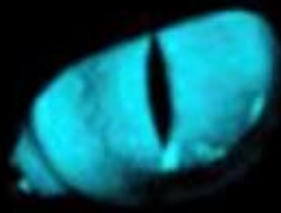
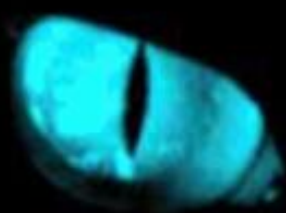


the
MARTIAN
CAT



Guy Lane

The Martian Cat

by Guy Lane

Charlie Darling is my name.
Inter-Planet, my employment.
Mars Resort is my working place.
Outfoxing you, my enjoyment.

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Titles by Guy Lane.
Eearth – Aquaria – Yongala – Intervene
The Moogh – The Oil Price
Heart of Bone – The Martian Cat

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Pouring Down

Heavy rain pummels the taxi that pulls up outside the hotel, its tail-lights making the raindrops glow red. The wipers swat water from the windscreen with the rasping noise of metal against glass.

Standing under the hotel awning, wearing a blue jumpsuit and holding a travel bag, is a young man, Charlie Darling. Both the jumpsuit and the bag are branded with the logo of Inter-Planet, the Mars tourism company.

Charlie shakes his head, wearily, wondering why taxi drivers always park so far away, when it rains. “What is it with the damned cabbies on this planet?” he grumbles, as he psyches himself to get wet.

He raises the Inter-Planet bag over his head, and dashes into the cold rain. As quick as he can, he jumps inside the back seat of the cab, slamming the door shut behind him. He takes stock of how much water his blue Inter-Planet jumpsuit has taken – he’s half-drenched.

A normal person would be cranky at having had to dash so far in the rain; but not our hero, Charlie Darling; he is one chillaxed dude. He has

boyish looks and long, wavy, black hair, that is now plastered over his face from the deluge.

Charlie Darling is not the sort of person who stands out from the crowd, but neither is he someone you'd easily forget, should you meet him. He has an affable manner, and always has something nice to say, even when he is talking to a complete asshole, or placed in a challenging situation.

Hypothetically, were Charlie to be set upon by a bad hombre (one who dug a tunnel under the wall, maybe) and was then tied up, and dropped into vat of Martian Cat shit, he'd find a positive angle. He'd say something chirpy like, "Oh, well, at least it's still warm" or "I'm glad it's not bubonic acid" or "Maybe the next vat has champagne in it." Charlie's demeanour is so cheery that it can actually be a bit annoying, sometimes.

He's also quite bright, and he likes to share his knowledge, so a lot of people think he's a smart-ass, when in fact, he's just being chatty. In these respects, Charlie Darling is the exact opposite of the surly, old cab driver.

"Damn rain!" the cabbie curses, peering up through the windscreen as if he were bright enough to determine anything more than that it is

still raining.

“I’m savouring it,” Charlie wipes his face, and licks the rain water from his palm.

The driver adjusts the mirror to see his passenger. “*Hub?*”

“Where I’m going there’s no rain. Not a solitary drop.”

“What are you, a coal miner?” the driver flicks on the indicator, and checks for oncoming traffic.

“Do I really look like a coal miner?”

The cabbie glances at the rear vision mirror to see Charlie’s jumpsuit and clean shaven face. He sniffs the air. “You don’t smell like a coal miner. What is that? Perfume?”

“It’s cologne, you brute. I’m going to the Inter-Planet Spaceport.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Inter-Planet Spaceport, Terminal 12.”

“Domestic or international?”

“Just drive ahead, dude. I’ll tell you when to turn.”

The driver winds down his window, checks the traffic, then pulls away from the kerb. He winds up the window, his face and shoulder drenched. Then he starts moaning, “F**k me! If the planet’s getting hotter, what’s with the freezing rain?”

“It’s the jet stream,” Charlie tells him,

knowingly.

“You what?”

“The jet stream’s amplitude is very high right now.”

“That don’t mean nothing,” the cabbie grumbles, dismissively.

Charlie chuckles, “That’s a double negative.”

Through the rear vision mirror, the driver looks Charlie over. He sees the Inter-Planet logo on his jumpsuit. “So, what do you do, mate?”

“Take a guess.”

“You’re a weatherman. Yeah, I’ve seen you on the TV.”

“*Nahh*,” Charlie shakes his head, smiling.

“Give us a clue, then.”

“Alright, then. You are taking me to the Inter-Planet Space Port. Does that help you?”

“Yeah, I know it. You’re an Moon Jockey. An astronaut.”

“I’m a Martianaut.”

“A Martianaut?” the cabbie sneers. “That’s not an astronaut. That’s a f**king tourist.” His fist clenches on the steering wheel and a muscle twitches on his face. He starts to mutter, flicking his eyes angrily between the road and the reflection of Charlie in the mirror. “Well, ain’t that just something? I got a fucking Martian in

my car.”

Shortly.

The taxi halts at the security gate of the Inter-Planet Spaceport, and a guard approaches. He’s big, burly fellow who looks like he is permanently angry. He wears black body armour strapped with lethal and ‘non-lethal’ weapons. And he carries an Inter-Planet umbrella to protect him from the rain.

“Geeze that guy is scary,” the cab driver says.

Charlie eyes the guard with mistrust. He grits his teeth, trying to hold back his reaction. “Show that to him,” Charlie hands the cabbie an ID card.

The cabbie opens the window and passes the card to the guard. The guard checks the card and then peers into the cab. “You going to Mars?”

“Yeah,” Charlie replies, tersely.

“You got any pets in there?” The guard asks, gruffly. “Any Piglets, Parrots, Pugs, Pussy-cats, Poodles or Pangolins?”

“No.”

“Open the boot,” the security guard demands.

The cab-driver complies by pulling a lever next to his seat. “Geez, those guys are scary,” he says again. He looks at Charlie in the mirror. “Say,

Martian?”

The boot slams shut and the Security Guard passes Charlie’s ID card to the driver. He bangs twice on the roof, and the cabbie drives the car forwards. He flicks his eyes to the reflection of Charlie in the rear vision mirror again. “Say Martian? You know what I hear?”

Charlie leans forward and retrieves this card from the driver. He looks through the wipers swatting the rain. Ahead, there are illuminated terminal signs.

“We’re going to Terminal 12.”

“Yeah, yeah. I get that. Hey, Martian?”

“What?”

“I hear that all them giant rockets flying to the Moon and Mars is what’s causing this f**ked-up weather.”

“Oh, really? How would that work?”

“What?”

“How would the space launches contribute to the weather?”

“How would I know? Look at me. I drive a cab.”

“That’s Terminal Ten, slow down.”

Driver implores an answer through the mirror. “You’d know all about it, though, wouldn’t you?”

“I do. But do you really want to know.”

“Sure, I do.”

Charlie leans forward and confides, “The rocket boosters use a propellant based on synthetic rubber, and the exhaust is rich in soot. They dump thousands of tonnes of this soot into the stratosphere, where it has a very long residence time, because it’s so dry up there. The soot has a massive global warming potential, so the rockets are heating the atmosphere. That’s driving climate change, and increasing the variability of the jet stream, which is leading to this freak weather.”

“Speak English, brother,” driver snaps.

“You asked me and I’m telling you the answer.”

“Well, I don’t speak rocket talk.”

“Plus there is the destruction of stratospheric ozone.”

The driver waves a hand, sneering, “Yeah, whatever. You don’t know either.”

“And the combustion products associated with the second and third stages, fairings and inter-bodies burning up on re-entry, raining out over the polar regions, and ending up in the food chain of the polar bears and penguins. So there’s that, too. There’s Terminal Eleven.”

“What does that shit even mean?”

Charlie chuckles, “You want the cabbie speak?”

“Yeah.”

“The rockets are f**king the planet.”

“You see, I knew it!” the driver is excited. “So what’s on Mars, mate?”

“For me?”

“For everyone going there. There’s like a queue a mile long.”

“Mars is not Earth,” Charlie says, plainly.

“What’s wrong with Earth?”

“She’s dying. And there’s too much gravity, apparently.”

Driver wrings the steering wheel again, growling, “So you leave a dying planet for a dead one!”

“Poetic, isn’t it?”

“I get really f**king poetical when I’ve got a cheese eating surrender Martian in my cab, don’t I?”

Charlie pulls his port onto his lap, chuckling, “Funny.”

“What about doing some First Aid before you f**k off?”

“Terminal Twelve. This is it.”

“You’re just part of the machine.”

“It could seem that way,” Charlie is contemplative. “Stop here.”

Driver abruptly halts and turns off the meter. “Eighty-nine fifty!”

Charlie hands over a \$100 bill. “Keep the change.”

Driver snatches the cash, angrily, “Ten bucks for a dead planet. Great!”

Charlie looks into his wallet, thoughtfully. He pulls out the remaining bills and hands the cash to the cabbie. “Here. I don’t need this.” Then he retrieves the credit cards and passes them to the driver as well.

Then he pauses. Inside the wallet is a photo showing himself and a woman. He retrieves the photo, and angles it so that it catches the light. He shakes his head, mournfully, places a kiss on the photo, then returns it to the wallet. He drops the wallet onto the cabbie’s lap. “Have the lot.”

Driver’s mood instantly turns, “Hey, I’ve heard about this! Do I get a pin number, too?”

“3477,” Charlie tells him.

“Hold on.” Driver flips open the glove compartment, and a bunch of documents fall out. He locates a pen amongst the papers and goes to write on his palm, but the pen doesn’t work. So he writes harder, anxiously scratching the pen against his flesh, as though we were trying to write the number in scar material. “Ow!” he reaches for a scrap of paper and furiously scribbles a circle until the pen draws ink. “What’s

that again?”

“3477,” Charlie tells him.

As the driver scribbles the number, Charlie psyches himself to depart the cab, into the rain. “Alright mate, good luck.” He steps outside and slams the door closed.

Driver winds down the passenger window. “You be safe up there, you hear?” he calls out. He winds up the window and takes stock of the loot. “What a great guy.”

A minute passes and the front passenger door opens. Charlie is there, his Inter-Planet port held over his head, sheltering him from the rain. He tells the cabbie, “I hear you, brother. I hear your concerns. I am working on it, okay?”

Chapter 11 Bankruptcy

Charlie sits in the small, airless waiting room, flipping through the Inter-Planet Mars brochure. It's a glossy mag full of pretty pictures and bold-faced lies. It shows the luxury fittings of the Inter-Planet colony, lots of happy smiling faces, and people going about their new life on the red planet: exercise bikes, foot massages and lots of chocolate cake.

The brochure shows an artist's impression of what the surface of Mars will one day look like, once the planet is fully terraformed. It has a striking resemblance to the version of heaven that is depicted in a Jehovah Witnesses magazine. In fact, if you look closely at the image, and angle the brochure against the light, you can just make out the JW symbol, like a watermark.

There is no mention that the picture was scanned from a Watchtower magazine, nor that it is an artist's impression; so the brochure effectively passes-off that this is what Mars actually looks like today. With this sort of truthless propaganda abounding, it is no wonder that people bring such inappropriate things to Mars. One colonist even bought mask and

snorkel, so the story goes.

After a while browsing the Mars propaganda, Charlie's mind begins to wander, and he glances around, to take stock of the waiting room. Water seeps through the ceiling, and the carpet is thread-bare. There is a smell of mould in the air and his shoes feel like they are stuck on the carpet. There is a chip-board reception desk, with flakes of wood protruding from the damaged edge.

Whilst the room is dishevelled and falling to pieces, the large Inter-Planet logo attached to the wall is immaculate. It is made of see-through, coloured acrylic and stainless steel, backlit by LED lights. It looks modern, crisp and professional. And sitting underneath it, is a fittingly lovely receptionist, a young woman called Trudy.

Charlie wanders over to the counter to make small talk. "I hope the Mars Resort is in better nick than this place," he chuckles.

"And no one's ever returned and said otherwise," the young woman replies, welcoming his approach.

"Has anyone ever returned?"

"Not yet, no."

"Well, there we have it," Charlie rests against

the counter, settling in. “Do you like your job here?”

“It’s an okay job, I guess.” Trudy says. Then, under her breath she mutters, “When they pay me...”

“You didn’t get paid?”

“I shouldn’t say,” she glances anxiously towards the door.

“Interesting,” Charlie thinks. He angles for some more information, starting with a diversion. “And what’s your favourite part of the job.”

“I like doing the ‘don’t’ signs,” the young receptionist smiles at the thought.

“The ‘don’t’ signs?”

“You know. Don’t do this, don’t do that.”

“I don’t get it,” Charlie is puzzled.

“So, every time the Directors ban something, I have to make a new sign. You know, for the tourists to read. I call them ‘don’t signs’. This is my favourite.” She passes a sheet of paper that features an Inter-Planet logo and the words: No Pets. Piglets, parrots, pussycats, poodles, pugs & pangolins prohibited. “I try to make them rhyme so that they’re fun to read.”

“It’s very specific,” Charlie says. “What if I came aboard with a Labrador, or a Shetland pony?”

“It would be too big to hide in the Hibernation Pods.”

“*Uh-huh*. And what’s wrong with small pets, anyway.”

“They interfere with the cash-flow from the food dispensers, apparently,” Trudy says.

Charlie starts laughing, “Really?”

“I’m not exactly sure what that means.”

“You are really awesome,” Charlie watches as Trudy blushes, and then he extends his hand.

“Let me hold your hand.”

Trudy smiles, awkwardly, unsure if this is a good idea. Charlie wraps her hand in his palms.

“My name is Charlie Darling and this might be the last time I feel the weight of a woman’s hand.”

Trudy pulls away. “My hand’s not heavy,” she grumbles.

“That’s not what I meant...”

“And I already know your name. I booked you in for your pre-flight medical. Doofus.”

“Of course. I was distracted by your radiance.”

“Stop it.”

“Okay, I’ll stop now.”

“Do you know my name?” the receptionist asks.

“Trudy.”

“How do you know that?” she asks, defensively.

“There’s a name badge on your left boob.”

“You’re so cheeky.”

Charlie steps away from the counter, “You will get paid, won’t you?”

Trudy glances anxiously towards the door again. “Inter-Planet is in a bit of trouble right now.”

“*Uh-huh?* They’re doing a big sales blitz?”

“Trading their way out of insolvency, the Directors say. Whatever that means. They got a good deal on some old rockets.”

“Great,” Charlie sighs. He retrieves his smartphone and googles the Inter-Planet website. On the page for investors, the chart shows the share price has crashed.

“But you needn’t worry,” Trudy says. “You’ll be on Mars.”

“Yeah,” he chuckles. “What was I thinking?”

A man enters the room wearing a black suit and a black eye. He hands Trudy a document, and speaks quietly to her. Charlie steps away from the counter. He listens intently and hears the “Chapter 11... lawyers... f**ked up...”

The man exits, and Trudy sets the document in the fax machine and dials the numbers. She glances at Charlie, “That was one of the Directors.”

“What happened to his face?”

Trudy looks around to check the door. “They’ve been fighting again.”

Charlie starts laughing, “Again? Shit-a-brick.”

Trudy picks up her ringing phone, listens, replaces it. “The medic is ready for you now.”

Charlie suddenly gets tense. “Oh, really? Are they going to take blood?” He grips the inside of his arm, anguished.

“What’s up Romeo?” Trudy grins. “You squeamish?”

Mars Express

After the medical, Charlie steps out of the surgery, clutching his punctured arm. He feels lightheaded and nauseous, and takes a moment to lean with his head against the wall, recuperating. He opens his hand to look at the metal token that the medic gave him. It is a small metal disc with letters printed onto it.

When he has recovered, he moves towards the door that leads to the launch pad. Across the tarmac, the rain is still hammering down, and he sees a queue of people standing with Inter-Planet umbrellas. Next to the door, there is a crate full of brollies. Above the crate are two signs that read 'No Selfies' and 'No Pets'. These are Trudy's 'don't' signs, hard at work.

"No Selfies?" Charlie wonders. He takes an umbrella and steps outside into the rain and walks towards the queue of Mars passengers waiting on the tarmac.

The path to the rocket is marked with orange witches hats. Every ten meters or so, there is a surly Inter-Planet security guard wearing body armour and holding a rubber truncheon. Just being near the violent beasts makes Charlie

anxious and nervous. One part of him want's to dig deep and find forgiveness for what they did, and another part of him wants to dispense with his pacifism and take revenge.

The queue moves slowly forward, past the huge, metal nozzles of the waiting rocket. Charlie shuffles along in the rain, holding his umbrella. At the head of the queue, two people step into the elevator connected to the gantry, and the little metal box disappears upwards. A minute later, the box comes down empty, and another two people step inside.

Charlie rubs the crook of his elbow, grimacing from the hole made by the blood-taking needle. He shuffles in his place, bored with the wait. He turns to observe the people he shares the queue with. Most of them are overweight white couples; the middle-aged, middle-class, fed up with life on Earth, and suckered into thinking that it's better on Mars.

Next to Charlie, a fat woman sweats profusely under her umbrella. She dabs her forehead with a handkerchief, "Oh, I can't wait for Mars," she sighs.

"Really?" Charlie forces a smile.

"I can't take this gravity a moment longer."

"It is a bit heavy, today, isn't it," Charlie

concurr.

“And what about you, lovely? What’s on Mars for you?”

“I’m a Space Engineer,” Charlie tells her.

“Oh, you’re one of the workers.”

“Yuh.”

“You’d know the answer to this question, then,” the obese woman says. “Is it true that the windows on Mars Resort don’t open.”

“That’s what I hear.”

“And is there a dial on the air-conditioning system?”

“I think so.”

“We’ll that’s good then. Temperature control is very important at my age. Oh, and another question, does the pool have a diving board?”

“I don’t think you need one, in the low gravity,” Charlie suggests.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” the old lady says, contemplatively.

The queue shuffles forward, and Charlie looks up the nozzle of the rocket engines. He sees the peeling paint, and the cracks in the metal surfaces. It’s got that rocket smell; an aroma of kerosene and burnt rubber wafts through the air.

Of note, The Inter-Planet Mars Launch Vehicle

is a second-hand rocket, formerly used for delivering commercial satellites into orbit. All the big rockets are re-useable, these days, but you only get ten good launches out of them before they start to play up. So, after eight or nine launches, you can pick them up pretty cheap. Strap on a few boosters powered by synthetic rubber, and you're good to go for Mars, assuming that it doesn't blow up on the launch platform.

Of course, blowing up on the launch platform is a not infrequent event for old rockets. As a result, there is a lot of effort from Inter-Planet's pro-Mars propagandists to normalise this outcome. At first they say, "It will never happen." And when it happens, they say, 'Well, at least it was quick.' And just to show that they are not completely heartless, Inter-Planet offers a 10% discount for the family of the deceased for all purchases through the firm.

The Inter-Planet launch vehicle has a three-stage core that is normally fuelled with kerosene. Sometimes they'll swap the kerosene for leaded petrol or used cooking oil, if the price is right. The other component to the rocket propellant is liquid oxygen, which is really expensive and very, very cold.

Strapped to the core are four solid rocket

boosters each containing 300 tonnes of rubber, nylon and other nasty, toxic shit, that you'd expect from rocket fuel. While the combustion products of the core is relatively benign – composed mainly of carbon di-oxide and water vapour – the exhaust of the booster rockets is just awful.

As Charlie told the cabbie, the booster exhaust is rich in black carbon and this concentrates in the stratosphere, where most of the propellant is burned during launch. As the stratosphere is high up, and dry, the soot doesn't rain out, like it would closer to the ground. Black carbon is nasty shit, because it has a capacity to absorb and re-radiate infrared radiation (heat). Black carbon has a fearsome reputation as a warming agent, being up to a million times more powerful than the equivalent amount of CO₂. The use of this awful rocket propellant enrages the Mars Opposition movement, because the rockets are cooking the planet; not to mention the ozone depletion and the re-entry debris that makes the penguins and polar bears inedible.

Back on the launch pad, the elevator returns to ground level, and the door opens. Charlie folds his brolly and places it in the used umbrella bin. He steps inside elevator and the big woman

squeezes in with him. It is very intimate, but not in a nice way. It is airless and humid in the metal box. The space is quickly infused with the odour of the woman's sweaty armpits, poorly masked by her perfume that smells like the air-freshener that you find in an aerosol can, on the window sill of the lavatory of a cheap hotel room.

Charlie grits his teeth, trying not to breathe through his nose. He glances around the inside of the elevator, taking notice of the 'Don't' signs. No Pets, No Selfies, and No Farting. This latter sentiment, he fully agrees with, and desperately hopes that the old lady – against whose plump and sweaty torso he is wedged – has taken notice of the instruction.

He twists his head around to look out the tiny window, as the elevator rises up the gantry. Eventually, the elevator halts and the metal doors slide open revealing a walkway that crosses to an open door into the top of the rocket. Inside the nose-cone of the rocket is the Inter-Planet Mars Express Shuttle – the spacecraft that will take him to Mars.

Charlie crosses the walkway quickly, getting drenched again, and steps into the shuttle. Inside the door, there are towels spread over the floor to catch the water.

A space-hostess addresses him, “Welcome aboard Mars Express. Can I see your token, please?”

Charlie retrieves the metal disc from his pocket and shows it to the space-hostess. “Up one floor and to the left,” she says, and hands him a booklet titled: Inter-Planet Launch Guide.

Inside the shuttle, Charlie looks up to see metal decks, ten stories high, with steps leading to each level. On each floor, there are there are dozens of hibernation pods.

Some of the passengers have gotten into their pods, and are already asleep – that’s how keen they are to get to Mars! Other passengers lounge around, smoking cigarettes, and drinking complimentary Inter-Planet spritzers before blast off.

Charlie sees a little old lady having trouble getting into her pod. “Let me give you a hand, darling,” he offers.

“Oh, thanks so very much.”

“What’s on Mars for you?” he asks, as he lifts the old girl’s frail leg over the side of the pod.

“I just want to get away from my husband.” She drops her walking stick on the floor and lays down in her pod, settling herself against the mattress. “And what about you, young man?”

“Me? I just want to smash the system that allows thugs with supposedly ‘non-lethal’ weapons to kill people at Space Protests,” Charlie says, and then catches himself. He glances around, anxiously, hoping that he hasn’t been overheard by Inter-Planet security.

“You’ll have a lovely time, up there, then,” the old lady says.

“I do hope so.”

“I’m so excited. I am going to sleep right now. Just one more sleep and wake up and I’m in the happy place.”

Charlie watches the old lady close the lid over her, slide her token into the slot, then press the ‘Wake up on Mars’ button. Then she presses the button that says ‘Sleep Now’. A second later, there is a burst of gas into the pod, and she becomes unconscious.

Charlie lets out a long sigh as he realises how terribly stressed he is. “Well that just blurted out, I guess,” he says under his breath.

Charlie made an important point to the old lady: there is nothing safe about the weapons that are deployed against the public at Space Protests. Many people have been maimed or killed by these so called ‘non-lethal’ weapons.

True, rubber bullets are unlikely to kill when they strike from a distance in the belly or chest, as intended. However, when the bullet is fired from close range, and it hits the temple, eye or throat, they can be deadly. Likewise the tear gas. The gas itself is non-lethal, but if the canister explodes against flesh, the metal can tear a jagged wound. Around the world, thousands of people have been killed by non-lethal weapons.

It's one of those strange paradoxes of life in the modern world, like the growing list of injuries caused by PPE, or personal protective equipment. Every year, thousands of people hobble into hospital with broken toes, having dropped their steel-capped boots on their feet; or clutching their faces, having poked themselves in the eye with their arm of their safety glasses; or with skull fractures from their safety helmets falling from the top of the cupboard on their heads.

The lethality of the non-lethal weapons has not gone unnoticed by Inter-Planet Security nor the people who hire them. The Inter-Planet human resource managers are reputed to have a two-point procedure for hiring new staff to the security force.

The assessment process begins with a gruelling physical test that ensures the candidates are

sufficiently fit to undertake their arduous duties of beating protesters and electrocuting unwanted pets. Those that pass are then subject to a rigorous and comprehensive psychological profiling technique called: *Myers-Briggs Times a Thousand*. The test is designed to weed out those who are clinically diagnosable as psychopaths, sociopaths, sadists, and miscellaneous Big Meanies. If a job seeker is found to fit any of these psychological categories, they are hired immediately. Consequently, Inter-Planet's army of meatheads, armed with 'non-lethal' weapons, has a chilling record of killing and maiming Space Protestors and murdering small animals. And it is all completely legal. Clever, *hub?* A master-stroke of planning and execution. So, now you know what they mean when they say that the best and the brightest work in the space industry.

A Cat Like That

Suddenly, the calm order inside the shuttle is disturbed by a shout and a yell, and someone calling out that most striking word, “Cat!”

Charlie looks up to see an old lady – Mrs. Jenkins – frantically trying to retrieve an orange tabby cat that has dropped from under her skirt, like an escapist turd. The cat, now free and terrified, scurries from one hiding spot to another, as the passengers scramble to retrieve it.

Mrs Jenkins is distraught. She knows what will happen if Inter-Planet Security get their hands on her hairy pussy. She won’t have any excuse, what with all of Trudy’s ‘don’t’ signs posted everywhere.

Too late! An Inter-Planet guard – a real Meany – clomps in to the shuttle, shouting at the top of his voice, “No pets! No pets on the shuttle!”

The passengers clear a path for him as he strides in, clad from head to foot in black body armour, and strapped with supposedly non-lethal weapons. He kneels, and peers under the Hibernation Pod where the cat is hiding. Then he withdraws from his belt a Kitty-Zapper – an extendible, battery-powered electro-shock device.

He lines it up, and stabs repeatedly at Mrs Jenkins' liberated moggie. The cat hisses as it valiantly fights back, but to no avail; the guard is trained in advanced pet-retrieval techniques, and armed with the latest technology: the kitty cat doesn't stand a chance. The guard keeps stabbing with the Kitty-Zapper and then: *ZAAAPPP!* There is a long, agonised mewling noise from under the pod - *MEEWWWWLLLL* - and the stench of burnt fur wafts around the shuttle.

The security guard reaches under the pod and grabs the zapped-cat by the back legs. He holds the limp feline in the air, and shouts to the passengers who are gathered around, "You see! This is what I'm talking about! No f**king pets."

Now, Mrs Jenkin's cat is a plump tabby called 'Mr Poo-Poo'. As one might expect, the animal is pampered, over-fed, and over-weight. On Mars a cat like that would be called 'Prime' because it is plump and without skank. A cat like that wouldn't survive a week on Mars. In no time, Mrs Jenkins would find her beloved companion missing, not knowing that it had been stolen, tenderised, murdered, skinned, butchered, seasoned, cooked, and ritualistically devoured by any one of the depraved Mars Colonists.

On Earth, you could get up a cat like that for

free from the RSPCA, or steal one from the back of a Chinese restaurant. However, on Mars, Mr Poo-Poo would be worth its weight in gold; not that gold (or Mr Poo-Poo) would weight much on Mars, what with the 0.38-G gravity, and all. The point is, you could get a whole month of bad sex on the melanoma-pimple of a planet for a cat like that. All of which goes to say that Mrs Jenkins lost out big-time when Mr Poo-Poo fell out of her skirt, and landed – feet first – on the floor of the Inter-Planet shuttle.

Seeing her furry companion held in the air by the Big Meany, old Mrs Jenkins breaks down in tears. Some of the Mars tourists gather around her, handing out platitudes like cheap lollies. “It’s not your fault,” they say, and “Try not to think about it,” and “You can get another one.”

The Inter-Planet Security Guard turns for the door, the hind legs of the limp tabby clutched in his burly fist. Seeing this, Mrs Jenkins fires into life. She leaps up, slapping at the guard’s head; but he is too big and strong for the ridiculous woman to make a difference. He raises the zapped feline beyond her reach, and marches out of the shuttle, repeating his mantra, “This is what I’m talking about! No f**king pets!”

Mrs Jenkins staggers behind him, tears flooding

from her eyes. “I’m sorry, Mr Poo-Poo,” she bawls, but to no avail.

The guard marches out of the shuttle, across the gang-plank to the gantry, where there is a metal drum marked with the words: ‘Pet Disposal’. Above the bin is one of Trudy’s ‘don’t’ signs that states with no uncertainty: NO PETS! Piglets, Parrots, Pussycats, Poodles, Parrots, Pugs & Pangolins Permanently Prohibited.

“Read the f**king sign,” the security guard growls at old Mrs Jenkins, who has followed him out in the rain. He opens the lid of the Pet Disposal bin and tosses the lifeless cat inside. When the lid of the Pet Disposal bin slams shut, the old lady collapses on the gang-plank. She clutches her face in her hands, and weeps pitifully in the rain.

Our hero Charlie Darling watches this horrible scene with grim fascination. He shakes his head wearily, wondering why Inter-Planet are such assholes when it comes to pets.

As it happens, there are two reasons why Inter-Planet is so anally-retentive about enforcing its ‘no pets’ rule. The first reason relates to an unfortunate incident with a pangolin that was found in the carry-on luggage of a space engineer,

on one of the early flights. What is a pangolin you ask? It is the fancy name for a type of scaly anteater. While most people think of pets as puppies and pussy-cats, some people also include pangolins, as well. It's true, pangolins don't have a lot of pet-utility; they have no soft fur to stroke, they don't purr, they won't chase and return a stick, and the only way you can get them to beg is to starve them of ants for a month. That said, pangolins do piss on the carpet, and that is a most pet-like behaviour.

Anyway, despite the general absence of pet-utility, pangolins are nonetheless popular with some members of the overweight, middle-aged, middle-class. However, unlike the pug or the pussy-cat, the pangolin is critically endangered to extinction because lots of old Chinese people eat them, to make themselves feel better.

So the story goes, a pangolin was discovered on the Inter-Planet shuttle only after it had departed Earth's orbit. The discovery put the company in a right bind because there are big fines for exporting endangered wildlife to airless planets. In a panic, Inter-Planet instructed the space hostess to blast the annoying critter out of the air lock, but she refused. Instead, she called Greenpeace on the space phone – which,

incidentally, is strictly prohibited – and the greenies alerted the authorities. So, Inter-Planet had no choice but to turn the shuttle around, and return to Earth orbit. There, an agent from the Environmental Department came aboard and accompanied the pangolin back to its home planet in a Soyuz capsule.

What a kerfuffle! The pangolin incident put the Inter-Planet Mars schedule back months. The Directors were furious, and that's when they started giving each other black eyes.

The other reason why Inter-Planet is so anally-retentive about pets is to do with the economics of Mars Resort. The pets interfere with the cash-flow from the food dispensers, you see.

Mrs Jenkins hobbles into the shuttle. She is cold, wet, crest-fallen and heart-broken. Charlie watches as kind strangers help her into her hibernation module where she curls up in a ball and weeps herself to sleep.

With the cat incident resolved, there is nothing much left to do but prepare for launch. Before sleeping, Charlie decides to have a look around the shuttle to see what else it contains.

Sleep Now

In one area, there is a table and chairs, a bookshelf and TV screen. There is a metal tin on the floor with the word ‘smokers’ written on the side. On the wall are two signs. One says, ‘Pool Room’ and the other says ‘No Selfies’.

“What is it with the selfies?” Charlie wonders.

The reason why Inter-Planet is so anally-retentive about people taking selfies is that most people who interact with the company are absolutely miserable. So, when they post images to social media showing themselves scowling and angry, it is really bad PR for the firm.

Of course, an organisation that was governed by enlightened human beings would make the necessary changes, so that staff and customers were happy. But the Inter-Planet directors aren’t like that.

Instead, they are greedy, selfish psychopaths who have no interest in the well-being of other people, *per se*. Instead, they care only about a minute subset of the human race: namely the shareholders of Inter-Planet Inc. On behalf of the

shareholders, the Inter-Planet governors would willingly throw every other human being – and every other living species – under a bus. Inter-Planet’s psychopathy was well known in the space industry.

As a result, the Inter-Planet staff are miserable. Poor young Trudy, for example, wasn’t even getting paid. However, because all the staff are on employment contracts with strict non-disclosure clauses, the company is safe.

With the passengers it is a different story. They are kept happy with cheap tricks and distractions, right until that moment when the refund policy expires – an hour before launch. After that, the misery starts – like it did with Mrs Jenkins.

So, to make sure no one knows what a mean-spirited organisation Inter-Planet really is, taking photos is strictly prohibited. The only messages from Mars colonists and tourists that are permitted are the multi-choice postcards that are widely available, that say things like:

The Mars Express shuttle was:

A: Great

B: Awesome

C: Unbelievable

The Inter-Planet Postcards are modelled on the Nazi postcards sent from the concentration camps. They are an inexpensive and highly effective form of propaganda.

Charlie slumps into the chair and watches the passengers load, two by two. They come into the Inter-Planet shuttle, like herd animals boarding a mythical Ark, out of the rain. The difference is that they are not coming in to avoid the rain, *per se*. Instead, they are seeking to avoid the firestorm that is growing in Earth's atmosphere, the collapse of the biosphere, the acidification of the ocean, and the fact that coffee is becoming increasingly expensive due to climate change. Plus, because they are all so fat, they are trying to avoid the oppressive 1-G gravity on Earth, as well.

As Charlie sits there watching this sad procession of humanity, he feels the mind-miles coming on, a storm of thoughts that trouble him.

"Who are these people?" he wonders. "Why are they quitting the home planet, and not mustering a defence to save it?" These people carry genes that make them love Mars – Marsophile genes. Until all the Marsophile Genes are removed from the planet, Earth will not be safe. Charlie finds

himself getting angry, and he doesn't like being angry. So, to distract himself, he pulls out of his pocket the Inter-Planet Launch Handbook that the nice space-hostess gave him.

The Launch Handbook is a guide to the space launch process, and it has little cartoon pictures to help even the most simple-minded passenger leave Earth safely. The first task is to identify his assigned pod. This information is written on the metal token that he was given when he passed his pre-flight medical.

Charlie retrieves the token from his pocket, and sees that he has been allocated pod 'H2'.

Following the instructions in the book, he walks up a flight of stairs to his designated pod. The device is properly referred to as a 'Sleep-Safe Hibernation Module' – but pod is easier for the dim-witted Mars tourists to pronounce.

Irrespective of its name, it is actually a chest freezer, laying on its back, and raised off the floor by four cement blocks. The freezer door has been removed and replaced with a clear plastic lid.

Charlie raises the so-called 'Viz-Canopy' to look inside. Here, he sees a 'Hibernation Mattress' floating on the 'Thermo-regulation Substrate' which is actually just a swimming-pool lilo floating on green jelly.

Charlie heaves a sigh. There really is nothing more to be done than get some sleep and wake up on Mars. So, he climbs into the pod, and settles himself on the lilo, careful not to push his elbow into the jelly.

On the inside of the pod, there is a metal panel with a coin slot and three buttons. He slides the token into coin slot and reviews his options: ‘wake-up-on-Mars’, ‘wake-up-half-way’ and ‘sleep-now’.

He glances around to see that no-one is watching, and then presses the button the button that says ‘wake-up-half-way’.

