and they say if you fall asleep up against her you'll wake up some place different, in places you don't ever want to be.

They say she's dark and curvy and when she was a blind girlkid her witchermom kept her inside but now she's all grown up and there's no keeping her inside. Her real mom is long old dead, her body found beaten bloody in a dumpster, died at twenty-seven years with flies on her face and Shannon Doe sees the miners out her window and thinks they are evil for what they did to her earthwhore mother. They are on her tongue and the taste is like fear and loathing and eating her alive.

I wonder, if she is really alive on Mars, this dark and curvy omen, how can I find her and I try to sleep with the image of her in my head but before it shuts down completely, my brain switches the picture to the redhead with amazing green eyes; the one I thought I'd left back there on Earth, the girl I've loved all my life and don't even know why.

The ammonia colored moon is gone. Earth is nothing more than a tiny dot out there in the inky blackness, just a dot among dots, so far away, and if I can get to the bow of Intrepid, I believe I can see Mars growing in the distance as Intrepid falls toward it at thousands of miles per minute.

The stars seem so low I can feel them on my face, taste them in my throat, day after long day, month after agonizing month. Back on earth the lilacs are in bloom. What's blooming on Mars?

I wake dream a Martian haunt and wonder what if they aren't humanoid, what if they are rocks or pieces of coal or

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spiny cactus or something, how do we communicate with that? I come up conscious and outside the chaise it is so cold I feel like I am freezing, it feels like I have a fever and my skin aches from it and I see the girl again sprouting like the birth of Venus and I reach out to touch her but her fingers cut me open and I become a one-armed earther laying dead on a concrete slab under a pink lemonade sun with a hole in my chest and brassface police are stealing a bloody blind girlchild baby.

And I feel the earthwhore omen's pain and I am there with her giving birth to a beautiful dark and curvy blind girlchild and loving her in secret after she is taken away and her real momma dies with flies on her face on the dirty garbage streets of Seekingtown.

I roll into a ball under the covers and try to sleep, try to dream of green eyes and red hair, try to imagine what it will be like on Mars, what it would be like to sleep up against the dark and curvy mysterious Shannon Doe.

I liked to kiss the girls with their long hair and sweet smiles when I was in school, liked their skin on mine and the way they smelled like fresh flowers, liked their breath when I leaned in close to kiss them and explore the gardens behind their eyes.

Now all that is just an afterthought, a page torn out and tossed away. After I left school I lived in a crummy little town with rotten luck that turned my dreams into concrete and asphalt like being walked all over by strangers, like the sun burning my eyes and skin, like finding out a Montana cold winter omen ran away with everything I had, and one day I woke up and didn't want to live anymore because I realized people were so selfish that it killed me but I got up and went to work anyhow and smiled at people and laughed with

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people and it was like bloody screaming neverending suicide.

I couldn't go on and I couldn't go back because there was nothing waiting for me in either direction. No person, no love, no home, no treasure, no hope, no future. I forced myself to live those same moments of my life over and over, hanging onto those miseries like they were precious gemstones because that's all I had to connect me to life. My body became a prison for my soul. There seemed to be no truth in anything. Without truth I felt powerless, without truth, my life seemed purposeless.

I felt useless after the icehearted omen Jessie Rose ran away with all my stuff, with everything I managed to get to show I once did something with my worthless, miserable life, felt useless and hopeless like some whore sitting in church and thinking that she doesn't belong there and that she's not good enough, that everyone knows what she is and everyone can see it in her eyes and the way she sits and the way she dresses and everyone around her is hoping for a look or a smile or a gesture that proves she has some value as a living creature, but there is nothing.

And that's when I joined the Navy, the best thing I could think to do with myself at the time, but I couldn't get over the space sickness, no gravity and launching from a dead standstill and after one hitch I told them to pack it where the sun didn't shine, I was going to spend the rest of my life with both feet on earth and find Tom Hunter the lost treasure man and begin looking for precious metal again but I never thought it would be on Mars.

What have I done? I'm better than this. I could be somebody. I could be doing something great. I need forgiveness, where is god? It was on the deck next to my boots when I

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went to sleep but I can't find it now, can't find it, where is god when I need it?

I'm looking for simple answers to my dreary life because simple answers make me feel I'm in charge of things. I'm not. It's an illusion. Simple or complex, someone else is usually pulling the strings.

Sometimes surviving tribulation is the worst kind of death. It never ends. It's like freefalling to the end of the cosmos. It never ends.

I lose track of the days and nights and hours and minutes of freefall toward Mars but one night while I walk the decks awake sleeping toward the cubicle that is supposed to be home during the trip, I can feel that the ship is slowing. There is no sound or movement; it is like something in my head, in my ear, or behind my spine. My skin feels suddenly heavy and stretched like it is being drawn toward the bow of the ship and my feet want to stay on the deck where they are.

We're slowing down I say to nothing and no one, and pretty soon the bosun pipes reveille, then a minute later he pipes the orbit docking details to muster at the Number One, Number Twenty-Two and Number Fifty Four cargo elevators. That means low orbit in a few short hours, just about daybreak on the surface of the planet looming in the portwindows.

By the time I get to the cubicle, the lights are on and the miners are already packing their gear so they can catch the first shuttle to the surface. Better hurry, they say. Takes about eight earth hours to unload this crate and you don't want to be on the last shuttle, all the pretty whores will be taken.

Ships as large as Intrepid won't land on the surface of Mars these days because the vortex created under the ship

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causes huge sandstorms that last for hours, sometimes days and weeks, and have buried some of the suburban areas of the cities. They could land far from the cities but so much sand is weather blown onto the landing slabs that it would take hours of riding out the sandstorms before they could begin launching the shuttles, so years ago they decided to just do it from low orbit.

On my way to Quarterdeck Number One Hundred-Twelve, I see the FSS Oriskany, CTS 134, idling at the Sixth Gate, receiving shuttles from the surface, one after the other, soon to be freefalling toward Earth. I am almost yearning to be back.

I'm on the second shuttle in a burnsuit with a rebreather over my face and the minute I put my feet on the surface of Mars, I know something is different, like I've been here before, like I know a secret about Mars that is scrunched up in a little pigeonhole in my mind. I feel powerful filled with energy invulnerable for no logical reason at all. I squat at the edge of the concrete slab, suck life from the rebreather and look across the broad, flat desert at a line of dusty distance mountains and, for just a moment, I think I see a figure in a shimmering burnsuit walking toward me.

**And so we meet again in the blink  
of an eye, as if by magic.**

I wag my head and the figure is gone, but the image is stuck in there and a dream from the first thoughts I ever had when I was an infant pops into my mind and won't let go until I stand and turn toward the receiving center and find myself looking down at a girl with red hair and neon green eyes, dark and curvy with red cherrykiss lips that could have

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been on a fashion vidamag. She wears a kind of military jumpsuit, dark green, long-sleeved and tight at the cuffs, the trouser cuffs bloused into flightdeck boots. On her head is a dark green, tight, heavy cloth flight helmet liner, from the back of which flows that long tousled red hair, and pull-down type dark lensed goggles pushed up on top of the helmet, and on her hands tight gloves, also dark green.

I'm a small man at five feet, six inches but she is tiny, five feet nothing even with the deck boots, and looks like a small adult angel child.

I step back, stiffen my neck to see her better when she mindspeaks.

Says hi Richard and I say hi, how do you know me, and she asks don't you know me, and I say I think maybe I do but not sure and right there she smiles a disarming smile and the entire universe slowly rolls over like the film on the surface of a soap bubble and I'm someplace I didn't realize existed, a place that smells like lilacs in bloom.

"You do," she says with her human voice. "You just don't know it yet. But I'll explain it and you'll be mystified."

You talk with a human voice I say and she nods her head a little and tells me I should, too, because everyone talks with their human voice on Mars, no mindspeak, because the Martians can intercept mindspeak but not voicespeak.

What does that mean Martians I ask and she touches my arm and says yes yes Martians.

Then she says it again, "Yes, yes, Martians. They're all around us. Come with me."

"I can't," I say human and my voice sounds high and screechy like I'm talking through a helium balloon. "I have to meet someone."

"Me," the girl says. "Come with me."



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“You?”

“Me. Didn’t you guess?”

I didn’t guess. “How is it you sounded like Tom Hunter when you called?” I ask, dragging my footlocker behind me as I follow her to a beat-up Hughes Vortex Glider at the edge of the landing slab.

“I sound like who I want to sound like,” she says. “But it was Tom Hunter who called.”

“Shouldn’t I check in with Customs?” I ask and she shakes her head no.

I load the footlocker and sit behind her. “You know my name. What’s your name?” I ask.

“Around here,” she says soft and easy without looking back, “people call me Shannon Doe.”

“Shannon...?”

“...Doe. Some call me Shenandoah.”

You that blind girl who got eyes from the Marsgod born from a dead miner daddy and an earthwhore mother on a concrete landing slab, my mind asks before I can think to stop myself.

She says nothing, pulls the goggles down over her spooky eyes, puts the little glider into lift and away we sail in a big spiral until the traffic scanner indicates it is okay to break out of the holding pattern and head for the mountains.

I’m sorry I said that about your mother, it was something I heard on the ship coming out, it doesn’t mean I believe it or anything.

She shakes her head. “Nothing I haven’t heard a thousand times before,” she says. “Don’t worry about it. You might as well relax; we have a little ways to go.”

“Where?”

“Lands undiscovered and treasures untold.”

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I'm quiet for about a minute, then I ask why is it she doesn't wear an OBA rebreather or a burnsuit and she tells me she doesn't have to because she was born here, she breaths Mars gases because she is a Martian and she knows places to go underground to protect herself from solar flares.

A bygod for real Martian!

Yes, yes.

