

Guardian.

By Sean. F. Stevens.

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GUARDIAN.

In a billion languages the infinity of space calls to me.

Caressed by the cool breezes that are the heralds of the coming Martian dawn, I stand on Olympus Mons and look down on the city below, where I once lived, and I know that my assimilation into the fabric of the stream is almost complete.

Memories of my former life rise to the surface of my consciousness, pausing to float there momentarily before sinking forever, absorbed by the totality of my new perspective.

I do not remember my human name, but brief flashes of my life fade in and out of focus, telling me the tale of my life as if for the first time. I remember the city of New Barrossa, sitting at the feet of Olympus Mons, I remember that I was born here, an only child of second generation immigrants, who worked - as did all in the city - on the massive project with the small name: Eden. For over a hundred years the Eden project had terraformed Mars and it still had many years yet to go before a human could stand unassisted in the thin Martian atmosphere as I did now. even after all this time, Mars still did not possess any permanent bodies of water and the planets' colonies were nowhere near as self sufficient as planned. but humanity is tenacious, and bloody minded, it will as always, persevere.

My life plays out in the shadows of my memory.

My childhood was quiet and uneventful, having had limited contact with but a few children of my own age, I was for the most part either plugged into the teaching machines or surrounded by the seemingly permanently dusty technicians who were my fathers closest comrades. I hardly ever left home, even my university degree was done via the machines, I have no memory of any bitterness at my situation, I simply presumed that this was all I had to expect from life, that this was how life was. But that is not to say that I did not feel lonely, there seemed to me to be an indefinable vacuum in my life of which I did not have the data to identify. I had been taught with my future functionality in mind, and the abstract notions of the human animal that I was at that time, were not covered in my highly compartmentalised curriculum, I simply did not have the vocabulary to express my internal disquiet, even to myself.

My parents only concerns for me in life was a repeat of what their own parents had had for them: perform your function to the best of your ability, meet with a genetically suitable mate and when a suitable time arose, procreate to ensure the future of the project.

My life had been set out for me.

At that time I began to have the first inklings that there should be more to my life than just to exist to serve, I was now an adult by the standards of the Eden project's worker code and yet, to me at least, not much had changed. I had no more freedom than the machines I operated.

Like most unmarried workers, I was allowed a day off work every other month for the purpose of finding a breeding partner, once found we would be allowed to live together and conceive a new trainee, once the child was born we would be sterilised to assist in maintaining a set population level, occasionally when the population ratio of new recruits dropped below a specific level the breeders were allowed to have two children, but this had not happened for several years and I could not see myself being one of the chosen, for that matter I was unsure if I wanted to be.

My loneliness had at first prompted me to go to the set meeting place for Pre-breeders and to my disappointment I had found that all the people there, were as grey and lifeless as I presumed myself to be, but I quickly realised that by my very introspection, I had set myself apart from them. With the first chance of a life beyond our duties, my contemporaries had no idea what

to do, many of them had walked up to the first member of the opposite gender they saw and immediately begun trying to breed, pausing only to refer occasionally to the company pamphlet on the subject to make sure that they followed the step by step instructions accurately. It would seem that the common feeling was that the quicker they succeeded in parenting, the quicker they could get back to work, the only real life they knew.

Though I had no name for the emotion I felt that day, I know now that what I had felt was pity, absolute pity, for them, and for myself.

It was then that I decided that I would, somehow, ensure that I would never let myself sink to such a pitiable level.

My first concern was how I would go about improving myself, and the answer came to me upon my very exit from the Pre-breeder's building. I found myself facing the huge bulk of Olympus Mons, and I looked upon it's dark silhouette in the evening sky as if I had never truly seen it before, and perhaps, before today I never truly had. I came to the conclusion that what I needed to expand my perspective were new experiences. I decided to myself that I would walk to Olympus with my next free day.

The ground was rough outside the city, but walking here was not difficult in the low Martian gravity, even though the breathing unit I wore was slightly heavier than my normal one as I had added some extra oxygen tanks to the apparatus than were usually required for day to day use, but were nonetheless not outside of the 'breather's specifications, I was unsure how much air I would need so I had allowed slightly more than a full days worth.

The mountain's feet stood just beyond the city's edge and I was almost immediately climbing a gently steepening incline, to either side of me were high cliffs, that cast soft edged shadows on the path in the diffuse morning light. I was breathing heavily, unused to this kind of exertion, but I was also exhilarated that for once in my life I was acting upon a thought of my own rather than the all too specific guidelines of the Eden project, "Perhaps this is what it truly means to be alive" I thought to myself, I was prepared then and there to renounce all my old beliefs in the ways of the project and find for myself a completely new philosophy on the shoulders of the tallest mountain on Mars.

I turned about and looked back at the way I had come, for the first time in my life I looked at the city of New Barrossa from the outside and I marvelled at how the wide evenly spaced collection of low prefabricated concrete buildings were dwarfed by the surrounding rock encrusted desert. It's insignificance in relation to the land had a profound effect upon me and for the first time I began to wonder if a city as puny as ours and it's sister city's of comparable insignificance that I was told had encircled the planet in a ring of terraforming factories could really tame this large wild planet, the more I saw the more I thought for myself, and the more I thought for myself the more I doubted.

I had been walking and climbing for the better part of the day and would soon have to turn back, off to one side I could see what appeared to be a hole in the mountain side, a cave, as I now know them to be called. My newfound curiosity was flying in the clouds of wonderment at all I had seen and I had been so starved for new experiences all these years that I was now as drunk on my joy of discovery as a worker who'd been standing in the middle of a methanol plant without a rebreather. The mountain side was steep at this point and I carefully edged myself over to the cave and looked in, the sun was edging past the peak of the mountain and it's light went only a few feet inside and then was lost in the darkness of the caves cool depths. I came to the decision that the cave would have to be the last of my experiences for the day, and noting it's steep downward angle I carefully went inside.