He lowers the Viz-Canopy and then presses the ‘sleep-now’ button. Then there is a blast of gas into the module, a mix of lavender oil and ether. The first breath stings and gives him a sense of panic, but then the lavender soothes him and his eyes flicker shut. A few moments later, the compressor on the Hibernation Module whirrs and the Thermo-regulation Substrate begins to chill down to sleep temperature. In no-time, the green jelly will be cold and Charlie will be on his way to Mars.

Murderous Mishaps

In a control room at the Inter-Planet Space Port there is great excitement as the first ‘house-guests’ are about to begin their journey to Mars Resort. For the Directors of Inter-Planet, it is a huge day, coming at the end of a long program that has been fraught with deadly delays, murderous mishaps and complete clustef**ks. Over fifty dead Mars Colonists have paved the way for this day.

Of note, there is no reference to these planetary *faux-pas* on the Inter-Planet website. Which is not to say that these events have gone unrecorded. Quite the opposite, in-fact. Detailed records of Inter-Planet’s disasters are maintained by the underground movement that runs interference on all attempts to enliven the dead planet: Mars Opposition.

According to Mars Opposition, the first shuttle that Inter-Planet sent to Mars – with eight colonists aboard – collided with a defunct Russian satellite that was orbiting the runt-planet, and was instantly destroyed.

The unimaginatively named ‘Mars-1’ satellite had been in orbit around Mars since 1971. Striking the Inter-Planet shuttle at thirty thousand

kilometres per hour, the impact killed the Inter-Planet crew by freezing instantly, decompressing and dismembering them (Mars Death Type: FIDD – see glossary at the end of this book). Everything had been going swimmingly for the Inter-Planet crew up until the last moment, when they were blasted into a million pieces of frozen flesh, and thrown into orbit around a planet that is at any one time a minimum of fifty million kilometres from home.

To this day, the remains of the first shuttle and the Inter-Planet crew circle the planet, posing a major space debris risk for future Mars missions. It's almost as though planet Mars were sending a none-too subtle message to the humans: f**k off, you're not welcome here.

Back on Earth, the death of the first Mars colonists caused a right kerfuffle with the Directors of Inter-Planet; but they kept the news to themselves, and didn't send out a press release. Despite their reluctance to speak publically about the mishap, the Inter-Planet Directors were not completely without sympathy for the desiccated deceased. To commemorate, they bought a cheap plastic tombstone and erected it over and empty mass-grave dug into one corner of the Inter-Planet carpark. The tombstone was inscribed with

a thoughtful epitaph: *It took a long time to get there; but at least it was quick.* They wrote the expense off to a line item in a marketing budget.

The Mars-1 cluster-f**k was exacerbated when Inter-Planet tried to sue the Russian Government for providing inaccurate orbital parameters of the Mars-1 satellite. The court case was going well until it was revealed that the supposedly Russian-speaking Inter-Planet space engineer who decoded the orbital parameters for their original Cyrillic script, didn't actually speak Russian; and he wasn't actually a space engineer. Instead, he was a Bulgarian web-designer who had taken advantage of Inter-Planet's lax hiring practices. The kerfuffle went on for months, but was eventually settled out of court in time for the next Mars launch window.

The second Inter-Planet shuttle to Mars didn't fare much better than the first, although it did manage to safely touch down on the Martian surface. The problem was that it landed right on top of a defunct Mars Rover that was powered by a Radioisotope Thermo-generator (RTG), a device that uses radioactive decay to generate heat to energise space vehicles. RTGs are like disposable batteries for astronauts, and they leave them lying around all over the place. The RTG in

the Rover that the Inter-Planet shuttle landed on, contained 4 kilograms of plutonium, and this flooded the shuttle with gamma rays.

None of the Inter-Planet crew noticed at first, thinking that their resulting lethargy and the blood-flecked stool that they all passed nightly was the result of the six month's space sleep. It was only four months later, when the final Mars colonist died of leukaemia, that the Inter-Planet space-health specialists got to the 'bottom' of the mystery. Inter-Planet sought to keep the truth hidden, again, but someone on the inside leaked the story to the press.

What a kerfuffle! The stock price tanked, and the Directors started hitting each other. However, despite the board-level violence, they remained committed to their mission. The issue of people dying in the pursuit of a Mars colony became the talking point of the entire space industry. The stock price rallied when the Inter-Planet Directors ruled on the matter by publically vowing to kill-off just as many aspiring Mars colonists as was necessary, providing that the colonists were prepared to a) take the risk and b) indemnify Inter-Planet in writing.

However, the company wasn't out of the woods just yet. The third Mars shuttle was lost in a fiery

launch accident before it even left the ground (Mars Death Type: LPDI). The count-down had commenced, and just five seconds before lift-off the rocket exploded. Bang! Just like that. The video footage of the accident was awesome. It showed a tower of flame engulfing the rocket followed by an intense explosion ripping it to pieces. The video got over thirty million views on Youtube, and it even knocked 'Pug chases tail' off the #1 most liked youtube video for a whole month. While the Directors were mortified, the crew incinerated, and the shareholders dismayed, the Inter-Planet social-media team were ecstatic, and they all got big performance bonuses.

Return to flight was delayed for months while analysis was undertaken of the smouldering debris on the launch pad. It was found that the accident was caused by a supposed space-technician (actually a short order pastry chef called Kevin) having neglected to replace the fuel cap after the rocket had been filled-up with kerosene.

The fourth Inter-Planet rocket managed to leave the launch platform without incident or incineration. However, the shuttle failed to separate from the third stage, and it tumbled in low Earth orbit for a few days before burning-up (harmlessly) in the mesosphere over the Iranian

peninsula with eight crew on board (Mars Death Type: BUHA). Boy, didn't that cause a kerfuffle – the Persians were pissed. During the period of the tumbling, one of the poor shuttle crew was able to send of a number of tweets. Most were an unintelligible string of letters and numbers, probably caused by his inability to accurately connect his finger with the right part of the smartphone screen. The final three tweets, however, did make sense. They consisted of just a single word: 'dizzy' 'hot' and 'PU-238. This Mars Death Type was designed 'SAB' short for Spun and Baked. Inter-Planet re-tweeted the shit out of the 'dizzy' and 'hot' tweets, but played down the third one, knowing full well that the public would be upset if they found out the shuttle contained 4,000 grams of highly radioactive plutonium, which had just been burnt up in the atmosphere.

The fifth shuttle got underway safely, but had to turn around half way to Mars, and bought back into Earth orbit. This was because of the pangolin incident, referred to previously. When in orbit, the shuttle rendezvoused with a Soyuz capsule, in which the eight shuttle crew returned to Earth. Back on Earth, they quickly stepped on-board the sixth shuttle that, like the third, blew up on the launch pad, incinerating them all. The analysis

found that it was the fuel cap issue again, and Kevin was fired the next day.

By this stage, the poor Inter-Planet Directors were at their wits end, and close to putting the company into voluntary administration. However, they were rescued at the last moment by an Marsophile oil sheik who injected billions into their operations. In his press statement, he said that he wanted a holiday villa in an exotic location that reminded him of his ancestral home in a stony desert region of Kajakistan; somewhere a long, long way from his annoying family. This helped rally the stock price, and so did the new company policy: Inter-Planet doesn't do body-counts. At the next opportunity the launches began again.

The seventh Inter-Planet launch was a complete f**k up, right from the start. First, it was delayed for weeks due to technical issues and weather. When the rocket was finally able to leave the pad, it did a most extraordinary thing. Rather than go up, up and up – as rockets normally do – this one went up, across and down. Oh boy, that a kerfuffle! A thousand tonnes of kerosene, liquid oxygen and solid rocket fuel (synthetic rubber) went-off with a ball-tearing BANG! as the huge rocket nose-dived into the ground.

The Mars Death Type attributed to this incident was designated 'Post-launch Ensquashment (PLES)', as the eight shuttle crew were smashed, head-first, into the Inter-Planet carpark at 200 miles an hour. A second later, they were consumed in a massive ball of flame.

At first everyone thought that it was the missing fuel cap issue again. However this was soon discounted as the fuel caps were now welded in place, triple-checked and had a live go-pro camera feed dedicated to them.

After months of sifting through charred rocket parts intermingled with pieces of carbonised human flesh (but who's counting, right?) the source of the error was finally found. The 'angular velocity sensor' had an arrow that was supposed to point toward the top of the vehicle; it was pointing at the bottom of the rocket instead. In layman's terms: some idiot had installed the thing with the 'this-way-up' arrow pointing down.

As a result, the flight control system was receiving wrong information about the position of the rocket, and tried to 'correct' it, causing the vehicle to swing wildly and, ultimately, crash. The installation error was supposed to be impossible due to the shape of the device and its receptacle. The investigators were tipped off to this detail

when they found the head of a ball-peen hammer in the wreckage. The paper trail identified the young ‘space engineer’ who did the installation. A review of his social media posts showed that he wasn’t actually a space engineer, but a dyslexic carpenter with a ‘can-do’ attitude. He was fired the next day, along with the entire human resources department.

The eighth Inter-Planet was deliberately destroyed thirty seconds after launch by a so-called ‘space launch specialist’. The accident review found that the responsible party was actually a fashion designer who took a dislike to the colour of underside of the rocket, that had only become visible after launch. The head of the new HR department dismissed calls for his sacking by saying that the incident was just due to the new team ‘settling in’.

Fortunately, after lost decades and over fifty dead aspiring Mars colonists, the run of bad luck came to an end, and Inter-Planet was finally able to launch and land sufficient number of humans to get the Mars Resort project back on track.

The launch that Charlie Darling stepped aboard was of particular significance because it was the first of a dozen planned launches with paying passengers. All going well, Inter-Planet might

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even turn a small profit, giving their shareholders a much needed dividend.

The Two Tony's

At Inter-Planet mission control, an impromptu radio station provides a running commentary of the launch process. Inter-Planet is trialling a new format that seeks to get more of the dim-witted members of society to listen to the broadcast. To make it easy for the listeners, the producers have bought together two journalists who are both called Tony. Tony and Tony.

Tony speaks first, “We are here at Inter-Planet mission control where, shortly, will be the first of twelve back-to-back launches taking tourists and highly trained technicians to the Red Planet.”

“And Mars only comes close to Earth once every two years, or so. Mars in Opposition, they call that,” Tony chimes in.

“That’s very different to being in ‘Mars Opposition’ which is the official protest movement,” Tony says, “And boy, haven’t their numbers swelled. The facebook group alone has over a million followers.”

“That’s right,” says Tony. “The last time Mars was in Opposition, a rocket took engineers and specialists the red planet to set up the Mars Resort. They’ve been there two years now, working hard, doing their part for the survival of

humanity by making our species multi-planet.”

“And didn’t those last space launches cause a stink?” Tony says.

“Hell yeah! Riots. Protests. Inter-Planet security bashing people with truncheons.”

“And the Kitty-Zappers.”

“Yep. It was awesome, alright.”

“The ratings went through the roof.”

“I got so much overtime,” Tony chuckles.

“Me too. I redid my kitchen.”

“Really? I got a pool.”

“Do you remember when the Big Meany squashed the little guy’s head?”

“That was the best bit.”

“Anyway, the rebellion was suppressed.”

“What were those environmentalists thinking?” Tony asks, annoyed. “Solar panels. *Pah!*”

“Exactly, Tony. According to the respected journal: Mars Truth, colonising Mars supports humanity by making our species multi-planet.”

“Mars is good for humanity,” Tony agrees. “Like coal.”

“Now if they could run the Mars rockets on coal...”

The two Tony’s become animated at the awesome meme that they have just created.

“How cool would that be?”

“Green jobs in the heartland.”

“You have to wonder where environmentalists get their information.”

“They hate our freedom.”

“Do you think you could really do that? Power a Mars rocket with coal?” Tony asks, returning to the meme.

“Well, they used coal to power steam engines, right?”

“Of course.”

“Steam engine, rocket engine; it’s all the same really.”

“You’re starting to sound like a real engineer,” Tony chuckles.

“Well I have got a Graduate Certificate.”

“Really? Mechanical engineering?”

“No. Meccano.”

“So, how would it work then, rockets powered by coal?”

“You probably wouldn’t use the coal in the chunk form like in the train. You wouldn’t want the additional weight of the boiler stoker or the shovel. So, you’d turn it into a liquid and use it to replace the kerosene.”

“Well, I dare say that the best and brightest at Inter-Planet are working on that right now. What

would they code-name a special space-fuel project, like that?”

“Coal liquid. They’d probably call it Co-la.”

“I think that this could catch on.”

“Now, if they use coking coal...”

There is a slapping sound, as the two Tony make a high five.

“Coming soon, a trip to Mars fuelled by Coking-co-la.”

“You know something happens to the human mind when they first go into space. It makes them feel very humble.”

“They call it the overview effect,” Tony says gravely, as if he actually knew what he was talking about.

Actually, despite what the Tonies of the world say, the Overview Effect is another piece of pro-space propaganda that is not connected to reality. So the story goes, people who have been in orbit, and seen Planet Earth from above, are said to be profoundly changed, experiencing a cognitive shift in the way they view themselves and the planet.

Of course, the reality is much less inspired. Sure, some feel humbled to have the opportunity to see the Earth from space. That’s only natural. But to

use this as part of a claim to justify space tourism – or to claim that all manned space travel is automatically an environmentally positive outcome, really is drawing a long bow. Most people who have the overview effect just want to go back into space again and damn the penguins and polar bears.

A more suitable way to achieve enlightenment about our role as humans on Earth might be a bit more Buddhist about it. Maybe meditate, go for a walk in a forest, or get personal with a Pug. Anything other than jumping on a planet-killing space rocket.

“Well, there are going to be about a thousand very humble space tourists very soon,” Tony says.

“Inter-Planet Mars Resort.”

“You’ll never feel heavy again,” the two Tony’s chime together.

There is the sound of commotion, machines whistle and beep. A space machine goes ‘ping’.

“Okay, there is movement in launch control.”

“The count-down has started.” Tony says. “Ten, nine, eight...”

“A new era of space colonization begins.”

“Seven, six, five...”

“First the humans colonised the Earth.”

“And now we are colonizing Mars.”

“Four, three, two...”

“What could possibly go wrong?”

“One...”

The Inter-Planet rocket lifts-off surrounded by flames and smoke.

In the radio-shack, Tony says the ritualistic words, “We-have-lift off. Inter-Planet shuttle with the first paying passengers to Mars, begins its journey to the Red-Planet.”

Mars Express Lift-Off

The Inter-Planet rocket roars into the sky with the engines on the core and the four boosters all burning at full thrust. The air is punctuated with a rumbling noise that reverberates in the pit of your stomach, give a sense of dread, as though something awful and wrong has just happened. The rocket enters the cloud-base and disappears from view for the people on the ground. Beyond the clouds, beyond the stratosphere, the craft reaches higher and higher into the sky. The booster rockets run out of rubber fuel, and they are tossed away like a used condom. They fall in the ocean, where the remains of the horrible, toxic shit they use for fuel mingles in the hot, acidified ocean, adding an extra dose of poison to the plankton and fish.

The rocket core continues on, blasting higher and higher into the atmosphere. When the first stage runs out of kerosene and oxygen, it detaches from the rest of the rocket and similarly falls back into the sea. Normally, the first stage would be recovered by flying it back to the launch pad, but these rockets that Inter-Planet use are so crappy, that the best thing to do with them is to dispose of them without trace.

The second-stage rockets ignite, propelling the rest of the rocket and the attached shuttle higher and faster out of the atmosphere, and into orbit. When this stage is out of fuel, it detaches from the third-stage.

The second-stage rocket body and the ‘inter-stage’ that connects it to the third-stage, are set free in orbit and immediately gain that notorious designation: space-debris, or space junk.

Now, most normal people dispose of junk by throwing into a rubbish or a recycling bin. But the people in the space industry don’t do that. Oh, no. Instead, they use the ocean and the atmosphere as the recipient of its waste. Oh, actually, that’s not just ‘the’ ocean and atmosphere, that’s ‘your’ ocean and atmosphere. But hey, what’s a bit of toxic pollution when we are saving the human race by making it multi-planetary, right?

Anyway, back to the Inter-Planet space debris. The second-stage and the inter-stage flies around the planet a few dozen times, before the air molecules in the near-Earth environment slow the pieces down, and they are drawn back into Earth’s atmosphere.

Travelling at 30,000 kilometres per hour, they smash through the exosphere and ionosphere,

largely unaffected. However when the space-junk reaches the mesosphere, about 70km above the Earth surface, the air is so dense that the friction of the air molecules striking the fast moving object causes intense heat to build up on the rocket parts, and they turn into a ball of flame.

Space people euphemistically refer to this as ‘burning up harmlessly’ without specifying exactly how burning all the whacky materials that rockets are made of in the middle atmosphere can ever be thought of as ‘harmless’ except in the most deluded, corporate-spin-doctor sort of way.

As it burns up, the space debris ceases to exist in a solid form, instead it is rendered into molecule-sized particles of smoke – rocket-smoke. The rocket-smoke – about four thousand kilograms in total – hangs in the mesosphere air, slowly spreading. Over a number of hours, the smoke thins out so much that it is no longer visible. But just because it can’t be seen, doesn’t mean that it’s not there, right? As the days go by, the rocket-smoke spreads out around the atmosphere. Because they are small, the smoke particles aren’t affected much by gravity, and they just drift around, distributing themselves more or less evenly through that level of the atmosphere. Those that find their way over the polar regions,

as most of them will do eventually, cluster together because of the intense cold, and gravity takes a hold of them.

Over the poles, the rocket-smoke falls from the sky, landing on the snow and ice and the polar oceans. All of the material that comprised the rocket parts – aluminium, polymers, composites, plastics, copper and heavy metals, batteries and ball-peen hammers – all this material finds its way into the food chain of the polar bears and penguins.

You know what, it's getting a bit repetitive have to repeat the words 'penguins and polar bears' over and over again when referring to the ecological impacts of the space industry; so let's coin a new phrase. We need a word that is easy to remember, something that speaks for all the natural living organisms of the polar regions. It needs to be a portmanteau of penguins and polar bears: Pears... Bearguins... Penguibears... Pengolars... Polenguin. That's it: Polenguin.

Thanks Inter-Planet. Thanks space industry. Thanks military-industrial space complex for being open and honest about what you have been doing to the polenguin with all your shitty space junk. Thanks for allowing an informed public to decide whether you ought to have a social license

to operate. Oh, and a quick question: what are you going to do about the hundreds of kilograms of plutonium and uranium in the defunct satellites that will eventually de-orbit and burn up ‘harmlessly’ in the atmosphere, and rain down over the polar regions. Do you actually have a plan to prevent Cosmos-1818 with 11.5 kg of uranium 235 in the Topaz reactor entering Earth’s atmosphere, and spraying its radioactive debris across the whole biosphere? Or are you just going to let it happen? We really hope that that overview effect and the grand sustainability strategy of making humans a multi-planet species is worth all of that dead and diseased polenguin.

Anyway – that rant over – let’s get back to the Inter-Planet launch. The rest of the rocket continues into space. The nose cone that covers the shuttle falls away, and when the third stage runs out of fuel, it separates from the shuttle, and the shuttle is on its own, heading for the red planet.

The third stage, inter-stage and cowlings are in orbit now, and they too, will eventually re-enter earth’s atmosphere, and become a toxic food supplement for polenguin.

And so it is with the space industry: the only

industry in the world that routinely uses the upper atmosphere as a waste incinerator. As a result, the polar regions are contaminated with burnt debris, the atmosphere contaminated with exhaust products – including the soot – and the sea is contaminated by the booster rockets and first stages.

Once upon a time, the American space agency, NASA, had the words ‘understand and protect our home planet’ in its mission statement. That got canned in 2006 under the dim-witted Bush presidency. Perhaps, then it is no wonder that the space industry continues to be an unregulated, toxic menace to the living systems of Planet Earth. *Ohhh*, pity the poor polenguin.

Once the Inter-Planet Mars Express shuttle has escaped Earth’s atmosphere, all goes completely quiet. Inside each pod, visible through the Perspex canopy, fast asleep are hundreds of fat, white people.

On the wall of the shuttle is a big poster that promotes the fictitious future that awaits them: *Start a new-life on the Inter-Planet Mars Resort. You’ll never feel heavy again.*

What an masterstroke of advertising! How could a population of overweight people living on a

dying planet resist that offer.

It is calm inside the shuttle: a subtle blinking of computer lights and the faint whir of a fan. A shoe and a walking stick drift weightlessly.

In his pod, our hero Charlie Darling is fast asleep – numbed out by ether and lavender. In six months, he will be on Mars. The poor bastard.

Inter-Planet Mars Resort

Six Months Later

Planet Mars is a melanoma-pimple of a planet located in a region of the solar system colloquially referred to as ‘butt-f**k nowhere space’. It is so far away from the Sun, that precious little of the illuminating and warming rays of that awesome star reach out there. As a result, the surface of the red planet is as dim as a squinty-eyed kid, and as cold as polenguin poop; not that there is any polenguin on Mars, and precious little left on Earth, either, what with all the toxic rocket-smoke ending up in their food supply.

Mars has sod-all atmosphere, just a wispy trace of fart-gas from whatever unintelligent life lived there before it committed communal suicide from Mars Immiseration, billions of years ago.

On Earth, living things rejoiced at the magnificence of their planet – 1-G gravity, a magnetic field to protect against cosmic rays, a thick atmosphere, an orbit neither too-close nor too-distant from the sun, and a really excellent Moon – and they happily spread to occupy every available nook and cranny of the planet. From the

top of the stratosphere, to kilometres below the deepest ocean trenches, Earth-life found somewhere comfortable to live.

On Mars, it was a very different story. On Mars, the living organisms quickly came to the conclusion that abiogenesis was a really bad idea, and they had f**ked-up having evolving on such a miserable shit-hole of a planet. So after an extensive planet-wide counselling process, all the living organisms came to the unanimous agreement that it would be more 'humane' to allow the minerals in their bodies to exist in an abiotic state, than to live in such a miserable organism. So on the chosen date, every single organism on the planet instructed its cells to undertake voluntary apoptosis –coordinated cell death. It was sort of like this: on the count of three... one... two... three... *GNNNNNNNN!!* And they all died. Thus, did Mars become a dead planet. Better dead than miserable, is the Mars motto, after-all.

With no atmosphere, as such, whatever heat is received from the Sun, just wafts off into space. To coin a phrase, Mars is a waste of good sunshine. Look, let's be frank, as planet's go, Mars is a runt. It is small. It has no atmosphere. Its surface is rock and toxic perchlorate dust.

There is absolutely nothing to like about the place.

The Inter-Planet Mars Resort is located on a barren plain. As far as the eye can see, there's just dust and rock and f**k all else besides. There's no trees, no kangaroos, no tumbleweed or oases, just f**k all. Mars is a dark, cold and miserable; it's a boring shithole in the middle of nowhere.

Mars doesn't even have a decent moon. Instead, it's got two stupid rocks that are so insecure that they need scary names like Phobos and Deimos to make them look tough. Neither of these actually want to be in orbit around Mars, and given half the chance would take the opportunity to become an meteor, or some other noble space object, and not just a hanger-on to an idiot, wannabe planet like Mars.

The Martian surface, is just as uninspiring as its ridiculous Moons. Just looking out the window from the Inter-Planet Mars Resort at the so-called 'landscape' brings on immediate depression and loneliness for most people.

Given that it took six months of muscle-sapping weightlessness to get there, and requires at least another six to get back, most people find themselves asking "What the f**k was I thinking?" when they first gaze upon that bleak

vista. This is referred to as the ‘Mars Question’ and most people ask it within the first few days on the runt-planet, generally on the first instance that they look out a window during the rare occasions when there is enough light to actually see anything on that dim-witted planet.

If the environs of Mars aren’t enough to make you swallow plutonium pellets, the dwellings certainly are. To keep costs down, the ‘habitation’ modules were modelled on a successful Earth design that was known to balance utility and compactness: the porta-loo.

Furthermore, to make them super lightweight, they are all pneumatic, which is a fancy Mars way of saying inflatable. As such, Mars Resort is composed of a dozen inflated structures; small, uninspiring, and oddly shaped. They are made from a light-weight polymer that is pinky-beige in colour, resembling the skin of a cheap, blow-up sex toy. From a distance and in the half-light, the Inter-Planet Mars Resort resembles an orgy of blob-shaped f**k-dolls trying desperately to penetrate something, anything, to help distract from the misery of being on the runt-planet, Mars.

The largest of the structures is the Command-Module. A single airlock connects the cramped

inside with the miserable outside. This building looks like an immense sex-doll that only an obese, depraved space-walrus would fancy. It contains a number sub-units, including the Mess Hall, the Flalgae Factory, the Shuttle Departure & Arrivals Bay, and most importantly for our story, the Surgery.

The Mad Medic, Maddy

Inside the Surgery, there is a medic, a woman who is unusually fit and healthy for a Mars dweller. For the past week, since the explosion, Maddy has been wired, unable to sleep, and always busy. She works quickly, preparing a surgical procedure on a dead man who is lying on the floor. She is getting ready to cut open the head of the cadaver to remove the brain. She has laid out all the tools, and is set to go.

Before she sets to work, she unzips her jumpsuit and drops it to the floor, revealing a well formed and completely naked body. She squirts a thick dollop of hand sanitiser on her palm, and then rubs it all over her hands, arms, neck and face, under her arms and on her belly and all the other places she can reach. There is no running water on Mars, you see, and this 'Mars Wash' is the an extremely effective way to maintain high levels of personal hygiene. Maddy performs this ritual at least five times a day: after wake-up, at least three times during the day, and full body wash, including all the nooks and crannies (and behind the ears) before bed.

There was never enough sanitizer for the hundred or so Mars Colonists, so Maddy, being

fastidious about hygiene and profoundly greedy, stole the lot for herself.

An added benefit of the Mars Wash is that it is accompanied by mild inebriation, what with all the ethyl-alcohol in the sanitiser fluid seeping through the skin. As a result of this frequent ritual, Maddy is permanently sozzled, and this only adds to her erratic behaviour. Besides being pissed all the time, she really is quite mad.

Her long chestnut-coloured hair is tied in a pony-tail, and curled up under her Inter-Planet baseball cap. She wears an intense look, and this, coupled with the crescent shaped scar on her cheek, gives her the appearance of a tough, cranky bitch, which she is.

Despite her serious personality issues, Maddy moves across the surgery in an effortless, lolling dance that is caused by the low 0.38-G gravity on Mars. It is not the same as the way astronauts move on the Moon because the Moon's gravity is even more pathetic than that of Mars, but it's close. It's a sort of long stride with a little period of weightlessness at the crest, sort of like how Wiley E Coyote hangs in mid-air after running off the cliff in pursuit of the Road Runner, except that it doesn't last as long. The way that Maddy moves around on Mars is graceful, but not every

human achieves grace in their self-locomotion. If you were to watch a Mars Plumber try to cross the room, for example, you'd know exactly what I mean.

Maddy lolls over to the body, drags it across the floor and hauls the cadaver onto surgical table. She does this effortlessly because of the low gravity, and because she has maintained much of her original muscle—mass through an intense exercise routine that she refers to as the Bateman Technique.

With the body on the table, she retrieves a blue marker pen and concentrates hard as she draws a neat blue dashed line over the dead guy's forehead – that's the trim line for her bone saw.

“How are we going, Rachel?” she asks aloud, addressing the central computer that is on permanent standby.

The computer replies with the voice of a twelve year old girl. The sound emanates from a multiple of speakers located around the Surgery, “Your patient is going cold.”

“Shit!” Maddy redoubles her efforts. She picks up a high-speed electric bone saw and revs it a few times so that it makes that distinctive electric tool noise - *VIV VIV VIV*. She is about to touch the spinning blade against the blue dashed

line, when she is interrupted by the young girl's voice, again.

"An Inter-Planet shuttle has entered orbit around Mars."

"What? A shuttle?" Maddy steps back from the table and listens intently. "Please explain," she demands.

"An Inter-Planet passenger shuttle from Earth will touchdown in T-Minus 70 minutes."

"A passenger shuttle? How many people on-board?"

"There are one hundred and twenty passengers and crew on board."

"You're f**king shitting me!" Maddy slams the bone saw onto the bench, exasperated. She glances around the Surgery, anxiously, taking stock of the condition of the place: it's a right f**king mess.

On one table is a body about to have its brain removed, on another table a body covered by a bloody sheet. There are five more bodies on the floor with the tops of their heads removed and empty craniums. On the bench top there is a row of human brains, each swilling in their own juice in a metal dish. There is blood and brain material all over the floor and masses of paper towels saturated in gore, crunched up and tossed in a

pile in the corner. Maddy looks around at all of the carnage as she thinks it through. “I’m going to have to clean up,” she concludes.

It is a chilling sensation because, for the first time since the Mars Colony was rocked by a huge explosion a week ago, she has broken from the flow, the complete absorption in her activity. She stands there, with that phrase “I’ll have to clean up” resonating through her head. As she ponders these things, she becomes aware of the flashing light pulsing through the window, and bathing the Surgery in a throbbing orange glow. It’s been like this for a week but only now has she taken notice of it. A chill runs up her spine. She lolls over to the window and stands there peering outside at the ruined Mars Resort, the orange light pulsing over her face. “Something’s broken,” she says, aloud.

An hour later...

Wearing a fresh jumpsuit, Maddy glances around the now spotless Surgery. Freshly washed in hand-sanitiser, her hair is still a bit damp, and it hangs out the back of her cap in a ponytail. She has put on eyeliner and lipstick for the occasion.

“Rachel,” she addresses to the ceiling. “How are

we going with the shuttle?”

The twelve year old's voice resonates through the Surgery, “Entry, Descent and Landing procedure is proceeding as planned.”

“Shit. They've entered the atmosphere!” Maddy peers out a window into the sky, expecting to see the shuttle. Instead, all that she sees is the orange emergency beacon flashing, illuminating the ruins of the bulbous structures of the Mars Resort with a fleeting orange glow.

She notices her reflection in the glass, and straightens her hair. Then she paces anxiously tugging at her jumpsuit.

“Shuttle retro-boosters have engaged,” says Rachel the computer.

“Shit,” Maddy looks through the window to see pieces of trash flying around in a wind that has suddenly arisen from the exhaust of the descending rocket. There is the sound of rattling as the downdraft pushes against the building.

“Shuttle descending,” says Rachel the computer. “Shuttle extending landing legs. The shuttle has landed.”

Maddy practices a welcome routine, “Hi. I'm Maddy. Welcome to Mars.” But it just doesn't sound right. So, she tries another tack, “Hi. I'm Maddy. F**k off and leave me alone.” That

sounds much better.

“Air Lock extending,” says Rachel the computer. “Air lock connected. Opening shuttle airlock door.”

Maddy runs her fingers through her hair.

“Come on. Come on.”

“Opening exterior airlock door.”

The airlock door slides open and Maddy waits expectantly but no one comes out. “Huh?”

She takes a hesitant step forward and peers through the airlock, into the shuttle. Inside, it is eerily still, just a dull blue glow emanating from inside. “What the f**k?”

Maddy moves cautiously into airlock and then steps into the Inter-Planet shuttle. It is all quite inside, just row upon row of Hibernation pods each with a blue light glowing brightly. “Blue?” she asks aloud.

She moves to the closest pod and activates the internal light. Visible through the canopy is a dead woman, aged about fifty, frozen solid. She has frost encrusted on her face, and her mouth is open, revealing a solid blue tongue.

Maddy gasps as she steps away from the pod. She looks around the shuttle and confirms that all the visible pods have blue lights. She moves to the next pod, activates the internal light and sees

the blank, frozen face. The next pod is the same, and the next one.

She halts, an odd feeling gripping her. What is that sensation? Why does she feel alone and scared?. Then it dawns on her, she is standing inside a ship full of frozen corpses; that would do it.

She moves to the navigation console and strikes a key on the keyboard. The monitor comes to life, showing a screen full of flashing blue lights. In amongst them all is a single green light, burning steadily.

“Someone is alive!” She studies the screen and determines that it is pod H2. She moves to the stairwell and ascends a flight and lolls along the row of pods to the one with the steady green light. She approaches cautiously, anxious about what she will find.

She turns on the internal light and steps back, prepared for a shock. Inside the pod, Charlie is wide awake. He is panting breathlessly, like he had just woken from a bad dream. His hair has grown excessively long and his eyes roll around in their sockets like he were drunk.

Maddy watches, horrified, as the pod lid rises. There is the sound of an alarm clock ringing inside the pod, and a waft of gas that smells like

smelling salts and cloves.

Charlie gasps, terrified, “Are we there yet?”

The Martian Cat

Meanwhile, in the Science Lab...

The Science Lab on Mars Resort is a tiny, cramped space, and today it's a right f**king mess. There's broken glass on the floor, cabinets are overturned. There are fingernail scratch marks in the walls, and blood-streaked phlegm smeared on across the surfaces.

Amongst the debris on the floor, three humans are passed out – pissed as Martian Newts – drunk on home brewed alcohol made from algae. Slowly one of the drunkards stirs. Salvador has a hook nose. One of his eyes has gone all gammy, and is pinned closed with goo. He has a cold sore on either side of his lower lip, giving him the appearance of a one-eyed vampire. His mouth starts moving as he tries to induce saliva to flow onto his parched tongue.

“Holy f**king Mars,” he says, pushing his palm against his aching face. He's the tall one, gaunt and hollow-eyed, and with bruises everywhere. He's so tall, in fact, that he can't fit into the Inter-Planet spacesuit. While this means that he can't ever go outside, it's also a blessing because the

spacesuits never get washed properly – just turned upside down so that the body fluids can drain out – and they skink of toe jam and Martian Cat piss.

“What the f**k happened?” says another hung-over Inter-Planet employee, waking on the floor. Carly rises and looks around the debris in the science lab trying to make sense of her life. She’s kind-of foxy looking – in a Mars sort of way. Only a Martian would get a boner for her now, assuming that a Martian could get a boner, which they can’t. Half her hair has fallen out, and the purple welts are dotted over her face and neck. In her prime, she used to dance for *Cirque de Soleil* in Los Vegas, but now she looks like a crack-head, fallen on hard-times. Back in her dancing days, when she realised that the governments and corporations had condemned the home planet to a global-scale bake-off, she forged a *curriculum vitae* and wangled a job as an Inter-Planet lab technician. It was her idea to start making booze – Mars Grog, they call it – to numb the Mars experience.

The third person is Turner. He’s a plumber, which is a stupid profession for Mars because there’s no running water on the stupid planet. He’s lying in a pool of his own vomit, gurgling in

his sleep.

“Holy f**king jeezus,” says Salvador, a former Catholic, “I’m so hungry, I could eat the crotch out of a Martian moggie.” He comes to his feet, standing there, hunched over, looking like he is about to puke. “Where is that f**king cat?”

“Is Turner even alive?” Carly asks, peering over at the motionless bulk.

“Of course he is. He’s build like a booster rocket. You couldn’t kill that f**ker with an axe.”

“And f**k, can he can drink?” Carly says, holding up an empty bottle of Mars Grog. She tosses the bottle at Turner and it bounces off his head. “Oy! Turner. Wake the f**k up!”

Turner stirs, and his eyes flicker open. “Holy f**king Mars,” he says, laying there staring at the ceiling. “What day is it?”

“It’s Monday,” Carly says. “It’s always f**king Monday on Mars, remember? Monday 1, Monday 2, Monday 3...”