You look human and talk human and act like any human I ever met, how can you be Martian, then I realize if you're born on Mars, even from earthers, you're a Martian, and I wonder if she knows about the haunts and she tells me she does, will I shut up and let her glide the glider.

So I shut up but it doesn't make me feel any better knowing I am sitting behind a red-haired greeneyed Marsgod who looks like an earthhuman omen who knows about the haunts.

The girl I've loved all my life and don't know why scares hell out of me and I get a creepy crawly feeling on the back of my neck.

Turns out a little ways to go is four hundred miles and three hours across an almost featureless land. I stare at it awake sleeping for the first hundred miles, then sleep unconscious oblivious until the glider hums down into a copper red canyon with mile high mountains all around. On the right, in the side of a nearly vertical rock wall, I see a small cave-like opening.

I look at Shannon Doe and wonder at the tragedies from which her life is built. They are etched on her face, those tales of loss and despair, overpowering the few moments of victory and illumination. She looks at me sideways; her neon green eyes tell everything and I wish I could interpret the

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messages buried there. I am overwhelmed to the verge of tears by feelings of sadness but she smiles and says inside my head that it is not as bad as I think.

But I can feel her loneliness aching in my throat and think she wants to fly away somewhere or sink forever into an empty nothingness or stretch herself like a deer carcass on a hard rusted barbed wire fence for all the world to see.

This is what you did to me is in her head and in her heart but maybe it is just something in me that pities her for the miners' cruelty so many years ago.

We get out of the Vortex Glider, unload our gear and walk to the mine entrance.

She sits and waits and is quiet, saying nothing even when I ask her where is Tom Hunter, only silence and soon her mind grows cold and empty like a bowl of spilled milk running down into the sands of time and space. I imagine that I crawl into the dried deer carcass skin she stretched on the hard wire fence and live out her life for her in the space of thirty seconds. She is quiet awake sleeping pressing face down against her knees and the clay red faraway Martian sun god warms her with its tongue on her skin in the mid-morning, chewing on the gristle of her soul and it kills me to see her so damned miserable because I know I love her and can't help.

Translucent Martian haunts dance around us as we slump at the entrance to the cave, parading ghostly memories of ancient days earthers could never know, faces of loves left or lost along the way, anguish of failures, joy of triumph, of good times before the planet lost its magnetic fields, before all but the heaviest of its atmosphere was blown into the empty cosmos by the solar winds, never to be found again, denying the worthlessness of the present; creatures

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of an awful darkness stalking the long cold nights peering into human minds dulled from working twelve Martian hours every day in the moldering copper mines and I am so glad I am not them until it hurts me and I weep.

I am moved by waves of feelings, lonely in the harsh shadows that run like fear beside me, darkness in which I am lost but cannot hide. I tremble to share the vision of what I see and hear in the darkness, share with someone, just one someone who might understand the deep, mysterious unuttered screams that rise in my throat like bile and are choked into my guts before I can say them.

Haunts thrust their faces between me and Shannon Doe when I look at her or think to move nearer, to touch her, console her, like they are protecting her from all the evil a human could do.

I've seen life and death beyond the limits of human fear, outside the prison of my soul, free from the arrows of pain. I have breathed life before, the blood of it has run through me hot and furious, the memories of it are caught in the web of my brain, strong and enduring. Its seed has infected me, running through the very essence of all that I see and do in this life. It devours me until I am transformed.

Can you remember when you died and how old you were? Can you remember when you were reborn?

I can.

Doe lifts her head from the cradle of her knees and looks at me. Were you killed or did you die slowly and so carefully that even now you do not know that you died? Ah, wait, I see you walking across a broad red desert dressed in a shimmering burnsuit until you fall, the light of understanding gone from your face, without the tears and laughter that was life, without the pain and beauty of the love you be-

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lieve you lost.

And it feels like she is writing on the walls of my mind with a great piece of chalk. I can feel the words scratched inside my head like an hour-long rocket burn and I bathe in it a long time and smile softly. And at that moment, in that freedom of half-understanding the meaning of my dream, all I want is to sit in that thought forever and ever and always. I want to plead to the haunts, “Do you mind if I just crash here on your planet forever with Shannon Doe plucking daisy petals and singing she loves me she loves me not?”

I awake suddenly and stand abruptly, striking my head on the roof of the cave. Was I really sleeping? Am I now really awake? Shannon Doe is there at the entrance talking to Tom Hunter and they are both looking at me and wondering what I have done just now to cry out so in pain.

Nothing I say in my head and they continue to talk. They are discussing wells and water and ancient city and glyphs very old, the way down is long and deep and dark and dangerous and we’ll be going first thing in the morning.

I ask where and Tom says lands undiscovered and treasures untold just like Shannon Doe said this morning and I shiver a little like a cold wind just blew across my grave and I want desperately to sleep up against dark and curvy Shannon Doe and wake up somewhere else the sooner the better.

As I stand there looking down at myself I realize with a start my body and mind and soul have been shaped by living too long in the stink of my self imposed cultural suicide back there on Earth. I didn’t really have a personality; not one that was my own anyway. The system took care of that the day I was born. No matter what I tried to do, I was going to be a working class grunt.

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That is inevitable, really, I knew. But when you are swimming in the mind stuff of the matrix you don't know there is anything else, anything outside; you don't even realize there *is* an outside. After all, my father, and his father, and so on backwards for generations had been shaped by the system so it isn't surprising their bodies and minds became slaves to it. So what could one miserable grunt hope to do standing alone outside the matrix?

It seemed madness to forsake one's own hopes and dreams and ideals and to accept being told what to do and even what to think by nameless faceless elitists. When I was younger, before I left the Navy, I imagined I could at least look around and make up my own mind about what I thought was going on. So I examined the society in which I found myself and saw everyone had been bred to be dominated by the leaders; bred to believe some people had a sacred right to take anything they had and claim it as their own.

Greedy lawyers and politicians to be specific.

And I thought hey this can't be right, who dreamed up this insanity anyway, so the first thing I did was to scratch a few marks on the stairwell walls where I could read them to remind myself and so other people could read them and wonder what the hell it all meant. The signs were good for awhile because one can be lulled to sleep real quick in the matrix; the system is rigged for it.

So the signs were there to keep me alert but it seemed odd sometimes stumbling around the cities awake sleeping and trying to convince myself that what I was doing was the right thing to do. Problem is that no matter how right you believe you are trying to expose the insanity, sooner or later you are going to attract the attention of some very powerful and very angry people who will decide the world will

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be better off if you are dead.

And so I committed cultural suicide, dropped out and turned off became invisible homeless jobless nobody living hand to mouth and day to day on the few scraps of change I could scrounge together from the junk I collected from the dumpsters on the wrong side of town. And I would have died in some stinking little filthy fourth floor walk-up if Tom Hunter hadn't called me to Mars to mine precious metal.

Shannon Doe is looking at me sideways with her eyes all squinched up like she is trying to get into my brain to see what is really in there. Nothing you'll be interested in I grumble and she turns away with pouty lips.

But why am I rethinking all this old crap? I forgot all this years ago and, at any rate, I should have left it back there on Earth. Someone, or something, is inside my head making me awake dream my old lost worn out life. I need to get busy collecting artifacts before I go completely nuts. Is Tom Hunter going to keep all this a mystery and spring it on me like a big happy birthday surprise after we get where we are going or what? For a minute I think I am going to fully awaken and find myself in the dirty little hotel room on Earth and all this is only the burnt ashes of my insanity. I wave a hand in front of my face to erase the errant thoughts and try to squeeze some water into my mouth from the bladder on my hip. It tastes old and nasty.

When I fully emerge from the sleep waking dream, the solitude of the Martian cave shocks me alert. I have been so immersed in the atmosphere of the dream, in the influence of it, that only on standing outside of it do I discover its effect on me.

Another world appears before me, an alternate time and space. Everything appears familiar on the surface but be-

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hind the dream is a new reality unlike anything I have experienced before.

I can see, in the distance, a child lying upon the burning sands of Mars, a sleeping infant who is dreaming of an adult male walking across the Martian wastelands dressed in a shimmering burnsuit, his OBA rebreather left or lost somewhere along the way. He is near to death.

I lie on my back, sleeping in a dimly lighted room, with my head turned to the left. A cool sheet is beneath me. Faint light enters from an uncurtained window. Far away, walking toward me across a barren, red desert, I dream a male figure dressed in a shimmering uniform. He appears and vanishes like a mirage in the rising thermals, always and ever drawing nearer and nearer. After what seems hours the man is beside me, looming above. He raises his hand to his brow, rolls his eyes skyward and sinks wearily to his knees, falls dead, face down, into the burning sand, the light of understanding drained from his weary countenance.

As he falls, I see that I am the man.

At the same moment, an anomalous cloud bursts from the still figure, whirling and rising above me, then rushes downward, exploding within me silently, painlessly.

This house has a green roof. It is painted white, chipped and peeling. There is a brick carpark and a sagging garage beneath a broad Catalpa tree behind; tall Maples line the street beside and in front. The ceilings are high, the windows tall, the wallpaper is stained and faded. There are two stairways; one in the living room foyer and one at the rear entrance. They lead to rooms on the second floor. I know the rooms are there although I have never been on the second floor, have never seen the stairs.

I am in the bedroom of a ten-month old infant boy. He



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sleeps fitfully on his back, his head turned to the left. He is dreaming of a man walking toward him across the broad, awful Martian desert. He was breach born and dead, this tiny boy; revived after long, anxious minutes.

I have become the child. He and I are one forever, body and soul.

I am the dreamer and the dreamed, dead and reborn.

I will remember the dream all my life but of the events that have occurred before this night I will have no memory until many years later.

