

Daisies of Mars

By

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Daisies of Mars

Nick picked his way through the garden of rocks that lined the foot of the ridge. It was tough to stride with dignity in a bright yellow environment suit, but he was a determined man, even if the suit's legs were stiff and he bounced with every step in the lower gravity.

Unable to raise his knee high enough, he stumbled over a stone and fell to his knees; a flash of fear for a hole in the hands of his gloves. But he pushed himself to his feet again and didn't hear the telltale hiss of his clock wasting away, and breathed easier again.

Who the hell designed these suits anyway? They're too tight.

Nick looked back to see how far he'd traveled from the rover. Only when Damien and his crony moved could he spot them; their red suits blended against the mottled rust. How far away were they, four hundred meters? Five? On Earth, he'd always had an eye for judging distances, but Mars skewed everything. Mars, the red jewel. Mars, humanity's hope. *Bullshit*. Mars was a damned desolate rock. After just three weeks he could feel himself starting to hate it. The sky was the wrong color. The horizon was too close. The gravity was off. Mars was made wrong, and all in endless reds and blacks. A rusty car on blocks. The glowing embers of a dying campfire. Mars. A man could starve for the lack of greens and blues.

Never in a million Martian years would Nick relocate permanently like his predecessor. Even to consider it, the man had to have been from one of those desolate places that baked a man dry, Africa, Italy, Arizona, used to the dust already, used to the monochrome country. Already Nick was tired of being cold all the time, and sick of being cooped up in Kepler. Everybody in the settlement drooped like wilted flowers despite the lower gravity – the Mars stoop, as he'd come to think of it – kicking their feet ahead of them, their faces grim and as unwelcoming as featureless slate. A smile. Wouldn't a smile be nice? A man could starve for never seeing a happy face.

Nick stepped up onto a rock and proudly planted a solid print in the cinnamon soil on the other side. *One small step for a facilitator ...*

Six months. One down, five to go. He could make it. Think of rivers, think of clouds, think of frogs and dresses in summer and umbrellas. Five months until antelopes, snowflakes, storm drains....

Migrate to Mars. Reinvent yourself. He shuddered whenever he heard Friends of Earth Co. foisting that particular motto.

Shading his eyes, Nick scanned the line of the ridge ahead. His helmet adjusted automatically to ambient light levels, but shading was a somatic habit; it let his body feel useful.

“Display,” he said aloud, “Ridge access map.”

The ridge's edges were the chalky orange of a rusty nail, and crisp against the gunmetal-blue sky of the dawn. On the screen of his helmet, an overlay of the area popped into place. A flashing yellow line on his display marked the easiest route up the escarpment. He didn't spy anybody up there, but he wouldn't with that mask of orange and blue.

“Display, close map.”

He took a step, but stopped when the map remained in place, hindering his view. He shook his head inside his helmet as if he could dislodge the overlay. Then he tried, "Display, exit map." And the map disappeared, and he felt foolish.

"The daft bitch hangs out on the ridge around sunrise," Damien had said. *"But she won't talk to nobody. You'd just be wasting your time."*

Unsaid, but not unheard, was *'wasting our time.'*

Back on Earth, a musclehead like Damien would have been a garbage man, a truck driver, a ditch digger. Half the time the man had no idea what Nick was trying to tell him. That, or he only pretended to not understand. Either way, Nick didn't like him.

But considering the stakes, Nick had stayed steadfast, sounding more confident than he'd felt. *"I'll be the judge of that, Mr. Damien. Let me talk some sense into her. It'll be better for everybody involved."*

He scanned the ridgeline again. She was watching him. Somehow he knew. He wondered what she thought about him bouncing across the landscape like an escaped balloon.

Nick took a deep breath. *Relax*, he thought. *Five months. It'll get better.*

~*~

Topping the ridge had been harder than he'd expected, hands to the outcrops over his shoulders, toes searching for holds. Rising temperatures were loosening the ancient permafrost all over the planet; it had been difficult to gain traction. Slipping a few times on surface ice, he'd come up with red smears on his yellow knees. Martian mud. Unbelievable.

The lands below were a study of vastness impossible on the Earth. Only as Nick traversed the top of the ridge could he truly understand that he wasn't crossing a mere mountain plateau. He was inching along the ridge of a crater, the farthest splash of an ancient impact, steep in many places, and generally as treacherous as everything else on Mars.

The opposite side was more imagined than seen. *An ant must feel the same way when standing atop a rock near a lake*, he thought. Nevertheless, the air was clear that morning, and he could make out far crags and cliffs many kilometers away, even if the air was still tinged with a pink haze despite the extra moisture the atmosphere held these days. Likely, that hue would forever mar the sky, reminder of Mars' mummified past.

Between the height of the crater's ridge and the underlying lowlands, it was easy to spot Kepler in the distance. Construction was nearly done on the great pillars which would eventually anchor its dome to the ground. They stood like sentinels at the town's four corners, the dome itself still an imaginary dotted line in the sky. As temperatures rose, and the geologic ice melted, the town would become an important port stopover.

Or so the terraformers claimed. Nick had trouble picturing boats at anchor down in the red dust.

Either way, it wouldn't be long before all of those dowdy faces creeping through Kepler would have no excuse for not venturing outside. Sunday strolls with sweethearts under the two

moons. Count a few shooting stars. That's what all the posters back on Earth seemed to advertise, guided tours of the constellations. Ride the glittering waterways of Mars.