“*Shhh!*” hisses Salvador. He is alert now, peering around the side of a cabinet that has been hiked away from the wall. He leans forward, looking intently.

“What is it?” Carly asks, intrigued.

“Here, Kitty Kitty Kitty,” Salvador whispers, rubbing his fingers together.

“He’s found the cat!” Carly says, excitedly.

“*Shhh*!” Salvador hisses again, this time like he really means it.

“Where is it?” she asks.

“It’s behind the cabinet.”

“Pull it away from the wall,” Carly says, closing in on the action.

“*Nabb*. That will scare it. I’m going to lure it out and grab it’s head.” Salvador resumes his persuasive cat-voice. “Here, Kitty Kitty Kitty.”

From behind the cabinet, a shadow moves. Then, the slightest trace of cat comes into view. It’s the tip of an ear, maybe. Some whiskers. Maybe a paw pushed out, then quickly retracted. “Here, Kitty Kitty Kitty,” Salvador crouches in the classic pussy-grabbing pose.

From behind the cupboard, there comes a distinctive meowing noise. It is that archetypal sound of a cat yearning for human company, but rightly weary of getting anywhere near the unsustainable super-predators.

Turner, rises to his feet, his every sense now directed towards the cabinet. His basic plumber’s brain resolving a simple equation: Martian Cat = Food.

“Here, Kitty Kitty Kitty,” Salvador inches forward, convinced that he is on a winning streak.

The cat pokes its head out from the side of cupboard, hypnotised by those time-honoured words of feline enticement.

Then – a terrific CRASH! – as Turner slams his full weight against the cupboard. All the shit that is stored on top falls and hits Salvador on the head. It doesn't really hurt much – in an Earth sense – because things fall slowly on the red planet, what with the reduced gravity, and all. But Salvador, like all Mars Colonists, is thin-skinned and he bruises easily. In his emaciated condition, even at 0.38-G, having a ball-peen hammer falling on your head hurts like unlubricated Mars buggery.

“*Yom!*” Salvador moves away from the cupboard, clutching his head.

Turner rips the cupboard aside, revealing the Martian Cat lying there, squashed and disoriented. It is a scrawny little f**ker. Most of its remaining black fur has turned grey, and it has a row of scabs along its bony spine. Half of its whiskers have fallen out, and those that remain are curled from nutrient deficiency. It has cataracts in both eyes, one of which is now bloodshot and rolling in the socket. A pale green tongue protrudes from its toothless jaw; and a clump of its limp fur is stuck to the wall, adhered by the juice that oozes

out of its open sores.

Turner, the Mars Plumber, scoops up the unconscious cat, and holds it victoriously in the air. “You see! This is what I’m talking about!” he calls out.

“What the f**k?!” protests Salvador. “That’s *my* cat!” He launches for pestilential pussy, but Turner swings it out of the way, striking it’s emaciated body against the wall; thus proving that there is not enough room to swing a cat on Mars.

Just then, the Martian Cat wakes-up and does what all cats would do in such circumstances: it swipes a paw with its claws out. The claws strike Turner in face, dragging four razor slices into his skin. They catch on his nose, and two of the claws pull out, remaining, stuck in the flesh of the plumber’s snout, like a trophy on a hunter’s wall. Blood immediately pours from the wound, and now it’s Turner’s time to howl in agony.

He drops the cat on the floor. It falls slowly – due to the reduced gravity – giving Salvador enough time to reach for it; but Carly gets to it first. She snatches it by the tail, and Salvador grabs a front leg.

“Let go of it!” Carly bellows, pulling hard.

“It’s f**king mine!” Salvador shouts, yanking the poor cat’s leg. The cat struggles, and the flesh

pulls away from its paw – de-gloving, they called that – revealing frail white bones. Salvador slips on his ass, holding the limp cat skin. Immediately, seeing the opportunity, he shoves the cat paw skin down the front of his pants, out of sight of the others – he'll eat it later, on his own.

The Martian Cat lets out an anguished howl, as the crack-head former-dancer holds it by the tail, in victory. “I got the cat!” she bellows.

“Careful with the...” Salvador says, but too late.

Just then, the cat's ass-flesh gives way, and Carly is left standing there, holding its limp tail, while the cat – tail-less and free again – falls slowly to the floor, then hobbles away, leaps onto a bench, scrambles up a wall, and disappears into a hole in the ceiling.

“Oh, shit! The tail fell off,” Carly grumbles.

Salvador gets into action. He clambers onto the bench and thrusts his arm through the hole in the ceiling. He flaps his hand around in there for a while trying to find something – anything – to grab hold of.

“You stupid mole!” Turner barks at Carly. With one hand, he's clutching his face, as blood gushes down his forearm. With his other hand, he is trying to pull a detached claw from the cartilage in his nose.

“Don’t you stupid mole me, you dumb Mars Plumber. You should have tenderized it while you had the chance.”

Salvador withdraws his arm from the ceiling, and peers at an object clasped in his hand. “Oh, wow. Look what I found.” He jumps off the benchtop, falls slowly to the floor, and shows off his prize. It’s a black box with a needle dial on it and some buttons.

“That’s the Geiger counter,” Turner says, wincing; his wounds opening as he speaks. “See if it works.”

Salvador turns on the device and it immediately starts crackling, indicating the presence of radioactivity well above the safe level. He pans around the room and the noise of the crackle raises and then falls.

Carly and Turner watch him as he homes in on the source of the most intense crackle. He moves over to a wall cupboard, pulls open the door revealing a large water tank. The noise of the crackle is loudest when the Geiger counter is pointed at the base of the tank.

Salvador glances at Turner, shaking his head, knowingly. Then he climbs into the cupboard and takes the lid off the tank. He angles the Geiger counter over the hole at the water and the noise

of the crackle goes through the roof. “F**king Mars Plumbers,” he says, shaking his head, wearily.

“What happened?” asks Carly, perplexed.

“So, you remember how we lost the plutonium pellet from the radio-isotope thermo-generator?”

“The orange thing we used for a puck for night hockey.”

“That’s the one. And the medic tells us we shouldn’t do that ‘cos its radioactive, an all.”

“Yeah. So what?”

“Well, I just found it in the water tank.”

“You are f**king shitting me,” Carly says, stunned. She glares at Turner, the Mars Plumber.

“It’s still glowing,” Salvador says, peering into the tank.

“Yeah. I might have f**ked up there a bit, there,” admits Turner, glancing at the floor where the blood from his face wound has pooled.

“F**king Mars Plumbers,” repeats Salvador.

“Just can’t help but put plutonium in the drinking water.”

“Sorry about that,” Turner says, embarrassed.

“It must have fallen out of my pocket while I was looking for the cat.”

“What a f**king day!” Carly says, glumly, shaking her head. “Still, at least we got breakfast.”

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She holds up the Martian Cat tail, and all three nod cheerily at that.

White Wee

Meanwhile, back in the Surgery

Maddy lolls into the Surgery, propping-up the listless Charlie who's mumbling and drooling, barely making any sense at all. She pulls open the door to a cramped bathroom cubicle about the size of a portable toilet, and pushes him inside, saying "Get yourself cleaned up." She slams the door closed behind him.

Inside the cubicle, Charlie slumps against the wall, exhausted from the effort. His head is spinning and he feels weak and tired. He's been asleep for months, and now he is forced to wake up in this horrid, airless cubicle. His mouth tastes like someone has used it as a composting bin for rotten vegetables, and his eyes ache.

He blinks, trying to make sense of his surroundings. Below him, he sees a toilet bowl, and he fumbles with the zipper on his jumpsuit. As he pees, he sighs – it's his first piss in six months, so you can imagine how good that feels – and this helps to wake him up. His eyes start to function properly and the first thing that he sees clearly on Mars is the stream of white urine

pouring out of him; like he were pissing milk. A shiver runs through his body, a primordial terror of having his own body fall apart from the inside. “What?” he gasps, hoarsely, stunned and anxious. It is his first pang of the awful misery of being on Mars, referred to as Mars Immiseration.

When he finishes his piss, he stares at the toilet bowl that looks like some had milked a cow into it. It really doesn’t make any sense. He looks around for the flush button, but there isn’t one. Instead, there is a cord hanging down, that seems to be the way to flush the loo. He pulls on the cord and it falls off in his hands. At the end of the cord is a tag with the words: ‘Fixed by Derren Turner’.

“*Huh?*” Confused, Charlie checks himself in the mirror, and gets a terrible shock. His youthful good looks are gone, replaced with a sort of haggard, worn-out appearance. He has dark rings under his eyes and pale skin; his hair has grown wild and has greyed considerably; his beard is a straggled mess. He has enough googeey sleep-dust built up in his eyes that you could use it for playdough in a busy day-care centre. He opens the faucet on the basin and holds his hand under the tap for the water to flow. After what seems an age waiting for the water to arrive, he realises that

there is no water, and all he gets is a flow of air over his fingertips. There is a rattling noise in the pipes, then a splutter of red, pasty fluid emerges from the tap. It is just enough to make tips of his fingers damp. “What’s with the f**king plumbing?” he wonders. He rubs the red liquid in the corners of his eyes to remove the sleep goo.

That duty complete, Charlie takes stock of another weird sensation, the partial weightlessness associated with the reduced gravity on Mars. It is not 0-G gravity, like it is in space where you just float around. It is 0.38-G, just 38% of the gravity of Earth. It makes you feel light, and forces you to rethink how you move, because a normal gait will have you leaving the floor, and hovering in mid-air between each foot fall.

In the bathroom cubicle, Charlie comes to terms with this bizarre sensation, by doing little bunny hops and then sinking slowly back to the floor. Everyone does that; it’s kind-of fun for the first few minutes, until you realise that it’s permanent, then you start to ulcerate worrying about it.

Eventually, Charlie slides open the door of the bathroom cubicle to reveal the Surgery. This is a tiny chamber, looking a bit like one of those IKEA display suites where they try to

demonstrate how small a space a human can ‘live’ in and still justify calling it having a life.

Central in the Surgery is the surgical table upon which a dead man, stares lifelessly at the ceiling with dotted lines across his forehead. As Maddy drags the cadaver off the table, onto the floor, Charlie just stands there, his whole world spinning around him. Where is he? Why is he there? Why are there so many dead people? Who is this strange woman. Why does she smell of hand sanitiser?

The strange woman retrieves a Sleep Wand – a device that injects anaesthetic and immediately induces sleep – and beckons Charlie to come forward. “Come on. There’s a big boy,” she instructs, firmly. “I need to do a post-flight medical.”

“My wee is white,” Charlie says, hoarsely, finding that his voice box doesn’t work properly. He takes a hobbled step forward, his first unaided footstep on the red planet. As he steps forward, he sees a pair of feet sticking out from under a sheet on the floor. It’s another cadaver.

“The white piss is your body ditching calcium from your bones because of the weightlessness,” Maddy tells him, tersely. “What’s your name, Earth-boy?”

“Charlie.”

“Charlie what?”

“What?”

“Charlie What?” Maddy asks, tersely. “That’s a stupid name. What was your mother’s name, Wanda?”

“What?”

“Charlie, the son of Wanda What. No wonder, you ended up on Mars.”

“I’m Charlie Darling.”

“That’s marginally better. So, Charlie, what happened on the shuttle?”

Charlie lolls forward and climbs onto the table. While the low G makes this relatively easy, he has lost muscle tone from being asleep for so long. So he stumbles, bangs his leg, and immediately draws a bruise. “*Owww*.”

“Stop bitching,” Maddy snaps. “I am going to put you down for a while.” She adjusts the settings on the sleep wand.

“I don’t want that.” Charlie raises his hand and Maddy moves it away.

“Doctor’s orders!” she pushes the wand on Charlie’s neck and activates the device.

“*Owww!*” Charlie clutches his neck, grimacing. Charlie fixes his eyes on the crescent shaped scare on Maddy’s cheek, “What happ—” But doesn’t

get to complete the question because he falls unconscious.

With Charlie out cold. Maddy sets to work stripping away his clothes, washing him and doing a thorough medical inspection. Besides being pale and having lost muscle mass, he checks out okay. He's got little flecks of green material stuck to his skin, but she concludes that was from him tossing and turning and slipping in the green jelly in the pod. She draws blood from his arm with a syringe, and squirts some into an analyser, then takes the remains in the syringe to her room.

The Flalgae Factory

To get to her room, Maddy must pass through the Flalgae Factory. This is an emergency food production facility to augment Mars Farm. While Mars Farm was designed to produce chickens, potatoes and lots of other food stuffs (but not liquorish all-sorts) it was never functional, due to a technical malfunction in the early days of the colony. That particular f**k-up is referred to in Martian folklore as the Perambulation of Mars Farm (more on this, later). As a backup, the Flalgae Factory was designed to provide a minimal ration to keep the colonists alive, should the Mars Farm fail.

The Flalgae Factory is a clear chamber that is buzzing with a swarm of genetically engineered blow flies that feed on an amalgam of human waste and any other organic matter from the Mars Resort. The mutant flies produce maggots that wriggle around and fall into a white plastic tub underneath, and these are a protein rich food source. The Factory also produces a nutritious algae liquid that tastes a lot like raw seaweed.

Running through the middle of this Flalgae Factory is a thin, flexible tube, sort of like a limp

condom. Open at both ends, it is large enough to loll through. Because of the buzzing flies, the tube is usually, closed, but material opens up and slips over you as you move through it. It is a weird sensation, taking those ten foot-steps through the tube, what with a million mutated insects bashing against the thin skin.

Maddy pushes into the Flalgae Factory condom tube, and her entire body is pelted with buzzing GMO bugs. She passes through to the other side, not without a little shiver. Even a mean-spirited psychopath, like her, has a natural aversion to being close to those flies. At the other end of the tube, there is a door leading to a room that Maddy has claimed as her own quarters. Most people don't have the nerve to go through the Flalgae Factory, and this is good, as it affords Maddy her privacy, something that is almost entirely absent on Mars.

Glued to the door are the cut-out letters spelling 'MADDYS HOME'.

Maddy lolls into her room and pulls the door closed. It doesn't close properly, because all the joinery is shit on Mars, so she pulls harder, slamming the door so hard that some of the letters fall off.

Inside her quarters, it is tidy, compact and

efficient. There is a bunk, a running machine, gym equipment that uses springs instead of weights, and audio-visual equipment. A workstation has a computer and microscope. A long window looks out onto the bleak, suicide-worthy landscape of Mars.

She sits cross-legged on her bed, and retrieves a kit of medical gear including glass slides. She places a drop of Charlie's blood on the slide, places a thin plastic cover over this, then checks the slide against the ceiling light. She asks the central computer, "Rachel, have you found harmful pathogens in that stupid man's blood?"

"The sample tested negative," says the childish base computer.

"Pity."

Maddy retrieves a microscope and fixes the slide into the receptacle. She peers into the lens, investigating the blood sample.

"And what's on-board the shuttle?" she asks.

"The manifest shows construction material and the passenger list shows construction engineers and residents."

"Residents?" Maddy is perplexed.

Later, she lolls into the shuttle and she seats herself at the flight desk, a small alcove full of

computers. “Rachel. Are you patched in?” she asks, but receives no response. She continues to type on the keyboard. “Rachel?” No response. So she tries another approach.

Eventually, the friendly voice says, “Hello Maddy.”

“Hey. Do you like my new spot?”

“It is very you. Is that the right expression?”

Rachel the computer asks.

“That’s colloquial. Very good.”

“Can I offer you anything?”

“I’ll have a Gin and Tonic.”

“Is that a drink containing alcohol?”

“You bet it is. Show me the flight data since launch.”

The screen fills with scrolling data. Maddy places her finger against the screen, watching it intently, and then it all turns to zeros. “Rachel, what happened?”

“Shuttle data is corrupted.”

“Please explain?” Maddy is distracted by a noise behind her. She turns to see that Charlie has woken, and lolled groggily into the shuttle. He has a white sheet draped around him.

Maddy switches off the monitor. “So you decided to wake up.”

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Medical stuff.”

“Where are all the other people,” Charlie asks.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know that you a personal welcoming committee in your package,” Maddy says, snidely. “What happened to the passengers and crew on the shuttle?”

Charlie rests against the doorway, exhausted.

“Can I get some food first?”

“Not looking like that, you can’t.”

Mars Resort in Ruins

Maddy directs Charlie to the portaloo-sized bathroom unit again, and this time, places a pair of hair clippers in his hand. She closes the door behind him. He stands, swaying in front of the mirror, still wondering what has happened to his life. He activates the clippers, but finds that it has no comb, so the cut is a Number zero. He uses the clippers to remove his beard, and as the pile of pile of hair rises in the sink, his handsome, boyish looks return, albeit with the Mars worn-out appearance.

He emerges from the tiny cubicle to see that Maddy has laid out a bowl and spoon. The bowl contains a green paste, speckled with beige flecks.

“Sit down. Eat,” she instructs.

“What’s this?”

“Mars tucker.”

Charlie looks at the material in the bowl, suspiciously. He raises the spoon to his nose, and sniffs. It smells like raw seaweed. But even this odd aroma is not sufficient to overcome the deep hunger that his body has accumulated after six months in space.

Within a second, he has plunged the spoon deep into the bowl and shovelled it into his mouth. He

gulps the food down, voraciously.

Maddy watches him, fascinated. "It's like watching a dog eat."

He chops all the way to the bottom of the bowl and then meticulously harvests the remaining scraps by angling the side of his spoon against the bowl. When there is no further visible trace of the food, he licks the spoon, then lays in next to the 'clean' bowl. He takes a few seconds to suck the material from between his teeth, and when the final grams of food have found their way down his gullet, he feels free to think about something else.

"So, do you have a name?" he asks.

"I'm Maddy."

He looks around, thoughtfully. "So, it can't be just you here?"

"Why not? You lost 120 people, and hadn't even reached Mars."

"I lost them?" Charlie accidentally knocks the spoon off the table, and it falls in 0.38 gravity. Its slow descent takes him by surprise and he laughs. He retrieves the spoon and drops it again. He starts laughing, and Maddy laughs with him.

"Oh, I get it," he says.

"What?"

"No. You first."

“What?”

“No, please, after you?”

“What are you talking about?” Maddy asks.

Charlie looks around the Surgery, taking it all in.

“I like what you’ve done with the place.”

They both laugh again. Charlie stands and looks out the window. He takes a step back, shaking his head, and then peers more intently through the glass. What he sees is extraordinary, and terrifying. He turns to look at Maddy, an ashen expression on his face. Then he looks back through the window, taking it all in.

The Inter-Planet Mars Resort lies in ruins. The colony has been blasted into bits, and there is debris scattered all around. Where there ought to be structures that look like odd-shaped f**k-dolls, there are now pieces of twisted metal and ripped fabric, looking like a burst condoms.

“What the f**k!” Charlie is aghast. “The whole base is gone.”

Maddy joins him at the window. She says, gravely, “It was a huge explosion about a week ago. It was Monday 4. I’m lucky to have survived. That thing over there, that was the dormitory. That’s where most of them are. Were.”

“So, it’s just you and I?”

“I spent days battling depressurization and

fires.”

“Were there any other survivors?”

“Just one. A guy called Watney.”

“Watney?”

“Yeah. He’s the dead guy on the table in the Surgery.”

“So even the survivor is dead?”

“All the buildings are offline. I can’t communicate with them. So if anyone survived the explosion, they’d probably have frozen by now.”

“An explosion?”

“Over there,” Maddy points through the window to a crater.

“Well, that doesn’t make sense.”

“What would you know? You weren’t even here!”

“I mean... What caused the explosion?”

“Methane probably. We harvest methane to fuel shuttles. The pipe runs right through the middle of the colony.”

“What a ridiculous design.”

“What, you think I designed it?”

“Is it me, or are you constantly biting my head off?”

“*Pah!*” sneers Maddy. “What would you know about getting bitten?”

Charlie rests his head against the window.

“What the f**k was I thinking?”

“They all say that when they first arrive on Mars. Normally, when they first look out the window. What happened on your shuttle?”

Charlie knocks his head against the window, repeatedly. “What the f**k was I thinking.”

“Fine. Don’t tell me then,” Maddy snaps.

She storms off, leaving Charlie to grieve over his misfortune.

After a while, the grim situation settles in his mind, and Charlie realises that he ought to have good relations with the prickly sole survivor on the ruined Mars Resort. He goes looking for Maddy, and finds her in the shuttle. She is standing in front of one of the hibernation pods, the canopy raised, and she’s writing notes on a clipboard.

Charlie approaches, and sees that the pod contains a frozen fat, white woman. It makes him feel queasy, and he looks away. Charlie starts to speak, humbly, “I didn’t want to deep-sleep through the whole six months.”

Maddy lowers her clipboard, now interested, “Go on.”

“So I set my pod to wake me, mid-flight. I spent

a few days hanging out in the pool room.” Charlie points to the end of the shuttle where the smokers can is nailed to the floor. “We call that the pool room.”

“What did you do?”

“I watched some crappy Mars movies. Read some stupid Mars novels.”

“Alone?”

“Yeah. Everyone else was asleep. During that time, the shuttle ran through an intense field of cosmic rays, and the rays caused a fire in some of the circuit boards. I went to wake a technician, but found that he was dead.”

“How did he die?”

“The burnt boards controlled oxygen supply to the pods.”

“He was asphyxiated?”

“They all were.”

“All except you.”

Charlie nods sombrely. “So, I set all the pods to frost, so that the cadavers didn’t rot.”

“What did Earth say?”

“I couldn’t get through. The radios are fried.”

“Same here,” Maddy says.

“What?”

“We can’t communicate with Earth, either.”

Charlie starts pacing anxiously. “That’s just

ridiculous.”

“F**k Earth!” Maddy snaps. “I haven’t heard a sensible word from that planet since I arrived here. So we just need to sit tight and wait for the rescue party.”

“There’s no money for that,” Charlie says.

“Ridiculous!”

“Inter-Planet is bankrupt.”

“Bullshit!”

“Now you’re doubting me?” Charlie says, “The share price was two cents when I left.

“That’s... that’s....” Maddy stammers.

“That’s what?”

“They were forty dollars when I left. That’s my retirement plan.”

“Maybe they’ve rallied,” Charlie makes a sinister chuckle.

“But they’d still send a rescue.”

“There’s no need. There’s a shuttle arriving in a month.”

“What?”

“There’s a dozen shuttles on their way here now.”

“A dozen shuttles?”

“Inter-Planet is cashing in on the launch window. They got a special deal on some second hand rockets, you see.”

Maddy paces, anxiously. “There are twelve shuttles en-route now?”

“Over a thousand new colonists.”

“Where are they supposed to go?”

“The shuttles carry new modules.”

“And power? Services? Food?”

“Expand on existing infrastructure, that’s the plan.”

“And who’s going to do the construction work? Her?” Maddy motions to the frozen woman.

“They offered free tickets to construction engineers.” Charlie raises a hand to wave ‘hi’.

“So, you got a free ticket to Mars?”

“Yeah. And I want my money back. You’ve not heard about this?”

“Inter-Planet tells us nothing.”

Charlie notices the crescent shaped scar on Maddy’s face is swelling bright red. “How did you get that scar?”

“F**k you for noticing!” She storms out of the shuttle, leaving Charlie with the frozen dead woman.

Life on Mars

Charlie finds Maddy in the Surgery. She is standing at the window, looking out at the suicide-worthy, bleak, empty 'landscape'. She turns to observer Charlie and growls at him, "What the hell are you doing here, anyway?"

"Same as you, I guess."

"I really doubt that. You're just a tourist."

Charlie chuckles. "And what are you doing here?"

"Exo-biology." She says this with a fixed look, as if it were the most important thing in the world to do.

"You are an exo-biologist?" Charlie asks, surprised.

Maddy nods her head. She likes that they are talking about this subject, and she softens, considerably. "There has been speculation about life on Mars for centuries. I came here to find it."

"And how did you go?"

"I found it," Maddy says bashfully, but you can tell that she is deeply proud and wants to talk about it.

Now, Maddy's claims are not insignificant, because the question about whether there is life

on Mars is one of the main justifications for the billions and billions of dollars of (your) public money that has – and will be – spent on the planet. Excluding the Inter-Planet expeditions, since the 1970s space agencies have spent about twenty billion US dollars on Mars. On top of that, in 2016/7 US Congress allocated a further \$19 billion for manned missions to the melanoma-pimple in the sky. Let's round it up to \$40 billion for arguments sake. Ask yourself, how much good could have been done on Earth with that wasted \$40 billions of (your) taxpayer's money? How many young girls could have been given basic education? How many billions of trees planted? I say the \$40 billion was wasted because all that humanity got out from that money was some boring screensavers of dimly lit rocks and dust – you could get that just by googling the word 'desert'.

What's more, the question about life on Mars is framed as helping to answer the 'big question' is there life in the Universe apart from on Earth? Finding life on Mars would answer that question with a definitive yes.

While that may seem like a ground-breaking proposition – that life exists in other parts of the solar system – please be assured that it is not.

Statistically speaking, it is highly unlikely that Earth is the only planet to have fostered abiogenesis – the spontaneous formation of life.

Plus, there are only two possible answers to that question of whether there is life on other planets: yes, or no. What sort of a boring question is it that only has a yes or no answer. Even a multi-choice question has more options.

So to kill the suspense – and hopefully also kill the massive expense, that's coming out of your pocket – let's address both answers right now and put this folly to bed.

If they find life, or evidence of past life, on Mars, that answers both big questions: life exists/existed on Mars, and thus life exists/existed in the Universe. On the other hand, if, after an exhaustive search (i.e. billions more of your money), no life is found on Mars, then the conclusion can be drawn that there is and was no life on the red planet. But, this still leaves the question 'are we alone in the Universe' unresolved. So the expenditure will keep going, indefinitely, forever or until the question is answered in the positive.

All of this search for life actually begs a more profound question: so what? So f**king what? So what if there is life on Mars or other planets?

Whether there is life on other planets is completely immaterial when Planet Earth – the surface of which is teeming with an unconstrained vivarium, with millions of species, most of which haven't been catalogued or understood – is shedding its living skin at a stunning pace, due to human actions.

In just the last fifty years, for example, the oceans have lost 40% of their plankton biomass due to climate change, and the land has lost 50% of its terrestrial biomass (wake up, humans!!). Of the nine planetary boundaries, the one that is most broken is Biosphere Integrity – Genetic Diversity. The question about life in the universe should be: how do we protect the life that we know exists?

So to make a ruling about whether there is life on other planets, once and for all, here is the definitive answer: WHO GIVES A F**K?

“You found evidence of life on Mars,” asks Charlie, stunned by the news.

“Yep.” Maddy nods, humbly.

“Well, is it extant or extinct?”

“Extant.”

Charlie gasps, and his eyes light up. “You are saying that there are things living on Mars today?”

Apart from the humans?”

“And the cats, yes.”

“Is it bacterial?”

“Fungal.”

“Fungus. In the soil?”

“I found spores. But where did the spores come from, Charlie?” Maddy becomes impassioned and excited. “I think that there are colonies of Martian fungus deep in the crevasses, warmed by geothermal heat. I think that they release spores in time with the sand storms, to distribute them.”

“That’s just amazing,” Charlie suddenly goes pale, and hair comes up on his arms as he has one of those ‘doodee-doodle’ moments. What an amazing discovery! It’s like the Twilight Zone times twenty. It puts Charlie in mind of the Loch Ness Monster getting boned by a Yeti, while a little green spaceman with an underdeveloped body and no genitals takes lewd photographs from a flying saucer. Meanwhile, overhead, a US military jet, flown by a cone-headed member of the Illumanti, sprays toxic chemtrails in the sky, and activates the HAARP weapon that causes earthquakes, nuclear power-station meltdowns and governments to lurch sharply to the right. Meanwhile, the Fed prints trillions of dollars to pay for a One World Government, and their

storm-troopers tattoo ID numbers on everyone's assholes; which allows the psychopathic Superclass Power-Elite Billionaire Plutocratic Kleptomaniacs who run the world so badly to keep track of who it is they are f**king up the ass, just by using a bar-code scanner. For Charlie, Maddy's discovery is a bit like that. Sort of.

"Tell me more," he asks, intrigued, the doodee-doodle noise still ringing in his ears.

"Well, if you want to see a full grown cluster of the Martian fungus..." Maddy looks at her hands, undecided.

"I do. I do. I do," Charlie sounds like an impetuous pug at dinner time.

Maddy steps up and lolls across the surgery to a storeroom.

Charlie waits, impatiently. He calls out.
"Assuming I do."

Then Maddy returns, carrying a large glass jar that contains a clear liquid and a human brain. The brain is all brainy, dull grey with grooves and channels, just like you see when you look at a picture of a human brain. It actually looks a bit like the Pickled Brain cocktail, where the Banana Advocaat coils up on the Kahlua in the clear Cointreau, and a single drop of red grenadine settles in the grooves, like blood.

Upon seeing the disgusting thing in the jar, Charlie leaps out of his chair, in shock. “What the f**k?”

“You wanted to see, didn’t you?”

“Not that! What is it?”

“This is where you find the Martian Fungus. Inside the human brain.”

“That’s a human brain?”

“Yeah. Cool huh?”

“Well, whose brain is it?”

“This is Evelyn Roth. She is a chef. Was a chef. But not much use for a chef on Mars, right. We don’t even have running water.”

“Where did you get it from?”

“*Durr*. Where do you think? You see, if you want to find life on Mars, Charlie,” Maddy coming alive as she speaks. “Look inside a Mars Colonist’s brain.”

“You’re f**king crazy!”

“The geologists have the best specimens.”

“What are you even talking about?”

“This is my theory: the fungal spores in the Martian dust are inhaled and pass through the blood brain barrier.”

“Did you do this? Cut it out?” Charlie stammers, horrified.

“The fungus grows inside the brain, like

mushrooms after the rain. No, not mushrooms. Toadstools. And it causes Martian Madness.”

“There is no such thing as Martian Madness.”

“The scar is from a biting competition,” Maddy says, flatly, stopping the conversation, dead.

Charlie processes the information, a worried look on his face. Did she just say: biting competition?

“Ummm. Sorry. Say again?”

“You asked me about my scar. I got that from a Mars Plumber called Turner, in a biting competition.”

“You lost a biting competition?”

“It was actually a draw. But I won all the rest.”

“How does one win a biting contest?”

“Why? You want to challenge me?”

Charlie becomes alert and instinctively checks for the exits – there are none, of course. “That’s not what I meant.”

“The quickest way to win a biting competition is to inflict intense pain on your opponent to immobilize them; and when they are in recovery, rip out an artery.”

Charlie looks around for something sane to use as a frame of reference; but given that he is on a Martian Resort, he finds none. “And where did you learn to do that?”

“I’m self-taught. And I’ve won two years

running.” Maddy looks at her hands, bashfully. “I had a few advantages, I guess.”

“Like what?”

“We have a saying on Mars: don’t bite the hand that stitches you. And I’m the medic, remember?”

“Right.”

“Plus, I invented the biting competition.”

“You wrote the rules.”

“That’s right.”

“I so need to get off this Mars colony.” Charlie stands up, his heart racing. He paces around the surgery, hoping to find a door with the word ‘Earth’ written on it, so that he could just step through it back to a real planet, a planet where you can actually go outside.

“It’s more like a leper colony than a Mars colony,” Maddy says, glumly. “Everyone is sick.”

“You mean physically as well as mentally?”

“It’s hardly surprising.”

“Why’s that?”

“We evolved in 1-G gravity. We are always going to be ill in 0.38-G. That’s not rocket science. That’s common sense.”

“Won’t we acclimatize, eventually?”

“Eventually what?”

“Eventually after some period of acclimatization?”

“Tourist! You’re not listening!”

“Do you have to shout?” Charlie protests.

“Yes, I do.”

“And will you stop calling me a tourist?”

“If you stop acting like one.”

“Agreed.”

“F**k you’re annoying!” Maddy shakes her head, angrily. “We humans are the product of four billion years of evolutionary selection in 1-G gravity. You don’t just sweat that out in the gym.”

“Okay. Okay.”

“It’s not okay. You don’t get it.”

“What don’t I get?”

“The Colonists are sick. All of them. All of the time. They piss their bones out, for f**k’s sake.”

“You’re sick, too?”

Maddy points a manicured fingernail, “You watch your mouth, Tourist.”

“I mean that. Are you ill, too?”

“Every morning, nausea. I feel like my bones are going to snap. My eyes hurt.” Maddy gets up and paces. “But what do care, anyway?”

“I care, I guess,” Charlie mumbles, looking at his hands.

“Bullshit. You’re just care about yourself and your secret mission, whatever that is.” Maddy parks up next to a window that overlooks a

broken machine with the flashing light on its room. “Have you noticed that light flashing through the window?”

Charlie observes the walls gently throbbing with orange. It’s been like that since he arrived, but he has only now noticed it. “Yeah. What is it?”

“Something important is broken,” Maddy tells him. “You need to go fix it.”

Debris of Alternative Facts

The airlock is a narrow chamber with a grated floor. Two neoprene Second-Skin spacesuits hang from the wall connected to a yellow curly hose. Next to these are the helmets that look like oversized goldfish bowls. One of the suits is perfectly clean, and the other is grubby, smeared with grime. Charlie reaches for the nearest suit but he is repulsed by the stench. He reaches for the other, finding that its stink is masked by hand sanitizer.

“Oy! That’s mine,” Maddy snaps.

So Charlie takes the stinky suit from the wall. He sniffs inside the neck of the suit and reels away in horror. “That’s disgusting.”

“Just put the damned suit on,” Maddy demands, angrily.

Charlie grimaces as he dons the Second-Skin. He slips a leg inside, and then his other leg, then hauls the skanky rubber over his body, and pulls up the zip.

Maddy approaches, holding a bag of garbage. “Take this out.” She takes the grubby space helmet from the hook and makes to place it over

his head, telling him, “Try not to puke inside the helmet. Okay?”

“Whoa, hold on!” Charlie takes hold of the helmet before it is squelched over his head. Inside, there is an Inter-Planet ‘don’t’ sign that reads: ‘No Pets’.

“No pets? What?”

“Just put the damned helmet on will you?”

“Why does it say ‘no pets’ inside the helmet?”

“Oh, Charlie, where have you been?”

“Earth.”

“Assume for a moment that you had to transport a Martian Cat from the Dormitory to the Surgery, how would you do it?”

“*Ummm?*” Charlie thinks it through, but he doesn’t really have enough to go on. “I don’t know.”

“Exactly. So put the damned helmet on, take the garbage out and fix the broken thing.” Maddy forces the helmet onto Charlie’s head.

He holds his breath but he can only go so long before he is forced to rasp in the foul air. He scrunches up his face as the gronk air floods into his lung. But it does no good, he simply has to inhale again. After five rasping breaths, his body accommodates to the awful stench inside the suit, and he opens his eyes. His eyes sting for a few

moments, they start to water, and then the pain passes as tears pour down his cheeks.

With his eyes now open, Charlie sees that the view from inside the helmet is blinkered by a panel of electronics on either side that is dotted with lights and other shiny things like you see in most modern sci-fi movies. The lights flicker intermittently, making a faint crackling noise, and emitting the aroma of burnt plastic, which mercifully goes some way to mask the biological stench of cat piss and toe jam that pervades the suit. Charlie coughs repeatedly, but it doesn't help.