**All our life energy is only borrowed.  
Someday we must return it to the Cosmos.**

“When I die,” my mother once said, “and if there is an adventure beyond, I am certain I will have no memory of this life, just as I have no memory of the life before this one.”

I didn't understand then. Now I understand.

It is July 10, 2025. This planet Earth is at peace, its nations rich and content. The devotions of its inhabitants are not to war but to the exploration of the cosmos and mining the inhabited planets and moons, and it is into this atmosphere that baby Richard Carroll Constable is given a soul to nurture and guard.

Shannon Doe stands before me, her head inclined, slightly aloof, with a look of mild curiosity behind her electric eyes. There will be more, she mindspeaks to me, so much more as the days progress. There will be another dream for you and the minutes and days and hours of your life will be revealed as never before. You will see that you and I have known each other for centuries, sometimes as associates and at other times lovers. Can you remember

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the life before this one?

I cannot.

You will.

We're obviously not playing by earth rules now.

We never were, never will, as surely as the turning of the planets.

How is it you know these things?

A smile plays petulantly across her cherry-sweet lips.

*How is it you do not?*

Then she is gone, turned away and slipped into the darkest corner of the mine cave and, try as I might, I cannot find her.

"She'll be back," Tom Hunter says, shrugging the rebreather away from his face. "You can take that off if you want. Breathing will be difficult but tolerable. There is an atmosphere coming from below in the mine."

I pull the OBA away from my face and feel a cold rush of fresh air sweeping up from the depths of the dark cavern. It occurs to me to wonder briefly how such a great volume of fresh air can rush upward from beneath the planet.

For the first time in nearly three years, I get a good look at Tom Hunter. He is a brawny man; dark and muscular with a creased, worn face and calloused hands. He has shaved his head since last I saw him and he has gained a few pounds around the middle. I figure he is forty years alive now. He is a little taller than I; five-eight, perhaps. Had we been on Earth Tom would have been wearing Marine fatigues. His burnsuit appears worn and soiled from crawling around in dark caves.

"We'll be going down in the morning," Tom says. "We all need to rest until then for it is a tough descent. Think you're up to it?"

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“Sure. I have some experience with these kinds of things.”

Tom Hunter cocks his head and clicks his tongue at me. “Believe me, Richard, you haven’t. This is like nothing you’ve ever seen or will ever see again in this life.”

And then he tells me what lays beneath our feet. A massive city miles and miles wide and hundreds of layers deep, cisterns of fresh water that still percolate to the surface and pond in some of the craters up here, systems that still produce an atmosphere that is breathable by humans, great buildings and transit systems, tunnels and tubes going in all directions all the way around the planet. No life-forms that we can recognize but some energy fields that seem to convey thought and emotions, undecipherable at the present time but Doe is working on it.

“How did you find her?” I ask.

“She found me, brought me here and asked me to keep it a secret until she could make sense of it.”

“Who is she?”

“*What* is she would be a better question. I believe she is a repository for the entire history of the Martian culture from beginning to end. Here, in this place, are all the vibrations of that history. Here, in this place, are all the artifacts preserved that, if properly interpreted, will reveal how and why and when the planet died. One by one she reads them in order and writes the Martians’ story.”

“No treasures?”

“Not the kinds of treasures you are accustomed to taking,” Tom says.

“Why am I here, then?”

“To help us secure and preserve the artifacts from treasure hunters, of course.”

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Of course. “How does she interpret the glyphs?” I ask.

“Well, she is a Martian, you see. She grew up out here after she got her eyes. She reads Martian like she was taught it as a first language. I don’t question why or how.”

I ask him if it is really true that Shannon Doe was born blind and got her eyes from a Marsgod and he says stranger things than that have happened out here but why not ask Doe to get the true story and purses his lips to let me know that is the end of the conversation.

Tom produces a couple of EZ Meals, cracks them open by slapping them against the wall of the mine cave and in a couple of minutes they are steaming hot so we squat against some rocks and eat in silence. I want fresh water. I want a bath. I want clean, fresh clothes. The burnsuit smells of sweat. I think of Marina City, even the squalid suburb of Seekingtown, the warm rooms and the clean baths with hot water and soap and soft towels and clean clothes. It doesn’t matter that those rooms are inside plastic domes and the air and water is recycled a thousand times a day. All better than sitting on a cold, hard rock eating an EZ Meal and drinking nasty old water.

The sun will be gone below the horizon in a couple of hours and we will be cold stuffed into our burnsuits with heatsticks laying all around us so we won’t freeze in the Martian night.

I wonder what has become of Shannon Doe and Tom says don’t worry about it, she’ll be back with fresh water before the sun is gone but he doesn’t elaborate, doesn’t say where she will get the water. I can see the glider outside in the fading light right where she had parked it so I figure she must be bringing the water up from somewhere below the cave.

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An image flashes inside my head, a well or fountain with stairs leading downward toward a stone quarry filled with clear, pure, sweet water and children running about laughing and screaming merrily; the memory of the dream returns and I am stunned and perplexed, stuck in an unreal, law-bending fantasy, a parallel universe; an intense, provocative world of loose, entrancing emotions that are spinning, twisting, going and coming. A life before, remembered only as a childhood dream, only as a disjointed vignette having no relation to anything in this life. What does it mean? How can it be? This is now my life, my personal awake sleeping hell in an endless horrifying land on the angry red planet Mars. How did I get here and why? Where am I going and how? I feel a trembling uneasiness inside, an impossible realization that I have been here before in another life and here I died in the past or in the future and was reborn on another Earth in another time.

What in hell does it mean?

A small man or thing approaches, carrying a yoke across his shoulders with hundreds of tiny bottles tied to it dangling and clanking together like wind chimes, each bottle filled or partially filled with colors of liquid; its face smiling a crooked smile of Martian gods long old gone. The little man seems to have been smeared with ochre and rivulets of oily perspiration trickle down, dripping from his elbows. He draws up a grotesque grin, exposing his thick toothless gums.

I shiver involuntarily uncontrollably, not from the coming cold night but from something unimaginable creeping at my feet like a hungry cat. A Martian god lurks in my dreams, in my mind, in my very soul. I long to cry out but cannot. Moaning, echoing cries of unimaginable terror of

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lost souls violently shimmer across the illuminated universe, driven by some unknown music. This moaning pulsates at every nerve of my body. I cannot help but drive my mind deeper into the inner insanity of my nightmare! I cannot escape! I am just floating deeper and deeper into the vividly detailed vortex.

I can hear fear whispering demented phrases and chanting hypnotic taunts, can feel anger broiling within me, can feel confusion hammering at every inch of my head, screaming in silent horror, "I must leave this chamber of terror! I must escape! Oh, God! You must help me! Help me escape this hell! Save me from this torture and take me to the shores of Heaven. Save me ... ."

Wait! I hear a sound! I hear a voice calling out my name! Who is in this world of mine? No one! Just me, just me and my fears. It must have been a Marsgod calling out my name, for it is calling out again and again saying, You must wake up You must wake up But I am awake you can't fool me I'll ignore this nightmare I must!

Tom Hunter is shaking me violently. Here, he says, put on your rebreather you have fainted from lack of oxygen. My head is pounding and I cannot see Tom's face clearly. Doe is there beside me I'm going to move the glider inside now she says the mapping satellite will be passing over soon and it mustn't be seen Richard can sleep inside where it will be warmer and so will I says Tom Harper and I remember nothing else for what seems only minutes but is hours.

It is dark outside the cave and, although Tom and I are sharing the glider, I can see my frosty breath every time I exhale.

"Where is Doe?" I ask and her hand touches my shoulder from behind.

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Here, she says in my mind, are you feeling better and I say I am but I still have a headache. Lack of oxygen says she and Tom wriggles in his sleep trying to find some comfort on the curved chaise.

Try to sleep, Doe whispers softly mindspeak, and I ask where have you been and she tells me she was down in the city beneath the desert to fetch fresh water and she gives me a little and it tastes wonderful like earthwater percolated through a hundred feet of Indiana limestone.

“I was having strange and terrible nightmares,” I say, “but it was not like oxygen deprivation; it was something else, like things were driving my dreams, like the Marsgods are trying to eat me alive.”

“Perhaps,” Doe answers. “They often do that to first time visitors. They like to know what’s in there and it isn’t always pleasant. Have your dreams continued?”

“They have and they are terrifying. What do they mean? When will it end?”

Doe sighs and slips back into her chaise, into the darkness, and her mind is silent. Presently, she mindspeaks softly from the blackness at the rear of the glider.

What does it mean? It means what it means. You already know how this ends. Every night I empty my heart and every morning it is full again. Crude and inhuman imaginations have become a nexus, keeping me from escaping this nonentity that I have become, that you will soon become. It was sixteen years ago when I gave the Marsgod my little fetchum and it gave me its eyes. I was a human like you! I cried like you; gentle tears streaming down a blushed emotional face; feeling relieved after releasing a silent salty tear. I heard like you, tasted what you’ve tasted, felt what you’ve felt and saw what you’ve seen. Oh, to know such wonders

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again! To hear the excitement rising in a child's laughter. A face of beauty and a body of purest gold.

For months after the Marsgod gave me sight I pretended to be still blind. I wished I had the courage to tear out my eyes and to commit suicide. I longed for the darkness again, to defeat the real world and to return to the world I had constructed in my mind. The Martian gave more than the ability to simply see colors and shapes; it gave me the power to see the past and the future, mine and yours and everyone else's and it is fearful. I am human no more. I am lost in a spellbinding, endless arena of caged fear. All of my insanity, all of my toils, all of my worst nightmares just stream out in every direction in my mind! I am so weary of sighing; when will the end come, when peace, when respite? You will become as I am; you will become a Marsgod before this is done, Richard. This is your final life as a human. From this form you will become something greater, something immortal and, together, we shall be one entity of purer light.