They'll be glum cruises if people don't cheer up.

Beyond the town, a plume of black smoke rose as a pencil-thin divider of the lightening sky. On the left, the mining outpost of Kepler seemed to simmer with potential. On the right, the lowland basin waited for the wet.

Fifty years ago, seeing one of the carbon-dioxide factories that roamed the planet had been common. Belching carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere, they'd crossed the red lands like the buffalos of old. Built to last, the machines had been an ambitious long-term project, but Mars with its fine dust had proved an inhospitable prison for machines as well as for people and, like the buffalo, their numbers eventually dwindled. Spotting one of the remaining rovers had since become rare. For the past two weeks the people of Kepler had talked about the approaching plume of smoke the way they might an eclipse, or a passing comet. It was not to be missed. Some even considered it a sign of good luck.

Nick didn't see the appeal. A tin can, a factory furnace, a scoop ... big deal: a clunky smoke robot.

Spirit of the planet. What does that say about the planet?

~*~

The woman he wanted to find liked to linger near the far end of the ridgeline where the sheer drop to the flats below offered a grand view of the region. He keyed his map again and corrected his direction, making sure he knew where his toes were at all times. Being lighter in the lesser gravity didn't make him more nimble. Rather, with his belly pressing against the tight wrap of his environment suit, it felt as if he was carrying a little pouch of moving water with him everywhere he went. It kept him off balance a lot of the time.

He exhaled and his breath whistled against the breathing grill inside his helmet. Fast food. That was something else Mars didn't care for.

It wasn't long before Nick spotted his contact standing near the edge of the cliff. He'd asked Damien about her that morning, how he'd find her, and the big man had laughed. *"Like I said, goes to the cliff. Stands there a while. Enjoys the view, I guess."*

"How will I know her when I see her?"

Nick hadn't trusted Damien's smile.

"Oh, you'll know her."

As Nick drew nearer, he saw that the woman had no face. Malfunctioning, the display of her fishbowl helmet fuzzed with frantic static, or *snow* as his grandfather had liked to call it, *like when the old box used to go on the fritz*. It shimmered brightly in the dim light, angry as a beehive, strange against the placid pooling of all the millennia that Mars had amassed in the lands below.

The lady herself was tall and thin, her suit old and red-dusted and worn so that the tint of the planet had ground into the once-black material and shone like gasoline in the sun when she moved.

Nick bounced to a stop and gathered himself. According to her dossier, she'd been living down in the crater all alone for quite a while. Obviously, she'd lost touch with technology. Very possibly she'd lost her touch with people too. Friends of Earth seemed to think so.

Nick considered his words carefully, but first things first. He straightened himself, and would have adjusted a tie if he had one. "Display," he said, "ping Janet Cribbs."

Half a minute passed. The lady didn't turn around. Nick began to feel like an intruder. Should he throw a rock at her? Tap her on the shoulder? He'd considered writing cue cards to hold up for her if his first hello failed, or if she refused to acknowledge his com, and he was beginning to regret not bringing them.

Alone with her thoughts, communing with nature, she had a reverent air about her. To tap her on the shoulder would feel like impropriety, a cough in church.

Damien had argued against him heading out to the ridge. "*She's never so much as said boo to us. Why would you be any different?*"

"Display," said Nick, feeling the slick inner material of his suit wicking away his sweat. "Ping all suits within range of the common channel." That would be about a hundred meters or so.

But then he heard the voice in his ear, crisp and scholarly. "I heard you the first time, Mr. Hutchinson." Immediately, Nick was reminded of a Philosophy professor he'd had in university: old skirt-suits, mismatching pumps, frazzled hair, and a voice like a knife.

Nick looked about. *How does she know who –*

"Mr. Nick Hutchinson, thirty-three years old, born December twenty-eighth, 2052, born to blah blah blah. Current employer: The United Earth Immigration Office, the worst acronym makers in history. Recently transferred to the Mars office of said department. Likes: long walks on the beach, bad television, boring desk jobs. Turnoffs: being transferred off-planet, being away from his mommy...."

Nick was silent a moment. Then the woman's voice again: "Welcome to Mars, Mr. Hutchison." As she said *Mars*, a picture of the planet flashed brightly across her helmet displays, four of them surrounding her head, before fading into the chaos of the static again.

His introduction stolen, Nick stumbled. "How – ?"

"Your environment suit is saying hello to everybody for miles. Broadcasting your life story. Most people turn that feature off. Your friends back at your rover show up as '*anonymous*.'"

This wasn't how Nick had wanted to start. "Ms. Cribbs, I'm here on behalf of –"

"Mrs. Cribbs," she said.

"I'm sorry," said Nick. "Mrs. Cribbs. I'm here on –"

She interrupted again. "Mr. Hutchinson, do you know why your suit is yellow?"

Nick paused. Staring into the moving nothingness of her helmet was disconcerting. He had to be careful with her, find out where he stood before he fumbled. “No,” he admitted.

“It’s the standard color ES that Friends of Earth gives to new arrivals. Makes it easier to see against the red ground. To recover your suit, that is, when you croak out here. The suits are important.”

Nick felt a ball of anger in his belly, completely irrational, and spoke spitefully, knowing that he shouldn’t. “Why’s yours black then?”

“So I’m always ready to attend a fancy dress party.”