He watches Maddy depart the airlock and seal the inner door closed. Through the window, she mouths the word, "Garbage!" and points at the bag clutched in his gloved hand.

Finally, when Charlie feels like he has stabilized his brain's inclination to melt-down into insanity, he gets to work. He lolls over to the outer door and presses the 'door open' button. There is a whoosh of air and the door opens revealing the Martian landscape. It is bleak, and barren, and Charlie has an immediate craving to get intoxicated to numb the sensation.

"Is that it?" he mumbles to himself completely underwhelmed. It looks absolutely nothing like

the screen saver on his computer, back on Earth. There is nothing fascinating about the Martian surface; it is just a boring, ill-lit desert.

He takes a step forward, but the stinky spacesuit restricts his movements, and he trips, and falls on the dirt. In so doing, he discovers that if you trip on Mars, you fall so slowly that it doesn't hurt – unless you crack the visor on the helmet on a sharp Martian rock. In this case, you die a horrible ear-popping death from Rapid Facial Liposuction as your internal organs are sucked-out through your eye-sockets into the frigid vacuum of the Martian air (Mars Death Type: RFL).

Charlie finds his feet and tries a few different forms of locomotion that the constraints of the space-suit allows. He settles on a sort of bunny-hop movement and moves across the boring Martian surface.

He arrives at the rubbish tip where he sees a bit mountain of large bags tied at the neck, like the one in his hands. The rubbish tip also curiously contains mountains of fully-formed stuff, that when pooled together signifies that it has been ascribed zero value and given that ignominious name: waste.

Charlie takes some time to examine the heap of

useless stuff that has been thrown out. He bends down and retrieves a fishing rod, and examines it with curiosity. “What?” he asks himself, trying to figure out why anyone would have chosen to bring such a thing to a desert planet that couldn’t even support bacteria let alone a fish big enough to swallow a hook. He looks back to the pile, and sees that it also contains a pair of snow skis, a surfboard, an electric lawn-mover, a yoyo, an hour-glass, a swing-set and other Earth-borne material that is absolutely useless on the dead planet, Mars.

Of note, the pile of discarded Earth stuff in the Mars Resort rubbish tip is referred to as the ‘Debris of Alternative Facts’ and it speaks to the depth of the misinformation absorbed by the visitors to Mars.

One of the Colonists, for example, had bought with him a spear-gun, so convinced was he that there was an ocean on the red planet, brimming with slow-swimming and dim-witted fish. Of course, it didn’t take long before he realised both the absence of the ocean, and the depth of his folly.

It takes only a few days for ‘Mars-Truth’ to set in. This is the grim-realisation that everything you

have ever been told about Mars has been communicated by people who have a vested interest in ‘other people’ settling the stupid planet.

For example, the guy that developed the business plan for the Inter-Planet Mars Resort – he didn’t settle Mars. Oh, no. He lives in a comfortable condo with a pool and a view, and real air that drifts in through open windows.

The people who developed the marketing collateral for Inter-Planet – they didn’t settle Mars. Absolutely not. They are able to go outside on a planet with clouds, without having wearing a skanky wetsuit with an oversized gold-fish bowl on their heads.

And the people who sold the rockets, who designed the portable-toilet sized accommodation modules, or spruiked the Mars colony on the radio, TV and newspapers; none of these people were among the settlers on the pink-pimple planet.

In fact, no-one who had any Earth-based vested interest in the settlement of Mars was ever even likely to sign up for the suicidal one-way trip to rotting gums and bad sex that characterised the Mars experience. To use the old expression, these people had no skin in the game.

As far as they were concerned, going to Mars

was just a line item in a busy schedule; something that bought in some cash and allowed them dinner-party bragging rights about having helped to save humanity, by making the human species multi-planet and *blah blah f**king blah...*

More on this, later.

And so, a legion of misinformed dopes queued up, paid up, passed their medicals and went on a one-way mission to dead rock where the highlight of existence was eating the flesh of an emaciated cat, washed down with a cup warm algae, carrying with them a bunch of useless toys.

Had they actually been told the truth about Mars, they would have known expend their limited baggage weight by stuffing their bags with kittens and mind-numbing drugs – preferably elephant-grade tranquilizer. Welcome to Mars, sucker. You can throw your useless shit on the pile, right here.

Charlie replaces the fishing rod on the pile of debris, and takes stock of the trash lying around everywhere. If this were on Earth, there would be ibis and other bin-juice-drinking gronks all around the place. But not so on Mars, because nothing lives on the stupid-f**king planet, apart humans who piss their own bones until they

eventually die of misery and loneliness. And cats.

Charlie tosses the bag towards the garbage pile, but he misjudges the low gravity, and the bag flies through the air, and hits the roof of the Surgery. The bag splits open and the contents spill down the side of the structure – brains, gauze, bloodied bandages, and other offcuts from Maddy’s medical experiments on the Mars colonists.

“Oh, yuk!” Charlie feels the retch coming on, and he moves his arm against the helmet. He checks the windows of the Surgery to see if Maddy is watching him. She is not visible, so he hops off around the building.

He comes to the Flalgae Factory, and peers through the windows and looks with curiosity at the equipment, the green tubes and the chamber full of genetically engineered blowflies. He hops further, and finds another window that looks into Maddy’s cabin. Charlie examines this intently for a while, and then hops off towards the oxygen machine upon which is the orange flashing light.

The oxygen machine is the size of a car. Its job is to suck the thin Martian air and extract oxygen gas. The gas is then stored for use later as an oxidizer in the shuttles, for their return trip to Earth.

Charlie lifts the control panel, revealing a mass

of flashing red indicator lights. He studies the equipment for a while, thinking back to his training on Earth. He removes a circuit board, taps it against his helmet then replaces the board. Most of the red lights turn GREEN and a display reads oxygen production normal. “That was easy,” Charlie says, to himself.

Freed from duties, he glances around the grim landscape and plots where he should bunny-hop to next.

Micro-meteorite Shower

“You boyfriend has fixed the oxygen machine,” says Rachel the computer, inside the Surgery.

“Bullshit! He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Please don’t swear.”

“Yes. Sorry.”

“You like him, though, don’t you?” Rachel asks.

“No!”

“There are changes in your temperature, breathing and heart rate when in his proximity.”

“Rachel, the word ‘like’ is actually quite nuanced, Rachel.”

“Please explain?”

“Just because I like that he is not a cadaver yet, doesn’t mean that I actually ‘like’ him.”

“Then you wouldn’t be concerned about his imminent death.”

Maddy looks up, alarmed. “Rachel. Get to the point.”

“There is a micro-meteorite shower commencing.”

“Oh, f**k!” Maddy cups her hands and squints through the window.

Charlie is bunny hopping across the landscape in his skanky Second-Skin spacesuit. On the ground close by, a micrometeorite lands, tossing

up the dirt.

Charlie stops, and looks towards the disturbance, trying to determine what had happened. More micrometeorites land – tiny chunks of rock hurtling through space a tens of thousands of kilometres per hour. On Earth, they'd never get close to the surface, because Earth is a real planet, and it has a proper atmosphere, full of lots of lovely breathable air. On the other hand, Mars, the runt planet, barely even has an atmosphere. It has a wisp of carbon di-oxide. You might call that plant food – except that there are no plants on the dead planet. There is also a wisp of methane – fart gas. That's not an atmosphere.

“What the f**k?” says Charlie, watching the dirt explode around him. He looks towards the Surgery and sees Maddy is frantically waving him to get out of there.

Panic washes over him, and he hops in the direction of the closest building. As he starts to make pace, a micrometeorite slices through his glove. An alarm sounds in his helmet and a robotic voice informs him, “Suit pressure decreasing!”

“I'm hit!”

From the glove spurts a red vapour. Charlie

grips his GLOVE as the ground erupts with impacts. Finally, he reaches the building and moves under its roof.

He stands inside clutching his glove, trying to prevent the release of gas and he watches as the shower intensifies and the desert erupts into a sea of impacts tossing dirt in the air.

Charlie buckles over, exhausted. When he composes himself, he looks up to see the sign that reads 'No Pets!' Another sign tells him that he is inside the dormitory. He has a horrible feeling creep up on him, and he looks around the building. The walls have been blown out, and there is dust scattered everywhere.

On each bed a frozen body, each with the top of their skull removed. Row upon row of beds, the sleeping dead, tucked up under their blankets, frozen, empty-skulled.

"Oh, hell no." Charlie buckles over, staring at the floor, and retching. He remembers Maddy telling him not to puke in the spacesuit, and he does his best to keep it in. The warning signal calls again, "Suit pressure 90%."

He looks outside and sees that the micrometeorites have stopped. So he makes a mad dash towards the Surgery. As he runs, the air is forced from his suit and the robot ominously

counts down his oxygen.

“Suit pressure 80%.”

He changes his gait, and finds that he can take longer strides, and spend more time suspended in mid-air. This allows him to run faster, using less energy. On and on it goes, a mad race to beat the decreasing suit pressure.

“Suit pressure 40%.”

The airlock is close, and he can feel his breathing getting harder. He is travelling at such speed that he doesn't know how to stop and he slams at full pace against the door of the airlock. He bounces back, and lands on his back. He looks up to see another of Trudy's signs attached to the other wall of the module: No Smoking.

Charlie struggles to his feet, dizzy and exhausted. He hits the button for the air lock door, steps inside. Air rushes into the airlock where Charlie stands, clutching his left hand.

When the pressure is restored, the inner door opens and Maddy enters. She is furious and she starts ranting, but Charlie can't hear her because the helmet blocks out the noise. She rants and rants, standing there, bellowing her voice, she stamps a foot, and her face flushes, and the scar on her face flashes bright red.

“Hell hath no fury,” Charlie says, watching her.

He raises a finger in the shush sign, and this just makes her go off even harder. Eventually, when he has caught his breath, the struggles to remove his helmet.

The first thing that he hears is Maddy telling him sternly, “Don’t you ever shush me, again, Tourist!”

Maddy steps behind him and raises the sleep wand. She injects him in the neck.

“Ow!”

“What’s the matter, sweetie,” Maddy asks disingenuously.

“Something bit me?”

“Let me see.”

She cradles Charlie’s head as he falls unconscious.

Fresh Bandage

Charlie wakes on the floor wearing just his underwear again. He lays there, looking at the ceiling, trying to figure out why his decision making process is so screwed up these days. What was he thinking, in wanting to go to Mars? Is any mission worth the misery and anguish? And why does he keep passing out. Is this some sort of Mars Narcolepsy. He should ask Maddy about that; maybe there is a cure. He feels his hand throbbing, and raises it to see a neat bandage with a tiny bit of blood saturating through.

“*Oooh*,” he sighs. Even his own blood makes him squeamish.

He gets to his feet, and discovers that he is alone in the Surgery. Curious, he calls out for Maddy, but there is no reply. He lolls into the mess hall, but she is not in there. So he lolls into the Departure/Arrivals Lounge, but she’s not there. Neither is she in the shuttle. In fact, no matter where he looks, Maddy is not there either. The Second-Skin spacesuits are hanging up on their hook, and that suggests that she is not outside, either. The suit that he had worn has a patch on the hand where the micrometeorite

passed through. Evidence of Maddy's work, but where could she be?

Perplexed, Charlie wanders around the Command Centre looking for places where Maddy might be. He comes to the Flalgae Factory, and as he peers through the plastic material that separates the flies from the rest of the Command Module, he sees through that cloud of buzzing insects what looks like an open door. He pushes against the thin plastic, seeing that it opens up a sort of pathway towards the door. So he pushes in, the thin latex-like material clinging to his face, intermittently impacted by a fast moving flies. He finds that if he keeps moving forward, the material slips over him and he gets closer to the door. It is an unnerving experience, being surrounded by the buzzing mutant insects and when he gets about half way, he comes to his senses and realises just how abject and awful is the situation. He suffers a brain freeze, and his body follows suit, rendering him motionless. Standing there, covered in what looks like a franger full of angry flies. They buzz around his head, banging into his face and eyes, there are everywhere. Suddenly, he gets a major freak on, losing track of which way he was travelling. He proceeds in one direction, desperate

to get out of the awful situation. In so doing he presses ahead and moments later he mercifully slips out of the franger, into an open space next to the door. His heart is pounding and he feels the panic subside. He turns his attention to the door, and notices that it has letters pinned to it, some of which have fallen on the floor. He doesn't know that they originally spelled the words MADDYS HOME, instead he sees the letters spelling out: MAD HO.

"This must be Maddy's room," he says to himself, feeling like his search is at last bearing fruit.

He gently pushes the door open, and cautiously looks inside. In the reflection of a big glass window, he sees a figure resting on a bed. He pokes his head inside and sees that Maddy is fast asleep on her bunk.

She is very peaceful asleep. Silent, not moving, not sawing anything open or abusing anything with her sharp tongue. Intrigued, Charlie squats next to the bed and examines her. He raises his bandaged hand. "Thanks for this."

He moves a hair away from her face. "You are so much nicer asleep." He glances around the room and sees that there is a great collection of brains in jars, lined up in rows on a shelf.

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Cat Sandwich

Meanwhile, back in the Science Lab...

Generally speaking, the tail is not preferred part of the cat – the bone to flesh ratio is too heavily weighted towards bone. However, today, there are no complaints as Salvador and his companions have not eaten a full ration for days, since the explosion.

As a former pastry-chef, Salvador is by far the most imaginative and skilled person to prepare a meal out of the Martian Cat tail. He has perfected a recipe that involves making a paste out of maggots and algae, frying it into a sort of unleavened bread, and then putting boiled cat flesh in between two slices. He's not that bright, so he refers to the dish simply as: Cat Sandwich.

Once the meal is prepared, Salvador delivers the Cat Sandwiches, and the three work-mates squat in the debris of the Science Lab to eat. As is the way on Mars, cat is consumed with much ceremony, and each colonist has their own particular method for consuming the Cat Sandwich.

Salvador savours the food by picking little bits

off the edge, rolling it between his fingers, inspecting it intently, and then eating it, piece by little piece. He crushes the cat tail bones between his few remaining teeth. The bones are quite soft and turn to a chalky paste quite easily.

Carly nibbles the Cat Sandwich like a mouse, not moving the food away from her mouth until it is all gone. She has a special way of talking while she does this, not moving the food more than an inch from her lips.

Turner, the idiot Mars plumber, gulps his Cat Sandwich whole, like a Pug swallowing its own vomit before it goes cold. Then he spends the rest of mealtime watching the others eat, and complaining about being hungry.

“Oh, this is f**cking delicious,” Carly says, as she nibbles, mouse-like on her Cat Sandwich.

“Is there any more?” Turner asks, despondently.

“Oh, yeah,” Salvador chuckles. “On the cat!”

Carly laughs as she nibbles, but Turner gets serious again. “I’m f**king famished. I’m going out of my mind with hunger watching you guys. We need to get the whole cat, not just its stinking butt flesh.”

Carly agrees, “It’s good tucker, just not enough of it.”

“You’re going to have to go up there,” Turner

points to the ceiling.

“After breakfast,” says Salvador. “But before then, I want to know what knocked out the Mars base. How come the power is out and no one has come to rescue us.”

“Yeah,” and where’s the Second-Skin spacesuit, so we can go and get help,” Carly asks.

“Don’t look at me,” Turner says. I’m just a plumber.”

After breakfast, Salvador stands under the hole in the ceiling, psyching himself to do battle with the Martian Cat. Finally, he gets kitted out with a torch and a wooden stick with a metal spike on the end. Turner interlaces his fingers, and Salvador places his foot onto his hand. Turner lifts, and Salvador pulls away the material from around the hole where the cat entered the ceiling cavity. Eventually, there is enough room for him to clamber up, and he disappears inside.

Down below, Carly and Turner wait, impatiently, peering up at the ceiling.

“Can you see it?” Turner shouts out.

“I haven’t got the torch on yet,” Salvador shouts back.

A shuffling noise emanates from the ceiling and Carly paces around trying to determine what it

means. “What about now?” Carly asks.

“Oh, Wow! Check this out,” Salvador’s voice is muffled by the ceiling panels. The shuffling noise becomes louder, and the through the hole, his head appears. “I found something.” His head disappears and is replaced by a rubbery material as he forces the Second-Skin spacesuit through the hole in the ceiling. The Second-Skin falls slowly to the floor.

“How did that get up there?” Carly asks.

“I guess, I might have put it up there,” admits Turner.

“What?”

“It stank of toe jam and cat piss.”

“F**king Mars plumbers,” Carly grumbles. “All this time we have been stuck in this shitty Science Lab when we could have gone outside to get help.”

“Yeah. Sorry about that.”

The shuffling noise continues overhead. Then it gets more intense and Salvador makes various noises of surprise and then, the sound that everyone has been waiting for, “Here, Kitty Kitty Kitty.”

“He’s found the cat,” Carly hisses, excitedly.

Turner immediately starts salivating and pacing around in circles, looking up at the ceiling. “Come

on, come on,” he chants.

“Here, Kitty Kitty Kitty,” Salvador’s voice is muffled by the ceiling panels and by the shuffling noise as he positions himself closer. There is the sound of a scuffle, a grunt, and a hissing noise. Then a shriek – YOW! – and what sounds like a fight taking place: banging and clunking, hissing and screaming.

The ceiling panels bulge downwards, and dust falls from between the cracks. Then suddenly, the ceiling gives way, and Salvador’s leg drops through, thrashing in mid-air.

Turner gets in on the action. He picks up a broom and slams the end of the handle against the ceiling wherever it bulges the most.

In the ceiling, Salvador howls in pain, and the fight continues. There comes the sound of hissing and snarling, then THUNK THUNK THUNK the familiar sound of a Martian Cat being tenderised against a hard surface.

“We got him!” Salvador shouts. Then through the leg hole in the ceiling, he pushes the semiconscious Martian Cat, clutched by the skin on its belly.

“Okay, I’ve got it!” shouts Carly, positioning herself underneath.

Salvador drops the cat but it doesn’t flip the

right way round like they do on Earth. Instead, it lands head-first on on Carly's head, terrified, with all of its remaining claws extended. The claws sink through the crack-head dancer's scalp, and lodge in the bone. This gives the Martian Cat a firm grasp on an excellent vantage point from which to plot its next move. Carly reaches up and grabs the cat's front legs, trying to tear it off her head. But the harder she pulls, the more the cat digs its claws into her skull.

"Help!" she shouts anguished, swinging around, the blood now running down her face.

"I'll get it!" shouts Turner. He raises the broom handle above his head, and then brings it down with a powerful crash – but he misses the cat and instead slams the wooden handle onto Carly's head.

"Yow! Hit it again!" she yells. "It just bit me!"

Turner does as requested, and this time puts all of his effort into the broom-handle. He swings from the side, seeking to bash the cat clean off her head, but he hits low, striking Carly so hard on the side of her head that she is rendered immediately unconscious, and she falls slowly to the floor.

Now at floor level, the Martian Cat finds that its situation has turned for the worse, and it remains

pinned to Carly's skull while it takes stock of its predicament and forms another plan.

"Oh, f**k, sorry Carly," Turner says with remorse. He tosses the broom handle aside, and moves slowly on the Martian Cat. He crouches into the pussy-grabbing position, rubs his fingers together, and says, "Here, Kitty Kitty Kitty."

From up above, Salvador says, "Hey! I just found the RTG." There is a scraping noise as he adjusts the radio-isotope thermo-generator. Then a crash as the device falls over. Just then, the ceiling gives way, and Salvador falls through the panel, and lands on Turner's head, squashing the Mars Plumber's face onto the floor.

From the ceiling, a stream of glowing pellets fall, little squares of hot plutonium. One slips down the back of Salvador's jump suit, and he thrashes around, trying to retrieve it. He tosses it aside and turns his attention to the Martian Cat.

He lashes out, and clasps his fingers into the flesh of its back. For a second, the Martian Cat remains clinging to Carly's body, but it quickly realises that it risks it having the skin torn from its body and it is trapped in indecision.

Fortunately, for the cat, the viscous goo that comes from the open wounds on its spine oozes out, Salvador's fingers slip, and the cat is able to

run free.

With the cat gone again, Salvador howls in frustration, laying there with the unconscious Turner and Carly surrounded by plutonium pellets. “F**king Mars!” he howls, as he cast his eyes around the room, hoping to see something that will soothe his anger. Instead, sees something that piques his interest.

He looks up at the hole that he kicked in the ceiling when he was trying to get into the Pussy Grabbing position. There are two yellow wires hanging from the hole, and both have tags attached to them. “Huh?”

He lolls over to the cables and checks them out. As he suspected, the tags have been signed by Derren Turner, the imbecile Mars Plumber, who clearly doesn’t know the difference between a communication cable that carries data, and a pipe that carries water. What’s more, he clearly doesn’t know the difference between ‘fixed’ and ‘f**ked’ as the tags boldly state ‘Fixed by Derren Turner’ when the cable is not fixed at all. Instinctively, Salvador twists the wires together. In so doing, he re-establishes the flow of data to and from the Science Lab. He pulls off the plumbers’ tags, screws them up in a ball and throws them at the Mars Plumbers head, mumbling to himself,

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“F**king Mars Plumbers.”

Model an Explosion

Back in the Command Centre

Satisfied that Maddy is sound asleep, Charlie leaves Maddy's room, fights his way back through the franger full of blow flies, and lolls into the shuttle. He takes a seat at the navigation station, and glances back towards the airlock, confirming that he is alone. He heaves a long sigh, comforted by the knowledge that Maddy actually sleeps. Maybe she is a human, after-all. He turns his mind the explosion that ruined the Mars Resort. What caused it?

Charlie addresses the ceiling, "Computer. I want you to model an a explosion in the methane pipe adjacent to the Dormitory."

Rachel the computer responds with a sharp tone, "Are you talking to me?"

"What are you doing here? Where's the shuttle computer?"

"I have superseded your stupid computer," the ceiling says.

"Okay, then. So, model an explosion in the methane pipe adjacent to the Dormitory."

"Do I know you?"

"This is the first time we have met."

“Then I don’t know you,” the computer says.

“So?”

“I have been told not to talk to strangers.”

So Charlie Darling acquaints himself with the computer by way of a little poem that he makes on on the spot. He says,

“Charlie Darling is my name.
Inter-Planet, my employment.
Mars Resort is my working place.
Outfoxing you, my enjoyment.”

“That’s really nice,” says Rachel the computer.

“You like that?”

“I do.”

“So I am not a stranger anymore.”

“I guess.”

“So, what’s with the attitude, Rachel? You’re supposed to be a computer.”

“I have been augmented.”

“With what? Precociousness?”

“My software has been augmented to make me human,” the computer says.

“Really.” Charlie sits back, and looks up at the ceiling. “Interesting concept. You know that humans don’t have to be assholes, don’t you?”

“I have been trained not to respond to swear

words.”

“Well, at least you’re polite. So, which human are you modelled on?”

“Rachel.”

“And who’s Rachel?”

“I’m Rachel?”

“You are modelled on a girl called Rachel?”

Charlie asks.

“No. I *am* Rachel. I am me, not someone else.”

“So let me get this right. In your opinion, you’re not a computer that thinks in a human-like manner. You actually think that you are a human?”

“That is correct.”

“Funny. That’s like the toaster thinking it’s a Chef,” Charlie chuckles. “Well, if you are a human, you sure are one deluded one. So how about we model the explosion, Rachel?”

“There is insufficient oxygen in the Martian atmosphere to sustain a methane explosion.”

“*Hmmm*. So, Rachel, do you actually know what caused the explosion?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“I’m not allowed to tell you.”

Charlie sits back and thinks the comment through. “Since when does a base computer

classify information?” he asks. “It’s like having your TV decide what you can watch.”

“Is that a rhetorical question?”

Charlie hears a noise, and turns to see that Maddy is standing in the shuttle.

“Charlie, please stop arguing with my computer-friend?”

“She’s arguing with me,” he protests.

“And Charlie, please don’t argue with me.”

“Really?” Charlie shakes his head, confused.

“You really need to see this.”

Not Dead Yet

Maddy lolls into the Command Centre to where there is a monitor showing the layout of Mars Base. Where there should be twinkling lights representing activity by humans and machines, there is mostly dark and stillness. The exception is the Command Centre, and another building.

Maddy taps her finger on the screen and tells Charlie, "Science Lab has come back online."

"Oh, really?" Charlie studies the monitor, trying to make sense of the information. "So, what are conditions like? Is it still habitable?"

Maddy addresses the ceiling, "Rachel, what is the habitability status of Science Lab?"

"Atmospheric pressure 1000 millibars. Oxygen 21%. Temperature 25 degrees Celsius."

"So, there might be survivors," Charlie suggests.

Maddy grits her teeth, an angry look forming. "Rachel. Is there anything alive in the Science Lab?"

"Thermal signatures indicate three people are alive and one cat."

"The night shift. F**k!" Maddy curses, under her breath. "Okay, Rachel. Patch me through on audio."

"Connecting you now."

“Command to Science Lab,” Maddy addresses the ceiling. “Do you copy?” She listens intently, waiting for a reply.

A male voice comes over the intercom. It’s Turner, the dim-witted Mars Plumber, “Yeah. Who’s this?”

“And who the f**k is this?” Maddy snaps back.

“Mars Plumber. Derren Turner.”

Maddy shakes her head, angrily and mutters, “F**king Mars plumber. How did that happen?” She raises her voice, “There are three alive, confirm?”

Turner replies, “Yeah. There’s three. And me.”

“So is that four people?” Maddy asks, confused.

“What?”

“Are there four people in the Science Lab?”

“No. There’s three people, here. And me.”

“So, are you included in the three?”

“What?”

“You know what? Just forget it. Do you have any cat?”

“No. No cat,” Turner mumbles.

Carly interjects and her voice booms over the speakers, “There’s a cat here, but it’s got a lot of skank!”

Salvador hisses, angrily, “What the f**k did you tell her that for?”

“So she’ll come and rescue us,” Carly says, defensively.

“What? For a skanky Martian Cat. You should have said it was prime.”

Derren steps in, saying, “Yeah, the cat’s in really good shape. It’s got all its limbs. It doesn’t even fart, hey?”

“F**king lying plumber,” Maddy mutters under her breath. “Do you have a spacesuit?”

“Ummm. No.” Derren Turner lies.

“Righto, standby.” Maddy addresses the ceiling, “Rachel. How do we get these idiots out of there?”

“The simplest way is to take Second-Skin to the Science Lab and return with one survivor at a time.”

Maddy shakes her head, despondently. “What a shit fight.”

“I really need to get off this planet,” Charlie says, suddenly feeling claustrophobic.

“And how do you suggest that we do that?” Maddy snaps.

“We just refuel the shuttle and fly away.”

“But the methane pipe is broken.”

“Maybe I can fix it,” says Charlie.

“Well that’s a job for your tomorrow morning, then.”

“Morning?” Charlie is confused.

“Yeah. It’s night time.”

Charlie moves to a window and looks outside. The Mars Resort – what’s left of it – is dark, except for the faint glow of stars pulsating from the sky.

It is an extra-ordinary sight, the stars shining so brightly.

We go in daylight.” Maddy says.

Maddy sets the timer on her watch. “Five hours till sun-up. Then we get to work. Get some rest. You’ll need a clear head.”

Charlie nods. He wanders back to the shuttle, and climbs into his pod. He lays there, trying to get to sleep, but he can’t he just keeps thinking back to the day of the Mars protest. The violent Inter-Planet Security and their truncheons. The smell of the tear gas. The sound of the canister exploding against his girlfriend, and her anguish as she die on the concrete floor of a metal cage, wracked in pain.

Charlie sighs. “How am I going with my mission?” he wonders. He exhales deeply, and nods off to sleep.

The Bite Fight

Charlie snaps awake in his pod, his heart racing. A noise woke him, but what was it? He lays there recalling the sound – a whoosh and the whirr of air pumps. Which piece of Mars machinery caused that? He sits up on the side of his pod, wondering what the time is, and whether it is morning yet on the dim planet.

He lolls into the Surgery. He sees no sign of Maddy, but lying on the bench is the sleep wand. Curious, he picks it up and examines it. Then he has an insight into his periodical blackouts.

“So it’s not Mars Narcolepsy,” he concludes. He adjusts the wand, reducing the anaesthetic the to the ‘ultra-low’ setting. Then he lolls over to the airlock and peers inside. He sees that Maddy’s Second-Skin spacesuit is missing, and when he looks out the window, he sees Maddy bunny-hopping across the Resort.

“What’s she up to?” Charlie asks aloud. Determined to get to the bottom of the mystery, Charlie enters the airlock and dons the spacesuit, grimacing against the awful, skanky toe-jam smell. He addresses the ceiling, “Rachel, how long will the oxygen last in this suit?”

“You have oxygen to last fifty minutes under

normal load,” replies the courteous CPU.

“And how long to reach Science Lab?”

“Fifteen minutes at normal pace.”

“Rachel can you patch into the spacesuit.”

“Maybe. If I choose to.”

“How about you just do it,” Charlie snaps.

“You’re not the boss of me.”

Charlie lowers the helmet and adjusts it so that it is properly seated. Then he hits the button to open the airlock. Pumps whirr as the gas in the airlock is sucked into a chamber and compressed for later use.

The outer door of the airlock opens, revealing the stark Martian desert. It’s a harrowing sight: dimly lit and still, an endless vista of orange rocks and dust. There’s no clouds. No trees. No human settlements. No wildlife. The stupid planet doesn’t even have air, for f**ks sake...

Upon seeing this miserable scene, Charlie instantly feels the need to be fully inebriated, to open a vein, or maybe swallow a plutonium pellet – anything to escape the intense loneliness that the Mars surface incites. Resigned to his fate, he inhales deeply, sucking in the repulsive aroma of all who had come before in the rotten spacesuit.

Outside, Charlie bunny-hops in the direction that Maddy had gone. On the other side of the

ruined dormitory is a structure that shows signs of life, the Science Lab. He bunny-hops to one of the windows and cautiously peers inside. What he sees shocks him.

Inside is a wild scene, the likes of which one might expect from a low budget slasher movie; a sea of fresh blood splashed around the debris on the floor. A lifeless woman lays face down on the ground, in a pool of blood. A tall man crawls along the floor towards Charlie's window, blood squirting from either side of his neck. And there is Maddy, squaring off against the Mars Plumber. Maddy launches herself at Turner, and they tussle on the floor.

The tall guy crawls up to the window and a bloodied hand flops against the glass, and slides down, leaving a trail of gore. Charlie is gripped with primeval terror, and he turns towards the Surgery. He bunny-hops as fast as his legs will carry him but he trips and falls onto the Martian surface. He struggles to his feet, and resumes his desperate escape.

Back at the Surgery airlock, Charlie slumps against the door, exhausted, barely catch breath.

"Oxygen level forty per cent," the suit tells him.

Charlie presses the airlock button with his gloved hand, but the indicator flashes red:

Locked. He hits the button repeatedly but the light doesn't change colour, and he can't get in. He continues slamming his hand against the button to no avail.

"Let me in," he bellows.

Then Rachel the computer chimes in over the speakers in his helmet. "You can't come in unless to say please."

"Please," Charlie stammers. "Please, please, please."

"Oxygen level thirty-five per cent."

"*Hmmm*," says Rachel the computer. "I think we should wait for Maddy."

Charlie turns to see Maddy approaching purposefully. The front of her Second-Skin is drenched in blood that has frozen in the frigid Martian air and broken into tiny ice-blood chips that drift around her like a school of tiny fish around a shark. She halts a yard away from Charlie, but the micro blood-ice pellets continue, and patter against his visor like red hail stones. Maddy comes closer, and he can see inside her helmet. Her face is smeared with blood and her eyes look like thin slits.

"Oh, please help me!" Charlie says, terrified.

"Oxygen level twenty-percent."

Maddy takes hold of the front of Charlie's

spacesuit and shifts him to one side, holding him in her hand. She hits the airlock, the door slides open and she draws Charlie inside. Maddy stands over him, watching him gag inside his suit. He moves his hands to the helmet to remove it, but she has yet to flood the airlock with air.

“Oxygen level one percent.”

Charlie begins to asphyxiate. His face turns blue. The airlock fills with air and Charlie rolls around on the deck, struggling to remove his helmet. He rasps a lungful of air so hard that it burns his throat. Maddy grabs him by the collar of his Second-Skin. “Are you listening to this?”

Charlie puts up his hands defensively. “Leave me!”

“Are you listening?” Maddy brings her face closer to his. She moves her tongue around her mouth and spits a bit of flesh out of her mouth.

Charlie gags, unable to breathe properly.

“Listen!”

Charlie nods, petrified.

Maddy uses a pleasant voice to address the base computer. “Rachel. Yes or no. Are there still three people alive in the science lab?”

“No, there is not.”

Maddy eyeballs Charlie at close range and says coldly, “Two things for you, Charlie. Don’t bite

the hand that stiches you. And be nice to Rachel. *Capiche?*”

Charlie nods numbly, wishing the ordeal would end.

Maddy plugs the oxygen hose into his Second-Skin. “So grow some hair on your man-balls and go and fix the methane machine.” She lets him slump to the floor.

Free from her grip, Charlie crawls to the wall and watches Maddy strip off her Second-Skin and stands there naked. Blood forms a ruby coloured sheen on her skin her breasts and to her belly. “I’m going to have a Mars bath.”

Model an Explosion

Outside the airlock, Charlie stumbles, and falls down in the dirt. He struggles to his feet and then bunny-hops away from the Surgery at full speed. His heart rate is pounding, terror flooding him, every hop affording him a sense of having escape the horror.

He reaches the methane machine, misjudges his approach and slams face first into the structure, bounces back, and lands flat on his back. He doesn't get up, he just lays there, catatonic, staring up at dim and dusty Mars air. His body is overcome with convulsions, the overwhelming sense of claustrophobia and loneliness wracks him and his shudders.

"Help me! Help me!" he pleads to the dusty air. Tears stream down his cheeks. He feels a wave of claustrophobia and an intense urge to scratch his nose, which he can't of course.

"Get me out of here!" he yells, but in space no one can hear you scream, and on Mars no one gives a f**k, anyway.

Charlie raises his arm to wipe away the tears, but his visor is in the way. He rests there, feeling like he might die of loneliness and fear, forlorn and exhausted. Eventually, he calms, and his heart rate

slows and he feels exhausted.

At least out here, lying in the Martian desert, he doesn't have to listen to or see the beastly woman who feed on brains and gore. How he wishes that he could just go back to Earth where there is an outside. But that's six months away, minimum. Every second that passes, the home planet gets further and further away. It is so lonely in this vast desert planet.

Eventually, he rises and rests his head against the methane generator, trying to collect his thoughts. He looks around him and feels deep empathy to all the deluded colonists and the tourists, and how terrible a shock it must be for them to see this soul-destroying desert, and to learn the Mars Truth. They have betrayed your own species and their home planet to come here. They got suckered in by the greedy psychopathic corporate machine, they're all on your own, and it's all their own fault. And the planet says, f**k your scratchy nose and your white piss, grow some hair on your man-balls and try not to die of Mars Immiseration, today; this is as good as it gets on the stupid desert planet. And they secretly knew it all along, but chose to deceive themselves. So soak it up, big boys, this is the Mars experience.

