

## In Sure and Certain Hope

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We need new ceremonies, I think, watching Dana. This is one of many things on which we disagree.

Dana is outside. I watch her through the thick glass of the base's windows. She stoops, articulating awkwardly where the suit bends at knee and elbow, digs in with the spade, then stands, lifting a heap of fine dust that begins to blow away even as she turns and throws it on the mound behind her. She has the floodlights on and her shadow stretches out into the vastness of the Utopia Planitia. Waves of dunes shift and shuffle behind her in the dying winds.

She lifts her head and I imagine her eyes behind the visor, what they see: the mountains looming above the squat base; the glare of the lights; my face at the window. She turns back, stoops, digs. Not burying. Reburying.

Sometimes the slow, cyclonic gyres that traverse the planet sweep storms over us that last for days. Sand whispers, then bites and rages at the windows of the rooms where we sleep alone, piles up from the outside. The wind gouges out new topographies.

We dream of David, frozen in his grave, eyes staring, filled with dust, and then, as the wind barrels in, suddenly open to the sky. There are no bacteria here and the dead don't rot.

Dana is coming back. She disappears from view, and then I hear a metallic clunk as the airlock's inner door shuts. She comes in, helmet in hand, takes me in with an accusing gaze. I lounge on the sagging sofa in t-shirt and knickers, flicking through a magazine from the last supply drop.

"Christ Maya, he was your dad." I pretend interest in an article on home office furnishing in the New York suburbs. She puts the helmet away, sheds the exo-suit like an insect clambering out of its carapace, crams it noisily into its cupboard. This is how we communicate now. Appeals to, or rejections of, familial connection – he's your dad; you're meant to be my mother – bickering, silence.

"You're not a bloody teenager, Maya."

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You probably know me best by two photographs. In the first I've just turned nine, though in Martian years I'm only five and you cannot see my face. I remember Dana taking it. It was the first time I was allowed outside. For months I'd thought I was big enough to use the suit and I'd been pestering Dana all that time, but it was decided I must wait for my birthday.

David came with me of course. No-one could think of anything that might go wrong, but somehow it seemed inappropriate for a child to be out alone. There were no cars to knock me down, no strangers to kidnap me, but still it seemed irresponsible to watch from inside as I entered that large, empty landscape. Old fears, old rituals.

In honesty, the suit was still too big. No-one had expected a child's suit would be necessary for the Mars Mission, at least not so soon.

I'd dreamed of outside for as long as I could remember. Whenever the others went out I'd watch from the portholes in the living room or, best of all, if they were on the right side of the base, through the panoramic panes of the greenhouse where we struggled, but

failed, to grow food. Strangely, when I thought of outside, I thought of being barefoot. I'd spend hours watching videos of beaches, people stretched out on towels, playing games in the sand, and I imagined feeling the cold, sharp edges of the Martian rocks under my soles, of squidding my toes into the dust, and – best of all – the whisper of fresh air over the tops of my feet and in my hair as I ran, red dirt kicking up from my heels. In my dreams I wear a bikini, toss beach balls, dive into azure seas.

I am insulated. Untouched.

There was no possibility of running in the suit. My hands barely reached the gloves, the boots were weighted and heavy, and the thick material bunched awkwardly at my waist. When I turned, my body turned before the suit came with me. I suddenly felt trapped, out of control. In the airlock, David smiled at me.

“Ready to go? Come on – happy birthday.”

I nodded, embarrassed to show my fear. He put the helmet over my head and locked it in place, then pulled down his visor. He spun the wheel to release the outer door, pushed it open and stepped outside. He beckoned. His voice came through the earpiece, tinny and distant.

“Come on, it's okay.” He reached back and held my hand as I stepped awkwardly over the threshold. As we walked around the base, the sound of my breathing through the earpiece and the heavy suit made me feel claustrophobic. Yet, periodically, I'd look up at the vast Martian plains, or back at the base – it seemed so small from the outside – and a wave of agoraphobia would sweep over me.

“Do you want to walk over to the supply drop?”

“No, no, I want to go back inside.”

Dana was waiting by the door with a camera. The shot was a lucky one. By an accident of framing David doesn't appear and, of course, my frightened face is invisible behind the gold sheen of the visor. I look playful: a small, slightly comic figure; a doll against the indifferent red and ochre landscape.