"But why have they chosen me?" I ask.

"Because you were ready and because you came. You are here," Doe said.

She is silent again and for a long time I wait for her to continue but she does not.

**And, so, it comes down to this:**

**We are here to kill you that you may live again.**

I sleep wretchedly, dozing and waking until Tom breaks a small heatstick an hour before dawn. When I finally wake the faraway sun is well above the horizon and Doe is already gone. Tom is busy packing his tucker and kit for the decent into the cave and before I can ask Tom says Doe has gone



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below into the ancient city hours earlier and that we should follow along soon, that I should get my gear from the foot-locker so we can get on with it.

It is clear that a person taller than we three could not descend into the tunnels without a great deal of discomfort. The tunnels are narrow and the ceilings low. Even Tom and I must bend occasionally to pass. Doe, leading the way, often gets far ahead of us, but waits patiently until we join her, guided by her dim lightsticks.

How far, I ask mindspeak and she says miles. Nothing else.

The descent is dangerously steep in places and the walls of the tunnels are so narrow that we have to squeeze sideways or creep on hands and knees and for every inch of the perilous way I can feel the presence of the Martians hovering about us, not hindering but not helping, either. Just observing with a kind of curious silence.

After what seems an hour or more, we find ourselves in a domed chamber perhaps one hundred feet wide and high. Our lightsticks are barely adequate to show its expansive breadth. Great towers and pillars etched with strange glyphs rise from the floor of the tunnel and vanish into misty gloom above our heads. Colorless plants cling to the scorified rocks and embrace the towers. Water flows from fissures and cracks, filling pools and running down the inclines to fall deeply into the dark, confining halls before us.

I've been here before, as a child, in a dream locked away in a tight, forgotten pigeonhole, in the keeping of a small man who held my hand and would not let me venture into the water, the quarry. Children, small and exuberant, jumped and splashed in the water at the far side, swam toward us, clambered out and ran back to jump and splash

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again. I struggled to work my hand free but could not and the small man thing led me away to a fountain or well, a pit low to the ground built of shaped stones with vines and flowers growing all about brightly lit and murmuring with the burbling sounds only percolating springs can make. Where was it? How could I know of this place when I have never been here before? How could the dream... what is inside my head making my mouth talk my feet walk my hands touch...my eyes see...

Doe scoops up some water in her hand and drinks with great pleasure, inviting Tom and me to do the same. When I remove my rebreather, I find that the cavern is filled with fresh air and plenty of it.

"You'll not need the OBAs from this point on," Doe says, as she begins shedding her clothing, sparse as it is, until she has stripped to her brown beautiful naked nothing, completely unabashed, without embarrassment of any kind, and plunges into a pool with a little cry of delight. Seconds later Tom and I follow.

The water is refreshing and cool, sweet and pure and we languish in it for long minutes until our light sticks begin to dim and grow dull and I worry that we will be stranded in the pool in the darkness, empty and alone.

Doe calms my concern and draws near, touching my cheek in the fading light. Wait, she mindspeaks. Wait for the darkness and see a miracle.

As my eyes grow accustomed to the fading light I see that the walls of the cavern are glowing with a blue, shimmering mercurial luminescence.

"What?" I cry out.

"Glow worms," says Tom. "Very similar to those found in caves on Earth."

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“I’ve never seen these, never on Earth in all the caverns I have explored.”

“Perhaps they were there and you didn’t see them because your torches were so bright,” Doe says close behind me.

I can feel the warmth of her body nearly touching me and my thoughts are diverted from the glow worms to fantasies of her with me in a snowy, downy bed with music and wine. She pushes a fingernail into my back firmly and says mindspeak that she will make that decision then sinks beneath the water and swims away to the far side of the pool.

You are teasing me I say mindspeak.

Not.

Are.

Not.

The pool, I notice, is separate from the cisterns that flow through the cavern and cannot taint the water we drink. We fill our flasks from the clear pools below several waterfalls after we have dried and dressed and scrubbed our teeth, then press onward, led by Doe and the glowing walls which fluoresce for miles and miles ahead of us. It is like walking down a softly lighted street at night after we get accustomed to it.

The unknown and the unfamiliar often wears a dark and sinister mask, and especially so when flitting shades and haunts stir in the labyrinths beneath the ground, creeping and soaring into and from within the cavern walls as we progress ever downward. The vault of the ceiling is higher and grander than any cathedral I have ever seen on Earth, glowing in the neon light of the tiny insects as far upwards as I can see.

“It is three hundred feet or more,” Doe says softly. “And

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you have only seen the smallest part of the passage. A great city lies yonder." She tosses her head toward the tunnel ahead.

"Will the haunts be with us all the way?"

"If you wish it."

"What does that...?"

But she is gone again into the dim light beyond my sight. Try as I might, I cannot see her although the passage is not entirely dark. I turn back to Tom who is following behind. Tom simply shrugs and smiles ever so slightly.

"She does that more often than I care to think," he says. "First she is here, then she is gone."

"But how does she do it?"

"Hanged if I know. She's more Martian haunt than human, that's for sure." He makes his way past me, leaves me standing alone, shaking my head in bewilderment.



Tom leads the way for several miles and, at length, we two adventurers come to a high precipice overlooking what appears to be dolmens or halfmen scarps, a great expanse

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of them spreading away before us, interrupted by what seems to be steep clefts and crags of terra cotta scoria, the bases of which are surrounded by deep piles of detrius. But as my eyes grow more accustomed to the vision, I can see that we are standing above an enormous city carved from the living rock. There appear at first sight to be massive stone statues of alien characters mounted upon the walls of the cavern. Doors, windows, vents and entry walks wind everywhere; some even appear to hang in midair. It is a city that, if populated by humans, could house millions.

“This is the city, then?” I ask.

“Not by a long stretch,” Tom answers. “This is a kind of suburb. It is called in the Martian tongue, *Haribnagai*, as close as we are able to pronounce it. The center of the city lies ahead of us another twenty miles.”

“Good God, man!” I cry. “Are we going to walk another twenty miles?”

“Not today, we ain’t. Tomorrow, maybe, or the next. We’ll be making a rest stop here to wait for Doe.”

“Where has she got off to?”

“She likes to scout ahead. Doesn’t want us to run into any surprises.”

My eyebrows go up a fraction of an inch. “What kind of surprises?” I ask, looking around for unexpected creatures.

“Outriders,” Doe says from the shadows of a wide crevice a few yards to our right. “The mine owners are trying to make certain that no one can claim any land except themselves. They’ve hired merks to patrol the outlands to keep people like us from finding anything that might have value.”

“Outriders,” I say.

“Outriders,” she replies. “Thugs, really, yeggs who have no morals or scruples and will kill us before they even know

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why we are here or what we want, and ask questions later.”

“After they’ve buried us out here where we won’t be found for a hundred years,” Tom adds.

“What’s the point?” I query.

“Point is the mining companies want Mars for themselves and if they buy enough politicians they’ll get it,” Tom answers. “Then this city and all the artifacts we’ve discovered here will be mining company property to sell or give away as they see fit.”

“Chances are slim right now that they’ll succeed,” Doe adds as she slips from the shadows and approaches us. “But next week or next month? Who knows?” She stops only a foot from me and peers intently into my eyes as if lost in a reverie.

“You ever have trouble with the law?” she asks abruptly.

“What kind of trouble?”

“Any.”

“I got on their bad list once when I was painting graffiti on walls and stuff. Antigovernment stuff. Anti-system stuff. I was an activist of a sort.”

Arrested? she mind quizzes.

No.

Followed?

Not that I know.

“But you stopped painting graffiti?”

I tell her I stopped and never had any more problems but she just cocks her head and smiles a little. “None that you can see from your viewpoint,” she says.

“Meaning what?”

“I mindsense some Earthfeds followed you here to see what you are up to.”

I look at Tom who is following the conversation with some

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interest. He shrugs and looks away; gets busy loosening his gear packs.

How do you know this, I ask mindspeak, and Doe says she sensed it from the moment she encountered me on the tarmac at Marina City, that's why she encouraged me to go with her in the glider instead of checking in at Customs, but now she is certain of it, so I am a fugitive and sooner or later the federal men will track me down by examining the records of all the craft that departed from the flight terminal that day.

"Thanks a lot," I say dryly.

"Don't worry. A few men examining hundreds of leads; it will take them awhile to come looking for you out here, especially when they have no satellite photos to look at. And even if they do get to the cave entrance, it will take weeks more or months to find their way down here. The haunts will see to that."

I look around, realize that I have not seen the haunts for several hours. I ask why.

"You forget about them and they forget about you. Besides, they aren't real, Richard. They exist inside your mind. Figments designed to frighten away intruders," Doe explains. "But they will not allow the federal men to pass easily."

It doesn't occur to me to ask how she knows that or how she can state it with such nonchalant certainty, or what the haunts could or might do to hinder the federal men. I am beyond wondering or marveling at her powers, although I am and always will be dumbstruck whenever she vanishes before my very eyes. I want, but think it imprudent, to ask how she manages it so cleverly.

She and Tom are measuring out an encampment and un-

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packing their gear so I figure they are down for the time being; begin scratching out my own patch, and dimly realize that it is not freezing cold here as it was on the surface. I am fairly sweating by the time I have spread the bedroll. We eat EZ Meals without engaging in speculative conversation and, directly we bathe one at a time in a tiny cistern, apparently constructed specifically for the purpose of bathing-somewhat like a mikvah of Old Earth- we crawl into our pallets.



“Any idea how long we’ve been down here?” Tom asks.

“Couple of days, I think,” I speculate.

“Not even one,” Tom answers, then rolls over and is soon snoring peacefully.