Nick looked out over the lowlands; he needed to recover himself. “Well, that seems to be a policy that needs updating,” he said. “It’s warm enough now that I wouldn’t freeze immediately. I’d have plenty of time if I had enough oxygen. I’d have ... maybe as much as a whole minute.”

He’d read that in a pamphlet his office had circulated.

“Yes,” she said, almost wistfully. “Not anymore.”

Her jibe about the color of his suit had shaken him. He’d wanted to greet her amicably, not argue points of terraforming. It was unprofessional of him. He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry,” he said, though for what he wasn’t certain. *Start again.* “Amazing view, is it not?”

A beat passed before she answered. “It was,” she said.

“A beautiful sunrise.”

“I come to remember,” she said, “not for the view.”

Nick heard a sigh through the helmet channel. As if loath to leave the vista, Mrs. Cribbs finally stepped away from the edge, turning to face him. “Well, you have me, Mr. Hutchinson. Congratulations.”

Nick looked into the eerie chaos of her helmet and found it oddly worrying. A face matters; without one, he had no frame of reference for her. Was she curious? Was she mad? Was she even in there?

“Mrs. Cribbs,” he said, “I’m here on behalf of the UEIO and Friends of Earth Co. – ”

“Not here,” she said. “Follow me.”

She stepped straight towards him and brushed past. Nick looked into the storm of her helmet as she strode away back the way he had come. Not knowing what else to do, exasperated, he followed.

~*~

Nick had yet to grow comfortable with walking in a noiseless world. Looking down into the crater below, he could feel the stillness of a billion years slopping up the sides of its cliffs, licking for his feet, sliding under his heels, growing bolder. When they descended further, it would overtake his neck, his chin, his mouth, cover his nostrils....

“Mrs. Cribbs,” he said again, keeping an eye on the vast hole, “as I said, I’m here on behalf of the UEIO and the Friends of Earth. I’d like you to reconsider their offer. Space in Kepler is getting scarce. Having this land to develop would be a great benefit for the colonization of Mars...”

He waited. He heard the blood in his ears, breath leaving his body.

Without thinking, Nick found himself copying the woman’s stride, anchoring against outcrops, planting his feet solidly, three points of contact with the ground at all times. She was a creature of Mars, a veteran of thirty years or more if her dossier could be believed. She trod precisely and carefully, using no excess motion. Compared to her, he was a robotic imitator.

“Frankly, Mrs. Cribbs,” Nick tried, “I find it strange that – as a pioneer of colonization – you’d stand in the way of the project. A new living facility is exactly what’s needed to expand the colonization program...”

Mrs. Cribbs moved slowly, confidently, around an outcrop, dropping further down into the crater.

Nick thought, *She must have turned the channel off.*

Not watching where he was going, he stumbled on a loose rock and swore again. The slope was getting steeper. On Earth, poised at such a precipitous spot, he’d fear a stiff wind would come up and push him over the plummet. On Mars, the immensity of the crater had a similar effect, the ancient stone below tugging at him, and he made an effort to keep away from the outside ledge.

“On Mars,” said the voice of Mrs. Cribbs in his ear, “there’s no such thing as talking to yourself. Silence is a virtue.”

Nick had more curses curl onto his tongue, but this time he swallowed and kept them safely inside his head.

~*~

With the coming of the sun, the sky turned a sapphire blue nearly the same as the good skies of Earth. But no bird songs dappled the air that morning, there were no early worms, and the echo of Nick’s breathing grew in his ears until it seemed to him as loud as any gale through the tops of the trees in autumn.

Mrs. Cribbs led Nick to a hab-unit tucked in underneath a rock face. Ten feet wide by twenty feet long, it looked to be the same as was standard in Kepler: white but marred with red, probably with a bed inside, a shower, a heating coil, and as many as three people bunched up inside like zoo animals. It’d be a tight squeeze, and probably stink like a kennel. Nick crinkled his nose a moment in preparation before remembering he was wearing a pressurized helmet.

She twisted the lock. It was dim inside, and not at all what Nick had expected. Yes, it was a hab-unit like he’d seen a dozen times before, but nearly empty. On the floor on the far side he saw bits of old machinery, a bucket, a broom, and what looked like full-size slats from a hab-unit’s walls.

What a waste of space. Does she lie on the bare floor?

She slammed the door shut behind him. “Pardon the mess,” she said, stepping past him towards the interior wall. Nick heard a hiss and a clunk. She swung open another heavy door and walked through. “You can take off your helmet now, if you want.”

Nick peered through the interior airlock door into the darkness. The light from Mrs. Cribb’s malfunctioning helmet shimmered upon objects around her as she strolled through the darkness with ease. Only where she passed could Nick discern shapes, and piece together the bits of the room like a puzzle.

Her walls were about ten meters apart. The light from their helmet displays struggled to penetrate the gloom towards the rear, which Nick guessed had to be at least as far away as the sides were wide, making the place nearly the size of the meal hall back in Kepler, vast compared to anything else he’d seen on Mars.

Once again he had to straighten out his curse words and keep them to himself.

“Okay,” she said, grabbing an air-sealable knapsack from off a table and looking around the room. “You wanted to talk, so talk. Time is money, right?”

Nick watched her for a moment, the fuzz of her helmet drawing his eyes in the dark. “Right,” he said, still in shock at the size of the place, grasping for the loose thread of his reasons for being there. “I’m here on behalf of the UEIO, and I wanted to talk to you about – ”

“You said that already. Cut to the chase.”