Time magazine's headline – is was their cover image, of course – stuck: Mars Child. You can also find it if you search for “First Martian,” though this also brings up images of the rest of the crew, particularly David, who insisted, typically, that he be first down the lander's ladder onto alien soil.

I trawl through the period of my celebrity occasionally. There was a rehash of the scandal about Dana's pregnancy and speculation about whether, given it was unclear if I was conceived during or after the flight to Mars, I was a true Martian.

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I hear Dana clumping around the kitchen and living quarters. I go to the gym and cycle to a recording of an online spin class. I go to the gym a lot. I snack. I watch box sets. I don't have any projects.

I've mostly stopped looking at Earth through the telescope, though when we're asked how we fill our time, it pays to pretend a fascination with it. People think they're interested in us, but they're really interested in themselves. Popular consensus has it I'm obsessed with the colours green and blue. Imagine! As if I care what happens on your damn planet. Sixty million miles must confer a wonderful “sense of perspective” they tell me in their emails. It must be so chastening, heart-breaking, they say, to see the greens and blues through the

telescope fading, becoming more Mars-like. They say they find it comforting to think I'm up there in the sky, looking down.

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The second photograph is also a birthday shot, my eighteenth. The Mars programme was defunct to all intents and purposes. EM Enterprises was bankrupt and by then we were being kept alive by government programmes and charity drives funding resupply missions. The rest of the colonists took the chance to go years ago, when David and Dana – David, mostly – held out. Mostly, people feel bad about Mars – about me at least; less so about David and Dana – and would rather forget us. There was, though, a brief fillip of interest as I become adult, whatever that means here. Would I, I asked Dana petulantly, get to vote in the Martian elections? Could I have sex without my parents' permission now?

You know the photo. I've just come in from another walk – I spent a lot of time walking outside then. Dana again appears with the camera, but David is long dead. I don't want to be photographed.

"Maya, come on." Coaxing and cajoling are key frontier skills here – there are plenty of voices saying Dana should rot in hell for what she's done, and her survival depends on me. "You need to do this. We need to keep them sweet. We can't let them forget us." I pout impatiently, sigh, agree.

In the photo my helmet is under my arm and my hair, a little unkempt, falls over the rigid, round neck of the suit. I'm smiling and my eyes sparkle. I'm Time's cover image once again – Mars Woman – and there's a long feature inside, which also reprints the Mars Child shot, about the troubled settlement programme. The image explodes across people's social media feeds for a day or two. I'm youth, beauty, the future, and at a dead end on a dead planet. Being eighteen, I'm also more openly the subject of the sexual fantasies that have been circulating for a couple of years. Even with our terrible web connections, data crawling to Earth and back over minutes, sometimes tens of minutes, I've seen those.

I do the press interviews by email, record video messages about what it's like to be a pioneer. I make stuff up about the importance of the science we do. There's the usual griping on Earth about the tax dollars we're costing.

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David was the dreamer. "They'll be back," he'd tell me. "We're their destiny. Someone will pick up the tab."

He died and we, the figures in his dream, carry on. We move about the base, we "do some science," we try to make our story sell enough to keep Earth interested.

Dana insisted on digging the grave, placing a cross. All that "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" jazz. I stayed indoors.

"You can bury the bastard yourself." There's no way back from a statement like that.

"We need new rituals," I told her later, trying to explain. Failing. We should have strapped him to a chair, over the ridge, eyes open to the Utopia Planitia. Facing the wind, facing the plains, facing the weather; out of sight. We should have left his body to erode, to be scoured, rendered dust.

Out of this body, rock. Out of this rock, sand. Out of this sand, silence. Weather. Now and forever, amen.

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And now, in a slow dance of avoidance, we move through the base, from room to room. The kitchen, the living room, the gym. The greenhouse, the bathroom, the sleeping quarters, mostly empty. Sometimes our paths cross. Occasionally we share a meal. We post images to our Instagram account, try to keep things going. Outside, the storm systems circulate and sand blows in the wind, pitting the rocks, the base.

Sometimes, I think I'll put on the exo-suit. Sometimes, I think I'll walk as far as I can go and then sit on a rock, open my visor, feel a short, sweet kiss of wind on my face before it snatches my breath away forever. But I go to the gym, snack, watch some boxsets. Insulate myself.

I open emails from Earth. I avoid the telescope. I await next year's supply drop. There's no action, no climax, no resolution. Everything has already happened.