

Correspondence I

It is certainly exciting to be among the first of our kind to explore this strange planet, and an even greater privilege to send back good news so quickly. As you know, the only previous explorers did so from a celestial perspective, never entering the atmosphere. All they were able to observe were some rather ordinary rock formations, and, of course, that the planet was surrounded by a glow so beautiful that many great songs and stories have since been written about it. In that whole time, however, our predecessors found nothing else of particular interest. I am proud to report that they simply weren't looking close enough. Early on, it so happened that ^0^, casually traversing the area around our craft, surmounted a high outcropping. On the other side was a most unusual collection of objects, strewn radially about a taller cylindrical structure. The objects are so similar that they appear to have once been combined into a single whole, that whole being very large and circular in shape, having been forcibly separated by something akin to an explosion. We managed to seal the central structure into a transport capsule, which we have just now launched back towards home. I suggest that you begin to study it as it soon as it arrives, as I believe it may hold the key to understanding this planet, which for too long has been nothing but a luminous beacon in our skies.

Correspondence II

^0^ is one of our best! After discovering the pieces of the round object, they have now brought our attention to a jelly-like substance so widely spread that we had initially thought it to be a form of flora. Based on its similarity to our own physical compositions (in terms of its being

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amorphous, limbless, and brightly-coloured), and its ability to be separated from the rock surface, we have decided to cautiously identify it as the product of a life form.

Correspondence III

I regret to inform you that ^0^ has begun to function in an unusual manner. Their locomotion has become slower, and some of their firmer outer covering has begun to separate from itself. They no longer seem interested in venturing across the rock, or even in consuming their daily ration of ammonia. Of all of us to become impaired during this trip!

Correspondence IIII

We have discovered a second set of objects, nearer to the pieces of the round object than the jelly, but far less numerous. They are hard in texture, have two rounded knobs at each end, and contain a different, softer material inside. As they are arranged in a complex symmetrical framework, with a punctured round section at the very top, ~~-:- has suggested that they might also be the product of a life form. To contrast them with the comparatively ordinary jelly, we have come to call this rare and unusual collection the “hard pieces.”

Correspondence IIIII

Something truly strange has happened to ^0^. While before their locomotion had simply slowed down, now they have stopped moving altogether, and refuse to respond to stimuli. None of us knows what to make of this development, and are hoping that one of you might have suggestions for restoring our valuable friend to his previous state.

Correspondence IIIIII

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I regret to report that morale is declining, and with it the comprehending faculties of my crew. A few (I think you can guess who they are) have created considerable unrest by speculating that ^0^ will not wake up at all. This is verifiably impossible, of course, as such a state – as I will call it, “permanent cessation of consciousness” – has never occurred among us, and even the temporary form is exceedingly rare. Their fears may best be attributed to the stress of the situation, which, even I must admit, is becoming increasingly taxing.

Correspondence IIIIII

We have decided to leave. With several others exhibiting similar behaviour to ^0^'s initial difficulties, the unrest among my crew is becoming more formidable than I can quell with logic alone. On a different note, ^0... has just found something new near the hard pieces. It is of a thin and light material, and covered in some sort of symbolism. Because of where it was found, we have come to call it the “hard pieces inscription.”

Correspondence IIIIII

We have just received your message concerning the difficulties which have arisen among you since the arrival of the transport capsule containing the tall cylindrical object. I regret to inform you that these were the same behaviours displayed by our comrade ^0^ before they fell into their current state, and, now, by at least IIIII of our other crew members, including myself. The only advice I can give you is to take the item and destroy it, in any way you can find to do so. All precautions must be taken in its presence, as, I regret to confirm, it does indeed seem capable of producing a “permanent cessation of consciousness.” It is clear that, whatever it is, it is a product of the darkest force that could possibly exist in the confines of space or time. Although we have managed to propel ourselves back into the atmosphere, I secretly fear that

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none of us will make it home in a state capable of communication, or that we may degenerate to a point where we lose control of the craft's direction. As a result, I have here enclosed the "hard pieces" inscription, in hopes that one of you might be able to decipher its grave secrets:

Dearest Robert,

How are you? How are the kids? How is the weather? I am fine. The Martians are fine. I mean, I think they are fine, they look quite a bit like slithering gobs of pudding, but I think that is just how they look. I wish I could send back one of the baby ones, as I'm sure the children would have fun playing with it. It doesn't shed and has no teeth, so would be a reasonable substitute for the dog.

I know, I know, you didn't expect to hear from me – Carolyn, who left you to hightail it to the red planet when the prospects looked good. I feel bad about that now, I really do. A bit selfishly, perhaps, but I'll explain. You know how we came here on those big round autorangers with living space around the rims and nuclear cylinders in the centres for unlimited power? So the others having gone back for supplies, I've been holed up all by myself in the BioDome for twenty-five numons (that's about a week in Earth time). I wasn't really checking on the autoranger, as the Martians have never really shown any interest in it before, but apparently they thought it was some sort of space-time flipper, like the ones they have here. Long story short, they seem to have accidentally programmed it to self-destruct in five numons – that's tomorrow, in our time, although to be fair we invented the Martian system on the fly, so the conversion is kind of iffy. Technically this process is only supposed to be initiated at the vessel's retirement, when the unit has been shot off into deep space, because destruction of a 50,000 mega-watt nuclear reactor naturally involves the release of a certain amount of radiation. So by the time you get this – well, you know. Like I said, I'm sorry I left. Tell the kids I love them, and

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remind them not to walk through the kitchen with their shoes on. It makes scuffs on the floor, as I've told you a million times (though you never seem to listen). If it makes you feel any better, in the grand scheme of things, with the Martians being able to cycle backward in time or whatever it is they do, and the whole universe and all of that, none of this really matters. I just hope they don't all die too? Is this genocide?

Sincerely, your loving wife,

Carolyn