Nick clicked the holds of his helmet, took it off with a puff of wind on his neck, and tucked it beneath his arm. The air inside her home was cool and clean, not at all like the salty stench of Kepler, which smelled like it had been filtered through a can of sardines. “Of course I said that already,” he said. “Because it’s important. I’ve come on behalf of – ”

“Friends of Earth Co....”

He was tiring of her attempts to intimidate him. He fumbled with the panel on his left arm until he found the switch to activate his wrist lights. He was proud to have found that suit feature already. At least he wouldn’t be left in the dark.

“That’s right,” he said, “Friends of Earth Co....”

“I’m assuming with some sort of offer?”

“Yes, in fact, with some kind of offer....” Nick swung his wrist-light around the room.

“Let’s have it then.”

Amazing, half of the right wall was a full-sized kitchen almost like the one he’d left on Earth: stove, cupboards, even a spice rack. He’d been on Mars only a few weeks, but he suspected what spices he saw were worth a fortune. He could trade them for a sack of gold, or more importantly, for the weight-credit to ship an equal amount of gold back home.

Near the back, his spotlight fell onto the soft face of a queen-size bed, and the cold porcelain curves of a full bathroom, strangely open to the rest of the place. *That explains the walls in the airlock*, he thought. In the middle of the room, two plush chairs faced one another with a radio off to the side.

Nick looked back to the bed and sighed, but he cleared his throat and said the words he'd come to deliver anyway. "Mrs. Cribbs, I've been authorized to offer you half off the cost of a hab-unit in Kepler for a year. One of the ... one of the newer ones." He could hardly stomach to finish, and drummed the bulb of his helmet sheepishly.

No wonder Damien thought this a fool's errand.

"Is that so?"

Nick didn't want to answer.

"I decline your offer," said Mrs. Cribbs, stretching an arm underneath what was likely the biggest bed on the planet.

"It's not that bad," said Nick, trying to bolster himself. "The new dome will be done soon. Then you'll be able to walk about without a suit. There'll be a lot more room then..."

Nick looked around the room, reassessing, a pang of jealousy in his belly for her living quarters. He took a deep breath. "Okay, Mrs. Cribbs, I understand now – that was a crappy offer, and you certainly maneuvered me into it, but could you please at least take off your helmet? It's bothersome. And I know I'm new here, but it seems a tad rude too."

Mrs. Cribbs came up from underneath the bed holding a bra. She stretched it out between her two hands like a cat's cradle and Nick heard her snicker. Her exterior helmet speaker, like her display, had to be damaged as well. Through it her voice sounded strangely two-dimensional and tinny, like that of an old intercom. Combined with the static of her helmet, it was hard not to feel as if he were speaking to a child instead of a sharp and savvy woman.

"Rude ... you're right," she said. "And very funny too. But you really should have *bothered* to read my dossier better, Mr. Hutchinson. Not doing your homework, that's also rude. Or else you'd know better than to ask me to take off my helmet."

Nick's voice took on the slight whine of the failed gambit. He said, "I didn't have much time. I skimmed it on the ride out. It mentions the accident ... your first husband..."

"My only husband. And his name was Don."

At the far side of the room Mrs. Cribbs faced him, still holding the bra. Nick's mind drifted from his purpose. Her head was a porthole in the darkness looking out onto a snowstorm.

She said, "My husband Don was killed in a blast when we were making sustainable subterranean habs seventeen years ago. Freak accident. That's what the dossier says. It also says I was badly disfigured. Barely survived. And at least that much of it is true." She pointed to her helmet, furious with snow. "This is my face now."

Almost as an afterthought, the display flashed briefly to a picture of Mars before noise absorbed the image once more.

Nick didn't know what to say.

Mrs. Cribbs tossed the bra away. "Tell me, Nick – can I call you Nick? Tell me, Nick ... when you were a kid, did you dream of Mars?"

After the embarrassment of his dressing down, Nick blanked at the strangeness of the question. "What do you mean?"

“It’s a simple question. Did you dream of Mars?”

Nick could only shrug.

“I guess not,” she chuckled, a strange chirrup when altered through the small speaker of her helmet. “Well, if it’s any consolation, I don’t think Mars dreamed of you either.”

“Really? What am I supposed to say to that?”

She indicated the plush chairs. “Have a seat, Nick.”

It was the most reasonable thing she’d said yet, and Nick did not object. His knees were tired from fighting the elastic tightness of the suit and needed to be gently coaxed. No doubt, his legs and back would be sore the next day. Too much time at a desk, and in low gravity, had made him weaker than usual. At night sometimes he’d lie in bed and imagine he could feel his bone density declining, the cells in his bones popping like soap bubbles in a sink.

Mrs. Cribbs put her hand on the back of the opposite chair and lowered herself into it, crossing her legs as if at an informal dinner party. She got to the point quickly.

“You don’t like Mars, do you, Nick?”

Nick didn’t like staring into the void of her helmet, *that’s* what he didn’t like. The snow was cold and unforgiving. It could give a man a headache.

“It’s taking some adjustment,” he said.

She prompted, “Nick, do you *like* Mars?”

“No,” he said.

“Do you know what the problem with Mars is, Nick?”

“What?”

“You, Nick. You’re the problem with Mars.” Nick was about to object when she held up a hand and said, “Now, I don’t mean just you, Nick, but people like you. For four billion years Mars has been just tickety-boo all by itself; Mars is Mars and it likes it that way. But you, and people like you, want it to be something else. You want to remake Mars to suit what you see in the mirror.”