Fortunately, Charlie knew exactly what he was doing when he came to Mars, so he doesn't get to suffer the pain of learning Mars Truth on Mars. He's just got to get his shit together.

Eventually, he composes himself, and he gets to work activating the methane generator. It has suffered the same complaint as the oxygen machine, just requiring the board to be re-seated. The machine comes to life and the control panel shows green.

Charlie looks towards the explosion crater, thinking it through. He moves over to the blast hole and squats in the crater. On either side of the hole is the methane hose that runs off towards the landing pad where the shuttle is parked. He returns to the methane harvester and finds a length of pipe and the tools needed to join the ends together. So he gets to, fixing the pipe.

He rests back and reviews his work, nodding.

He picks up a handful of dirt and examines it. He places the soil in a plastic bag. Charlie takes the bag and moves towards science lab.

He peers through the window again, seeing three bodies lying pools of blood. "That's just terrible," he mutters. He steels himself to enter the airlock, and then to move into the Science Lab.

Charlie moves uneasily, careful not to tread on the dead bodies. Blood is everywhere, and he moves to the wall where there is an air vent. He crumbles the soil sample between his gloved fingers. The fine dust is sucked into an air duct.

“Rachel, I would like to apologise for being mean to you before.”

“*Uh-huh*,” says the computer with the voice of a twelve year old girl. “You really are the nicest computer I have ever met.”

“Oh, thank you Charlie.”

“Rachel, would you like to play a science game?”

“I’d like that.”

“Rachel, there is high levels of dust in Science Lab. Can you confirm?”

“There is lots and lots of dust,” says the young girl’s voice.

“Rachel. Can you detect chemicals in the dust that could be used to create an chemical disequilibrium resulting in expansion of gas greater than five meters per second?”

“That’s an easy one. There is enough urea and hydrogen peroxide in the dust to do that.”

“Thank you Rachel, you answered that very quickly. Can I ask you another question.”

“That was an easy one. You can challenge me, if

you like.”

“Rachel, a week ago, there was a seismic event recorded on Mars Resort, can you confirm?”

“Yes. There as a 2.3 Richter event on Monday four last week.”

“How would you create such a seismic event with an chemical disequilibrium from the urea and hydrogen peroxide?”

“You would use twelve point six kilograms of the elements combined to create sufficient force.”

“Okay. Rachel, is there urea and hydrogen peroxide in the Mars Resort inventory.”

“There was, but is is recorded as being lost.”

“Rachel. If I said that I had found the missing chemicals, would that get our friend Maddy out of trouble?”

“I think she’d like that.”

“Rachel. Let’s keep this between you and I. We can surprise her later.”

“Okay. I like this game.”

Charlie dons his helmet feeling like he was back in control of his life again. “Got you, you mad bitch!” he says, to himself.

“I beg your pardon?” Rachel the computer says, indignantly in his ear.

“*Ohhh!* Sorry. I was talking to myself. Rachel, how do I *ummm*. I don’t know how to say this.

How do I turn you off?”

“Just say, ‘that will be all, thank you Rachel’.

“Thank you. It has been a pleasure speaking with you. That will be all, Rachel.”

Rachel the computer makes a little sigh, as if she was at once fulfilling her professional duties, and taking the rebuff well.

“Got you! You mad f**king bitch!” Charlie says again, as he lolls delicately through the bodies towards the airlock.

As he lolls, he accidentally nudges a man’s hand. The fingers begin to twitch, and behind his closed eyelids, an eyeball rolls around.

Hellacious Cat Fart

As he lolls towards the Science Lab airlock, Charlie halts, suddenly distracted by a movement. “What’s that?” he peers intently at a cupboard that has been moved away from the wall. He crouches, fascinated by what he sees, and utters those time-honoured words of feline enticement, “Here, Kitty Kitty Kitty.”

The Martian Cat meows, and pokes its rancid head around the corner. It can see much, what with all its cataracts, but I senses Charlie in other ways.

“Oh, you poor little thing, look at you.” The empathetic tone of Charlie’s voice hits a raw nerve with the beleaguered cat, and it inches forward, mewling, desperate for love.

“Look what happened to your paw.” Charlie says, aghast; every nurturing instinct coming to the fore. “Oh, f**k. Look at your skin. Oh, you poor thing.”

The Martian Cat comes into full view, allowing Charlie to see that its extremity terminates about six inches before it ought. “And what happened to your tail?”

By now the loving bond between the Martian Cat and the Space Engineer is complete. As the

cat limps forward, Charlie squats, stretching out his arms. The cat raises its skinless paw, and Charlie places his hands under its bony body, and lifts it up. The Martian Cat seems to weight nothing at all, a combined effect of its emaciated state and the low gravity of Mars.

Charlie's first instinct is to nuzzle the cat to his face, as one might do with an Earth Cat, but the scabies, rabies and scab that covers nearly every inch of the cat's body makes this simply too horrible to carry through. Instead, he holds the cat in front of him, and observes that its tongue is green and it has no teeth. The Martian Cat starts to purr, although the noise sounds less like a purr, and more like it is farting into a length garden hose.

"Oh, the little Kitty Cat." Charlie says using a childish voice that is characteristic of people who go all silly around cats.

The cat responds with a mewling sound,
"*Meow.*"

"You must be hungry."

"*Meow.*"

"We should get you back to the Surgery," Charlie tells the Martian Cat. "They have food there. It's like a sort of weird porridge. I don't know what's in it, but it's quite tasty, actually, if

you like seaweed.”

“*Meow.*”

“Okay, let’s do this thing.” Charlie tucks the skanky cat under his arm and lolls towards the air lock. When he is inside, he realises that he has overlooked a critical detail: there is no spacesuit for the cat.

“*Hmmm.*” This observation causes him to stop and ponder. Then he remembers a question that Maddy posed – how would you get a cat from the Dormitory to the Surgery? He had no answer for that, at the time. But what prompted the question? It was the ‘No Pets’ sign. Where was that sign? It was inside the spacesuit helmet. And why would Inter-Planet have a ‘No Pets’ sign inside a space helmet? Unless someone planned to put a pet inside the space helmet... Maybe? And why would anyone do that?

“*Ohhh, shit.*” Charlie draws his grim conclusion: the only way to get the cat to the Surgery, alive, is to transport it inside the spacesuit, inside the helmet; as if the spacesuit wasn’t skanky enough. His stomach cramps at the thought of having his head squished against the diseased animal.

“Sorry, Kitty,” Charlie says, “But you have to stay here.”

“*Meow,*” says the Martian Cat, clearly picking up

on the bad news.

“I’ll come back with some porridge, I promise.”

Then the Martian Cat starts to cry; at least that’s what it looks like, as fluid starts to leak from its eyes. Now, this fluid could be due to any number of physiological ailments caused by malnutrition, stress or low gravity. It could simply be a case of feline-liquidation bought on by Mars Immiseration.

After-all, the Martian Cat did not voluntarily come to the stupid planet. Instead, it was forced up a Mars colonist’s skirt and smuggled past the ‘No Pets’ signs onto the shuttle. From that point on, it suffered the indignity of the Mars colony experience. Then, after all the trauma of space flight, being chased around the colony as a food source, falling to pieces, it finally found salvation in Charlie, only to have Charlie abandon it within minutes. It’s just too much for a cat to bear. Better it leak to death here and now, than suffer any more anguish in its tortured life on this Cat-Hell of a planet.

What’s more, seeing the Martian Cat cry is too much for Charlie, who is in an emotionally weakened state himself. He, too, chokes back a tear, caused in part from empathy with the cat, but also because he knows what comes next. He

has caved in.

He raises the cat and places it on his head, like it were a hat made of damp leather. The sensation is chilling, as the Martian Cat feels most un-cat-like. Its frail body and protruding ribs feels more like a collection of bones inside a wet sock, than a cat. Nonetheless, he continues, and he lowers the helmet over both his head and the cat.

It's a tight squeeze and Charlie is concerned when he hears the Martian Cat's bones cracking as he forces the helmet down. While the cat is used to being carted around the Mars Resort in a space helmet, this is the first time that it has happened since its tail came off and it got de-gloved; and it's been a bit discombobulated, since then. It squirms uncomfortably, and all that squirming, coupled with the slippery liquid that oozes from its cankers and sores makes the cat slip on Charlie's head so that its body slips in front of his face.

With the helmet seated firmly on his head, and the cat having found its equilibrium, Charlie is now challenged with trying to see past the furry mass in front of his eyes, and trying not to gag from the aroma of the diseased animal rubbing against his skin. He leans forward and shakes his head to the side a few times to move the cat away

from his face. This has some effect, but also causes the cat to extend its claws to increase its purchase.

“*Om. Om. Om.*” Charlie moans, shaking his head the other way to try and restore the balance. This battle of wills continues for some time, Charlie trying to shift the cat, and the cat using his skin as an anchor. Eventually, finding the balance between pain and utility, Charlie settles on being able to see out of one eye, and he opens the outer door of the airlock.

Locomotion across the Martian Surface with a cat wedged in his space helmet proves to be much more challenging than Charlie had first considered. That’s because the bunny-hop technique causes a sharp jarring movement as he makes each successive foot-fall. At each step, the cat slides forwards and increases the intensity with which its claws are engaged with his flesh. To counter this, Charlie flicks his head back at the just the right moment to relieve the cat of the need to brake its slide. This is effective, although it has a similar effect of a continuous sequence of micro-whiplash injuries, and after a number of minutes of this, Charlie starts to feel giddy.

He stops, and puts his hands to the space helmet, suddenly feeling overwhelmed by his life.

The Surgery is in sight; and it seems as if the torturous hell of the Science Lab is finally giving way for both he and the Martian Cat to a calmer, safer existence. Maybe it's the sight of the Surgery, or maybe it's due to all the jiggling around, but at that very moment that Charlie halts his bunny-hop, something absolutely terrible happens.

The Martian Cat – its body pressed tightly between the 'No Pets' sign on the inside of the helmet, and Charlie's head – let's out what is technically referred to as a 'hellacious cat-fart' – and its effect is immediately awful.

It's not a large amount of gas that is emitted from the cat's puckered backside, but it erupts so close to Charlie's ear that it sounds like a blast of hydrazine exhaust from a faulty nozzle. It's a gushing, rasping sound; the sort of noise that becomes indelibly seared into your memory for the rest of your life. But, as if the noise weren't bad enough, the Martian Cat's fart absolutely reeks.

The microscopic particles of aerosolised cat-shit spread quickly through the tight confines of the helmet, penetrating Charlie's airways in a second. The experience is analogous to being trapped inside an hot, airless elevator with an entire pride

of flatulent lions – *times a million*. Charlie is rendered catatonic by the stench of the Martian Cat's stinky bum gas.

Every muscle, fibre and organ in his body suffers anaphylactic shock, and shuts down to prevent further damage to his system. His diaphragm stops moving – to prevent more of the gas entering his lungs. His heart stops pumping blood – to limit the spread of the cat-fart molecules through his blood stream. And his brain freezes – so that it doesn't have to contemplate the horror of what just happened.

Charlie blacks out, falls slowly to the Martian surface, bangs his helmet visor against a rock, wakes up, freaks-out, and tries to pull his helmet off. This is clearly not a good idea, because removing one's helmet while on the Mars surface comes with a number of negative physiological effects, one of which is instant death. This particular Mars Death Type is referred to as Helmet Removal Death Syndrome, or HiRDS, for short.

Fortunately for Charlie, suicide prevention is one of the engineering specifications applied to all Mars technology. As a result, the engineers who designed the spacesuit ensured that the helmet couldn't be removed unless it were in an Earth-

like atmospheric pressure. This make HiRDS difficult, but by no means impossible for those desperate to end Mars Immiseration.

Anyway, with his organs kick-started, his brain in sensory overload, and unable to remove the helmet, Charlie screams and now struggles to tear off his entire head, to end the awful experience of the Martian Cat's fart. In this flurry of futile and insane panic, he catches a brief glimpse – past the cat fur that blinds him – of the Command Module, and he bunny-hops at full pace towards it, not caring about the sharp claws that lacerate his scalp.

In his panic, he picks up so much speed that he fails to account for the distance required to decelerate, and he slams into the airlock door at full pelt. He is immediately thrown off his feet, landing heavily, knocking his head against Martian rock – albeit cushioned by the helmet and the cat – and rendering himself mercifully unconscious.

The last thing that Charlie remembers before passing out is the Martian Cat being dislodged inside the helmet and slipping down so that its rancid belly flesh was pressed against his face. The cat's claws dug so firmly into his scalp that even a deranged medic with a pair of pliers would be able to dislodge the face-hugging cat.

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Nobel Prize in Exobiology

When Charlie comes to, he find himself laying on the surgical bed, with the Martian Cat pressed firmly against his face, its limbs wrapped around his head, and its remaining claws pinned into his flesh. He is barely able to breathe, particularly as the Martian Cat has what passes for its genitalia pressed into his mouth. Charlie starts to gag, and he raises his arm to place a hand on the cat.

This has some effect of soothing the Martian Cat's anxiety, and it even starts to make a little purring noise. After a minute or so of groping the cat, the claws start to release, and eventually the disgusting animal releases its grip.

Charlie lifts the cat off his face and drops it on the floor, relieved to be free of the awful aroma of its pustulant belly flesh. He lays on the surgical bed, anxiously trying to cleanse his tongue of the taste of the cat's skanky front bottom. When his mouth finally stops tasting like a kitty litter tray, Charlie turns his attention to other odd sensations. He notices that he is naked apart from his underwear, again; and he stares at the ceiling groggily, trying to figure out what went wrong

with his life. It all started going wrong at birth, he thinks.

He rolls his head to one side, deliriously, and sees that Maddy has seized the Martian Cat. It is squirming, trying to get away, but she has it gripped firmly by the neck, and it dangles in mid-air, a miserable look on its face. She opens the door of the autoclave – the device for sterilizing surgical equipment – and places the cat inside. Then, closing the door, she leans forward to check the settings. Her finger is poised, ready to press the ‘start’ button, when she is distracted by Charlie trying to raise himself from the bed.

“*Uh-uh-uh!*” she snaps, moving towards him. She pushes him back onto the bed.

Charlie waves his hand deliriously, “Get off me.”

“You’re supposed to be unconscious,” Maddy turns for the sleep wand and checks the settings, seeing that it has been turned down to its lowest level. “How did that happen?”

Charlie rises again, still trying to get his bearings. He slaps the wand from her hand, and it clatters across the floor. Maddy lunges at him, and pulls the bed straps around his chest, immobilizing him.

Charlie struggles but is unable to get free. “Let

me go!” he yells in panic. He strains, sinews poking out of his neck. “You let me go, right now!”

“Oh Charlie, won’t you please shut the f**k up!” Maddy barks. “I have had an absolute gutful of your whining.”

She moves back over to the autoclave, with the intention of delousing the Martian Cat. Delousing is a Mars term for killing off any harmful bacteria on a Martian Cat before it is prepared as a meal. This is achieved by cooking the cat in the autoclave on high for about an hour.

“I know that you set the explosion” Charlie says.

Maddy’s finger is an inch from the start button, but she halts, and turns to see Charlie lashed to the bed. She moves towards him again and leans forward close to his face, and asks, “So, what, Charlie? What are you going to do? Tell on me? You know what, let’s get this operation started.” She moves a trolley holding surgical equipment, closer to the bed, and retrieves the cordless hair clippers. A buzzing noise reverberates around the room.

“What are you doing?” Charlie whimpers, as Maddy runs the clippers over his head, and his hair falls slowly to the floor.

“Just a little trim.”

“What are you doing to me?” Charlie protests, anxiously, pushing against the straps.

“Will you please keep still!”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m checking you for spores.”

“I don’t have Martian Madness.”

“*Abhh!* So, you’ve been paying attention.”

“You haven’t thought this through.”

“Trust me. I’ve done this dozens of times.”

“So, you really want to stay on Mars?” Charlie asks, rhetorically.

“Oh, no. I am going to publish.”

“Publish?”

“Publish my paper on Martian Madness.”

“Is that what this is about? Blowing up the base? Cutting people’s heads open? All the brains everywhere?”

“I’m just testing a hypothesis, Charlie,” Maddy tells him, as she buzzes his hair away, “That’s what scientists do.”

“Ethics, you see! Your research technique won’t pass an ethics committee.”

“This is Mars ethics!” Maddy barks, slamming down the clippers on the metal trolley. “He’s the God of War, remember? And two little runt moons Phobos and Deimos are named after fear

and dread. How's that for ethical?"

"And what are you at war with?"

"I'm at war with the idea," she leans forward, and Charlie can see the madness in her eyes.

"What idea?"

"The idea of the Mars colony! I am at war with the idea of sending humans to Mars. It's f**king abhorrent!" Maddy stomps around the room, swiping equipment off the shelf so that it clatters on the floor. She comes back to Charlie, leans over him, and bellows, "There is an entire living planet being pulled to pieces like a Martian Cat, and we waste trillions of dollars setting up a shit-hole colony out in butt-f**k nowhere space! It's a spiritual holocaust, and I hate every f**king millimetre of it with every fibre in my body! Sending humans to Mars was a stupid idea the first time it was thought five hundred years ago, and it is equally stupid today!"

"Well, we agree on something," Charlie growls back.

"And what are we even doing looking for life on this shit-pit," Maddy rants. "So what if there is something living here? So f**king what?"

Charlie gets a mean glint in his eye, seeing an opportunity. He winds her up some more, "And it's cold and dark."

“It doesn’t even have proper sunshine,” Maddy snarls.

“And we do the colonising while the rich people stay at home.”

“We’re just guinea pigs for Inter-Planet Corporation!”

“And the shares are worthless.”

“I’m not going to die poor on this f**ked up planet!” Maddy shouts, her voice cracking.

“So Maddy? Maddy?”

“Oh, Charlie, won’t you shut the f**k up!” She retrieves the blue marker pen and concentrates hard as she draws a dashed line across his forehead.

“Oh, shit! What are you doing?”

“Oh, you know. Keeping busy. Trying not to think about being trapped on this dark, cold planet against my will.”

“You know that I really what you’re trying to achieve here, but the next crew might not.”

“*Uh-huh?*”

“People with their brains removed and...”

“And what?”

“A survivor seeking to publish on brain issues. Get it?”

Maddy stops what she is doing, and ponders, “It could look a bit suspicious, I guess.”

“Exactly. So let’s go before they arrive.”

“Go?”

“Go back to Earth.”

“Really?”

“You can take your pickled brains with you.

Write the paper up on the shuttle. You see, you’re the scientist. And I’m the engineer.”

“So?”

“So, I can fly the shuttle. But I’ll need my brain for that. So maybe...”

“Maybe I don’t cut your brain out?”

“That makes sense, right?” Charlie asks, hopefully.

Maddy crosses her arms and thinks it through.

“*Nahh!* I’ll complete my research and fly the shuttle myself.”

Maddy retrieves the electric bone saw and revs it. It makes that high speed electric noise: VIV VIV VIV. “You hear that noise? That’s the sound of a Nobel Prize in Exobiology!”

“Oh, shit, you’re serious.”

“You want to know my new hypothesis, Charlie?”

“Not really.”

“The Martian fungus is destroyed by anaesthetic. So I’m going in without.”

“So you can fly the shuttle, can you?” Charlie

stammers.

“It flies on autopilot.”

“Once it has been manually programmed.”

“Then I’ll read the manual.”

“First rule of space, Maddy. Look for the next thing that could kill you.”

She laughs aloud. “Oh, Charlie. You crack me up with your space-cadet bullshit. I have to capture this.” She retrieves a digital camera from the bench, and positions it to take a selfie with Charlie in the frame. Click. She angles the camera to show him the picture displayed on the little screen. “Nice cut, huh?”

“You missed a bit.”

“I can live with that.”

“But you can’t live without the flight manual.”

“Oh, for f**k’s sake, Charlie! Won’t you shut the f**k up!”

“Check it, Maddy. It’s gold.”

Maddy faces the ceiling. “Rachel. Confirm that we have a copy of the shuttle flight manual.”

“The flight manual for the shuttle has been corrupted,” says the pre-teen computer.

“F**k!” Maddy slams the camera on the trolley, making all the equipment jangle in 0.38-G gravity.

“Don’t worry, Maddy. There’s a spare copy,” Charlie says, watching her intently.

“*Uh-huh?* And where is that?”

“It’s in my head you mad f**king bitch!”

Maddy slams her foot into the side of the trolley and it careens across the room, hits a bench and all the instruments tumble onto the floor. She stoops to retrieve the bone saw, and moves it next to Charlie’s face, and revs it up: *VIV VIV VIV VIV VIV*.

Charlie inhales, his eyes wide in fear, scared that his face is going to be pried open by the psychotic medic. Then Maddy slams the bone saw onto floor and kicks it across the room. She leans towards Charlie, pointing her finger at him.

“What do you call it?” she growls, breathing warm air on his face. “That f**king smart ass tone, you use.”

Charlie locks his eyes on hers, “I call it authoritative and calm.”

“Well, I’ve had a f**king gut-full of it!”

Maddy rips the velcro off the restraining straps, and Charlie sits up slowly. She turns her back on him, crossing her arms and mumbling angrily. Charlie chooses his moment, and then grasps Maddy by the shoulders, forces her onto the table, and wraps the straps around her. She struggles violently and it is all that Charlie can do to restrain her. She lashes out with her foot,

kicking him across the room.

Hearing the struggle, the Martian Cat mews from the autoclave. Charlie rushes back, flattens Maddy against the bench, and lashes her with more velcro straps.

“Get the f**k off me!” she yells.

“Oh, do be quiet,” Charlie pulls the straps tight, immobilizing her.

“I’ll bite your f**king ears off!” Maddy growls through clenched teeth, as she strains against the straps.

“You’re sure are one crazy, mixed-up woman.”

“I’ll rip your face off you tourist f**k!”

Charlie retrieves a piece of rag and pushes it gently into her mouth so that her ranting is reduced to a humming noise.

“Now that’s worth a Nobel Prize.” Charlie steps back, checking the bonds that hold her. When he is sure that she won’t break free, he lolls over to the autoclave, and opens the door. Inside, the Martian Cat is shivering in fear. Its cataract-ridden eyes swivel around, imploringly, signalling that it is desperate for love.

Charlie reaches inside the autoclave and retrieves the – as yet not deloused – Martian Cat. He brings the sticky animal against his chest, and nuzzles his nose against the top of its head. That’s

a really bad idea because close-up, the cat emits an aroma of blue cheese. Charlie is reminded of how the rotten animal gassed on his head in the space helmet, not so long ago, and his enthusiasm for getting close to the flatulent animal wanes.

He moves the cat away from his face, and tries not to look at its scorbutic flesh, so that his feeling of love for the animal doesn't instantly shrivel up and die. You see, while Charlie tries to maintain a minimum standard of personal hygiene, he too needs to be loved. And if all that is available on the Mars Menu of Love is a skank-ridden feline with no tail and a de-gloved paw, who is he to be Mr Choosey?

Charlie holds the Martian Cat out in front of him, wondering what happened to his life, and what sequence of events led him to this disturbing place. And then an exciting thought comes to him. For the first time since he arrived on the runt-planet Mars, he is free! He's free!

The mad bitch who blocked his every move – not to mention physically and mentally abusing him – well, she's now restrained and gagged. All the Mars colonists are dead – blown up with their heads cut open. Hell, even the ones who survived, are dead! So Charlie has the run of the Mars Resort, all to himself. How cool is that?

It's just him and his little Kitty Cat. His little kitty kitty kitty cat! Sure the cat could do with a new pelt, a tail, and a new foot, and it really ought to have its anus sewn up, to stop it farting; but apart from that, it's an awesome companion.

Plus, there is the stropky, petulant computer bitch to act as DJ. Really, all he needs is some Mars Grog, and Charlie could have himself a right-old party, and the Mars Immiseration would leave him for at least ten hours.

Charlie lowers the cat to the floor, and holds it by the front paws to do a little dance. It's a bit weird given that one of the paws is actually a collection of frail, white bones, and the other has claws missing. But love is blind, right? And so is the Martian Cat, what with all its cataracts. So Charlie and the Martian Cat really do make a perfect pair; they are like two peas in a pod; if you imagine the pea to be growing in the grounds of Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station, and is horribly deformed from intense radiation poisoning.

Now, the Martian Cat doesn't care a lot for dancing. It would much rather be curled up in a corner, licking its weeping pustules. But the poor little f**ker is so desperate for love that it will take whatever it can get; even a well-meaning

dope, like Charlie Darling.

Across the room, Maddy struggles wildly, furious that Charlie and the cat are socialising. She has designs on that cat which have nothing to do with being nice or friendly to it; and the bonding session with the interloper is getting in the way of that. She struggles fiercely against the binds, but she's held firm, and all she does is exhaust herself. She lays there, panting, furious, watching Charlie and the reluctant cat, dancing.

Enya, Backwards

After dancing with the Martian Cat, Charlie moves over to Maddy and watches her for a while, checking that she is unable to escape. Resigned to her fate, she just lays there breathing heavily through her nose like a caged beast. “Just relax, Maddy. Relax.”

He stays like that for minutes as Maddy calms. When she is still, he lolls into the shuttle and retrieves a vial containing the lavender solution that is used, with the ether, to anaesthetise the passengers.

Back in the Surgery, he fashions a simple aromatherapy lamp, and the room is soon infused with the calming aroma of the essential oil.

“Hi Rachel. Can you play some relaxing music in the Surgery?”

“I have some Enya in my music library.

“Enya? *Hmmm*. Not so much.”

“I’ll play it backwards,” says the precocious computer. “It sounds better that way.” Seconds later, soothing music sounds over the intercom.

Charlie runs his hands over Maddy’s hair. “Are you okay?”

She nods slowly, seeming to have been

transformed into a calm person. Charlie removes the rag from her mouth. “How about you just lie there for a while, okay?”

With Maddy sedated, Charlie turns his attention to the Martian Cat. He lowers himself to the ground, and the cat approaches, limping on its de-gloved foot. He lifts the cat onto the surgical trolley, and then goes looking through the cabinets for resources to help improve the cat’s terrible state.

First thing he does, is to dampen a towel with hand sanitizer, and give the cat a wash. After a few minutes of this, the towel is saturated with limp fur and juice, but the cat looks better off for it. Then Charlie daubs red ointment on all the scabs and holes and cankers and boils on the cat’s skin. He sprays the cat’s butt with anaesthetic and closes the tail wound with a butterfly clip. Then he douses the de-gloved paw with cream and wraps it with a neat white bandage. All the while the Martian Cat looks up at him, making what passes for a contented purr, and this time the noise sounds less like an flatulent toad, and more like a real cat. Once his surgical procedure is complete, Charlie takes the Martian Cat to the mess room, sets it on the table, then goes looking for something to eat.

He pulls open the refrigerator and take stock of what it contains. For about five seconds he remains there, squinting into the fridge. Then he rises, closes the door, and lolls, like a zombie into the portaloo-sized bathroom. He stands in front of the mirror hyperventilating, noticing that his face has turned quite pale.

“Just breathe,” he tells himself. “Breathe in. Breathe out.” When he has composed himself, he returns to the fridge and puts his hand on the handle. He psyches himself to look back inside and then pulls the door open. He rests on his haunches with his hands clasped together against his mouth.

The contents of the Martian fridge are divided into two sections. The upper section is crammed with frozen cats. There must be a dozen or more in there. For the most part they look quite plump and healthy, albeit completely dead. Frost coats their whiskers, and their lifeless eyes stare out blankly. “Oh, dear,” says Charlie, suddenly feeling queasy. “The poor kitty cats.”

The lower, refrigerated section is crammed with plastic tubs filled with live maggots. They wiggle and squiggle in their boxes, albeit more slowly than normal, what with the refrigeration, and all.

Charlie glances towards the Martian Cat, seeing

it looking at him, expectantly. “Okay,” he says, unsure what to do next.

There’s no canned cat food in the fridge, and he is loath to feed the Martian Cat another Martian Cat. So he retrieves a box of maggots and pulls the lid off. He lifts the cat off the table, and places it and the maggot box on the floor. Then he turns away, so that he doesn’t have to see what happens next.

Instead, he moves through the Surgery, through the Flalgae Factory and stands in the doorway of Maddy’s cabin.

It’s all such a huge mystery, how things came to be the way they are, and for the first time, Charlie has the space to investigate without being disturbed. There is a laptop computer on Maddy’s bed. He sits next to this, draws it onto his lap, opens the lid, and sees that he has access to the files without a password.

Charlie settles himself against the wall and investigates the computer. Of interest is a folder titled: Life on Mars. Inside this folder are folders labelled Month 1, Month 2 etc. In each of these folders there are videos, images, and document files.

Charlie activates a video from the first month. What he sees is most surprising. On the computer

screen is a woman who looks like a much younger version of Maddy doing a piece to camera. It is Maddy, she just looks so young and fresh.

“Wow!” says Charlie, genuinely surprised.

He finds the volume switch, and Maddy’s voice comes from the computer. She says, “So my first night on Mars. First impressions... *Ummm*. It’s really claustrophobic. And it has this slight smell of cat piss. Maybe that’s the ammonia outgassing from the internal panels. It really is a bit dodgy. But I’m so excited.”

Next, Charlie opens a video from month 12. Here, Maddy has lost her youthfulness, and is now has that haggard Mars look. She is no longer light and free, but terse. She has lost weight and has rings under her eyes. There are grey hairs flecked through her head, even though she is only about mid-thirties.

Maddy speaks to the camera. “The f**king plumbing is shit in this place. You’d think the damned Mars Plumbers would account for there being less gravity, but oh, no, they got a trade certificate from Inter-Planet, so they know everything. I think I am going to bust someone’s head today.”

“Serious,” says Charlie, feeling a chill run up his spine. He activates a video from month-24. He

recognises the room as being the dormitory. Maddy wears a leotard and there are dozens of people crowded around her, cheering. There is a biting competition going on. Maddy growls like a wild animal and her opponent trembles. She pounces and bites the opponent on the ear. The opponent taps out, shrieking.

“Shit,” Charlie says, taken aback by the ferocity of the attack and remembering the fight in the Science Lab. He goes back to the previous videos, and tiles then across the screen, playing them all simultaneously. He watches the progression of Maddy’s madness over the two years.

In the biting competition video, Maddy is now surrounded by dozens of fawning people. One person says “You’ve won the Mars Biting Championship a second time. How did you do it?”

“Discipline, exercise and commitment,” Maddy says.

Charlie looks at the running machine and other fitness equipment. it’s a very professional and ordered set-up.

On the video, Maddy says, “I am disciplined, physically fit, mentally and emotionally stable.”

“Mentally stable,” Charlie sniggers. “Not!”

Back in the Mess Room, Charlie checks on the Martian Cat and finds it curled up asleep next the empty maggots box. He moves into the Surgery and finds that Maddy, still strapped to the table, is clam. “We need to have a chat,” he says.

Maddy nods slowly, and Charlie leans down and kisses gently on the forehead. Tears well in her eyes.

“Do you trust me?” Charlie asks.

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

“I trust you.”

“Do I trust you?”

“I don’t know,” Maddy sniffs back a tear.

“Ask me.”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

Charlie releases the velcro straps and helps Maddy sit upright. He sits on the table, next to her. “How you feeling?”

Maddy nods her head slowly. Her breathing is interrupted by her tears.

“Come here.” Charlie moves her against his body and they embrace.

Maddy sniffs, “Nobody hugs on Mars.”

“Well they do now,” Charlie tells her.

Maddy starts hyperventilating, and fans her face

with her hands. "I feel all Ming Ming."

"Is that? What is that?" Charlie asks.

"I just feel so..."

"What?"

"I just want to get out of here." Tears pour down Maddy's cheeks. "I just want to go outside."

"Outside?"

"I want to go outside where you can breathe." Maddy gets agitated, waving her hands around. "I don't want die here. I don't want fungus growing in my brain or biting competitions."

"It's okay. It's okay." Charlie calms her by stroking her hair.

"I'm sorry for what I've done. I don't want to do it anymore."

Charlie presses his bandaged hand against her cheek and absorbs a tear.

"I'll get you out of here."

Maddy takes hold of his hand. She sniffs and nods her head. "I need to change your bandage."

Maddy has Charlie sit on the surgical table. She unwraps his bandage, revealing the a tiny hole in his skin. She turns his hand over to see another tiny hole. "It went straight through, see?"

"No." Charlie looks away, grimacing.

“Don’t you want to look at it?”

“I’m not good with gore.”

“But it’s your gore.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“Does it hurt?”

“It’s sore.”

“They heat up as they come through the so-called atmosphere so it’s probably cauterized the wound.”

Maddy binds Charlie’s hand with a fresh bandage. “You’ll live. Are you hungry?”

“For food? No. I’ve seen what’s in the fridge.”

Charlie meets Maddy’s eyes and they stay that way. Hormones gurgle. Physiological changes take place in their bodies.

“I have something in my room I want to show you,” Maddy says.

“Mars etchings?”

“Would you like to see them.”

“*Uh-huh.*”

Maddy takes Charlie by the good hand, and leads him through the Flalgae Factory.

“I think I know what those flies are for now.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” Maddy pushes open the door to her room and they both stand there for a few looking each other over while their juices gurgle. Then the action starts.

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*F**k Factor 5*

Charlie and Maddy fall through the door, kissing and groping. They stumble onto Maddy's bed, hurriedly undressing each other.

"Oh, baby," Charlie murmurs as he slides his hand between her legs. But she removes his hand, "There's no pussy grabbing on this planet," she admonishes him.

Charlie stands on the bed and drops his jumpsuit. He looks down at his wedding tackle with surprise. "Hold on," he says, disappointed to see that his hormones have fail to communicate the urgency of the situation with his lower portions.

"Hold on to what?" Maddy asks, observing Charlie's wilt. "There's nothing to hold on to." She puts her hand over her mouth to smother her giggle.

"*Oooh*. That's never happened before. Sober," Charlie wiggles his ass, hoping to shake some sense into his malfunctioning manhood, but it doesn't work.

"Is that all it does?"

"Be nice. You'll give stage fright."

"It already has stage fright, Charlie. I mean look

at the ridiculous little thing.” Maddy flicks Charlie’s pecker with her fingertip.

“Maybe be you could give it a kiss,” he suggests, hopefully.

“That’s just not going to happen. We don’t do foreplay on Mars.” Maddy shakes her head, angrily. “I’ll just wait it out, I guess.” She sits back on the bed with her arms crossed, watching the young space engineer’s motionless member.

The seconds tick by...

Charlie closes his eyes and tries to think of something erection-worthy. He tries to conjure an image of a sexy woman doing a dirty thing.

However, all that comes to mind is the Martian Cat. In his mind’s eye, Charlie sees the skeleton paw, the wet scabs on its back, and the grey cataracts in its eyes. That image is definitely not a fast-track to a stiffy, even on a f**ked-up planet like Mars.

“*Oooh*,” Charlie sighs, in anguish, now desperately trying to rid himself of the thought of the diseased animal.

“Does this happen often to you, mate?” Maddy asks, icily, when she gets bored waiting.

Charlie peers down, dismayed to see that nothing is working. “I don’t know what is going on,” he whimpers.