Doe, curled into her bedroll, apparently fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow. I hope I can fall asleep as quickly for I am exhausted. My legs and back ache and my biceps cramp painfully from crawling and clambering through the cavern for hours. Sleep will be purchased with difficulty.

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My former Division Officer, Lieutenant Commander John Graf, was not looking at me. His gaze was directed over my right shoulder to the view port behind me where the vastness of the cosmos spread to eternity. Something out there had taken his attention momentarily from his attempt to encourage me to reenlist.

“Ah,” he said presently, “I believe that will be your passage to Earth about to dock.”

I suppressed an urge to turn and look, blinked twice and remained at ease, thrust out my chin a bit and stiffened my neck for no other reason than to let Lieutenant Commander Graf know that my decision to sign off and return to Earth was final. I was resolute about it, at least in my own mind. Serving in a Space Force that was little more than a Merchant Navy, ferrying passengers and cargo to and from Earth’s moon or to shuttles waiting in orbit that would take them and it to Mars and beyond was not my idea of a great vocation, even if I could have tolerated the weightlessness without getting ill, which I couldn’t.

Mister Graf curled one side of his mouth and clicked his tongue as he returned his gaze back to me. “Two years is hardly long enough time to get the hang of things.” He shuffled the papers on his desk and peered up at me, seeking, perhaps, a chink in my resolve but finding none. “Your Department Head has given you consistently high marks and recommended you for advancement in rating and for reenlistment. But I understand your difficulty with the weightlessness. Had it myself for the first couple of years. There are medications for it you know.”

“I know, sir,” I responded. “They don’t help and often make things worse.”

His gaze was again diverted to the view port as the

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bosun's pipe alerted crews below that the ship was alongside. I knew everything they were required to do in the next hour. I'd been one of them. But my enlistment had expired two weeks earlier, during which time I had merely been an unwilling civilian tourist waiting in steerage for passage off the Charleston, a mid class Cruiser, to Earth, one hundred thirty-eight thousand miles away.

I could never reason why the government called their ships Destroyers, Cruisers, Battleships or Carriers. No nation on Earth had engaged in a hostile act against another for over one hundred years. Tradition dies slowly, if at all, and particularly is that true of naval and marine traditions. Crewmembers were still called "Sailors" or "bluejackets," and war fighters were still called "Marines" or "jarheads."

Every ship, from the smallest to the grandest, carried a complement of Marines; those assigned to Charleston numbered over one thousand. And all they did was transfer, stow and disperse cargo. In the two years I had served in Charleston I had not seen a weapon of any kind nor had I witnessed any alerts or emergency drills where the Marines were required to muster with arms to defend the ship.

Few Marines, including their Commanding Officers, could display more than one or two ribbons because there were no campaigns anywhere on Earth or in space where anyone could earn a commendation. We, all of us, were Merchant Sailors, like it or not. Turn over of personnel, particularly in the Navy, was over eighty percent; in the Marines it was close to forty percent. That meant that every two years some poor sap had to train three or four thousand new crewmembers just to keep the Charleston in orbit. I could hardly imagine what the deficits would be for a Carrier that normally carried a full complement of ten thousand,

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including ship's company, the airwings, the Marines, civilian advisors and scientists.

That's why Department Heads and Commanding Officers were keen to keep people like me from signing off and going home. Mister Graf drummed on the desktop with a pencil, snapping me back to the reality of the moment.

"Have you a job offer?" he asked.

"No sir," I replied. "I was self-employed before I signed on and I'll go back to it."

More paper shuffling. The slightest grin played across his lips. He brushed back his graying hair and drummed some more. "Treasure hunter, eh?" he said. "Anything in it?"

"Can be, sir, if you get to a dig in time or discover something buried or lost before anyone else beats you to it."

"First come, first served."

"Something like that, sir." I disliked calling him sir, particularly since I'd been a civilian for two weeks, but old habits and old traditions, as I say, die slowly in the naval service. Besides, it did no harm since he had intimated that he would recommend me to a future employer with a glowing letter which, in my case, would have been addressed to me.

We talked about treasure hunting for a few minutes, then he folded the service record and stood to peer down at me. He was an inch or two over six feet tall; close to a foot taller than I. He said he regretted losing me, I'd been a good sailor despite my problems with weightlessness, the department had fared well while I was aboard, the docking crews liked me and things probably wouldn't be the same after I had gone. Stuff like that. I heard only bits and pieces; my thoughts were on the hangar deck where the Typhoon Class shuttle was being unloaded and prepared for its return trip

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to Earth.

I hadn't even one second of thought that my decision to sign off the Charleston and to muster out of the naval service was capricious. The Charleston was a clean, modern ship of the line and the worst that could be said of it was that she was not a particularly good feeder; hardly reason enough to scorn loyalty to her. Although some of my shipmates and officers, including Mister Graf, hinted that my decision bordered on perfidy, on treachery, infidelity and desertion, I was determined not to stay aboard Charleston a minute longer than necessary. I wanted off, the sooner the better. The little Typhoon shuttle was my ticket back to Earth and San Diego. Man, I could hardly wait.

I had to wait for three more weeks. As I languished in the ready room next morning, word came down that it had been discovered, during preflight inspection, the Typhoon had a potentially serious stress crack in the primary tachyon converter and would be returning to Earth empty, with a skeleton crew, using chemical rockets. No cargo or passengers were permitted to be aboard in case other problems developed with the rarely—but sometimes—unreliable and cranky chemical boosters. There were no methods of escape from the small shuttle. I was both furious and disappointed and began to wonder if it was not some kind of cruel game to keep me onboard as punishment for having the audacity to sign off while the Charleston was operating in high orbit around Luna.

Officially, I was a civilian and, as such, I had been assigned a berth in Transient Quarters where all sorts of other refugees, trades persons and immigrants, men, women and children, were berthed awaiting passage either to Earth or to the mining camps of Mars and beyond. A hundred years

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ago this Transient Quarters was called Steerage; third class accommodations buried deep within the dark corridors of the ship, far from the chow halls, farther still from sick bay, far from any view port that gave a glimmer of sunlight and so far from Earth that it hurt my heart to think of it.

Fortunately, only young men are foolish enough to sign on to serve in a naval vessel, so only they have such moments of despair, disappointment and displacement; however, because of the resilience of their years, they can weather the storms in which they occasionally find themselves, with all the hope of continuity which knows neither paucity nor introspection.

As a civilian, I was encouraged not to visit my former shipmates lest I infect them with anti-system cursing and ranting. In the Navy, when one is in search of a scapegrace, it is always wisest to point to those who perpetrate the offense which, in my case, was the Navy or, to be more precise, the system under which the Navy operated that resulted in such blatant inconstancy and incompetence.

I quickly sank into a state of hopeless indolence and rebellious discontent.

And, as it turned out, I was at last carried back to Earth in the Charleston itself.

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**It was the time of the first sun, the first breath of life,  
the first fall of water from the sky... It was the death of  
darkness and the birth of light. It was the time of  
flying as we did in dreams... when we were children.**

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After what seems only a short time, the sound of scurrying and shuffling stirs me awake. A glance at my chronometer reveals I had been asleep four hours. I raise my head from the pallet to see Doe rolling and tying her gear. Tom is nowhere in sight.

“He asked to go back to Marina City to purchase more supplies; food and clothing and, perhaps, a firearm or two and to find out what the federal men are up to,” Doe explains when I ask about him.

“Won’t that give them an opportunity to track him from here and back?” I ask, aware that such a perilous decision could only mean she had some cause for concern. “And why do we need firearms?”



“He left when there were no satellites above and he departed from one of the windmills on the surface which is many miles from the cave we entered. He is using a maglev scooter we keep down here for emergencies.” She slings her light traveling pack across her shoulders. “And since the feds carry firearms, it might be prudent if we have one or two for self-defense.”

“Windmills?” I quiz, squinching up my eyes to regard

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her with suspicion. “Why has no one mentioned windmills on the surface before this?”

Doe smiles. “Because they don’t look like the windmills of Earth. They are venturis with shafts plunging down for several miles. Wind storms on the surface, some of which can be fierce and prolonged, draw water from deep sub-aqueous sources for use in the cities and for agriculture, and to drive the machinery of industry. At the same time, the surface air is converted to breathable air by heating soil to extract high content oxygen, and hydrogen for fuel. Those devices are no longer used to produce hydrogen, obviously. These cities, which could house millions of earthers, will be crowded with transients within months if their locations are ever revealed.”

“So the haunts will keep them out?”

“For a time,” Doe replies. “I imagine the mine owners will think of a way to overcome their influences soon enough.”

“What are they, really?” I ask cautiously. “The haunts, I mean. They can’t be living creatures; not after all this time.”

“Is that your analysis of them?”

“Well, yeah.” I begin stowing my gear, rolling and patting everything into a small bundle I can easily carry across my shoulders. “They must be some kind of computer generated images. But what triggers them to appear or vanish, is what I want to know.”

Doe grows pensive and turns away. “Later, when we get to the city and you see it for yourself, I’ll explain what you are experiencing,” she says softly. She stands for a moment gazing wistfully out across the great expanse of the Martian city with the slightest hint of moistness in the corners of her eyes. Presently, she returns to the task of tying her bedroll



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into a manageable pack.

An updraft of air and a moaning of winds through the venturi shafts signals a storm on the surface. "Tom will have a rough time of it," she says. "I should have dissuaded him from going to the city. The scooter isn't designed to withstand wind and sand storms."

"Oh, it was his idea, then, to go?" I ask.

"We discussed the possibility that the federal men might trace us to a spot somewhere out here," Doe replies, "so he volunteered to snoop around and find out what they're up to."