“That seems unfair. Earth has ten billion people – ”

“But they don’t want Mars, Nick. It’s like they have a rose but want a daisy, so they paint the rose to match, but underneath the paint it’ll never be a daisy; it’ll always be a rose.”

“Those ten billion people need space, land – ”

“Is that what Friends of Earth has for them?”

Nick leaned forward. “Mrs. Cribbs. If you were to sell the rights to this crater to Friends of Earth Co., you would be securing the future of colonization for the area.”

Mrs. Cribbs sat back. “I respectfully decline.”

Nick could sense a smile on her face. His fingers curled into the cushion of the chair. “But Kepler is like an animal pen,” he said. “Whole families live in single habs, the septic system is taxed – ”

“In fact, I disrespectfully decline as well.”

“It’s only a matter of time before people start getting sick, or worse. You could help them. With access to this crater – ”

“I’m keeping them bottled up, am I?”

“They need more space.”

“Mars can do what it wants with them.”

Nick had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. “Mrs. Cribbs, I don’t – ”

“God, you’re so green,” she said, uncrossing her legs and leaning in. “Do you think I’m keeping those people cooped up in Kepler? Wake up, man. How did you get here today? Where did you get that suit? I hope you’ve been enjoying it because you might not get to wear one ever again.”

To Nick, it sounded suspiciously like he’d just been called stupid. He counted to five before asking, “What are you talking about?”

She was quiet a moment, looking away into the darkness.

“How long have you been here, Nick.”

Nick, determined not to be deflected, answered plainly, “About four weeks.”

“No, I mean here, in my place?”

“Oh, um ... ” Nick joined her in searching the shadows for a number. “I don’t know. Ten minutes?”

The fingers of Mrs. Cribb’ left hand twitched where she was resting them on the arm of the chair. Finally, her fingers stopped tapping and the hardened edge returned to her voice.

“Okay, Mr. Four Weeks, we don’t have a whole lot of time so, first off, let me just start by saying that you don’t know a damn thing – not about Kepler, not about Friends of Earth, not about Mars. You’re even entirely clueless about dreams.”

Again, she held up a hand to silence him. Nick, however, had not been about to interject.

Dreams?

“Unfortunately, what you *do* know matters to Kepler, matters to Mars, and it *does* matter to dreams.” Mrs. Cribbs leaned the storm of her face closer as if reading his mind. “Yes, Nick. You heard me right. Dreams. People dream of a better life: colonizing a new planet, doing something important with their lives. Earth is so crowded now that three people have to share one pair of pants just to walk around. People see those stupid ads that Friends of Earth splash all over the damned place: come to Mars, be a lord of all creation, a pioneer, a superhero. They hock their lives on street corners, shuck everything that was important to them, their friends and families included; anything they can’t carry in a lunchbox gets thrown in the trash. Then they come up here and Friends of Earth stuffs them in to Kepler, into Newton, into Brahms....”

“Look,” said Nick, “I’m trying to help you. I’m trying to help them. I came with – ”

“Nick, you’re just trying to lure me back to the company store.” She threw her head back and sang, “You load sixteen tons, and what do you get...?”

“Look ...” repeated Nick; obviously he couldn’t bolster forward with any semblance of diplomatic normalcy. He needed an entrance into her gobbledygook. “Mrs. Cribbs, this isn’t funny. There’s a lot riding on this proposed project – the future development of the entire area. It might mean the difference between Kepler becoming a hub or a backwater. The men I came here with – those guys who show up as *anonymous* back at the rover – they mean business. I think they’re tired of waiting for your answer.”

“They have my answer.”

“They’ve come out here to convince you, one way or another. If I hadn’t talked them into letting me come first, they’d be here with you already.”

The snow of Mrs. Cribbs’ helmet display made the shadows to either side swirl and writhe. She said, “What a good guy you are, Nick.”

Her display flashed the round red orb of Mars again, and faded.

Seemingly sleepy, she sank into her chair and sounded solemn. “Nick, we don’t have a lot of time, but I want to tell you a story. It’s a fairly simple story, a bit of a tragedy, or maybe a comedy – some people say they’re the same thing, and maybe they’re right. Anyway, it’s about a guy. He migrates from Earth to Mars, but he doesn’t like Mars, this guy. He’s never dreamed of Mars. He just wants his nine to five and someplace to put his feet up after supper.”

“But this guy ... when he gets to Mars ... this guy finds that he’s alone there. There’s no government, no committees, no oversight, no Boy Scouts of America. It’s just him. He learns that Earth has sold Mars to Friends of Earth for a handful of magic beans and a song – and they’ve sold all the people on Mars to Friends of Earth too, and they’ve sold the Martians to the Friends of Earth, and Mars’ moons, Phobos and Deimos, the sons of Mars, and the sunset of Mars too, and Friends of Earth doesn’t even want to paint the rose to make it a daisy, they just want to pluck the petals....”

“I – ”

“Shutup, Nick,” said Mrs. Cribbs from inside her fortress of snow. “You’re like a baby who’s wandered out into traffic and doesn’t understand the danger. Listen,” she said, “display, ping all walkers in a two kilometer radius. Full audio.”

From her suit, with the same tinny intercom tone, a woman’s voice said, *‘Identified: Nick Hutchinson. Distance: one point five meters. Anonymous: nine persons: varying distances.’*

Nick thought, *How’d she do that?* But aloud he said, “Nine?”