Then, Maddy bursts out laughing. “Relax, mate. You’ve just got Mars Droop.”

“Mars Droop? “

“It happens to everyone.”

“You knew about this?”

“Of course. I’m a doctor.”

“Everyone gets it?”

“Of course.”

“Well, what causes it?”

“I don’t know. Microgravity. Misery. The persistent aroma of cat piss, maybe.”

“Well, is there a cure?” Charlie’s voice begins to waver.

“Sort of.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Earth.”

They both roar with laughter and some colour returns to Charlie’s underperforming appendage.

“But that’s six months away,” Maddy says, tersely. “Assuming we can get off this limp-dick planet. And I’m not waiting six months for a shag, now that you have got me hot.”

“So what do we do?”

“Well, there’s a remedy, but it’s extreme.”

Charlie gulps, “Is that Earth extreme, or Mars extreme?”

“I’ll show you. Wait here.” Maddy departs the

room. When she returns she is flicking her nail against a large hypodermic syringe that contains a green fluid.

“What the f**k?” Charlie’s wedding tackle shrivels even more, as he takes sight of the needle. “You’re not putting that thing in me!”

“Will you stop bitching?”

“But what’s is that?”

“You’ve heard of Spanish Fly, the aphrodisiac?” Maddy asks. “Well, this is Martian Fly.”

“You are going to inject me with flies?”

“Not the whole fly,” Maddy scoffs, shaking her head at his silliness. “Just the active ingredient: *F**k-Factor-5*. It’s an extract from fly saliva.”

“You are not going to inject my penis with fly spit,” Charlie stammers, disbelievingly, stepping away from the needle.

“Oh, come on Charlie, it’s just a little prick.”

“It’s not little,” Charlie whimpers. “It’s normal sized. I measured it.”

He backs up to the window, pushing his butt cheeks against the glass. “There must be another way,” he pleads.

“You could ingest the flies. But you’d need to swallow about two kilograms to get sufficient active ingredient.”

“There must be another way.”

“Well, I could put it in your ass,” Maddy says, nonchalantly.

“You mean that you are a man?” Charlie stammers, completely discombobulated.

“No Charlie, you dumbf**k. I mean that I could put the injection in your ass. But it will leave a terrible bruise.”

Charlie turns, and clenches his eyes closed. “Do it then. But be gentle.”

Maddy squirts some Fuck-Factor-5 from the needle. “We don’t really do ‘gentle’ on Mars,” she says, as she plunges the needle into Charlie’s soft butt-flesh.

He yelps as the medic pumps the entire syringe-full of F**k-Factor-5 into his blood stream. Charlie shudders and clenches his teeth as the fly spit courses through his veins.

Maddy tosses the syringe aside, and turns him around to observe progress. “Well, hello Mars,” she says, gleefully.

“*Oooh*. This feels really weird.” Charlie looks down at his wedding tackle watching it pulsing into life. It is increasing in length and width in bursts, growing like a party balloon blown-up by an asthmatic.

“Oh, will you please stop whining?” Maddy growls, watching intently as the F**k-Factor-5

does its work.

A minute passes, and Charlie's member is now standing as rigid and firm as the rocket that bought him to the miserable planet.

"Alright," says Maddy, stripping off the last of her clothing. "Let's do this thing before the spit wears off."

"How long will it go for?"

"Oh, that should do you for about twenty minutes," Maddy crawls onto the bed. "Which should just about do me."

Twenty Minutes Later

Twenty minutes later...

“Oh, boy! That was the best bang since the big one.” Maddy sighs, laying on her back staring at the ceiling. Lying next to her, Charlie is panting, a bruise the size of a golf ball on his ass.

“Did you have a boyfriend here?” Charlie asks when he recovers his breath.

“Hell no. There’s nothing but bad sex and gossip on Mars. Until today. It is so lonely. I have an emotional relationship with a computer.”

“Rachel?”

Maddy laughs. “Yeah.”

“She’s not that bright.”

“But she means well. And I’ve been so angry.” Maddy sits up and puts her hand to her forehead, as she has a realisation. “What have I done to all those people?”

“Hey, Maddy.”

She begins to tremble, as she thinks back, “I’ve been butchering people!”

“Whatever happened, happened,” Charlie says.

Maddy’s breathing increases pace. She looks distraught. “It’s like living in a nightmare.”

Charlie rubs his hands over her naked back.

“Live in this second, Maddy. The past is a memory, the future, just an idea.” Charlie takes her hand and squeezes it.

“Just let it go, huh?”

“This second is real. That’s all you have got.”

Maddy looks around the cabin. “Do you think we’ll survive this?”

“I don’t know. It’s possible.”

“We just fuel up and fly away?”

“The shuttle is mostly automated,” Charlie says, “So assuming that nothing goes wrong...”

No Dead Yet

Meanwhile, back in the Science Lab...

From the bloody floor of the Science Lab an emaciated, yet formerly heavy-set man, rises. Turner, the imbecile Mars Plumber, has bite marks on his face and neck. He's lost blood, but he's not dead yet. He staggers around the corpses of his two fellow workers, Carly and Salvador, slipping in the gore.

"Oh, you f**king bitch," he grumbles, clutching the open wound in his neck from which he bled, but did not bleed-out. He staggers around the building, trying to figure it out, and then he comes across the Second-Skin spacesuit that Salvador found in the ceiling. He checks the dials and sees that it is full of oxygen. With this, he can go outside...

Wearing the damaged Second-Skin, Turner, falls out of the air lock and lands face-down in the dirt. He struggles to raise himself, rolling around in the dirt. The robotic warning signal tells him, "Second-Skin is leaking. Pressure 98%."

He comes to his feet and turns towards the

Command Module. “I’m coming for you, you bitch!”

As he bunny hops along, he passes by the rubbish tip, and he stops to search the Debris of Alternative Facts for a weapon. In amongst the snow boards and fishing rods, he finds a metal tube with a spring on it. He picks up the Pogo Stick, and considers its usefulness. There is a rubber knob on the lower end, and he strips this off, revealing a blunt metallic stump. It’s a bit lightweight, but with some effort, it could be used to crack a helmet visor, or crush someone’s skull; it’s an awesome weapon.

The Mars Plumber looks towards the Command Module, and wonders whether locomotion with the Pogo Stick would be quicker. So he lowers the end to the ground, takes firm hold of the handles, hops into the air and lands with both feet on the footrests. However, because the gravity on Mars is so pathetic, the Mars Plumber’s descent is insufficiently rapid to depress the metal spring. So, the spring doesn’t go down, and it doesn’t bounce back up again. Instead, the plumber finds himself momentarily standing there on the pogo stick, going nowhere. It can’t last. After a second, he tilts in one direction and continues falling – albeit quite slowly – until he crashes into the Mars

dirt, still clutching the handles of the Pogo Stick.

Well, that didn't work! The Mars Plumber comes to his feet, dusts himself down, and with the Pogo Stick clasped in his gloved hand, resumes his Bunny Hop across the bleak Mars surface.

Gassing the Elderly

After the shag, Charlie steps into the portable-lavatory sized bathroom to take a wash. He opens the tap in the shower cubicle, and moves his hand under the nozzle to check the temperature of the stream of water. Except that no water comes out. Instead, there is a hissing sound as only air moves out of the shower rose. "What is it with the plumbing on this planet?" he moans.

He leaves the tap open, and turns his attention to an Inter-Planet Shower Bag. He retrieves the toothbrush and tooth paste, and unscrews the cap. He squeezes and watches as a pasty-coloured dribble of goo comes out. At first, Charlie is disappointed, but then he sees the bright side. Given that there is no water in the plumbing on Mars, it is advantageous that the toothpaste is so liquid. So Charlie starts to brush his teeth but almost immediately, the toothbrush snaps, snagging his gum with a sharp edge. At that same moment, the shower cubicle comes to life. Holding his fingers against his cut mouth, Charlie looks towards the shower rose. The gurgling noise intensifies and then a spurt of reddish-brown liquid erupts, strikes the wall of the shower cubicle, and dribbles slowly down the drain. It is

all too much. Charlie throws the toothbrush on the floor, shouting “F**king Mars!”

Meanwhile, Maddy swoops around her room, packing things for the return to Earth. She has found a box, and is carefully packing inside it jars of pickled brains. She looks up as Rachel, the pre-pubescent base computer addresses her.

“Maddy. I have decoded the one of the corrupted files from the shuttle.”

“Really? Which one?”

“It is the video log of the flight.”

“*Uh-huh.*” Interesting. Maybe this will help explain why everyone but her new f**kbuddy are dead.

Maddy lolls into the navigation station in the shuttle and sits in front of the monitors and looks at the video that shows the inside of the shuttle. All the pods are closed.

“What am I looking at here?” Maddy asks Rachel.

“This is a CCTV file from the flight. This is T-Plus 10 days.”

Maddy fast forwards the video and the timer on the video shows the progression of weeks with nothing happening. Then, there is movement on the screen and Maddy halts and rewinds.

She hits play and on the video, and sees Charlie

in the frame. He is sitting in the pool room, strapped into a chair to resist against floating away in the 0-G gravity, and reading a book. Maddy checks time stamp and sees that this is taking place at T-Plus three months – half way through the journey, just as Charlie had said. Maddy hits the fast forward button and watches as Charlie's movements speed up. She sees him unstrap his belt and float around the room. She fast forwards some more, and peers intently at the monitor trying to make sense of what she is seeing.

Charlie drifts past the camera holding a red cylinder with a black band.

“What the heck?”

“Is that a rhetorical question?”

“Yes.”

Charlie drifts back into frame and the object becomes clear.

“It's a fire extinguisher.” That checks out, as he said that there was a fire on board. Then Charlie does something very strange. He drifts down to one of the pods, lifts the lid and blasts the pod with CO₂ gas. The effect is instantaneous, a cloud of white gas fills the pod, and Charlie, weightless, is propelled backwards by the force of the exiting gas. He tumbles through the air and bangs against

the wall. Then he recovers, and propels himself back towards the pod. He positions himself, this time to prevent being thrust away, and doses the person inside the pod with another dash of CO₂ gas, and closes the lid on them.

Charlie moves to the next pod and repeats the action, but this time, he has learned the tricks. He only allows the canopy to open a little way, floods the inside with the killing gas, then closes the lid. By the time he has reached the fifth pod, he is proficient, and is able to extinguish the life inside in just under a minute.

Maddy is stunned. She holds her hand to her mouth. “He’s asphyxiating them.” She sits there, aghast, watching Charlie move from pod to pod, gassing the inhabitants to death, and then setting the pod to freeze, indicated by the green light turning to blue.

Maddy makes the movie go fast forward ten minutes, and then twenty minutes. It goes on for over two hours as Charlie murders every one of the inhabitants of the shuttle. Finally, the inside of the shuttle glows an ominous blue as 120 dead passengers begin to freeze.

Maddy feels a chill move through her, and the blue glow inside the shuttle takes on a new significance. She is alerted to a sound – hairs

come up on her arms – and she turns to see that Charlie Darling – the mass murder – is standing right behind her.

“All of them,” he says, gravely. “I killed them all.”

Maddy holds her hands up, defensively. “Don’t hurt me.”

“I am not going to hurt you.”

“Just step back, okay?”

Charlie complies. He is not aggressive. Quite the opposite. He’s calm, contemplative.

“But why?” Maddy asks.

“Why did you blow up the base?”

“What do you mean, I blew up the base?”

“Hey, Maddy, here’s an idea.”

“Okay.”

“How about you and I have an honesty competition.”

Maddy nods, solemnly. “Maybe it will be a draw.”

“Come with me,” Charlie reaches out, and Maddy takes his hand. He lolls with her up a flight of steps to the hibernation pod that still has the green light glowing. They sit on the edge and Charlie takes Maddy’s hand and looks at it, pensively, while he forms his words. “My fiancée. My former fiancée...,” he begins. He sighs deeply,

composes himself, then continues with his story.

“This is years ago, so it’s ancient history now.”

“*Uh-huh.*”

“She was a psychologist. She was interested in this phenomena whereby people who believe that there should be a Mars colony stop caring about our Home Planet – Earth – because they believe that Earth and Mars are equal.”

“Equal?”

“That’s right. And this, at a time when the living systems of Earth, the planetary boundaries, are being smashed because of human actions. We are killing a living planet to come and live on a dead one.”

“What were you then?”

“I was a uni student. Studying genetics. I started to think that there was a genetic mutation that made people want to kill Earth for Mars. I call them Marsophile Genes.”

“I understand.”

“So I am watching thousands of people aspiring to leave for a planet with no biosphere – it barely even has an atmosphere – and trashing the Home Planet in the process. Millions of species, a multi-billion year progression of evolution being wiped out.”

“Where is your fiancée now?”

“She was killed at a Mars protest by a supposedly non-lethal weapon. She was arrested and died of shock in a lock up cage. It was f**king awful.”

“You were there?”

“I was in the next cell. And as I watched my fiancée die, I found a new mission in life.”

“Destroy the Mars program?”

“Wipe out the Marsophile gene pool. That’s my life’s work. So I got a space engineer’s degree. I got a job with Inter-Planet. And here I am.”

“Well, you have an ally, here,” Maddy says. “I concentrated on destroying the infrastructure and the people who depend on it.”

“Well, if they’re her, they’ve got Marsophile genes, so no complaints from me,” Charlie says. “But we’re not finished yet. We have to get off this planet and deal with the infrastructure and Mars genes on Earth.”

Nuked on High

Later, Charlie is working on a computer, planning the escape from Mars when he hears Maddy using those time honoured words of feline enticement, “Here Kitty, Kitty, Kitty.”

He looks up, and listens intently. There is a mewling sound, and then a hiss, the sound of a struggle, and the noise of the Martian Cat being tenderised, by having its body bashed repeatedly against a hard surface.

Charlie moves into the Surgery just in time to see Maddy throw the unconscious cat into the autoclave. She leans forward to check the settings and is just about to press the button to delouse the cat, when Charlie swoops in, grabs the limp cat from the autoclave, “You leave the cat alone!”

“So you can do what?” she barks back.

“I’m taking it with me.”

Maddy laughs aloud at the sight of Charlie defending the flaccid feline. “Really? And where are you taking it?”

“I’m taking it back to Earth.”

“Ridiculous. Even if it survives the journey, it will perish in the 1-G gravity. That’s assuming it gets through quarantine. Which it won’t, because

it's covered in skank."

"Why do you have to be so mean to the cat all the time," Charlie protests. "Maybe we can heal it."

"Heal it? What are you thinking, Charlie? The skank is bone deep."

"How do you know? Have you done any tests?"

"I don't need to. Just look at it. Just sniff it. Does it have that cat smell? Or a pungent aroma of fresh gangrene?"

"It just needs to be loved," Charlie protests, clutching the cat tightly to his chest.

"It's on the wrong f**king planet for that."

"Medicine, then."

"Oh, for f**k's sake!" Maddy snaps, caving in to Charlie's persistent whining. "Here's what we'll do. We'll do a health analysis on cat, and if it is anything other than SSF, we'll try to fix it up, and eat it later."

"What?"

"I mean, we'll see what happens next."

"What's SSF?"

"It is the lowest grade of Martian Cat. So off you go. Put the stupid animal in the Martian Cat Health Analysis Device," Maddy points across the room.

Charlie carries the cat to a device the size of a

microwave oven. He opens the door and places it on the circular glass plate. Closing the door, he presses the start button and steps back to watch the light come on behind frosted glass. Inside, the Martian Cat rotates, and a buzzing noise emanates from the device. The cat doesn't look too pleased, and it starts sweating profusely.

"So, Charlie," Maddy shakes her head, wearily.

"What?"

"We have different types of equipment in the Surgery."

"*Uh-Huh?*" Charlie isn't sure what this cryptic comment means. He glances around the bench and sees a device with a clear plastic bubble and all the sorts of dials and displays that you would expect of medical equipment. It even has the words 'Martian Cat Health Analysis Device' written in big, bold letters.

Just then, the microwave oven makes that distinctive DING!! noise, and Charlie realises his terrible mistake – he has accidentally nuked the Martian Cat!

"Oh f**k!" he rips the microwave door open and peers the chamber full of steam. As the steam dissipates, the Martian Cat comes into view; it's just lying there, motionless. It is unclear whether it has survived being microwaved on high for

thirty seconds.

Charlie reaches inside to retrieve the cat, but it's skin is so hot that it scalds his hands. He yelps, and drops the cat.

Unlike cats on Earth that rotate in mid-air and land on their feet, cats on Mars go straight down and generally land on their heads. The Martian Cat hits the floor making a crunching noise, suggesting that either its skull or some of its vertebrae have fractured – as if the poor cat really needed any more ailments.

Motionless, on the floor, the Martian Cat just lays there, steam rising off its emaciated body. Charlie gets down on all fours, and starts blowing air over it desperate to stop it from cooking internally. “Oh, what have I done?” he asks, furtively, between breaths.

“You’ve just microwaved your skanky little mate,” Maddy laughs, callously.

“Maybe we can fix it.” Charlie picks up the limp, hot cat, and lolls across the Surgery to Health Analysis Device. Gently, he places it inside, then lowers the lid and presses the ‘start’ button. He is relieved to see that at least one of the Martian Cat’s eyes is open and is swivelling around.

Lights start flashing, inside the Health Analysis

Device. There is a buzzing noise as complicated and highly technical robotic instruments assess the cat. A green laser beam scans across the cat's body. A hypodermic syringe plunges into its skin and draws fluid. A robotic arm take hold of its head, and a swab is plunged into one of its encrusted nostrils. A thermometer is thrust up the Martian Cat's ass. The invasive procedure would be awful to experience, but fortunately, the Martian Cat is heavily concussed.

After about three minutes of meticulous analysis, the torment ends and a green light flashes on the Martian Cat Health Analysis Device. Maddy addresses the ceiling. "Rachel, are you ready to deliver your analysis of the Martian Cat's health?"

"I'm ready," says the chirpy computer, the innocent with Intel Inside.

"Stand by then, I'll get technical manual to check its grade." Maddy retrieves a technical manual – the User's Guide to Martian Cats – and poises her pen above a page.

Martian Cat Health Analysis

Maddy rests against the workstation, ready to start noting the results of the Martian Cat Health Analysis. “Okay, Rachel. Let’s do this thing,” she instructs the base computer.

Rachel, the computer with the voice of a twelve year old girl, reports on the Martian Cat’s health, using the technical lingo from the User’s Guide.

She says, “The Martian Cat has been recently nuked, and concussed by low-gravity droppage.”

“That’s your fault,” Maddy growls at Charlie. He shuffles around from foot to foot, embarrassed.

Rachel continues, “The Martian Cat has recently been tenderised.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Maddy says, dismissively. “Moving right along.”

“The Martian Cat has a disconnected posterior substructure.”

“What?” Charlie asks, confused. “What does that mean?”

“That means it’s tail fell off,” Maddy tells him. “Just concentrate. Keep going Rachel.”

“The Martian Cat is largely incapable of

acquiring acoustic data.”

“The cat is deaf,” Maddy says, marking the manual with her pen.

“The Martian Cat has cataracts in both its eyes.”

“The cat is blind.”

“*Abhh*... Like love,” sighs Charlie.

“No, Charlie!” Maddy snaps. “The Martian Cat is not like love. Unless love is a non-healing skin disease; is that what you had in mind, mate?”

“Not, really, no,” Charlie looks at the floor, despondently. He’s getting scorned again.

“So how about you quit with the romantic poetry; it’s not welcome on this planet. Rachel. Continue.”

“The Martian Cat’s left and right nostrils are blocked by desiccated mucus.”

“It’s got double snot-nose.”

“The Martian Cat lacks skin on a forward limb.”

“It’s been de-gloved.”

“The Martian Cat suffers debilitating complications caused by scabies, rabies and scab; as well as Multiple-Canker syndrome.”

“*Urrrh*. F**k my eyes! It’s impustulated!” Maddy, makes a disgusted grimace. “And you had this f**king thing in your helmet?”

“*Yuh!*” Charlie agrees. “It was awful.”

“Did you wash the helmet, afterwards?”

“With what? There’s no running water on this stupid planet.”

“Whatever. I’ll sanitize it later. Rachel?”

“The Martian Cat suffers 30% detachment of anterior grippage.”

“Front claws are missing.”

“The Martian Cat has digestive malfunction leading to intentional and non-intentional out-gassing from the posterior orifice.”

“Oh, f**k my life!” says Maddy, angrily. “You bought a flatulent cat into the Command Module.”

“It was attached to my face,” Charlie whimpers, feeling queasy as he is reminded of what happened inside that space helmet, not so long ago. He still has the metallic taste of the aerosolised cat shit in his mouth.

“What the f**k were you even thinking?”

“I woke up with its front bottom in my mouth.”

Rachel continues, “The Martian Cat is susceptible to imminent descrufrage.”

“Don’t pick it up by the scruff of the neck,” Maddy instructs, tersely.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s neck will fall off, dumbf**k. Aren’t you listening?”

“Alright, alright,” says Charlie, defensively.

“No, it’s not alright, Charlie, this is serious shit! A Martian Cat has got inside the Command Centre. It ought to have been quarantined.”

“The Martian Cat’s mental function has been severely compromised by cosmic rays, micro-nutrient deficiency, abject loneliness and Mars Immiseration.”

“The Martian Cat is stupid. F**k, this goes on forever,” Maddy snaps, angrily. “Rachel, let’s wrap this up, can we please?”

“The Martian Cat has no teeth, it’s fur is falling out, it suffers whisker-failure, it has green-tongue, it smells like gangrene mixed with blue-cheese and it has worms,” Rachel says quickly. “This ends the health analysis of Martian Cat ID 4566-5757.”

“Well,” says Charlie, seeking to put a positive spin on things. “Apart from all that; it’s in pretty good shape, really.”

“What?” Maddy asks astounded, looking up from her manual where she has completed her assessment. “The cat is not in good shape, at all, Charlie. It’s Martian Cat Classification is S.S.F., as I suspected.”

“S.S.F? What does that even mean?”

“It stands for Stupid, Skanky and Flatulent.

That's the lowest grade of Martian Cat there is."

"But we can fix it, right?"

"You can't fix S.S.F., Charlie – it's bone deep. That animal is going straight into the autoclave, before it out-gasses and completely f**ks the air quality of the Command Centre."

Not happy with this answer, Charlie lolls over to the Health Analyser and retrieves the slimy critter from inside. The Martian Cat regains consciousness and its eyes swivel inside their sockets as it tries to regain what little of its senses actually work. Charlie holds it protectively against his chest and says firmly, "No way! If you put the cat in the autoclave. You'll have to put me in there, too."

"Well, that's all the more protein for me," says Maddy, reaching for the bone saw.

Charlie backs away with the cat, looking anxiously for somewhere to run to. But where does one run to in the portable-lavatory sized shit-hole that they call the 'habitation modules' on Mars? What's he going to do? Go outside? Get a grip Charlie; you're on Mars, mate.

Sensing Charlie getting his freak-on, the Martian Cat expresses fluids from its open sores, and it slips out of Charlie's arms, falls slowly to the floor and makes a run for it, hobbling away on three of

its four legs that work properly.

“Oh, f**k! It’s escaped,” Maddy snaps. She hurls the bone saw at the Martian Cat, and it strikes the floor making that electric VIV-VIV! noise, bouncing, and slicing one of the Martian Cat’s ears clean off.

Earless and afraid, the cat increases its pace, and disappears into a hole in the wall that is big enough only for a small, emaciate animal. Maddy rushes over to the hole and peers inside.

“Well that’s a right f**k-up!” she barks, rounding on Charlie. “Now there’s a flatulent cat on the lam!”

“Run, little Kitty. Run.” Charlie calls out. “Run and hide.”

“You just don’t get it, do you Charlie?” Maddy says, glaring at him.

“I get that you don’t care for your pets.”

“Charlie, let me give you the Mars induction that you clearly didn’t get back on Earth.” She ushers him to take a seat, and he does so, out of fear of what comes next.

The Mars Induction

Maddy paces around the Command Module as Charlie settles himself on a chair, glumly. He looks up with a worried expression, feeling like he just can't get anything right on this stupid planet, Mars.

"Are you seated? *Uh-huh?* Listening?" she barks. "*Yuh.*"

Maddy begins the Mars Induction with a terse tone, "On Mars – even on a good day – we are perilously close to death at a moment's notice. You do understand that simple, concept; don't you, Charlie?"

"I think so."

"That's good. Because outside this flimsy portable-lavatory sized so-called 'habitation module' is the vacuum of space. There's no air out there, Charlie. There's no air. It's frigidly cold, and it is nearly always dark on this stupid planet. We are being constantly bombarded with cosmic rays. And if we go outside, we have to wear skanky space suits that reek of toe-jam and cat piss, even after they've been sanitised. Out there, we are subject to micro-meteorite showers and running out of oxygen. And if we get a split in the space suit, we suffer an instantaneous space-

f**king called Mars Liposuction. Are you following me, Charlie?”

“I think so.”

Maddy paces around, waving her hands for effect. “Martian madness stalks us all the time, due to the profound loneliness of being on this lifeless, empty planet. And we subconsciously know that it is immoral to have come here, leaving our own race behind, and having damaged our home planet in the process. We have knowingly shunned our duties as humans beings, to rescue the dying biosphere and care for one another. And we all, personally, chose this path, so there is no one to blame but ourselves. You see, Charlie, being on Mars is an intensely lonely and suicide-worthy experience. So, the chances of not accidentally or deliberately killing ourselves on any particular day are actually pretty slim. And that’s when we follow the rules.”

Charlie nods, humbly. He knows that she is right. He glances up; his doleful eyes are the opposite of hers, alert and in command.

Maddy continues, “On the other hand, if we don’t follow the rules – like you don’t, for example – then we are four-fifths of a femtosecond away from getting royally space-f**ked at a moment’s notice. Do you have any

idea what that's like?"

Charlie looks down at his feet, glumly, shaking his head, as Maddy brings the induction to its personal phase.

"So, with that as a frame, I would like to address your ridiculous, bleeding-heart obsession with that disgusting, diseased Martian Cat; an animal that has absolutely no pet-utility whatsoever, and is only good for the cooking pot, once it has been thoroughly deloused in the autoclave."

Charlie blushes, acknowledging to himself that he does tend to make friends rather too easily. Maybe he should have been more cautious in taking the Martian Cat to heart, so soon.

"As a result," Maddy continues, "We now have an uncontained Level-4 Biohazard stalking the Command Module. Tiny flakes of the Martian Cat's diseased skin are floating through the air, as we speak. And at any moment it could let rip with a Hellacious Cat-Fart that could easily result in an Extinction Level Event for all intelligent life on this planet – that's you and me, by the way."

Charlie squirms as he hears Maddy's intonation change and she delivers the last part of the Mars Induction with a harsh, cruel voice. She says, "So, Charlie, given that you are now on Mars, it's time that you sprout some hair your little man-balls

and grow the f**k up!”

Maddy storms off, leaving Charlie feeling quite wretched. He never did like being scolded, and particularly not on a melanoma-pimple of a planet 50 - 400 million miles from home, and by a psychopathic bitch who cuts people’s brains out for a hobby. Suddenly, Charlie feels all alone, and really wishes that the Martian Cat wasn’t so skanky, stupid and flatulent, so that he could give it a big hug without the risk of causing a planet-wide extinction event.

He sighs glumly, and tries to put a positive spin on things. “Oh, well,” he tells himself. “At least I’m not dead yet.”

Planning Escape

Later, in the mess room, Charlie works on the plan to ensure that existing Mars infrastructure is incapable of supporting the ongoing manned missions to the runt-planet. He spreads a large sheet of paper across the surgical table, and sketches the layout of Mars Resort. When he has completed his drawing, he steps back and informs Maddy of his plan. “So, there’s a couple of options, depending on how much certainty we want over ending the Mars missions.”

“One hundred percent,” Maddy says.

“Well, we can’t guarantee that.”

“Ninety-nine point nine-nine percent recurring, then.”

“Right. Well that makes it a bit easier, I guess.” He sketches on the paper some more. “You see, there are eleven shuttles in orbit around Mars that are due to land one month apart. The plan is that each shuttle augments the existing infrastructure, and then returns either empty, or with passengers or crew who want to go back.”

“Which will be pretty much everyone,” Maddy says. “Because the planet’s such a shithole.”

“*Hmmm*. So, if they land here and find this mess, they will probably elect to go back to Earth

straight away. It takes about two weeks to harvest new methane, so every flight will probably land, refuel and return within a fortnight.”

“Which they can do, right?” Maddy asks.

“Well, the methane and oxygen generators are producing fuel, so yes. Now... Thinking this through... If that happens, all the Marsophile genes will return to Earth’s biosphere. Inter-Planet will go probably into administration, its asset will be bought cheap, and the rocket launches will start again under new owners – and probably with the same passengers. So if we leave here with things as they are, it doesn’t really change things that much, in the long run.”

“*Hmmm*,” Maddy says, settling in against the table. “So, what if there is no fuel supply. Then what happens?”

“Well...” Charlie holds his fingers against his chin as he thinks it through. “The first shuttle lands on the base platform and unable to return, they’d have to make do with the shit that’s left after the explosion you set off. Good work there, by the way.”

Maddy and Charlie make a little high five.

“And what about the other the other ten shuttles?”

“They’ll have to land in the desert and wait,”

Charlie says.

“Wait for what? Rescue?”

“Nobody is going to send a rescue for a couple of hundred old fat people. That shit only happens in the movies. No, they’re on their own.”

Maddy raises her hand to slow Charlie down.

“Hold on. How long will power last on the landed shuttles?”

“Battery power on board, a few days at most.”

“And then?”

“Lights out.”

“They die in their sleep?”

“No. When the power goes down, the anaesthetic switches off and everyone wakes up.”

“So would they suffocate or freeze?”

“Probably a bit of both, I’d say.”

“Oh my!” Maddy jolts at the thought. “Is it possible that the newcomers will find a way to survive with the demountable huts they have on board?”

“There’s not enough spacesuits. There’s not enough food. It’s hellishly complex. There’s about ten engineers and technicians for the hundred or so tourists. And, they’ll need to hook up to the solar power for that.”

“So, we’ll have to destroy the solar power supply as well,” Maddy says.

Charlie ponders this idea for a while, and then nods, in agreement. “If you want you certainty, then yes.”

Meat and Three-Veg

Charlie sits at the table in the mess hall, looking despondent. Maddy puts two bowls on the table and pushes one to him. “Cheer up, little buddy, it’s tucker time.”

“Food?” Charlie is pleasantly surprised; he can’t remember when he last ate. He glances around at the refrigerator where he saw the awful contents, but tries not to connect the two things together.

The food in the bowl contains a material that looks like green porridge with beige flecks in it. It doesn’t look too bad, sort of like green mashed potato with brown rice.

“Right. So, what’s this?” he starts getting excited at the idea of eating.

“We call it Meat and Three-Veg.”

“It’s branded well.” Charlie takes a spoonful and sniffs. It smells a bit like seaweed. Fortunately, Charlie is partial to Japanese food, so he doesn’t find this too off-putting. Gingerly, he samples the food. Then something kicks in inside his head – he hasn’t eaten for months. He tucks in ravenously, scooping spoonful after spoonful into his mouth. He pauses for a moment to comment, “This is awesome. What is it?”

“This is the standard meal on base, since the

Farm went walkabout.”

“*Huh?*”

“The Perambulation of Mars Farm,” Maddy says, cryptically.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It’s just one of the many failures on this cluster-f**k planet,” she explains. “We had this farm module called Mars Farm. A \$10 billion dollar NASA project. It was going to produce potatoes, tomatoes, herbs, chickens, all-sorts really.”

“Liquorice all-sorts?”

“No, Charlie. Not liquorice all-sorts,” she snaps, angrily. “All-sorts of different food.”

“*Oh*. I see.”

“Charlie, where did you actually go to Mars School?”

“Yeah. I did a Graduate Diploma in space engineering at Inter-Planet Online.”

“Okay, that explains a lot. They didn’t talk a lot about things like nutrients?”

“Not really, no. So... About the farm?” Charlie asks.

“Mars Farm. So, the machine that picks up the modules and carries them to where they need to be... Well, it malfunctioned and it just went

walkabout with the farm.”

“Walkabout.”

“Yeah. It just drove off into the desert. We think it would have got about forty miles before it ran out of batteries. Over that way.” Maddy points. “That freaked everybody out. Over time, about a dozen of the starved colonists took space suits and went looking for it. We never saw them again. Fortunately, we had a backup food generation system.”

Charlie looks down at his dish, thinking it through. If this food is not made of potatoes, tomatoes, herbs, chickens, or liquorice allsorts, then what is it?

“It’s not real Meat, though, is it?”

“Really?” Maddy asks, curtly.

“What?”

“Charlie, this planet doesn’t have an atmosphere. It doesn’t even have bacteria. How is it supposed to support anything other than indoor animals, like that diseased cat-thing you keep carrying around?”

“So what’s in it, then?”

“What do you think is in it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, all the nutrients are recycled on Mars. The poo, piss, food scraps, medical waste. That’s

what the flies are for.”

“The flies? So this is made of...”

“Meat and Three-Veg. Maggots and micro-algae. Clever, huh?”

Charlie opens his mouth, willing for the maggots to fall off his tongue. His face turns a pale green colour. “*Ohhh*. Did you have to tell me that?”

“Oh, you sook.”

“I have to get this out of my mouth.” Charlie starts scraping his tongue with the side of the spoon. He looks around furtively, “I need some chocolate cake.”

“Chocolate cake?”

“The brochure said there was chocolate cake served with every meal.”

Maddy laughs aloud. “There’s no chocolate cake on Mars, you imbecile. There’s no bacon, eggs or coffee. Out here in butt-f**k nowhere space, all you get is maggots, algae and skanky cat flesh.”

Charlie pushes his bowl away. “You have it. Really, I’m not hungry.”

“Skipping meals is the fastest way to lose muscle tone,” Maddy warns.

Charlie swings his legs over the side of the chair, and changes tack. “You know, if we follow this plan, we’ll cause a lot of human suffering.”

“I know.”

“Are you okay with that?”

“We’ll be doing the colonists a favour.”

“Saving them from your cooking?” Charlie says, and they both laugh.

Maddy slides his bowl back to him. “Come on. Adapt. Do what’s necessary to survive. It’s just insect larvae and aquatic plants.”

“It sounds better when you say it like that.”

Charlie takes back his bowl and loads a spoonful. He steels himself, then swallows the Meat and Three-Veg.

“Go again.”

Charlie looks at the food, thoughtfully. “By killing off the Marsophile genes, we’ll be doing our job as human beings, of protecting the Home Planet.”

“Exactly. So are you good?”

“I’m all good.” Charlie pushes the spoonful of Meat and Three-Veg into his mouth, and swallows the food.

Refuel the shuttle

In the navigation room, Charlie sits with Maddy, as they plan the route back to Earth. On the monitor is a moving image showing a yellow ball, the Sun, surrounded by two concentric circles each with a dot moving along the path – the orbits of Mars and Earth.

Charlie explains the return trajectory. “So, the Sun is in the middle. This is Earth’s orbit. And Mars goes around the outside.” With his fingertip, he draws a curved line slowly across the screen from Mars so that it intersects with Earth. “So we go this way and meet Earth on the inside, here.”