"It doesn't seem like something Tom Hunter would do. Volunteer to make that trip just to learn what the earthers are doing, I mean. Not when there is all this to explore." I nod my head toward the city and draw down a grim face.

Not like Tom Hunter at all. Curious.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tom Hunter reached the safety of Marina City the following day, after holing up in one of the windmill shafts until the windsand storm had passed. After he had found a room, bathed and dressed, he took the vintage scooter in for maintenance and caught a taxi into Seekingtown, the section of the city populated by hard rock miners, prostitutes and swindlers of every persuasion, some of whom had landed on Mars one step ahead of the law. There, in one of the saloon restaurants, he ordered a real meal and a quarter-bottle of Napa Perlot wine, the measure of eight ounces. Later, after a visit to one of the brothels, he would make his way to the landing port. It was there, he knew, that the federal men would begin their traces of all the craft that had departed Marina City without filing a flight plan.

Although the number of unauthorized flights might have

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been in the hundreds, none were actually illegal since no laws had yet been enacted to prohibit them. The mine owners saw to that. They wanted as many of their people as possible out on the barrens looking for artifacts, mines, roads, wells, ruins or precious metals. Filing flight plans wasted valuable time, valuable effort and valuable company funds.

Nearly everyone was employed by the mine owners, either directly or as vendors, suppliers or support personnel. Even the prostitutes who kept the miners happy were, in their own ways, working for the mining companies.

After he had enquired at the space port, he would go back to Seekingtown to purchase a couple of stun pulsers.

He had made some friends at Customs during his three visits to Mars, and he expected them to return some favors by way of informing him of the whereabouts and progress of the federal men in tracing Doe's flight to the mine.

The answer to his knock on the door was a gruff permission to enter. Across the desk in the narrow office sat a heavy jowled man with a grim face and shaggy brows. At either side of the desk sat men in very clean, very new burn suits with shoulderpatch logos denoting that they were employed by one of the inscrutable agencies of the Earth government. Each man carried a menacing looking laser pistol on his belt.

The Customs officer scowled at Tom and half rose, then, at a signal from one of the government men, sat heavily and narrowed his eyes gloomily.

"I'll come back," said Tom, reaching behind him for the door.

"No, no," one of the federal men said, holding out his hand to usher Tom to the desk. "We've just this moment been talking about you, Mister Hunter. You should come in and hear what we have to say about your friends."

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Tom turned toward the Customs Officer with hands out and questioning eyes. "Compton?" he pleaded. "What's this?"

"Sorry, Tom," Compton replied with a slight shrug. "It is out of my hands. They want to question you... ."

"We'll do this, mister Compton," one of the federal men interrupted. "Do you have a room where mister Hunter can be interrogated?"

"The detention room is down the hall to the right. Third door. No one will bother you there."

With that, the two federal men escorted Tom Hunter toward the detention room, he resisting all the way and muttering low but clear and emphatic curses at his captors. They flung him into a chair, seated themselves on either side and began.

"Do you know where we can find a girl named Shannon Doe?" one asked.

When these two feds first hustled him into the interrogation room, Tom figured they were looking for Richard, so you can imagine his surprise when they asked about Doe. He didn't know how to answer or even if he should say anything at all.

Tom asked them why they wanted to know and the fed simply asked the question again, a bit more firmly than before. But—how could he say it?—it seemed impossible to get any truth out of them; neither of them would say why they wanted to find Doe.

The youngest of them, a thin and shallow-faced kid with a fluff of powder-blond hair, pulled a grim smile and let Tom know if he didn't tell them where they could find Doe, he was going to spend a few years in a federal prison on the dark side of the moon.

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Straightaway the older man took his colleague by the sleeve and, drawing down an angry scowl, out they went into the passageway. Tom couldn't hear them so he spent the time looking for a way to escape. There was none, of course, unless he wanted to smash the dome and kill everyone inside who didn't have a rebreather.

After about ten minutes, the older man opened the door and told Tom he could go. No explanation and no apology. He turned and strode away, leaving the door open. The passage was empty save for the unblinking eyes of the surveillance cameras.

It was too strange and too easy. Tom was certain they would follow him. He must pretend not to think it in case they were mindseeking him, and knew he must find a way to leave Marina City without their knowing.

Tom found his way to a fast hoverbus bound for Old Seekingtown where, he hoped, he would be able to purchase three pulse pistols, a few packets of EZ Meals and some simple medical supplies to mend the cuts and bruises they all had suffered while clambering through the caves. As a caution, he decided to buy himself a new uniform to replace the worn one he had brought with him from Earth. Perhaps, he thought, he might disguise himself a bit, too, and escape detection in case the federal men were following.

The nearer he walked towards the city center the smaller the avenue became. The streets began to lose their box like grid, and became more haphazard and unplanned. The streets became more and more dense and lively and crowded. The wide straight avenues became squeezed alleyways alive with the buzz of suburban life.

He was in the old section of Seekingtown, the original

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Martian outpost, and it felt and looked frantic. The scene of urban life before him had probably changed little since the colony was established 25 years earlier.

All kinds of produce and spices and a variety of other merchandise stood waiting for customers in huge sacks in little storefronts. The storefronts were all crowded and squeezed together.

Shallow-faced, pale skinned scrawny laborers carried on their backs and in their arms and on primitive wooden carts all kinds of merchandise back-and-forth from hovercarts to the various markets.

The market he choose was a grimy, dusty, dimly-lighted den of loosely piled boxes and cartons of all sizes and descriptions such as one might find in a milliner's or haberdasher's shop on Earth. The smell of exotic foods combined with decayed coral from some long dead Martian sea lingered in the dreadful air.

He made his way through the aisles of chaos until he found the merchant perched upon a sort of stool which appeared to have been made from the bones of a terran dinosaur. Behind him, in a narrow apartment, the merchant had managed to accumulate for himself a disarray of the kinds of Rattan furniture, from end tables to a single bed, one might expect to find in the Philippine Islands on Earth.

Tom wondered briefly what accident or fancy had collected it all there on Mars.

The pillows and antimacassars were layered with the rust-colored fine dust drawn in through the ventilators and deposited everywhere. Dust motes drifted through the still, heavy air, evidence the filters were not working properly.

Dusty lace curtains, clearly out of place in the hostile Martian colony, were drawn closed over dingy windows.

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The merchant was dressed in a remarkably clean and beautiful deep red *Moroccan Selham* over a hooded white *Saharan gandora*, and upon his head was a deep blue turban, the loose end of which was draped delicately around his neck and over his left shoulder.

“*As-Salamu alaikom*, Peace be with you,” the merchant said, standing and placing his hand over his heart.

“*Wa-Alaikom assalam, Abdullah Barakatu*, Peace be with you also, servant of God,” Tom responded, touching his breast in the customary manner of the Arabs of Earth.

“How may I be of service?” asked the merchant with a charming smile.

Tom made his order but was disappointed to learn the merchant had no men’s uniforms to fit him. He could have chosen a woman’s or a child’s uniform but they were cut wrong and would have marked him as a strange fellow indeed. Men’s clothing so small could only be brought from Earth on the next available ship.

“Might you, then, have a hooded burnoose my size in a plain color, nothing flamboyant, mind you, that I could wear over my uniform?” Tom asked.

The merchant allowed as how he just might have one that could quickly be altered so that it would not drag the ground. He produced a garment that was suitably priced, measured Tom’s height and breadth for fit, then vanished down the narrow passage where he spoke briefly to someone in one of the rooms, and returned to ask if Tom cared for anything else.

“Three pulser pistols, if you have them.”

“What power?” asked the merchant.

“Stunners.”

A minute of rummaging through some cabinets pro-

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duced three small Dangerfield pulse stunners, each different from the others, and each about the size and shape of a bar of hand soap. The merchant charged the circuits of each to prove they worked and were fully powered, then carefully wrapped them and placed them into a small box.

As they were concluding the transaction, a young woman, her fine eyes and delicate face unveiled, clad in an exquisite *salwar qamis*, tapped gently upon the frame of the passage to attract the attention of the merchant. She returned the altered burnoose and vanished into the room from which, presently, came the hum of a sewing machine.

The merchant tallied up the fee, making a point of tabbing the three pulsers onto a separate ticket, "To prevent prying eyes from knowing," he said.

Tom paid the fee with gold coins. The merchant's eyes narrowed and the slightest smile appeared on his thin lips. He nodded knowingly.

"To prevent prying eyes from knowing," said Tom grimly.

"I know," the merchant replied. "Would you care to change into your disguise before you leave?" He indicated with an extended arm the way to a dressing room.

When Tom had finished dressing, the merchant accompanied him to the front door, his imposing six-foot frame nearly filling the portal. He touched his breast reverently and said, "*Allahu Akbar min kulli shay.*"

Tom returned the gesture and, clad in the hooded burnoose and with his packages slung in a bag over his shoulder, stepped into the squalid street. The door closed behind him and Tom heard the unmistakable click of the lock.

'God is greater than everything,' the merchant had said at the parting. It seemed strange, almost prophetic, the

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*Takbir*, uttered apropos of nothing at the moment. It seemed almost a portent and a blessing at once, and it left Tom uneasy and alert.

He waited for a hoverbus at the transport station, standing near the boarding platform so he could embark immediately it arrived. Presently a young woman slipped quietly up beside him, standing with her hands clasped behind her, rocking smoothly on the balls of her feet. She smiled when he looked at her, then turned her attention to the direction from which the hoverbus would arrive.

She was small; five feet perhaps, dark hair and brown skin, dressed in garments one would find on someone who more frequented the shops of Marina City than the dark, narrow alleys of Seekingtown.

Tom imagined she was an ally of the federal men assigned to follow and record his movements, report his purchases, his departure from the city and the direction of his flight.