Mrs. Cribbs nodded. “That’s right. Nine. Consider it a compliment, Nick. Normally, your *friends* would only bring four men, but as you’re here there’s nine. They must think you’re young and virile, a scrapper despite all your ughs and groans. When they came for my old friend Harman, they only sent two men. He was an older gentlemen, a wonderful storyteller; he lost an arm in a cave collapse years ago. Didn’t take more than two Friends of Earth employees to hold him down and pry off his helmet. They don’t want to damage their suits, see. They don’t make very many. And they’re very expensive....”

She stopped and Nick stared into the moving static of the woman’s helmet and understood that she was studying him. Only slowly did the tumblers of his face click into comprehension.

“What? Why? Why me too?” He pushed himself to his feet, stopped halfway to the door, and came back. “What am...? I was trying to help!”

Mrs. Cribbs sighed. She said, “I’m done, Nick.” She could have been pushing away from the dinner table, saying *I’m full*. “Done like Dillinger. The only question left is, what are you going to do?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. I can’t do anything anymore, but you can.”

Nick could feel a pulse beating in his tonsils. He swallowed a painful gulp of air and couldn’t talk.

Mrs. Cribbs pushed herself out of her chair. “Nick, listen carefully. Don’t take this as a compliment, because that’s not how I mean it, but never in my life have I met someone as obtuse as you.” She shoved a frantic Nick towards the door and he stumbled willingly. “We need to get you out of here. If you’re not here to see anything when they get here, maybe they’ll leave you alone – providing you let on that you’re playing dumb, that is. Can you play dumb, Earthling?”

Nick stared at her, his helmet in his hands, not knowing what to say.

“Atta boy. I thought you could.”

She punched in her code and began cycling the inner air-seal door. “Meet them, Nick, but try and get as far from here as you can before you do. Tell them I became belligerent, wouldn’t listen to reason. Hell, tell them I attacked you. You barely got away....” She seemed to like the sound of that and she chuckled.

In the airlock she began cycling the outer door without first closing the inner. Immediately, a light above their heads began to flash: red, red, red, seeming to match the dull hammer of Nick’s blood through his ears.

A woman’s voice, the same as in his helmet, said calmly: *Warning: Breach Potential. Clear the hatch. Warning ...*

“Play dumb, Nick. Play dumb until your time is up. If you’re as quiet as a little mouse, maybe they’ll forget about you, let you leave....”

Nick found himself suddenly thinking about the lack of forwarding address for his predecessor. Exactly what job the man had accepted the dossier hadn’t said.

Mrs. Cribbs grabbed him by the shoulders. “Hide in the walls, little mouse, get off this terrible planet that you hate so much. Tell someone what it’s like here. Tell anyone. Just say *something*.”

Nick nodded dumbly. He’d have agreed to fetch her the sun right then, or hogtie a comet, anything, as long as it gave him hope of seeing his mussed bed and wobbly bureau back in Kepler again.

“Put on your damn helmet, Nick.”

Nick looked down. He was still carrying his helmet under his arm like a basketball. Fumbling in his excitement, his fingers felt the size of sausages, and the last clasp clicked into place only seconds before the airlock hissed and all the air was sucked out of the room with a muffled boom.

A funny moment of calm, contemplation. Outside the door he saw Mars.

Another breath, thought Nick.

Then Mrs. Cribbs' hand was at his back, pushing him forward. Her voice in his ear was fully that of a woman again. "Nick, your time just ran out. They're coming. Go!"

Twenty feet up the escarpment Nick looked back, and for the first time really saw how small and alone the woman looked against the backdrop of the ancient boulders and the cracked cliffs. Against Mars.

Nick had never been so scared in his life. He said, "Will you ... what are you gonna do?"

"I'll be fine. Just don't ... make sure you ... just go, Nick, dammit. Go!" The last was limp, said without enthusiasm.

Nick didn't want to look back again.

~*~

Clambering up the inside lip of the crater, Nick fell to his knees often, rising again quickly without properly listening for the deadly *shhh* of air escaping.

He reached the spot on the ridge where he'd ascended only an hour before and saw men climbing up. *She was right*, he thought. *Nine of them*.

His knees were shaking. Crouching down, he scraped his belly over a lip of red rock and skidded his first step over the side. Pebbles and rocks bounced soundlessly down the hillside.

Immediately he heard a gruff voice in his ear. "What the...? Hey! Watch it! Turn around, you idiot."

"Moron."

Only Damien's voice was level. "Turn around, Hutchinson. Get to the top."

Nick didn't stop. He keyed the common channel. He'd never been much of an actor, but the fear in his belly gave proof to his voice. "Hey, holy shit. I'm glad to see you guys." More rocks slid down the hillside beneath his feet, the soil loose. "Sorry," he said, nearly yelling into the com. "I didn't ... didn't see you guys there."

"Friggin' Earthers."

Is she hearing this? He imagined he could hear her laughter in his ear again.

Damien was cold and businesslike. "Turn around Hutchinson. Get to the top."

"She's crazy," said Nick.

"Turn the hell around."

Nick cleared his throat loudly over the com and started to climb again. As he hoisted himself over a boulder, he made sure he planted his foot on a stone and tipped it down the hill behind him. It bounced silently against an outcrop and ricocheted off a suited shoulder.

A voice said, "Idiot."

Damien's red ES was tailored around wrists the size of Nick's forearms, a neck the size of his thighs. Standing close, Nick looked up into eyes that were calculating blue baubles, wondering what they meant to do with him.