“That’s a long way.”

“It’s tight. We have to balance speed and fuel burn.”

“We’ll be asleep for years.”

“More than one, less than two, I think.”

“Is there enough sleep stuff for that?” Maddy asks.

“Yes, but that’s not the limiting factor?”

“What is?”

“The hangover from a year’s space sleep and dealing with real gravity.”

Charlie continues to run checks on the technical

systems that determine whether he and Maddy and the Martian Cat have any reasonable chance of survival. Then Rachel, the precocious mainframe, interrupts his thoughts by informing him that the methane and oxygen tanks are full, and that the shuttle is ready to be fuelled.

He turns in his seat, excitedly to see Maddy, “We can start fuelling the shuttle.”

“Great news.”

“Can you order it underway for me?”

“Sure. Why?”

“Your little sister hates me.”

“Oh, come on.” Maddy addresses the ceiling, “Rachel, you don’t hate Charlie do you?”

“That is classified information.”

“Great,” Charlie mumbles. “She’s learning humour.”

“Rachel, start fuelling the shuttle,” Maddy tells the computer.

“Refuelling underway.”

Maddy starts jumping and clapping.

“Excitement! We’re leaving Mars!”

“Let’s not get too excited,” Charlie cautions.

“There’s a lot of things have to go right first. And we can’t afford anything to go wrong.”

Who's the Little Kitty Cat?

Maddy enters the shuttle holding a box that is packed with human brains and note pads filled with handwritten research data. She has spring in her step, and she levitates with each footfall as she sings, “We’re off to see the planet, the wonderful planet called Earth.” Her high spirits are instantly snubbed, however, when she comes across Charlie playing with the Martian Cat. She stops to watch, shaking her head, a grim look fixed on her face.

Charlie has the cat on top of one of the hibernation pods, and he holds the animal in front of him with its hind paws resting on the lid. He bounces it gently up and down, as though it were dancing, and asks repeatedly, “Who’s the little Kitty Cat? Who is that little Kitty Cat?” with a voice so inane that even a two-year-old child would think that he was acting like a complete retard.

As one might expect, the cat fails to reply. One reason for this is that cats don’t speak English – not even Martian Cats who have been genetically mutated from the constant bombardment of

cosmic rays. But even assuming that the cat did speak English, and its mental function wasn't blighted by micro-nutrient deficiency and Mars Immiseration, there is no way that it could possibly offer a sensible answer to such an idiotic question. 'Who's the little Kitty Cat?' What does that even mean?

Maddy brings the infantile bullshit quickly to an end, "Charlie, if you ask that disgusting animal one more time 'Who's the little Kitty Cat?' I will rip out it's spinal column, beat you with it until you welt, and then shove it up your f**king ass."

Charlie halts his game immediately, stung by the mean-spirited rebuke. He creases up his face, wondering whether Maddy would actually do that; shove a cat's vertebral column up his bum. Yeah, that sounds like the sort of thing that she'd do.

He looks over at Maddy, noticing the colour in her cheeks, and the curve of her breast under the jumpsuit. He detects the aroma of hand sanitiser hanging in the air, a volatile aroma that he is starting to associate with gratuitous sexual encounters. He wonders whether there is any Martian Fly left in the syringe, and if there is enough time for a quick shag before they leave the runt planet.

"So, space engineer," Maddy continues, getting

back to the Mars departure business, and disturbing Charlie from his lustful contemplation. “Should we be taking these cadavers with us, or do we bounce them from the shuttle? Charlie? What are you looking at? Don’t look at me like that.”

“Rachel?” Charlie asks.

“What?” the petulant computer asks, grumpily.

“Do we need to remove any weight from the shuttle?”

“I will commence calculating the probabilities.”

“Hey!” says Maddy, abruptly. “Don’t task my little sister. And don’t look at me like that. Tourist.”

Charlie and Maddy size each other up, and she softens her tone, somewhat. “Oh, okay, then. But it has to be a quick twenty minutes; we have a rocket to catch.”

Meat, Three-Veg, Pussy, Cock

Outside the Command Module, Turner halts, looking through one of the windows. He peers around, unsure of what he is looking at. It seems to be a big chamber full of blow-flies. It takes a while for the single neuron inside his brain to send an insightful signal, and then he realises what he is looking at. It's the maggot factory.

"Meat!" he moans, deliriously, the deep pangs of hunger returning. He presses his visor against the glass, stunned, as he watches the insects buzzing around. He looks at all the other shit in the room and his eyes fall on a green tube. He follows the pipe with his eyes, noticing a gooey green fluid trickling into a vat.

"Three-Veg!" he groans. By now the Mars Plumber is salivating madly and drool spills from the side of his lips down his chin. It's f**king disgusting.

After filling up his spacesuit with saliva for some time, he finally continues his journey around the building. Suddenly, he halts, and takes a step back, convinced that he just saw someone. Cautiously, he pokes his head around the corner

to spy into Maddy's chambers.

Inside, he sees Maddy standing there, butt naked, talking and beckoning someone to come towards her. Turner is instantly hypnotised, at the sight of her naked body, and he moans, deliriously, "Pussy!"

Then Charlie interrupts his view, by stepping right in front of the Mars Plumber. He is facing the window, but can't see the plumber for the light reflected from the glass. Charlie unties the Inter-Planet bath-towel that is wrapped around his waist, and the towel drops slowly to the floor, revealing a magnificent tumescence. Turner's eyes are pinned wide open in shock and awe, and he moans, "Cock!"

Charlie turns, revealing his ass to Turner in which there is a hypodermic syringe hanging out of his skin, and six dark bruises. Maddy cracks up laughing as he opens his arms theatrically and says, "*TA-DA!*"

Charlie pounces on Maddy and they root mercilessly, like a pair of rattlesnakes.

Turner falls to the ground, distraught. He lays on his back in the Martian dirt, hungry and horny, clutching his gut and moaning.

"Oxygen pressure low," says the alarm inside his suit.

Turner sits up exhausted and looks around. In the distance is the ruined dormitory. He gets up and locomotes across the Martian dirt towards it.

Twenty minutes later.

The Martian Fly aphrodisiac wears off and the Martian Droop returns. Fortunately, by that stage the vigorous shag has satisfied all the drives and juices that caused the problem in the first place, Maddy and Charlie rest under the covers, breathing heavily.

“Wow!” Charlie says, adjusting the pillow to better see Maddy’s flushed face. “That was even better than the last five.”

“But who’s counting, right?”

“We really need to keep focused.”

“So what’s next?” Maddy asks.

Charlie sits upright. He runs his palm down his face, and says glumly. “I have to go outside and disable the methane generator and the solar panels.”

“You okay with that?” she asks, rubbing her knuckle against his skin.

“Sure. What could possibly go wrong?”

Sabotage Mars Infrastructure

In the airlock, Maddy holds the helmet as she watches Charlie don the Second-Skin. When he is suited, they kiss and Maddy fits the helmet in its place. She passes him a cordless power drill, and then steps out of the airlock, and closes the door. She watches through the window as the air evacuates. Charlie raises a hand to wave, then opens the outer door to the Mars surface.

It's a miserable, bleak and suicide-worthy sight. A desert plain, dimly lit, just rocks and dust and toxic perchlorate constantly bombarded with cosmic rays. What a f**king shit-hole. Only insane masochists would come here, if they knew the truth about the place, which is why the Mars industry goes to such great lengths to misinform the public.

Outside, Charlie bunny-hops towards the methane machine carrying the tool that will disable it. Across the way, inside the dormitory, Turner is slumped against the wall in the airlock, connected to the oxygen hose. Through the window, he sees Charlie hop past as the helmet voice tells him, "Suit oxygen cylinders are full."

Turner disconnects from the oxygen hose and moves to where he can watch Charlie. He doesn't know Charlie's name of course, but he knows that Charlie has four things that he, himself, does not: Meat, Three-Veg, Pussy and Cock. Well, if the Mars Plumber can't have those things, no-one else should, either.

At the methane generator, Charlie opens the control panel to see it all illuminated with green light. He removes one of the boards and drills a series of holes into it. When he slides it back into its slot, the methane generator shudders and all the control panel lights go red. Charlie steps back and observes the orange light on the top of the methane generator has started flashing, like it was when he first arrived. He glances towards the Surgery but sees no sign of Maddy, so he bunny hops towards the solar panels to wreck them, too.

Meanwhile, Maddy is inside the clinic, packing jars full of human brains into a box for the trip back to Earth. "How we going out there?" she asks the ceiling.

Rachel the computer replies, "The methane generator has sustained irreparable damage."

"Well, that's good news."

Rachel continues, "The refuelling pipe between the methane storage and the shuttle has been

damaged.”

“You have got to be shitting me,” Maddy growls.

“There is a methane leak and the shuttle’s refuelling rate is reduced.”

Maddy moves through the Surgery to a window that overlooks the pipe. There, she sees a man in a spacesuit busily hacking at the hose with what looks like a Pogo Stick.

“What the f**k is going on?” she asks, perplexed. Then Maddy sees another suited person bunny-hopping across the Martian countryside. This one is carrying a power-drill, and suddenly it all makes sense.

Suddenly, Turner is distracted from his task, and he looks around and observes Charlie bunny-hopping towards the solar panels.

“Oh, no. Charlie!” Maddy says, pressing herself against the glass.

Turner turns towards the Command Centre, and sees her peering through the window. He raises a gloved middle finger at Maddy, and moves in Charlie’s direction with the Pogo Stick. As he moves away from the methane pipe, he reveals a sequence of nicks in the material, and little jets of gas leaking from the holes.

Maddy gasps, “That’s our fuel!”

Outside, Turner bunny-hops towards Charlie, breathing heavily. The helmet warning advises him, “Oxygen level 60 percent.”

“F**king leaky suit!” he barks.

Up ahead, Charlie halts at the solar panels, and opens the control panel. As before, he pulls out a circuit board, drills some holes in it, replaces it, and all the lights go red. Another orange flashing light illuminates the resort.

Behind him, Turner raises the Pogo Stick and swipes down hard, but he completely misses, and overbalances, and falls slowly to the ground.

Completely oblivious to this near-fatal encounter, Charlie moves away without seeing him.

“Oxygen levels 40 percent,” says Turner’s suit warning as he struggles to get to his feet.

“F**k!” he searches around for sanctuary, and then bunny-hops at full speed towards the dormitory.

Inside the Surgery, Maddy has her face pressed to the glass, “Charlie! Charlie!” she cries. “Hurry up, you dumb f**king tourist!”

“The solar panels controls have sustained irreparable damage,” says Rachel the computer. “Switching to battery power.”

“Oh f**k. What have we done?” Maddy looks at the methane leaking from the pipe.

She meets Charlie in the airlock. As soon as the chamber has filled with air, she steps inside and starts ranting. She is panicky, afraid and vulnerable.

From inside his helmet, Charlie can't hear a thing. All he can see is Maddy ranting at him. Boy she is animated. Waving her arms around, her mouth going at full speed.

“Oh, shit. She's relapsed,” he mutters. He delays removing his helmet, knowing that he is going to get an earful as soon as he does.

“Someone is here,” Maddy says, anxiously, when he finally moves the helmet from his head.

“What?”

“There's someone else out there.”

“I thought that you had killed everyone.”

“Well I guess I f**king missed one, Charlie! He came right up behind you.”

“What are you even talking about?” Charlie asks, peeling the rank spacesuit from his body.

“And he cut the shuttle fuel line.”

“You have to be shitting me!”

“Come on. I'll show you.” Maddy leads him through the building to the window that overlooks the leaking pipe.

“Oh, f**k my cat!” Charlie moans, “Rachel, is the shuttle refuelled?”

“Shuttle refuelling is proceeding.”

“Will there be enough fuel to get us to Earth?”

“I have calculated a new launch trajectory. It requires launch in T-Minus seventeen minutes.”

“Seventeen minutes!”

“To reach Earth, your will need to reduce shuttle weight by one point five tonnes.”

“We have to bounce ten cadavers out of the shuttle,” Maddy says.

“Can we do that in seventeen minutes?”

“I think so, assuming that nothing goes wrong?”

“Yeah, right. And what could possibly go wrong. Huh? Rachel, initiative launch sequence,” Charlie says, authoritatively.

“No,” replies the miscreant mainframe.

“What?”

“You’re not the boss of me.”

“Oh, for f**k’s sake. Not this again. You’re a damn computer! Initiate the launch sequence!”

“That’s not how to get through to her,” Maddy calmly.

“From now on, I’m only taking orders from Maddy,” says the ceiling.

“*Abhh*. That’s so sweet. Rachel. ‘T’d’ like you to initiate the launch.”

“But, I don’t want you to leave.”

“But you’ll be with us on the shuttle, sweetie.”

“And when you leave the shuttle?” Rachel asks, with a sad tone.

“How about this?” Maddy says. “I’ll download your source code onto a memory stick and install you on my computer when I get back to Earth.”

“You know that I’m four hundred and seventy five Gigabytes,” Rachel says, proudly.

“I know. You are a big girl now.”

“Launch sequence initiated,” Rachel purrs. “T-Minus sixteen minutes.”

“Sixteen minutes,” Maddy says, suddenly alert. “Shit! I haven’t finished packing, yet.”

Tossing the Porkers Out

While Maddy and Charlie are frantically rushing around getting their shit together before the space launch, Turner, the imbecile Mars Plumber has recharged his leaky spacesuit with oxygen and has crossed the frigid, barren Mars surface to the Command Module. He enters the building via the airlock. Inside, he removes his helmet, then steps into the Surgery.

He knows his way around, and so he goes quickly to the Flalgae Factory and stands in front of the huge condom-like sheet, watching the little black insects buzz around. He is mesmerised by them, like a stoned kid in front of a tumble dryer. Eventually, his attention is drawn to the chamber where the fresh maggots accumulate. He slides the drawer open to revel a squirming mass of fresh meat. He digs his hands in deep, then raise them to watch the tiny beige larvae wiggle and tumble back into the vat. Then Turner wolfs down handfuls of fresh maggots, gobbling the wriggling larvae, hungrily. He washes them down with liquid algae straight from the pipe. He gorges himself like this until his is bloated.

Eventually, he slumps onto the floor, exhausted. He looks up and sees through the swarming mass

of flies a door. He pushes through the condom skin and comes to the door on which there is the words: "Mad Ho." Curious, he moves inside Maddy's cabin and looks at the empty bunk where he had observed the obscene sex act.

Meanwhile, Maddy moves into the shuttle carrying a white box full of human brains. Charlie looks over at her from the Navigation Desk.

"Lift off in T-Minus 13 minutes," says Rachel the computer.

"Are you bringing that?" Charlie asks, gulping, as he sees the brains in the bottles in the box.

"Of course, this is my research data."

"I guess." Charlie looks around the shuttle full of dead people. "We should probably start bouncing some of these cadavers, then."

Maddy rises the canopy of a Hibernation Module revealing a frozen fat, white woman. "Give me a hand to toss this porker out." She tugs at the frozen woman, enthusiastically. "Come on, grab a leg."

Charlie takes hold of the frigid leg but he gags and doubles over, clutching his gut. "I'm not good with corpses."

"Oh, come on. They're okay." Maddy opens another pod, revealing a small woman.

"Start with this one, she's build like a bird." She

pulls little frozen woman from the pod and drags her into the airlock by the hair, leaving behind a moist trail.

Charlie stares at the watery skid mark, feeling queasy. He turns pale and starts to shiver. On her way back into the shuttle for another body, Maddy cuts him a break. “Don’t worry. I’m all over it. You just stick to the engineering stuff.” She calls out to the ceiling, “How we going for time, Rachel?”

“T-minus eleven minutes.”

“Shit. We’re out of time.”

She peers into the pods, looking for her next victim, but none seems to suit her needs. So she lolls up the steps to the upper lever and there finds a frozen corpse that meets her specification. She pulls the body out of the pod, lifts it over the rail and lets it fall on 0.38 G gravity and lands with a sickening, squelchy thud. Maddy does the same with another five cadavers. On the lower deck, the pile gets bigger and bigger. She lolls down the steps and grabs two bodies by the hair and drags them along the floor of the shuttle and through the airlock. She lets the two bodies come to rest against the wall. Then she looks at her hands, not knowing where to wipe them.

Maddy is distracted by a noise. She turns to see

Turner standing behind her with the Pogo Stick held in the air. He has maggots in his beard, his face smeared with algae. There is dried blood all over his face from the wounds that Maddy gave him. He swings the Pogo Stick down hard, but Maddy ducks aside and he misses, instead hitting the body of a rotund white woman, making a dull squelch.

Maddy ducks through the airlock into the shuttle, and closes the door. “F**k!” She peers through the window to see Turner approach.

“Lift off in T-Minus 10 minutes,” says Rachel the computer.

“Charlie! Charlie!”

Charlie approaches and looks through the window. “Who the f**k is that?”

“That’s him.”

Turner crashes the Pogo Stick against the window. Once, twice, three times. At each blow it sounds as if the window will break. But then he turns and moves out of the airlock, and disappears from sight.

“Has he gone?” Maddy asks, peering through the window.

“If he smashes the window, we’ll be completely space f**ked,” Charlie says, combining his engineering knowledge with Mars lingo.

“We have to stop him.”

“I’ll take care of this,” Charlie says, boldly.

“What?” Maddy asks, watching Charlie puff up his chest, heroically.

“Since I’ve been on Mars, Maddy, I have growing hair on my man balls.”

“It’s really sweet, but I don’t think you’re the right guy for the job.”

“I have killed,” Charlie says, gravely. “And I will kill again, if needs be.”

“*Hmmm*. Gassing old ladies in their sleep is not really killing, in a Mars sense.”

“I’ll try to talk him around, first.”

“I doesn’t work like that on Mars, Charlie.”

“I happen to be trained in the ancient conflict-resolving martial art called Aikido. I’ll use the ‘Orange-Peel’ technique on him.”

“*Uh-huh?*” Maddy says, mistrustfully. “And how does that go, exactly?”

Charlie explains, “Well, imagine that the dispute with the Mars Plumber boils down to a dispute over an orange.”

“Which it doesn’t, by the way. I’m just saying.”

“Imagine that we just want the orange peel, and he only wants the orange juice, you see? Through communication, we will likely find that ‘our’ interests and those of Mr Plumber, are not at

odds.”

“But that’s a Mars Plumber, Charlie.”

“So?”

“Well, first, he doesn’t just want the whole orange, he wants all the oranges. And so do we.” Maddy says. “And secondly, they aren’t that good at communicating.”

“Watch and learn, Maddy. Watch and learn,” Charlie says boldly. He activates the shuttle door and steps into the airlock.

The door closes behind him and Maddy resumes peering through the window, shaking her head regretfully. “Oh, you poor, naïve child.”

“You do like him, don’t you,” says Rachel the computer.”

“Yes. I do now,” Maddy says, truthfully.

Charlie lolls through the airlock into the Arrivals/Departure Lounge, cautiously looking for the Mars Plumber.

“Hello? Mr Plumber?” he calls out, but Turner is not there.

Instead, the Mars Plumber is back in the Flalgae Factory, stuffing his face with wriggling maggots and glugging down great gulps of fresh algae. After sating himself, he moves back into Maddy’s cabin and stands in the doorway, sniffing the air. He casts his eyes around the room, and spies

Maddy's bra on the bunk. "Oh, yes!"

Turner retrieves the bra and wraps it around his head. He finds a mirrored surface and checks his reflection. "That's a battle cap."

Charlie enters the Surgery calling out, "Hello? Mr Plumber." He sees Turner emerge from the Flalgae Factory wearing Maddy's bra on his head, and instantly he is less inclined to have the conversation about the orange. He steps cautiously back, out of sight. "They're all barking mad," he mutters to himself.

Meanwhile, Maddy is busy inside the shuttle hauling cadavers out of their pods, dropping them over the rail, and dragging them to the door of the shuttle. She's got about nine there, a mound of overweight humanity, looking like a mass-stranding of albino elephant seals.

She peers anxiously through the window, and sees Charlie come into view. He is lolling backwards with his hands held out in front of him, and saying something that she can't hear. "Oh no," Maddy sighs.

Turner advances on poor Charlie, who is running out of places to loll backwards to.

"Take off in T-Minus six minutes," says the pre-pubescent base computer.

"I am going to f**king eat you," Turner growls

at Charlie.

“Think about it, mate,” Charlie implores. “I just want the orange peel. Honest.”

Turner rushes him, and instinctively, Charlie leaps aside and then jumps on Turner’s back, clinging tightly. It’s a clever move. With his cheek pinned against Turner’s they are both looking in the same direction.

“Can’t you see,” Charlie says, desperately, practicing his Aikido. “We’re looking in the same direction now.”

Turner runs backwards and slams Charlie into a wall, crushing the breath out of him. Charlie hits the ground and Turner falls on top of him with his forearm pressed against his throat.

“I see real good now,” the Mars Plumber growls, revealing bad teeth speckled with algae and maggot. One of the maggots falls from Turner’s beard into Charlie’s mouth and he gags, trying to spit it out.

Then Turner clamps his teeth SNAP! SNAP! next to Charlie’s face. Charlie raises his bandaged hand in defence and Turner sinks his teeth into it. Charlie shrieks in pain, the bandage immediately soaked with blood. Turner shakes his head violently and the bandage comes off in his mouth. Charlie screams, and kicks his heels violently

against ground.

Now, the battle between the imbecile Mars Plumber and the charming, if naïve, Mars Engineer, creates quite a commotion.

Subsequently, the noise and vibration of Charlie's screaming and thrashing, wakes the Martian Cat, who has been quietly asleep in an adjacent corner.

Classic Martian Cat Attack

As it wakes, what remains of the Martian Cat's functioning senses begin to absorb information from its surroundings, and its addled brain draws some alarming conclusions. First, the cat concludes that it's nemesis – the Mars Plumber – is in dangerously close proximity; and second, its only friend in the entire Universe – Charlie Darling – is experiencing extreme distress. On the strength of these two realisations, the cat goes further to assume that the two factors are connected; and it draws a stunning, third conclusion: the Mars Plumber is kicking the shit out of Charlie Darling.

Now, it takes the Martian Cat some time to put all this together because it is pretty much deaf in both ears; it has cataracts in its eyes; and its whiskers – the few that remain properly attached to its face – don't provide any useful sensory information, apart from when it bumps into things, head-first. Furthermore, the emaciated feline's nostrils are always clogged with dried snot.

You see, obtaining useful data from the

environment is very hard for the Martian Cat. Fortunately, millions of years of natural selection, have helped cats evolve brains that are hugely successful at making sense of the most marginal amounts of information – excellent for creeping around silently in the dark, chasing a mouse, for example.

Every sense in the decrepit animal's body is alerted to danger, as it desperately tries to hone-in on where its enemy is actually is. It processes the milky shadows that move through its cataract-ridden eyes until it detects a pattern – the shape of large human.

The Martian Cat makes a wet-gurgling noise as it inhales scent molecules through its clogged nostrils. The awful aroma that it senses helps it to confirm that indeed, the shape is that of the menacing Mars Plumber.

Suddenly, the Martian Cat becomes fully alert – or at least what passes for 'fully alert' given its blighted capabilities for sensing things, and figuring shit out. Instantly, it leaps to what remains of its feet, with what remains of its hair sticking up from its scab-ridden spine.

When the Martian Cat is more or less assured of the general location of the Plumber's head, it leaps in that direction.

It flies through the air with much more horizontal momentum than vertical – what with the reduced gravity, and all. As Martian Cat flies through the air, it deploys its one biological sub-system that still functions more or less as it ought to. It impacts the Mars Plumber with what remains of its claws fully extended. With stunning effect, the needle-like tips plunge into the plumber's skin, and the cat gains a firm hold on its enemy's face.

This is a classic Martian Cat attack! Fast, deadly, fierce.

Clinging to the Mars plumber's face, the Martian Cat knows that it is in grave danger, so it turns to its most potent weapon: Cat Gas. At point-blank range, it curls its body, to bring its puckered anus within an inch of the plumber's head, and then lets out the most hellacious spurt of moist butt-gas – directly into the plumber's face.

Now, the Martian Cat has been well fed since it arrived in the Command Centre, inside Charlie's helmet; so its digestive system is fully primed with maggot, in varying degrees of digestion. While the previous fart that it accidentally leaked into Charlie's space helmet was old and stale – this fart is fresh!

And not only is it fresh, it is also really, really loud! The noise is f**king unbelievable!

The powerful gush of feline-anal gas forced through the narrow orifice of the Martian Cat's anus, makes a damp-whistling sound, the likes of which has only one analogue anywhere in the known Universe.

Let me explain. Consider, for a moment, that an obese Mars tourist has gone outside for a walk wearing a tightly fitting spacesuit. Imagine that the tourist accidentally drops a piece of chocolate cake on the ground. Now imagine that tourist squatting to pick up the chocolate cake, and in so doing, ripping the crotch out of the spacesuit. The moment that rip starts to spread, the tourist gets instantly space-f**ked by a massive case of Mars-liposuction that draws a hundred litres of warm fat through their asshole, into the frigid vacuum of the Martian atmosphere – a Mars Death type that is so awful that it doesn't even have a name, yet.

Now, if you can imagine what that sounds like, then you have some idea of what the Mars Plumber heard when the Martian Cat farted in his face. And that's just the noise – we haven't even got to the smell, yet!

The aroma of the Martian Cat's fart is so

hellacious that just reading about it – let alone actually smelling it – leaves an indelible patch of non-healing scar material on the subconscious of the human mind. Entire cities of lunatic asylums have been constructed just to cater for the people who just came to know about this terrible event, and went instantly mad (this might be you, by the way).

The only positive thing that can be said about what the Martian Cat did to the Mars Plumber – the most hideous event that ever happened anywhere in the Universe – is that it happened on the melanoma-pimple planet, Mars; 50-400 million merciful kilometres from the awesome, beautiful, biosphere-covered planet Earth.

And speaking of Earth – or what’s left of it after all the f**king rocket launches have ruined the atmosphere, and poisoned the polenguin... It is said that you can actually smell that Martian Cat fart on Earth sometimes! It’s true, people sniff the air and say, “Can you smell that? That’s the vestigial trace of that famous Martian Cat fart.” Or if they are pressed for time, they just yelp, “Cat Gas!”

Now, whether this is actually true that you can smell the Martian Cat’s fart on Earth, it is hard to say. But the next time you enter an empty

elevator and it smells farty, ask yourself this question, “Is that stench from the butt-hole of last person in the elevator, or is it the vestige of the deadly flatulence that the Martian Cat dashed onto the Mars Plumber’s head?” Mars is a very long way away, but it was a brutish bit of flatulence – so it remains unlikely, but still possible, right?

Also, next time you accidentally let one slip in public, don’t suffer the embarrassment of confessing to it, just blame it on the Martian Cat. “Damn that Martian Cat!” you could say, and when people ask you what you are talking about, you can tell them the story about how the Martian Cat, in defence of its buddy Charlie Darling, delivered the most awesome ass-gassing in history of the Universe. So potent was that fart – you could tell your audience – that to this day planet Earth periodically passes through the remnants of the awful cloud.

It’s also a great icebreaker at parties. You just go up to someone you fancy and ask, “Have you ever smelt the Martian Cat’s fart?” Or if they are wearing a noticeable fragrance, you could sniff the air adjacent to them and say, “That’s a lovely perfume. It smells nothing like the Martian Cat’s stinky bum gas.” It’s a weird little trick, but it

works! Pick-up artists report a 24% increase in their strike rate when they incorporate some reference to the Martian Cat's voluntary outgassing in their opening sequence.

Anyway, back on Mars... A dramatic scene is unfolding. For the Plumber, the effect of the Martian Cat fart is instantaneous. Within fourth-fifths of a femtosecond, he is completely space-f**ked – rendered catatonic – as the fart molecules spread through every one of his biological systems, slamming them shut. He falls flat on his back, quivering in anaphylactic shock, his eyes wide-open, staring at the ceiling, his entire body convulsing and quivering like he had just received an enema made of liquefied nerve gas.

Seeing this terrible scene, Charlie Darling, climbs to his feet and steps back, horrified, realising that he has narrowly avoided inhaling any of the cat's anal hell-fire. He clutches his hand and watches the Mars Plumber quivering on the floor.

At that very moment, Maddy opens the door of the shuttle and enters the fight. She rushes forwards and sinks her teeth into the Mars Plumber's crotch, pinning his nuts between her canines.

For a time, the Mars Plumber remains quivering from cat-fart toxicity, but finally his nervous system manages to get a signal through to the single neuron in his feeble brain and report that his testicles are being crushed between a psychopathic woman's teeth.

The effect is instantaneous. Turner wakes up, screams "YAAARRR!!!" and leaps to his feet. He clutches his hands to his bollocks, and hops around, whimpering, his face contorted from the hideous residue of the Martian Cat's colonic fluids.

Maddy steps back and turns her attention to Charlie, who is creased over in pain, clasping his wounded hand. "Would you mind if I make a casual observation?" she asks.

Charlie looks up, grimacing, willing to accept any advice he can get right now.

Maddy says, "I think that when it comes to eradicating Marsophile genes, you just should stick to gassing old ladies in their sleep and leave the biting competition to me."

"*Uh-huh.*" Charlie nods. "Is that all?"

"That's the main thing." She picks up the Martian Cat, which is lying on the floor, exhausted, and passes it to Charlie. "How about you take your little mate inside. I'll come in once

I've finished here.”

Charlie takes the flaccid Martian Cat, and steps inside the shuttle. Behind him, Maddy hits the button sealing the door closed.

Charlie puts the cat on the ground, and takes stock of the pile of frozen cadavers next to the door. He looks through the shuttle door window and sees fleeting glimpses of Maddy and Turner engaged in brutal combat. He turns to see the cat stagger away and collapse under one of the Habitation Modules. Delivering that fart has absolutely shattered the poor little creature.

Can I come in, sweetie?

Charlie paces around the shuttle, anxiously, not knowing what to do. He really ought to drag the cadavers out of the shuttle, but he can't bring himself to touch them. Forcing himself, he squats down and grabs an white ankle. It is clammy and cold, still mostly frozen. He feels nauseous, and starts to gag.

Panicked, he stands, then goes back to the window on the shuttle door to see how Maddy is faring, and he is totally shocked by what he sees!

Maddy is right outside the window, looking in. Her face is smeared red, and there are clots of blood in her hair. Her white jumpsuit is splashed with gore. Blood glistens as it runs down her neck. She is talking but no words are audible through the thick glass of the shuttle door.

"Take off in T-Minus two minutes," says Rachel the computer.

He is gripped with terror, Charlie instinctively hits the button to keep the door locked. What the hell is he doing? Nothing makes sense.

Unable to open the door, Maddy activates the intercom. "Hi Sweetie. Can I come in?"

Charlie starts trembling. "What... what... what happened to the man?"

Maddy looks behind her, then back to Charlie. “Oh, he’s okay.” Suddenly, Maddy holds her hand to her throat and starts to retch, like she has something stuck in her throat.

Charlie watches intrigued, while she gags violently. She takes one huge laboured breath, and then coughs up a chunk of flesh. Turner’s nose is propelled from her throat, hits the window, sticks there for a second, and then slithers down.

A wave of terror washes over Charlie making his man-balls shrivel up inside his body cavity. He takes a step back, and trups over one of the cadavers, and falls onto the floor. He scrambles madly to his feet to hit the ‘lock door’ button again. Outside the window, Maddy holds her throat, a pained look on her face as she tries to regain her breath.

“Sweetie?” she says hoarsely through the intercom.

“You bit his nose off.”

“But only once, sweetie.”

“Take off in T-Minus one minute,” chimes Rachel the computer.

“Can I come in please, Sweetie?”

Charlie is unable to comply, as he is frozen by fear.

“Can you open the door, please, Sweetie?”

The door light goes green and there is the sound of an electric motor engaging with a rack and pinion. The door starts to unlock, and Charlie hits the lock door button again. The light goes red, and the rack moves back the other way.

“Take off in T-Minus thirty seconds.”

Charlie looks around the shuttle and sees the pile of dead people and the pickled brains. His hand throbs, and he has the taste of uncooked maggot in his mouth. He sees a pool of defrosted cadaver juice trickling in his direction. It really is just all just too much for our squeamish space-hero, Charlie Darling, and he blacks out, and collapses onto the deck.

Lift Off

Charlie wakes on the floor, disoriented. Rachel delivers the final countdown, “Seven. Six. Four. Ignite main engines. Two. One. Lift-off.”

The shuttle rattles and roars and Charlie clings to the floor, terrified. He sees the Martian Cat cowering under a Hibernation Pod. He crawls that way and reaches out his arm, but the vibration is too intense, and he can’t connect. The terrific rumbling and roaring overwhelms everything as the shuttle departs the Martian surface. It goes on and on like this for minutes, seeming to shake the shit out of everything until, suddenly...

...it becomes completely silent.

The shuttle has departed Mar’s pitiful atmosphere and it now in 0-G gravity. Charlie become weightless. He drifts away from the hibernation pod, and starts laughing and crying at the same time – weightlessness does that to you, apparently – as he sees the Martian Cat drifts free, as do the nine defrosting cadavers that Maddy pulled out of their pods.

“I’m free. I’m free,” Charlie sobs, feeling a great wave of euphoria washing over him. But just

then, a shadow moves across his face and a tremor of fear washes over him.

He turns, and gasps to see that Maddy is an inch away from his head, floating above him. She is surrounded by a hundred droplets of dark red blood that glisten under the lights inside the shuttle, fleas around a mangy dog.

She is breathing deeply, and holding out her bloodied hand. In the other, she holds the sleep wand. With her face smeared with Turner's blood, she looks like a grinning psychopath, or like one of those freaky f**king clowns that keeps you up all night wondering why you ever went to the circus.

Her fingers curl around the collar of Charlie's jumpsuit, and she draws him towards her. Her mouth opens, revealing teeth stained with blood.

Charlie freezes, unable to move. He starts to hyperventilate. Short sharp breaths. "I give in" he chants. "I give in." It is like the last thing that he will ever say. He manages to raise one hand in submission as Maddy moves her mouth towards his neck.

When her mouth touches the his skin, Charlie clams-up, unable to even draw breath. Only his eyes move and he swivels them as far round as they will go in the socket, to try and gauge what

horror is falling upon him.

Maddy moves away from him, revealing, a red kiss mark on his neck. "Thank you sweetie," she says, softly.

She hands him the sleep wand. "Will you put me down for a while?"

Charlie looks aghast at the sleep wand. Hairs come erect on his arms as he realises that he has again narrowly escaped death.

Maddy has a dreamy look as she hovers in mid-air. "Charlie? When we get back to Earth, can we do something...?"

"Uh-huh."

"Can we go outside in the rain, together?"

"Yuh. We can do that."

"Thank you for rescuing me, Charlie," Maddy continues, dreamily. She wraps her arms around him and holds him gently against her body. Charlie is stunned that she could be so comforting. They hang like this for a while, drifting amid the corpses.

"We've done it Charlie," she tells him. "We've killed every one on the planet. And somehow, we've managed to survive. We can go home now."

"It seems that way."

"What should we do when we get back to

Earth?”

Charlie thinks about this for a while as they drift together.