"I have not seen you here before," she said presently, searching his eyes carefully. "Do you come lately from Earth?"

Tom nodded, shrugged a little and murmured, "Yeah, lately." He looked eagerly for the bus.

"Looking for heaven, maybe?" Her voice was soft and had the soft dialect of the American South. "Or the protection of the Lord of the Universe?"

"Only the bus."

"That's good because you can't find heaven here, love," she said. "Perhaps we may never find heaven at all. Or the Lord of the Universe. Or the bus." And she laughed merrily.

"Everyone wants heaven but no one wants to die to get there."



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The girl turned to face him and, smiling, extended a tiny hand. "How true. I'm May. You?"

Tom pumped the hand and cocked his head. "Tom," he said. "What did you mean about heaven a second back?"

"I overheard you invoke the name of God at Hassim's shop."

Tom's eyes flashed alarm and he stepped away, looking for an avenue of escape.

"No, no," said May, glancing about. "I'm sent to make certain the federal men do not detain you or follow you." She lifted her chin a bit and pursed her lips, diverting her eyes to an area behind Tom.

"Do not look around, Tom," she said. "Just walk away now quickly. Return to the shop. Knock four times, then two. Hassim will open the door and hide you. The federal men are walking this way. Go now. Go!"

As Tom turned to make his way back to Hassim's shop, he could just barely see four men approaching, clad in glimmer suits so they could not be directly observed. How, he wondered, had May been able to pick them out so clearly?

**Behold, I show you a mystery;  
we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.**

Maybe some people are born angry, maybe some are born to torment the cosmos, maybe some people are born mad and never find sanity no matter how hard or how long they try. Maybe some people don't even know they are mad or know but don't care. Maybe everyone is mad a little or a lot. I've often sat up wakesleeping at night wondering if I am mad and thinking the only people who don't wonder are those who are really mad.

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I am craving a cup of hot tea and longing for Earth. A hundred years ago, I had a plan for happiness but I let it slip away and I couldn't help but wonder if it was my own fault and that if I had planned better or differently, I might have found the happiness I sought.

But that was a hundred years ago in a different life on a different planet and it seemed pointless to dredge it up and clutter my life with it now but I dredged it up and let it clutter my life as never before. I felt compelled somehow to cling to misery just so I wouldn't forget who I was and what I longed to be some day.

When I was younger I imagined that I was invulnerable and my life was measured in decades, seven or eight at least, or even ten but, as I grew older and wiser—more aged than wizened—I began to realize that my life was measured in months and weeks until one day I understood that my life and everyone else's had always been measured in minutes and seconds and that death might appear at any moment after birth to cut us down and carry us away.

The cosmic second, my mother used to say.

But if you are careful and clever you can live an entire lifetime in that one cosmic second, and sometimes two or three.

So I began to despair for the years I had wasted on trifles, on meaningless pursuit of worthless goals and love of treasure above the treasure of love. By the time I was old enough to begin to understand the meaning of life, I wondered if it was too late to do anything about it.

Outside the stork-eyed far away red sun absorbs the Martian sky until night falls ice cold black and I am glad I am in the cave city with Doe and I stare at the glow of the heatsticks against the sloped walls of the cavern because I

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cannot sleep for fear of the returning dreams.

Doe stirs softly and the sound of her breathing is like that of a kitten purring and I want to press against her and close my eyes to sleep again in peace and dream of nothing at all or perhaps only the memory of the sounds of the gentle music of Brahms or Chopin and wake up in a completely different time and space.

Does Doe dream of the vulgar miners eating and drinking and smoking and laughing over the lifeless forms of her father and mother? Does she see them with dark dreaming eyes wishing them dead because she knew they murdered her father and left her mother's mutilated corpse in a trash bin for the flies and the worms?

Does she still wish for the safety of her blind childhood before the Marsgod gave her the vision to see the past, present and future of the cosmos? Dark and curvy Shannon Doe doesn't have time to understand all that she can see because her life, like mine and everyone else's, is measured in mere cosmic seconds.

Pity.

Night blue cold is burning above and snow crystals drift down from the cavern roof to melt and dissolve in the pools of water. Some day ocean waves will thunder over our heads and we'll look up and the sky will fall into our mouths and I briefly wonder if I'll live long enough to see it or ever find my way back to Earth.

The greed that brought me to Mars burns like battery acid on my tongue. Is it real, is this place real, is this time real? I'm not so sure any more and I want to turn off my mind and close my eyes and sleep and wake up some place else because I hate my life and hate what I'm doing and hate that I can't seem to change anything.

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Waiting for the bus on the snowdirt evening streets of Evanstown, I closed my eyes and dreaded the appointment with the dentist in a few minutes. My tooth began to ache again when I pushed my tongue against it like it woke up as soon as I began to think about it and it wanted to remind me how I had neglected it.

It was snowing and the cold just made the aching worse. When will the goddamned bus get here is all I could think.

May waited in the cold for the same bus with snowflakes catching on her dark skin face and her white breath torn from her lips and carried away on the freezing wind and she turned her dark wolf eyes toward me and caught me stealing her beauty and I looked away and shrugged deep into my coat to hide my embarrassment.

Then the bus stopped against the curb and I hurried inside and sat on a cold plastic bench and May followed and took a seat next to me and pressed the curve of her hip against me and in ten seconds I fell in love on a bus taking me to the procaine drill, and her singing wolf eyes danced my heart. In fifteen minutes she was gone but not before telling me her number and I saw her now and then for a year or so until the greed of treasure and the dream of forever in California sunshine took me from her but she promised she would love me until the end of time and I didn't even care because the treasure and the sunshine were more important.

Dark haired California baby doll faced girls were with me in the city frowning wizened old women were with me in the city dark honey soul sparkly eyed girls were with me in the city and it was night and I was sleepwake dreaming about myself and my skin was space colored or the cast of

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iron and my hands were soft and dark like black sand on a black beach in a black universe.

Cold Montana omen Jessie Rose was yellow in the street light as she watched the red lipstick flow onto the curve of her mirror lips and in the wet color she saw the shape and taste of herself. Her parents always sent her to bed early but every night kept her awake with the sharp sound of their screaming and fighting.

It wasn't about love it wasn't about marriage it was convenience that pulled us together because it was cheaper to live together and it was not so lonely even if we fought a lot we always ended up hot in bed until the sun was in the morning sky and we slept.

I couldn't remember if those long old gone people had names if any other people have names if I have a name watching the pink cherry blossoms under a cold heavy morning sun bowing its head low. I remember pink petal tongue and quiet curling coyote eyes, dark and soft, and I would laugh and lean in close and she'd smile and goddamn she was so beautiful and I don't remember more than her hand on mine her little hand like she'd break like all the voices and bus engines would break her into tiny pieces but later a thousand years all crammed into one night she was still whole still all there and murmuring against my skin and smiling and she felt so soft and her eyes cut me open like ripe fruit like soft flesh like soft boiled eggs and goddamn goddamn she was so beautiful sometimes I couldn't tell where she ended and the rest of the world began.

I'd be as cold and still as the stars and that lovely little girl would give me a little hug and her coyote eyes burned holes through my soul eating me alive and the smell of her

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skin and her breath was an evil curse from the god of the city and the night wound around her throat and down her spine right on through the streets and parking lots like hot chocolate and the feel of her tongue was on me like soft slow waking in the morning like train whistles waking you up like bus engines waking you up like people talking too loud down the hall like telephone ringing waking you up from sweat and summer blood red sleep and meanwhile back in Evanstown May pretty May brought into the world a baby boychild and she called him Richard but she never told me it was mine and Jessie Rose got greedy and stole all my stuff and ran away with a lowlife piece of baggage who murdered her and I forgave her because I loved her and it was just stuff and I can always get more stuff but there was only one Jessie Rose they should have fried that son-of-a-bitch. I did two years of hard time in the Navy just trying to forget and somewhere in the future there would be this one-armed man shot in the chest on a cold concrete slab and a bloody red blind baby girlchild where people spend quick fifty dollar nights in Seekingtown on the too faraway planet Mars.

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I'm wasting time thinking about this useless nonsense. I'm wasting my life and the lives of everyone else out here and there are only a few seconds left to make decisions before cold cruel death comes to snatch me away to some stinking dark forever nothing gamma ray burst cosmic second.

Cherry blossoms are sailing like antigravity pink snow in Japan back on Earth and I wish I could be there to see those cinnamon candy petals those mother of pearl flowers those plum and orange and tangerine snowflakes covering the ground all around like a shiny soft peach skin fur coat

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shifting here and there in the Shangri-La winds like waves tossing ticklish against my awake sleepdreaming face.

I think I have lived a thousand unlearned and unexamined lives of passion and grief and joy I think that I am as old as Adam as old as that ancient scaly serpent of evil fame who grins sadly and tricks me with his contrives. I think Doe learned a host of things while she was blind while she was confined in her darkness while she was a sister of the stars prisoner I never saw such peace on any face in life or in death and the slow rise and fall of her bosom runs on the endless treadmill of my mind a soft fuzzy puppy asleep beside me a thousand miles away and my hands are just empty cups to hold bitter wine.



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God seems too remote for me to find where do the birds go when they die god where do the kittens go where do the dogs go where do the horses go and where do all the people

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go god when they die? My thoughts are a narrow stone street plunging downhill to fall into a sea of red winds and a boiling cauldron beneath stars wrecked by a million centuries of cosmic seconds until I am drained away drained away drained drained drained.

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When I was four my mother went to work on an assembly line at an auto company and I used to walk six blocks to wait for her bus in the afternoon so I could take her home because I was afraid she would loose her way. Foolish little boy your mother builds automobiles how can she lose her way but she made me stop because she was afraid something awful might happen while I was waiting at the bus stop and sure enough when I was eighteen something awful happened at the bus stop while I was waiting to go see a dentist. How did she know? The last words she said to me her last telephone words were I love you Richard I'll see you over there and I knew she meant over there on the other side. How does she know?