Damien prompted him to switch to a private channel. "Why were you running?"

Only then did Nick realize Damien had been tracking him the entire time. "She had a gun," he said. "I wanted to warn you."

"More like you wanted to get to a bathroom," a voice mocked.

Inside his helmet, Damien's face was grim and gray, and he scowled. "Get off this channel, Jim." He didn't threaten or bluster. A quick fuzz of static indicated that Jim did as he was told.

Nick could feel the weight of the Damien's attention return to him.

"What kinda gun?"

"I don't know, man," said Nick in a voice higher than normal, "A gun. We were talking, then she pulled it out and told me to get in the airlock. I thought that was it."

Nick looked into Damien's eyes and saw less there than in the swirling chaos of Mrs. Cribbs's helmet. Any moment, the man's big hands could reach for the locking clasps at his neck. He had thick knuckles, fingers reinforced against the cold. It struck Nick then that Damien's red suit would blend in with the land.

Humanity's hope, the red jewel.

"Guns aren't allowed on Mars," said Damien rather mechanically. It seemed a decision had been made. He beckoned. "Come with us."

Nick felt his stomach rising in his throat. He considered running, but Damien and his men walked away and he followed.

A few minutes later, at the top of the escarpment leading down into the crater, Damien stopped and keyed Nick's com individually. "Hutchinson, you stay here to make sure she doesn't circle around and get up here. Okay?"

"Yeah."

Damien pinned him with a huge hand on his shoulder. "You see her, you let us know."

"Yeah."

"I mean it. Can't let a valuable asset like you come to any harm, can we?"

Nick held Damien's eye as long as he could and nodded. The men began their slow descent into the massive crater then, and Nick watched them as dots on his display growing ever nearer to the rock where he knew Mrs. Cribbs's hab-unit to be. When the dots split evenly into a semi-circle, *like hounds cornering a fox in a hole*, Nick felt suddenly sick, and as none of the pamphlets he'd read had mentioned what to do in the case of vomiting inside one's environment suit, he shut down his display and turned his back to the crater, unwilling to take an active role in the scene. Even to watch the dots made him a part of the play.

He walked towards where he could see the blemish of Kepler sparkling in the distance against the perfect red. The land had a somnolent air about it that morning. The sun was fully up with blue and maybe Mars was yawning with it?

He didn't know what he expected to see down on the flats. Mrs. Cribbs' daring escape, zooming across the ancient plains chased by a cloud of orange dust? She waving happily from the porthole of a cartoon rocket blasting into space?

Nick kicked small rocks ahead of him and let his gaze swim about in the lower lands. He remembered his breath and he heard the gale in his ears again. Then he stopped and he stared, seeing an aberration in the land other than what he expected.

Perched on a rock overlooking the flats, still a roil of snow even though her head was no longer in it, sat Mrs. Cribbs' malfunctioning helmet.

Again, for a moment, Nick feared he might feel sick. He hesitated to approach the helmet, as if it really were an angry beehive, but blinked and shook the dumb thoughts from his eyes.

Without touching the helmet, first he checked for a note jutting out from underneath, then for writing on the helmet itself. He even cupped the sides and stared into the static for a few seconds, hoping to coax meaning from it.

As expected, the fuzz revealed nothing, and he lifted the helmet with a finger and peeped beneath. Underneath, he saw Mars. Rock.

Holding the helmet in two hands, he looked all around him. Red rocks, black rocks, orange sand, blue sky ... yellow suit. The gale of his breath was lessening. He heard the vastness of the planet pumping in his ears. *Pick up a shell on the beach and listen....*

He raised the helmet aloft. Inside he saw the same snow as on the out. He saw static. He saw fuzz. He saw chaos.

But he couldn't see through the display.

Nick set the helmet down on the rock where he'd found it. He rotated it so it faced out over the vista. He stepped away and he closed his eyes.

On the ancient plain below, the old carbon dioxide factory crawled over the land that would someday be a living lake, the line of black smoke from its stack dwindling in width as it approached the height of the two moons.

It wouldn't be long before the people of Kepler awoke, stretching out of their dreams, yawning in the light of the distant sun. They'd throw on their thermal underwears and their weighted slippers, hydrate cups of awful coffee, and press themselves to their porthole windows to muster pleasantries in the glow of the factory's passing.

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A preview of
Do Unto Others

~1~

The Messenger put his head down and watched his feet. A splash of sand here, a curl of smoke there, movement seemed like something he had only imagined. The wind cut curlicue dens into the low sandbanks siding the road, hiding from the sky.

The top of his shoes, if they could be called shoes, flaps of canvas he'd torn from a potato sack, were pinned with needles into squares of old rubber tires that he'd fashioned into soles. If shoes, they were ugly shoes, no doubt about it, but their thickness kept the heat of the asphalt from scorching the palms of his feet, and the canvas, light and breathable, kept the sun from nibbling at the tops of his toes.

He was sick of the stillness through which he traveled, so he watched his feet. Raise one foot. The canvas shoe flapped. Lower it down. The canvas settled. *Don't look up.*

Movement. Water for the mind.

Never. Never. Never stop moving.

This part of the desert had died. More than died. *Desiccated*. It was a word he wanted to forget. *Desiccated*. Why did he even know that word? The sun, already streaking orange brushstrokes against the horizon, would soon rise high to say, 'Good morning. Soon you'll be *desiccated*.'