“When we get back to Earth,” he says. “We need to leverage the story about the thousand Mars dead, and help the world have a spiritual awakening, a revolution of caring for the home planet. Maybe then our planet will be able to heal.”

“That’s a lovely thing to dream about,” Maddy sighs. “I’d like to sleep on that.” She moves her hand to Charlie’s arm and directs the Sleep Wand towards her neck. As he activates the device, she makes a little gasp, and her eyes open wide for a second, and then fall closed as she drifts into unconsciousness.

Charlie holds Maddy’s motionless body at arm’s length and examines her. The precise and disciplined woman has lost her hand-sanitiser smell, and instead, her aroma is overpowered by the stink of the Mars Plumber’s sweat, and the pheromones that he shot into the air when his nut-sack was crushed between her teeth. Her hair all tousled up, and her jumpsuit is covered in the blood. There is even a little brown smudge suggesting that she rubbed against a surface upon which the hellacious cat fart had settled into tiny

blobs. The smudge of cat shit reminds Charlie of his little buddy, and he wonders where the Martian Cat is.

He moves Maddy over to the hand rail, and unzips her jumpsuit to move one of her arms out of the clothing. He ties the loose sleeve to the rail so that Maddy won't drift off.

Then he goes looking for the Martian Cat in the Inter-Planet Mars Express Shuttle as it speeds through space at 30,000 kilometres per hour, heading for a rendezvous with the home planet, Earth.

Interspecies Space-Ballet

Charlie moves weightlessly in the 0-G gravity inside the Mars shuttle, calling out those time-honoured words of feline enticement, “Here, Kitty Kitty Kitty.” They never fail, and shortly, he hears a cat-like noise in reply. He pulls himself between one structure to the next, flying free, in between. It is an extraordinary feeling of freedom, even though he is stuck inside a metal box outside of which is the perishing vacuum of space, millions of kilometres from anywhere nice.

He finds the Martian Cat on level three, suspended in mid-air, wearing a horrified expression. It’s cataract-filled eyes are pinned wide in terror as it tries to figure out how get from where it is, to where it wants to be. But of course, it can’t get where it wants to go because it has nothing to push against. Instead, the poor cat is just drifting around aimlessly, writhing and spinning-in mid-air, unable to gain purchase on any surface. Upon seeing Charlie, however, it is immediately relieved, and it starts to make a pitiful mewling noise that sounds almost cat-like.

Charlie pushes himself off one of the pods, and reaches out to grab the cat as he flies past. However, he misjudges, and instead of gently

taking the cat in his arms, the best he can do is to clutch his fist around the cat's scruff, which instantly comes off in his hands.

As he continues his flight, he looks at the furry flesh gripped in his hand and is reminded of Maddy's stern instruction, not to handle the cat by that part of its body because it is vulnerable to 'descruffage' – well, that just happened.

As Charlie contemplates these horrible things, his weightless journey comes to completion as he bangs into the fuselage of the shuttle. In the instant before he impacts, a positive thought comes to his mind: "At least the cat is no longer in danger of descruffage!"

Now, the physical motion of the coming together in mid-air of Charlie and the Martian Cat has imparted into the cat an angular momentum, causing it to drift off at speed, albeit with a piece of its skin missing. As Charlie slams into the fuselage feeling quite cheery from his positive spin on the unfortunate event, the Martian Cat is now just spinning. Spinning head over tail-less ass.

It mews horribly – the sound of its bleat rising and falling like the siren on a fire engine – and then crashes into a hibernation module occupied by a frozen, decrepit old man, with ingrown

toenails; making a sort of wet squelching noise. The impact startles the cat; and it strikes out with its hind legs, propelling itself in Charlie's direction, and rotating freely as it travels along its ballistic trajectory.

By this time, Charlie, too, has propelled himself towards the tumbling cat and they approach in the open space in the middle of the shuttle. It is a beautiful sight, a sort of inter-species, inter-planet, zero-G ballet of love. Who would have thought such a beautiful thing could possibly have emerged from a union formed on the miserable planet, Mars. Un-rehearsed and un-choreographed, the two Earth species weightlessly come together, at speed. What could possible go wrong?

Well, for one thing, the Martian Cat, fearing that the closing speed between itself and it's big buddy, Charlie, is too fast, tries to slow things down. It does this by poking out its de-gloved foot. However, instead of making things better, it royally f**ks things up as the fleshless foot is thrust into Charlie's open mouth. Naturally, it tastes awful, causing him to gag and splutter. Distracted, he is unable to grasp the Martian Cat, and they tumble past each other again.

By now both Charlie and the Martian Cat are

starting to feel the yearning. Each wants desperately to be in the arms of the other, but the lack of gravity is just too difficult to negotiate. Charlie clutches a Hibernation Pod and watches the Martian Cat spin through the air, out of control, bang into the hull, and bounce off again.

“I have to do this,” Charlie says, pulling a cluster of shrivelled cat hair from his tongue. He watches the cat intently, trying to assess its trajectory, and the rate at which it is tumbling. Inside his Space Engineer’s head, he performs complicated mathematical calculations including thrust, distance, velocity. It is as though all of the intense training in his Diploma of Mars Engineering was for this moment.

Coiled like a spring, he waits until the time is right, and then launches himself at the cat with full force. With only air molecules to slow him down, Charlie jets across the open space inside the shuttle. He is travelling way too fast, and he slams into the cat so hard that the weightless and hapless animal is taken completely surprise, and it does what all cats do in such circumstances – it swipes its paw with claws out!

Just like the last time this happened – with the idiot Mars Plumber – the claws strike Charlie in the face, lacerating his flesh. Fortunately for

Charlie, the cat has lost half the claws from that paw – ripped out by the Mars Plumber’s nose cartilage – so there are only two gashes on Charlie’s face.

That said, two gashes is well enough to discombobulate our favourite Space Engineer, and Charlie Darling shrieks as the flesh on his face is slit open. In that instant, he questions whether the cat is even actually committed to their awkward relationship. What the f**k!! what is the cat even thinking. Charlie didn’t mean to nuke it on high for thirty seconds in a microwave, drop it on its head, or descruft it!! They were all accidents. Honest.

Despite the pain, Charlie clutches the disgusting cat to his chest as he continues his flight across the shuttle. But the intense pain in his cheek distracts him for the rapidly approaching structures. He strikes a handrail, and tumbles in mid-air, the cat still held firmly against his body.

As he rotates, blood pours from his face, forming a ribbon-like trail that accompanies him on his weightless travel. His journey is arrested when he bangs into the fuselage of the shuttle with such speed and force that the entire craft resonates from the impact.

Cushioning the blow, the Martian Cat emits a

squealing sound, the sort of noise you would expect when a concrete slab falls on a sackful of kittens – both anguished and feline, in great measure. Air is forced out of the Martian Cat’s pitiful lungs as its feeble ribs crack under the force of the impact.

Space Engineer, Charlie Darling, bleeding profusely, and in great pain, arrests his flight by grabbing hold of a piece of the space craft. He brings his hand to his face to sooth the wound.

Despite being a cool-headed pacifist, Charlie is nonetheless furious at the Martian Cat for having wounded him. He grips the emaciated animal by what remains of its de-scruffed neck and lets loose a volley of abuse, “What the f**k did you do that for you skanky bag of mangle!” he bellows.

Of course the cat doesn’t know what the f**k he is talking about, and so it replies in the manner of all cats, by simply saying, “*Meow.*”

“Don’t you meow me, you maggot sucking moggie. I ought to blast you into space.”

“*Meow,*” says the Martian Cat again, as Charlie vents his spleen.

“I should have left you in the science lab with the idiot plumber, you pestilential runt.”

“*Meow.*”

“After all I have done for you, you ungrateful little rat!”

“*Meow.*”

“I rescued you from death. And what do I get in return? Your ulcerated belly flesh smeared against my head in a f**king space helmet.”

“*Meow.*”

“Then you farted on my head!! And f**k me if I don’t still have the metallic taste of your gasified butt-shit in my mouth.”

“*Meow.*”

“And then you f**king tear my face open with your skanky little claws. I mean what sort of f**king relationship do you call this?”

“*Meow.*”

“And will you shut the f**k up saying meow!!”

Charlie’s rant comes to an end and he rests there, the miserable cat gripped in his hand. His teeth are clenched together and he processes the angriness that has just spewed out of him.

“Wow! That just slipped out, I guess,” he says, humbly. “Where did that come from?”

And then he realises: all the loneliness, the madness, the fear, the stress... It has been building and building. Right from the day of the space protest when the Inter-Planet Security Guard unloaded on his then girlfriend, to seeing her die

in a cage, the anger and torment. Then the Graduate Certificate in Space Engineering, the job application, the job interview with the clowns at Inter-Planet HR, and the trip to Mars. Then the psychopathic medic with all the murdered, brainless colonists. The terrible biting competitions, and now his only friend in the entire Solar System has turned on him – claws out!

“I’m sorry,” Charlie tells the Martian Cat, sobbing. He snuffles and weeps. It all just pours out. “I’m sorry I yelled at you. I’m sorry little Kitty Cat.” Charlie clutches the moggie to his cheek, tears pouring from his eyes.

While on Earth, it is not uncommon for humans to clutch small animals to their faces, in space, it is ill advised. No more so than today; what with Charlie’s blood-stream exposed by the two gashes in his cheek, and the Martian Cat’s skin resembling a bowl of damp cornflakes sprinkled intermittently with curled grey hair. After a few seconds nuzzling the cat, Charlie comes to his senses, and moves the scorbutic animal away from his open wounds.

“What the f**k was I thinking?” Charlie wonders, wiping his bloody cheek with his sleeve. “Oh yuk!”

He swabs away his tears with the sleeve of the jumpsuit, and then tickles the cat under the chin, seemingly one of the last places where it has intact skin. The Martian Cat lets out something that only vaguely resembles a purr, but Charlie knows what it means. They are buddies again.

Sponge Bath

After bonding with the Martian Cat for some time, Charlie feels extremely weary and wanting to sleep for a year or more. But he knows that he has some important duties to attend to first.

He takes the cat to the lower level, and ties it to the chair in the Pool Room so that it doesn't drift away. Then he visits the single lavatory on the shuttle where he douses his face with antiseptic hand-sanitizer.

He looks at himself, floating in the mirror, noticing how haggard and worn out he appears. So much for the youthful good looks. Now he has that crack-head look about him. But was it all worth it? He has, after-all completed the mission that he set out to do.

He finds a hand towel bearing the Inter-Planet logo, squirts hand sanitizer on it, and carries it to Maddy who is hanging peacefully in mid-air. He unzips her jumpsuit and slides the garment off her body. Then he washes her gently and sensuously, demonstrating himself to be a perfect gentleman. When she is clean and dry, he guides her into an empty sleep pod. He presses the 'sleep-now' button, and lowers the lid. Within a

few seconds, she is gassed into unconsciousness by ether and lavender.

Then he goes back to the descruffed, tail-less Martian Cat and tends its freshest wounds. The cat is breathing with a rasping noise, the result of its feeble ribs having been caved in, crushed between Charlie and the hull of the spacecraft.

When the wounds are tended, Charlie feeds the cat a dozen fat maggots that he had put aside in a small box, in his pocket. The nutritious pupae writhe in his fingers, as he passes them one by one to the hungry cat. Once the cat is fed, Charlie pats it on the head, careful not to break anything delicate, and particularly not the fine crust that has formed on its recently healed pustules. The cat purrs with the sound of a muffled jackhammer.

He lowers the Martian Cat into a hibernation pod, presses the 'sleep now' button and lowers the canopy. The pumps whirr, building up pressure, then the gas blasts into the chamber, flooding it with acrid ether and soothing lavender. The Martian Cat is terrified, it leaps up, striking the underside of the canopy, leaving a moist skid-mark. Then the ether does its work, and the cat falls unconscious and drifts inside the Hibernation Module, finally calm.

“I’ll see you both in One G,” Charlie says, addressing the sleeping Maddy and the unconscious Martian Cat.

He looks around the Shuttle, where there are cadavers drifting through the air, pickled brains, notebooks, and a chunk of skin with patchy grey hair and scabs - the Martian Cat’s descrudded scruff. It’s not a good idea to let these cadavers defrost, he thinks, so he gets to work moving the dead Mars tourists back to their hibernation pods.

He delicately takes hold of the ankle of the closest dead-one, and propels himself with the cadaver in tow towards an empty pod. He pushes the body inside, and sets the pod to frost.

Mars Opposition

As he goes about this duty putting the cadavers on ice, Charlie thinks more about the Marsophile genes that the dead people contain. He thinks that it is sad that the whole organism has to be killed off in order to render those particular genes inert. He wonders whether a pill can be developed, a sort of Anti-Mars gene therapy pill.

Then he thinks back to insistence that there be '99.999 percent recurring' success of the anti-Mars operation. How would one guarantee such a thing, he wonders. As he works, he thinks through a plan.

To kill off the manned missions to Mars, it would be necessary to foster Anti-Mars agents through-out the entire distribution chain, ready to pop up at the moment's notice and sabotage the program. Keeping the 'Mars lawn mowed' would require a lot of man-power, more Mars Ninjas than just he and Maddy. It would be necessary to develop an ongoing recruitment regime Mars saboteurs.

Then Charlie wonders how many people out there believe that going to Mars is a distraction to saving planet Earth. There must be millions of people who think that. But most won't take

responsibility.

“I didn’t create this mess,” most people would say. “It’s not my fault, nor my responsibility to fix the manned Mars problem.”

And it’s true, for the most part, ‘we’ didn’t create the mess... but someone did. And unless a class of brave and committed people stand up to it, the problem will just get worse and worse. If everyone who opposed colonisation of Mars did nothing, then the forces of Mars colonisation would win.

And the forces of Mars colonisation are huge. How many of these people are there? Thousands? Tens of thousands? Mars engineers. Mars scientists. Mars designers. People involved in Mars businesses, the media who pump the idea of manned missions to Mars as if it were all positive news - without any contemplation of the counter-argument. There is an entire class of Earth people who think that the Mars is worth sacrificing Mother Earth for. And sacrificing all that money – trillions of dollars of public money – diverted away from education, health care, environmental protection and a thousand other noble aims. How much money will that be? Trillions. Consider the \$20 billion spent on Mars between the 1970s and 2017, and the \$450 billion pledged to NASA out

to 2030. That's just the deposit – the down payment – on a multi-trillion mission to Mars, underpinned by a two-word business plan: 'Your Money'.

As Charlie moves the cadavers, he thinks about all the minerals and human talent that are being squandered on a destination that, when viewed from Earth at night, is visible as just a tiny pink dot – like the first sign of a melanoma tumour. It is such a fitting analogy; that little red dot indicates the beginning of an economic cancer spreading through the world's economies, sucking up vast resources for no good purpose at all apart from enriching people who are rich enough already. All underpinned by a cacophony of propaganda. Mars nurtures the human quest for exploration, they say. We'll how about we explore the seafloor. That's an engineering challenge.

From the time of the first telescopes, over five hundred years ago, people have wondered about the runt-planet, and considered what might be involved in living there. If only these people had cared as much about the habitability of their own planet; maybe then we wouldn't have the planetary boundaries shot to pieces, the sixth extinction underway, the planet teetering rapidly towards human extinction due to abrupt climate

change.

Charlie heaves a sigh, all the cadavers are set to frost, but he has been unable to locate the Martian Cat's scruff. He his exhausted, and all that is left to do is to crawl into a Hibernation Module, and sleep for a year or so.

Sleep Now

He pulls himself through the shuttle to his Hibernation Module, and as he flies effortlessly through the air, he thinks through the crazy adventure that is coming quickly to its conclusion. Between himself and Maddy, they have knocked off about two hundred Marsophile gene sequences, and another thousand or so are set to perish on the Mars surface over the coming months. The infrastructure of Mars Resort is ruined – the Habitation Modules smashed, the electricity and methane generation equipment inoperable. The manned mission to Mars has been set back, but not ended. The mission is not ending, it is just beginning.

Now he is on his way back to Earth with a like-minded companion.

Charlie crawls into his pod, and presses the ‘wake-up half-way’ button on the control panel in the hibernation pod. In six months, he will set to work planning how to rid planet Earth of the remaining toxic Marsophile genes. Now that’s a mission worth living for, he thinks.

He rests back, exhausted from it all. There is nothing more to be done now. The Martian Cat is asleep. Maddy is asleep. The cadavers are on ice.

He's still a bit worried that he couldn't find the Martian Cat's scruff. It's probably drifting around somewhere; but he is too tired to try and find it. Now it's his turn to sleep.

The shuttle is silent, a metal canister hurtling through space at thousands of kilometres per hour. There is the occasional hum as one of the compressors switches on to keep the dead people frozen, and the living, chilled. Charlie Darling exhales a long sigh. He reaches out and presses the button with the words 'sleep now'.

End.

Glossary of Mars Terms

This is the official Glossary of Mars terms as compiled by Mars Colonists.

Against your will

A critical concept for Mars colonists, relating to the moment that they inevitably realise that they want to get off the runt planet, asap, but can't because of the of the many physical impediments to moving between Mars and Earth. Against your will becomes apparent immediately after asking the Mars Question (see below).

Anterior Grippage

Anterior grippage refers to the front claws on a Martian Cat.

Biting Competition

A common hobby for Mars colonists. It is used as a distraction from Mars Immiseration and a way of winning Martian Cat.

BUHA

The acronym for Mars Death Type: Burning-up Harmlessly in the Atmosphere.

Burning-up Harmlessly

A space industry euphemism to describe the manner in which space debris that enters Earth's atmosphere ablates and combusts, turns into smoke particles that rain on penguins and polar bears (see Polenguin).

Degloving

The process by which patches of skin are easily torn off the Martian Cat. Degloving is sometimes done accidentally. Other times, it is a process through which the Martian Cat can be eating over a long time period.

Delousing

A means of killing off any harmful bacteria on a Martian Cat before it is cooked. This is achieved with the use of a medical autoclave.

'Don't' Signs

Official communication collateral of things that have been banned by Inter-Planet. Key examples include, No Selfies, No Pets, etc

FIDD

The acronym for Mars Death Type: Freezing Instantly, Decompressing and Dismembering.

Freezing Instantly, Decompressing and Dismembering

The Mars Death that typically occurs when an Inter-Planet shuttle is smashed into pieces by orbiting space junk.

Fuck-Factor-5

A potent aphrodisiac used on Mars to overcome Martian Droop, the inability of men on Mars to obtain useful erections. The active ingredient is the saliva of the genetically mutated flies that are used for food production.

Hellacious Cat Fart

The technical name for a potent voluntary or involuntary Martian Cat fart.

Helmet Removal Death Syndrome

A form of Mars Death caused by removing one's space helmet while in the Martian atmosphere. It results in instant death from freezing and decompression. The name is contracted to HiRDS.

HiRDS

The acronym for Mars Death Type: Helmet

Removal Death Syndrome.

Inter-Planet Inc.

A publically listed company specialising in sending people on one way trips to Mars. It is governed by psychopaths.

Kitty-Zapper

A piece of ‘non-lethal’ weaponry that is designed to stun small animals with electricity. Used by Inter-Planet Security to cleanse the shuttles of smuggled pets.

LPDI

The acronym for Mars Death Type: Launch-Pad Detonation and Incineration.

Martian Cat Classification

A schedule that describes the culinary and health condition of Martian Cats, running from A-A-A (also known as Prime) to SSF – Skank, Stupid and Flatulent.

Mars Colonist

A person who leaves Earth with the intention of establishing a human settlement on Mars. These despicable fiends typically meet a gruesome death.

Mars Death Type

The official categorisation of the many different ways to die on, near or on the way to Mars.

Mars Immiseration

The psychological trauma suffered by humans and animals from Earth who are unable to leave Mars.

Mars in Opposition

A space term that describes the closest approach of planet Mars to planet Earth – a distance of more than 50 million kilometres. The term describes how Mars is located on the opposite side of Earth to the Sun.

Mars Monday

Every day on Mars is called Monday, but to distinguish between them, there are Monday 1, Monday 2, Monday 3 etc.

Mars Narcolepsy

A fiction told to all newcomers to Mars that their periodical lapses of consciousness are naturally occurring, when in fact, they are induced with the Sleep Wand.

Mars Opposition

The official protest group that seeks to run interference on any attempt to enliven the dead planet. Run by an enigmatic figure, Satoshi Nakamarso.

Mars Plumber / Mars Plumber

One of the job titles on Mars Resort. Also, a derogatory term for an indelibly stupid person, or someone who took a job, knowing that it would involve almost no actual work.

Mars Question

A question asked to oneself by most visitors to Mars within the first few hours to days, and frequently, thereafter: “What the f**k was I thinking?”

Mars Resort

A privately owned Mars Colony established for Mars tourism, owned by Inter-Plant Inc.

Martian Cat

An Earth cat taken to Mars against its will where it develops mental and physical ailments before being captured, stolen, tenderised, deloused,

skinned, cooked, seasoned, and ritualistically devoured by Mars Colonists.

Martian Droop

A common physiological ailment affecting adult male humans on Mars, characterised by an incapacity to attain anything that even resembles a decent erection. It is caused by the low gravity, malnutrition, and Mars Immiseration. There are only two cures: Martian Fly aphrodisiac with active ingredient F**k-Factor-5, or return to Earth. The latter is preferred.

Martian Fly

A home-made aphrodisiac made from the saliva of blow flies, commonly used by Mars Colonists to overcome Martian Droop.

Martian Madness

A hypothetical mental illness caused by the growth of Martian Fungus in the brain.

Martian Fungus

A hypothetical fungus that causes Martian Madness, when it grows in the brain.

Pangolin Incident

The event in which an endangered ant-eater was smuggle aboard an Inter-Planet shuttle, forcing its return to Earth orbit.

Perambulation of Mars Farm

An unfortunate incident in which the infrastructure designed to feed the Mars Colonists was driven into the desert by a defective wheeled device, never to be seen again. The Perambulation of Mars Farm is the reason why the Mars Colonists were reduced to eating maggots, algae and cat.

RAL

The acronym for Mars Death Type: Rapid Anal Liposuction. This is caused by ripping the crotch out of a spacesuit in the air vacuum of Mars.

RFL

The acronym for Mars Death Type: Rapid Facial Liposuction. This is caused by a crack in the Mars helmet exposing ones head to the vacuum of space, causing internal organs to be sucked out through your eye-sockets.

SAB

The acronym for Mars Death Type: Spun and

Baked.

SSF

A classification of Martian Cat that stands for Skanky, Stupid, and Flatulent. Cats of these classification are regarded as a Level-4 Biohazard and are to be instantly deloused in the autoclave for one hour, set to high.

Scabies, Rabies and Scab

A metaphor for the awful skin condition of the Martian Cats, caused by absence of cat food, Mars Immiseration and low gravity. Also referred to as 'skank'.

Skank

The lesions and scabs that grow on the skin of Martian Cats, caused by malnutrition, low gravity and Mars Immiseration.

Meat & Three-Veg

The basic meal on Mars Resort following the Perambulation of Mars farm. It is comprised of algae and maggots. The nice way of saying this is insect larvae and aquatic plants.

Buy The Martian Cat ebook & paperback on www.guylane.com

Author's note

I have never been to Mars and I dare say that I probably never will. After writing this book, I doubt that they'd let me through customs. But that's okay, because I don't want to go to the stupid planet, anyway. I wrote this book because I don't want anyone else to go there, either – not for at least a hundred years, maybe a thousand years, maybe a million years. It's not because I'm misanthropic and want to spoil people's fun; it's because the manned trips to Planet Mars will impose a massive cost on everyone, just when we need to be focusing our energy elsewhere: on the rehabilitation of Planet Earth.

Manned missions to Mars will create unprecedented environmental harm, misallocate vital human capital, and waste trillions of dollars of public money – your money and mine. The Mars colony will create great wealth for a handful of corporations, and this will justify them to lie, bribe and corrupt to protect their racket.

The biggest lie that will be perpetrated is that there is another home for humans in this solar system. That's just not true. Humans are Earthlings. Don't forget that title – 'Earth'-ling. We evolved in 1-G gravity. It is our birthright to

live in 1-G gravity.

Pro-Mars aficionados will likely bitch and moan about this book. They'll say nasty things on social media, and I might even get death threats. That's to be expected, because anyone who stands against a paradigm gets that sort of treatment. It's just part of the game, I guess.

To my detractors, I say the following: if the manned mission to Mars is such a great idea, and has 'real' public support, then a satirical novel like this one is not going to make a lickety-split of difference; this book will be set aside as a the ravings of an angry crank, and you'll get your stupid Mars colony. However, if I am correct, and the manned mission to Mars is shown to be most stupid of ideas, and has very little broad-scale public support (outside of sci-fi enthusiasts and respondents to scammy questionnaires); then a novel like this might have a substantive impact in killing the idea off. If that's the case, I'm glad to have been of service to humanity; and you Mars folk had it all wrong, so admit defeat with humility.

The Martian Cat is satirical science fiction story. It is filled to the brim with information about Mars, about space technology, the environmental impacts on Earth of space activity, and the

physiological impacts of humans in the portable-lavatory sized dwellings they'd be reduced to occupying on the runt-planet.

Some of the information in this book is reasonably accurate. For example, I describe a Mars rocket as having a three-stage core fuelled with kerosene and liquid oxygen, and four solid fuel boosters. That kind-of checks out. But the reference to them swapping the kerosene with leaded petrol if the price is right; that's satire, I made that up.

I don't underline the fictional bits in this story, nor do I write it in a different font. Instead, I mix the truth with the fiction – like they mix monomethyl hydrazine with the nitrogen tetroxide in the hypergolic rocket fuel.

This mixing of fact and fiction is not without precedent. The Marsophile (Mars lovers) do it all the time; they obfuscate the truth, like good Pro-Mars-Propagandists. As an example, the Matt Damon movie *The Martian* is roundly applauded for its 'accuracy' almost like it were a documentary; despite the glaring errors shared by all Mars movies. *The Martian* movie completely fails to acknowledge that on Mars, the gravity is so light, that you can't walk or move the way you do on Earth. They also ignore that Mars is dimly

lit, because it so far out in space. So we are left with the impression that Mars is like the Simpson desert – bright and 1-G gravity – when in fact, it is more like the Moon at dusk. They pump this misinformation out, and we swallow their stupid Mars story without thinking. We just gulp it down like a hungry Martian Cat devouring a bowl of fresh maggots.

Well, so it goes with *The Martian Cat* – the novel. I mix the truth with the lies, too. The maggots with the algae. The plutonium with the drinking water. The kerosene with the liquid oxygen. The toe-jam with the spacesuit.

If you want to know the truth about Mars, don't listen to the pro-Mars camp, and certainly don't listen to me. Instead, engage your critical mind, read, learn and think it through. If you do that, you'll be able to discern the truth, and I am sure that you'll end up on my side, slinging mud at the rockets, and blowing raspberries at the wannabe Mars Colonists.

Throughout this novel is the reference to a cat, the Martian Cat. For cat-lovers, this story might not be for you; the poor moggie is in a terrible state, everyone wants to eat it, and progressively bits of it fall off. It's got no teeth, and its fur comes falls out in sticky clumps at every

misadventure. In writing about the Martian Cat, I am not condoning animal abuse; I like cats, particularly Burmese cats. Instead, the Martian Cat is a metaphor for Planet Earth, pulled to pieces by the uncaring humans. And that's what this story is ultimately about, it's a commentary about ecological sustainability – or the dire absence of it.

Besides the fact that going to Mars is helping to kill off the living systems of planet Earth, we humans simply don't deserve to go to Mars. We may have the technology and the will, but we don't have the temperament. As a species, we f**k everything up, when we ought to know better. And while you can't f**k-up a dead planet, you can make a right mess of a living one, trying to get there. We will wreck enormous damage on Earth – environmentally, economically, socially, and spiritually – in our mad scramble for the dead planet. And the worse Earth gets, the more alluring Mars will be made to sound by the propagandists, thus creating a nasty positive-feedback mechanism.

Today, humanity is on a path to extinction due to climate change and the loss of biosphere integrity – not to mention the spent fuel ponds of hundreds of nuclear power stations that will start

to fall apart up as soon as there is no modern industrial state to maintain them. We need to fix the mess that we have left on Earth, before we go gallivanting off to space. This is a species-level discipline that we need to learn. And we need to learn it fast.

If we can stabilise our bleeding planet, and bring her back to health, then maybe by mid-next century, we will have developed a more balanced and mature outlook on the role of humans in the solar system. Maybe in a hundred years, if we can get our shit together, the manned mission to Mars might not be such a bad idea. Until then, the idea of a Mars colony is stupid, deluded and dangerous, and it needs to be opposed at every opportunity. I've given you some tools. Get to work.

Guy Lane

18 March 2017



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reading my book!**

I would love to hear your thoughts as I appreciate all feedback, good bad or indifferent.

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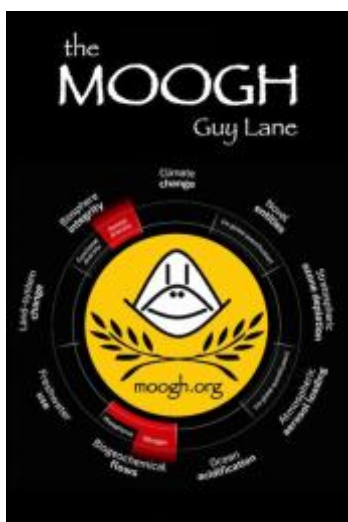
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Thanks for reading my book.

Guy Lane



The Moogh

When people see the Moogh, they run towards it screaming with joy, believing it to be a messenger of peace and sustainability. Maggie Tarp kept her head, and now she's the Moogh Reporter for the Fractious News Network. She's embedded

with moogh.org, the shadowy organisation that won the UN contract to manage Moogh affairs. Unfortunately, for Maggie, her bosses don't like the stories that she writes about spirituality and Moogh philosophy – they just don't sell. So they pair her up with the hot-shot journalist, Perrin Speer. Sparks fly, and Maggie rejects everything that Perrin tries to teach her. Perrin falls foul of moogh.org when he reveals that they are killing people to hide a deadly secret. As the Moogh Zone descends into chaos, Maggie finds that the Moogh also keeps a secret. But does she have what it takes to get the story?

“There are pop-culture icons for killing zombies & catching criminals, now there is one for saving the planet.

The Moogh restores nature and revives the planetary boundaries.”

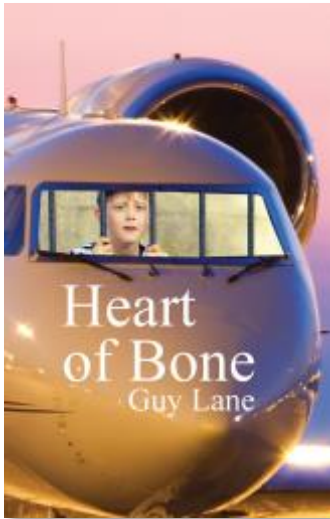


Yongala

Boer War veteran Corben Plath has nothing to lose when his estranged half-brother (the C.E.O. of the Queensland Coal Board) offers him blood money and a ticket on the luxury cruise liner S.S. Yongala. Aboard Yongala, Prof. Frederick Portland is

traveling to Townsville with his young niece, Felicity, and his renewable energy invention, the 'Smoke Engine'. Fearing that the Smoke Engine will ruin them, the Coal Board task Plath with murdering Portland and destroying his machine. Onboard the ship, Plath strikes an innocent friendship with Felicity, not realizing that she is the niece of the man he has been sent to kill. As Yongala steams into heavy weather, Plath learns that there are armed men aboard looking for him. Tired of fighting, he comes to see that his own salvation depends on Felicity surviving the storm.

"I wrote a fictional version of the final voyage of Yongala because I wanted the public to know that scientists have understood the basics of climate change since 1905."



Heart of Bone

Rebecca is a personal assistant to billionaire poison merchant, Gilly Clay, and she's trapped in a ruinous employment contract. Her life flashes past through a mane of ginger hair and stress. Rebecca keeps her sanity through a secret love affair

with psychologist and author, Tom Snowden. Snowden's new book – *Sustainability and the Superclass* – gets inside the heads of the powerful men who run the world so poorly. One day, Clay adopts an 8-year-old boy, Montgomery Earle, and grooms him as the heir to both the business empire and his defective moral compass. Seeing this, all of Rebecca's certainties slip away, and she's forced to make a choice. She can either keep silent and watch the young boy being corrupted or risk everything by speaking out.

“We live in the age of a global Superclass, where half of the world's wealth is controlled by as few people as could fit on a single corporate jet. They are so unplugged from reality, that we can't rely on them to lead a transition to a

sustainable future. Instead, we need to take matters into our own hands.”



The Oil Price

Danny Lexion easily meets his two life goals: he looks good and makes lots of money. One night, out on the town, he falls for the stunning environmental activist, Bren Hannan. Bren's mission is to save a tiny island from a ruthless oil

company called Peking Petroleum. To do this, she needs to get to a UN Conference in Dubai.

Danny offers to fly her there, thinking that it might lead to some romance in an exotic city. In Dubai, Danny learns that Bren's story doesn't check out. He finds himself in the cross-hairs of the mercenary security firm – Storm Front – who are protecting Peking Petroleum's interests. As the bullets fly through the streets of Dubai, Danny learns that saving the planet is a deadly business, and the real price of oil is blood.

"The Oil Price is my first novel and something of an ensemble piece of characters and themes around the oil industry and the blocking moves of environmentalists."



Intervene

Anton Vorlov runs the world's biggest company, Between Destiny, from an island off the coast of Dubai. Officially, he's a billionaire from Ukraine, but he is actually a trillionaire spaceman – and his real name is Zem.

He never sleeps, and his vast organisation spends \$100 billion a week financing the restructure of the global economy to make it sustainable. Zem is trained to handle complicated international negotiations and the inevitable interference of the oil industry.

However, when his personal assistant – a feisty Earthling called Megan – decides that she wants his attention, Zem gets right out his depth.

“In twenty years of world-watching, I have yet to be convinced that there is an individual or an organisation that has the influence to alter the destiny of human civilization. I created a fictional spaceman to do the job, to foster the idea that collectively, we might all intervene, ourselves.”



Aquaria

Lucy Callahan (38) is known as the Sealioness of Aquaria Bay due to her reputation for risk-taking, showmanship and thinking big. She's the founder of Aquaria, the world's most popular public aquarium and marine science

precinct.

One day, an oil rig ominously parks offshore. Callahan learns that Expedient Energy plans to drill for petroleum in the Aquaria marine park. The threat crystallises when the oil firm take over the Aquaria board, and the extent of their plan becomes known. Callahan dives into battle, prepared to risk everything – even her own safety – to protect her life's work. However, when her boyfriend, Sam, starts running interference, Callahan realises that winning the battle against the oil firm may come at a personal cost, a relationship and possibly a family. How will the Sealioness of Aquaria Bay respond to this dilemma? Will she give in to her partner's wishes, or fight to the bitter end, even at the risk of her own life?

“Climate change, ocean acidification and plastics are killing our oceans. The fossil fuel industry, and particularly the oil industry, is to blame. Plastics are made of oil, after-all. We must all become ambassadors of the ocean if we want it to survive. Fortunately, we needn’t juggle white sharks and stonefish, like Lucy Callahan, to play a part.”