My memories become more staccato here; I remember the lukewarm light of the sun fading into the background to be replaced by the damp, almost icy cool of the caves interior. I had brought a small torch with me, in anticipation of not getting back to the city before dark and by it's light I could see that the cave was almost perfectly circular and seemingly roughly hewn or excavated

from the side of the mountain rather than naturally formed. It had apparently happened a long time ago and was scrubbed largely featureless by the eroding damp air within the mountain. I cannot remember if I examined the walls closely or merely gave them a passing glance, either way I know now that no matter how far I walked there would have been nothing to see in that tunnel, for it had been excavated many years earlier by a survey team and then abandoned to the elements, deserted and empty.

Time was pressing, so I made a mental note to examine this cave further the next time I came here and turned to go, I had already walked so far into this tunnel that the light from outside was now just the merest speck in the distance.

My memories stand out clearly here, like a scream in the dark, for indeed that is what I now did as a pain beyond my previous experience tore through my chest, I fell heavily backwards onto the damp cool floor of the tunnel and slid backwards several feet. With the clarity of hindsight I cannot help but pity myself, for my naiveté was truly that of a child's at that time. I had never wondered why no one ever visited or left New Barrossa, I had simply taken it to be the status quo, I had never considered it to be because humanity had ultimately found that the cheapest and most easily exploited natural resource at it's disposal was humanity.

I had never suspected that I was a slave.

The tiny capsule of acid that was placed in the chest cavity of every new worker at birth was what would be called a "trade secret" of the Eden Project. My fellow human's waited on Earth as the generations rolled by, they sung praises for the "selfless workers" of the Eden Project and planned for the day when Mars finally became hospitable enough for humans to immigrate en masse and help reduce the strain on some of Earth's increasingly overcrowded continents. Little did they know of the truth of the matter, and the workers of the project knew even less, but neither knew that the workers of the Eden project had less value than the machines they serviced and operated. The capsule had been activated the moment I had walked deep enough into the tunnel to cut off the disarming signal from the city and was timed to begin the release of acid into my vital organs within five minutes if I didn't go back within the signals range, the company that managed Eden worked on the principal that if the workers conditioning didn't stop it from wandering where it shouldn't, the capsule would. The conditioning usually worked, and when it didn't....

Workers were easily replaced.

I lay dying, uncomprehending at that time of what or why, but certain without a shadow of a doubt that my time had come, I stared at the ceiling and wondered why I was still able to see it when my torch, though unbroken to the best of my knowledge, was underneath me.

The light was all around me, and was diffuse and yet painfully bright at the same time, without any intermediate phase, at the centre of the light stood a woman or perhaps a man, the entity I would come to know as the Guardian seemed to be a figure of both beautiful face and features and yet of no specific gender as far as I could discern but without the necessary vocabulary or terms of reference at my disposal at the time I settled on thinking of the figure in front of me as female. She seemed to be clothed in the light from which she had appeared, and if I had known anything of religion (which I didn't) I would have considered her to be an angel, which was as correct and incorrect as any other supposition I could have come up with.

My vision splendid bent over me with a face full of wisdom and compassion, she spoke: "Dear friend." She said, her voice as beautiful and ambiguous as the rest of her. "It is good to see a fellow traveller in the quest for the truth of all things."

My pain had faded but I could not move, I was amazed and frightened and curious and a hundred other emotions for which I had no names all combined into one overwhelming feeling of awe.

"Who are you ?" I eventually whispered.

"I am the Guardian." She replied.

"Of what ?" I asked, with all the impolite directness of a child, and yet as a fully qualified worker of two years, I was already the equivalent of thirteen Earth years old.

She smiled indulgently. "Of everything." She said, and waved her hand expansively around her to take in it's wide sweep the whole of the universe of stars.

I gasped in surprise, we were suddenly outside on the mountaintop and above us it was full nighttime, though I must have collapsed no more than an hour past noon and I hadn't been talking to her for more than a minute or so. I was in such a state of astonishment as I was standing quietly next to her, marvelling at the beauty of the diamond sparked pitch black sky above me that it didn't occur to me for several minutes that I shouldn't be standing at all, had she cured me ?, or was this all some pre-death hallucination ? She turned from the wonder of the night sky and eyed me in a serious, though not grim manner.

"This is not a dream," she said, reading my thoughts. "But I have not healed you, I cannot turn back time."

"But how can I be here, with you ?" I asked.

"I cannot bring you back to life." She announced. "But I can offer you an alternative to the certainty of death, that is why I have come to you." She gestured towards the night sky. "I can offer you a new perspective." She said and paused, smiling faintly. "Indeed, the ultimate perspective." She added.

I stand on Olympus Mons and gaze in wonder at the absolute perfection of creation and the complex nexus of life that pervades all. I need not remember what the Guardian asked me next or the answer I gave to her question, for her memories are now my memories, and mine are hers. As has been done many times before and as will be done many times again in the future, the Guardian has merged with someone near death, someone with the wonder of the universe within them, someone with the innocence of a child, someone like me.

We live and learn, the truth in the saying goes deeper than words can convey, only by experiencing the wonder of the innocent in paradise can the Guardian remember what it was like for her to be innocent too.

I step from the peak of Olympus Mons and leave it and Mars far behind. For a time, my work here is done, but I shall certainly return one day. The universe calls to me, and this time I answer its call, the joy of life, all life, flows within and through me. I look back at the Solar System, fading into the distance, and allow myself a tiny nostalgic smile.

I ... We, are the Guardian, the universe is our companion and our best friend, we will protect it with all our love and all our strength and all the hope we can muster.

We are the Guardian, we will watch over you, always.

The End.