The button in his mouth clicked against the ramparts of his backmost teeth, then slid beneath his tongue and lodged there in the leftover spittle like a frog wiggling into soft mud. He resisted the urge to rake his teeth over his cracked lips to coax out more saliva. That would only break his scabs, make them sore. Doing that, he'd learned, was a bad idea. He'd never leave it alone if he did, and force his focus onto his body instead of on the road ahead.

Sucking on the button kept a sheen of saliva coating the inside of his mouth, an old trick he saw in a movie once. But he needed water soon or it wouldn't matter how many buttons he had. Soon, without water, his walking days would be over. Ended on the same page as Lot's wife. Turn around to face the way he came. The profane taste of too much salt. And crumble.

Usually, even the driest lands can boast of some small vitality, cactuses storing moisture from out of the air, lizards feeding on insects, tiny mice, but this place was outside of life, a waiting grave.

This place is the taste of salt.

The blood of small animals, mostly lizards, had been keeping him alive lately, but not for four days had there been tracks by the side of the path, or brush thick enough for shade, or even the chirrup of beetles in the evenings. All the land was dead and soon he'd be dead within it, and his message dead within him. Fallen in the middle of that golden painting, his meat tough and

chewy. Stopping would be the easiest thing to do. Stopping would make his feet happy. No shame in stopping. Stopping only for a minute. The easiest thing to do.

Stop. Stop. Stop. Why not stop?

Finally he gave in and raked his teeth across his lips, felt that sweet tang, heard the creak of enamel against his lips, a noise in the world that he'd made. He'd give into that minor urge to quiet the larger temptation. Damn the sand and the heat and the emptiness. It couldn't have him. No place could have him until he found where he was meant to go.

His foot in the air, the canvas billowed. Set it down again. The canvas settled.

A stroke of wind blowing across the road briefly stripped the path down to the black, flashing with a stripe of yellow. The Messenger withered a glance over the sifting sand, looking for the telltale fan trail of a salamander's swishing tail. His lips had begun to bleed again and he tasted copper.

You know what would be great right now? A pear! Mmm. I know you were never a big pear guy; you didn't like the gritty texture of their rinds, but oh man, remember how juicy they were? How they'd squirt juice down over your lips, juice to your chin.... Juice you'd have to wipe away. Remember how that annoyed you then?

No sign of life, the Messenger raked his eyes around the shifting patterns the wind had made, searching for a story to save him.

Mmm. Remember when Molly would bring home fresh watermelon from the market, and you'd sit by the open window, spitting seeds out. Ten floors below....

He hefted his metal and plastic parasol higher, leaning it against his shoulder. It had grown progressively heavier the past few days. Raising his eyes further afield, towards the horizon, he hoped to see mountains. By the light of the moon the last few nights he'd seen their silhouettes, their tips making a jagged line of the horizon. That's how he'd known them for mountains, their icicle edges; only at night could he see them; during the day the air was haze.

Maybe it was to those mountains that he'd wanted to go? It was certainly where the road was going. Only, those mountains were days away yet, and his road was now measured in hours, not miles. He'd never live so long. Days.

It was looking towards where he hoped to see mountains that he saw what he hadn't thought to see ever again: shadow, slanted into an arrow, an aberration in the golden flat. Strange to see a shadow that was not his own. He blinked, and shifted his hat on his head for better light. The shadow remained out there in the sand, not simply a dark spot of desire in his eyes.

For a moment he nearly decided not to go. Danger hid in shadows. Snakes liked the shade. Men with guns made shadows; their guns cast shadows too, though he'd left men with guns, and men in general, behind long ago. The Messenger twirled his parasol in thought. The sun was rising. His arm was wavering. What choices there were to make had already been made for him.

Stepping off the road, he kicked sand ahead of him as he went, reluctantly leaving the road, the security of purpose.

~*~

In the end it was a day of rarities.

He found an old shed buried in the sand, and that was rare. It was rare that there were no snakes inside to hiss at him as he tumbled through a window; snakes sought the shade as much as men. It was a rarity of relative coolness in there, and rare that he caught a scrawny lizard living inside the shed for his supper, like him already half mash from dehydration, despair, and hunger. And rare that, despite how sun-shrivelled he felt, he'd had a hard time falling to sleep, shaking with laughter. How long since he'd laughed last he couldn't even remember, and that too was somehow funny, a rarity in humour.

It wasn't his luck in finding the shed that set him to chuckling. Or the dead lawnmower that he found inside, or the patio umbrella sheathed into a carrying sack on the floor, or the rake, or the hoe, or the spilled bags of dried dirt. It was the green garden hose coiled up on the wall. The green garden hose, cracked like the hard pan.

Never hold water like that, he thought. And the laughter had come.

The Messenger fell asleep and dreamed of hourglasses. The next day he gave thanks to the little lizard that had sustained him, and set out walking again. Plants were growing in the lee shade of the shed. Further down the road, brush poked out of the roadside. Eventually he came upon a green sign that read,

Scanlon 22 kilometres

He rested in its shade for a spell, then he carried on.

About the Author

L.S. Burton lives in St. John's, Newfoundland, where he works as a writer and freelance editor. Though his stories are diverse, they all revel in the music of words and celebrate imagination. In 2011, Burton was awarded the Percy Janes Award for Best Unpublished First Novel in the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts and Letters Competition for his novel *Raw Flesh in the Rising*.

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