Go to sleepy little baby, go to sleepy little baby, when you wake we'll patty patty cake and ride a shiny little pooh-nee.

She lay her weary head upon that soft sanitized hospital pillow and went to sleep before I could say goodbye went to the other side before I could ask directions crossed the river of forgetfulness before I could hurry to her side to touch her cold blue hand and she was only forty-one years alive and I've had a nonverbal standoff relationship with god ever since.

I cried for three years in the darkness and then the words on the walls the graffiti on the walls the chalk powder words



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on the boxcars the painted sidewalk words became my tears while I was not associated with the human race when my humanity had run out of me like melting ice like I was barbed wire and asphalt and gutter rain like I was street lamp burning dog teeth ripped out skin and bone when I was so afraid I didn't sleep for days because I'd dream I was picking through trash and all I could find was her hair.

The ochre man waddles up to me and peers at me with his bottles clanking and banging together on the yoke across his shoulders and cloudy salty eyes shakes his head says maybe he'll be okay maybe he'll live after all maybe you can go home in a day or two and my mother is pressing her face into her pillow and crying I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places I'll never smile again the last time I saw Paris children laughing and splashing in the old stone quarry but I can't go in I think I am too young I think I don't know how to swim and the water in the quarry is blood red gushing I am terrified and the ochre man is waving his arms and running people here and there something is wrong it is a mistake no one can mend and I am sleeping on a bed of nails with one foot in the fire.

"They are going to poison the wells," someone says in the back of my mind.

"They can't!"

"Oh, yes, they will."

Is that you, Richard? someone mindspeaks to me.

"I think he is finally asleep," says Doe.

Is that you, Richard?

"Let him sleep," says Tom and I awaken abruptly, exploding into myself bewildered and disoriented.

I roll onto my side and see Doe and Tom with a girl. They are helping Tom with his packages and casting furtive

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glances at me.

Who asks, I mindspeak.

May.

Then I am running out of myself, groping for a handhold to steady myself as I lurch into a standing position.

May? Suddenly I am all old cold night air and sun bleached bones and speechless and ashamed because I know that voice I know that song I know that sadness.

May?

Tom and Doe walk away to where the scooter is parked and they are talking about the wells being poisoned by the mining companies to keep colonists from settling here.

May? She approaches and she is smiling and I hold out my arms and she falls into me and I kiss her red red mouth and it dances with mine like a long lost friend and I feel that my heart is going to explode.

May.

Richard.

There was a boychild?

On Earth with my mother.

How old?

Five.

Does he know of me?

Yes. I've told him you are a wonderful man and a good and loving father and that you are away but will return soon and that you will take him to the ballgames and fishing and treasure hunting. He likes the idea of treasure hunting most of all.

May. I'm sorry.

I do not need to hear it but thank you.

How did you find me?

I've searched for you since the boy was born, since five

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years ago. Really, now, we need to think of what we shall do to stop the mining companies from poisoning the wells.

“But how?” I ask.

Tom and Doe come closer cautiously, not wanting to intrude upon our mindspeak reunion.

“There are several hundred vigilantes gathering in Seekingtown at this moment,” Tom says, reaching into his bag and producing a pulse stunner. “They are going to lure the mine owners and the government men into an ambush at the Copper Canyons in a day or two, when they are assembled and have their plans well thought out. Then they will capture as many as they need not kill and demand that the mine owners abandon their plans to poison the wells or get off the planet.”

“It will mean war,” I say, drawing down a grim face. “The government will drop ten thousand Marines onto the surface and everyone will die in a single afternoon.”

“The warfighters will take our side when they hear what... .”

“You won’t live long enough to tell them.”

“But we are broadcasting on all frequencies,” says Doe. “Every ship between here and Earth can hear our pleas.”

I shake my head and slump against the wall. “You don’t understand. The Communications Officers will be instructed to block all incoming messages. The Marines, the sailors, will only hear that bands of insane colonists are murdering innocent people. The ships will go into orbit above the Copper Canyons and begin killing people with laser cannons, then the Marines will jump down and mop up those who manage to survive. In a day, two at most, everyone involved in this plot will be dead.”

Doe looks stricken and turns away. Tom stiffens his neck

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and chews his lips. May lets go my hand and looks at me anxiously. "But we must do something. If they succeed in poisoning the wells, no colonists can live here for decades and those who are here, who live out here away from the distilling plants, will die. We just can't allow it," she says firmly

"Wouldn't it be easier and a lot less destructive to simply limit the number of colonists who are allowed to come to Mars?" I ask. "There must be something else going on here. It makes no sense to poison the water everyone spent so many years and fortunes finding."

"How can you fathom the thinking of the mine owners?" Doe asks. "They want the planet to themselves and if they have to poison the wells and kill several thousand colonists to get it, I think they won't hesitate."

Tom comes up to me and places a beefy hand on my shoulder. "Richard, I heard the whole story on the way back with May and I believe her. We have to do what we can to stop the mine owners. Will you help?"

I don't believe the mine owners are going to poison the water it is insane it is a lie and something else is happening here. I step back and wave my hands before my eyes as if to erase those three things standing before me who are they what are they why are they here what am I doing?

It makes no sense I say and they bob their heads up and down ya ya poison the wells smiling like freaks at a side-show how can I know if they are telling the truth or lying? I am ivory tusks and elephant bones an empty skin stretched over a baobab tree I am empty I am mindless my thoughts have been stolen and I can feel myself sliding down inside my head like rain smears on a dusty window like words on a broken mirror.

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The ochre man returns gliding through the cavern like a vampire bat and is gone leaving his clanking bottles smashed and running red blood red all over the floor why am I here? Must I go and die at twenty-nine to prove my love for you must you die to prove your love for me old exhausted angry men spraying death at the enemy nameless faceless sons of earth kill and die tears and sweat, swearing at the sky and cursing god I can't remember if you have a name I can't remember if you are dead or alive I've never seen the baby boykid back there on earth and I don't want to kill and I don't want to die because I just learned to live five minutes ago don't ask again I have no answer I have not learned to speak or dream I have not learned to laugh I have not learned to fly I have not learned to run from the noise and swift fearful city streets it is cold I am cold I am hungry so hungry can't you feel this hunger it makes me a ghost how can you lie to me like this?

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*A hand omnipotent in endless space, from chaos forms a world and finds a place where, through countless ages yet unborn, through numberless cosmic seconds, a star might shine from dusk to dawn.*

*Great mountains rise, majestic in their might, and sun-filled mountains aglow with mellow light and rippling streams go purling through the darkened forests to silver lakes that glisten in the shadows.*

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Jessie Rose turns on the light and slips from bed and goes into the kitchen to make a cup of tea and sits in the darkness drinking her tea then goes outside to stare up at the black night faraway stars or stray dogs or wandering cats with nothing but the quiet to keep her company and I press my face against her pillow and try to go back to sleep but I can't because all I can do is wonder what is she doing out there and I wait for her to come back and she always says she is listening to something or someone in the sky she can't say what it is and I say aliens and when she laughs her old bricks voice is like the purring of an ancient cat and she slips into bed and turns away from me and I press against the hot curve of her back and before I fall asleep she asks how are we going to pay the rent she loves her four-fingered alien baby she says but it cries too much and it never blinks shut up I say and I sleep until she turns on the light and slips out of bed again when the lights go on again all over the world child of god bright starlight antigravity cosmic second heart of darkness alien child.

\* \* \* \* \*

We gather there upon the broad plain above the Copper Canyons and wait for the mine owners and the marines and the merks and the federal men in their glimmer burnsuits but they never come. Two days we stay until we are old tired hungry and our rebreathers are exhausted and we are dying of freezing cold and radiation but they never come so we all return to Marina City or Seekingtown or the mines and the caves and the ruins and when we four arrive at the ancient city we find a dozen merks waiting for us. Only because Doe can mindseek them are we able to avoid being killed. She leads us around the ambush and we catch

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three of them off guard and stun them witless and tie them to a dolmen with gags over their mouths.

They leave me to guard the three and venture off to find more.

Doe calls up the haunts and they swirl from the cavern walls and crevices first by the dozens and then by hundreds and then by tens of thousands. How can this be? Where have all these creatures come from? Tenuous wraiths trailing bright tails of shimmering fire their eyes as black as the blackest night like they are a thousand miles deep like they are universes wide and the merks are caught by surprise and scream in terror as the haunts the Marsgods fall upon them and rend them limb from limb I think I am going to puke and I am holding the stunner on the man named Kennedy and he is struggling in terror to free himself struggling to crawl away from the haunts and he kicks at me trying to knock the stunner from my hand and I reach behind me to get his lasepistol and as I turn something heavy and large smashes into the side of my face and I am thrown sideways and I see a man's boots walk up beside my head and out of the corner of my eye I can see he is pointing his lasepistol directly at my head.

\* \* \* \* \*

I am outside in the desert. I don't know how I got here; I must have lost consciousness for a while. I walk toward the low plain before me and I think I can see an infant lying on the sand, a boy, his head turned toward me, watching intently as I approach. I think I am dreaming, I cannot be here without my rebreather, the infant cannot be here without a rebreather and why is an infant here in the first place?

As I approach the infant I know that I am losing consciousness; I am dying, the clock is ticking, time is running



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out and the poker is in the fire. My cosmic second has ended and I fall to my knees and just before I collapse upon the red cold sands of Mars I can see that the infant is me and the last thing I hear, the last words the ochre man is saying is thank god missus Constable it was touch and go there for a while but the boy will survive.