

Round Trip

Martin reclined on a deck chair and watched passengers board. Their ship, the *Amiga Bonita*, was moored and taking on streams of cargo and travelers. Shuttles docked in turns to bring aboard goods and ferry excursions.

The commotion was constant: docking, with swooshes of pressure change as airlocks opened and closed; unloading, with forklifts beeping and winches grinding; undocking, with warning alarms sounding; departing, with rockets exploding as shuttles returned.

He'd ferried down earlier to see Mars himself. It wasn't what he'd expected. It had become too much like Earth, for one thing. He'd treated himself to lunch at the Australia Club and then splurged to have a native pedal him in a rickshaw through the hustling streets of Red Sydney.

He saw multitudes of species and races, but very few Martians, less than a dozen, including his solemn driver. He'd read how the Martians avoided the domed metropolises. Their species cherished the empty desert, and most went insane when they spent too much time in the crowded colonial cities.

He saw Chinese in the streets, alert and industrious. Olive-skinned Venusians walked slow on webbed hooves. Saturnians, sleek and prosperous, seemed at ease and self-assured.

The Australian colonialists, in sequined cowboy hats and designer jeans, sped above them all in eagle-drones, or travelled the streets leisurely in gem-adorned rickshaws. They wore a careless air—the Aussies took their power for granted.

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He'd thought about visiting Santa Sandeedas, the libertarian district, home to psychonauts, cult religions, and the only go-go clubs in the universe that allowed dancer drones in every unholy configuration. Almost any deranged innovation was allowed in Sandee: perv drones, genetic mutations, biomechanical implants, and, his former line of work, psych drugs. Sandee was live and let live, Babylon on meth. It was a mire of colonial hedonism.

But he resisted the temptation. He had to turn over a new leaf, and Sandee was the kind of place where he'd blunder again. He had to decelerate his soul's descent into hell. He was done with intimacy, he reminded himself, no matter how transactional or fleeting. No more women, including drones and screens.

When he left Earth, he'd promised himself no more. He was done hurting people. He would live the rest of his life platonically, with zero entanglements.

Now, back on board, tired, hot, and hungover from too many drinks at lunch, Martin waited for the cruise ship to set out again on her meandering voyage across the solar system and beyond.

Close by, a group of young women were sitting together. Some were pregnant, and all wore khaki pantsuits and wide-brimmed hats. They kept the deck steward busy with drink orders, talking loudly and laughing, and some had drunk enough to think everything someone said was hilarious. They appeared to be seeing someone off, but Martin couldn't tell which woman was staying on board.

The departure warning tone blasted. "If we don't want to be stowaways, we'd better trot," one of them said, laughing.

Now they were hugging goodbye and he saw who they'd come to see off. She seemed very interesting and, despite himself, he gave her much more than a casual review.

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She was a tiny woman in most ways, just over five feet tall, with long, dark hair, dressed in tailored khaki pants and a white linen blouse that looked classic and expensive, and her beige woven hat was fashionably shabby. Her friends gibbered final goodbyes and Martin noticed she had a Neptunish brogue, her voice was full and laughing.

Stephanie Rillo, the geneticist, came over, smiling at him for some reason. She sat beside Martin and they told each other about their day. Like him, Rillo was fascinated at how the non-Martians had prospered, and how brooding and mysterious the few natives seemed.

The Neptunish sounding woman waved goodbye to her friends and walked towards them, where she'd left her bags. She nodded at Stephanie.

“You know her?” asked Martin.

“We were introduced,” Stephanie said tightly. “Priscilla.”

“She's alone?”

Stephanie looked at him. “A man thinking with his head, if that's possible, will stay away from her. Board at funville, depart at crazy town. She was an incubator for a homesteader.”

“Don't worry about me. Just curious.”

“I'm surprised she's leaving. Few do. Foreign incubators get genetic edits—inserts to help them withstand the synthetic atmosphere and bear children who can survive the frontier. The edits have improved, but the ones she got years ago can cause major health problems. She's taking a big chance—the risks increase by leaving Mars.”

“I read genetic edits can be undone.”

“No,” Stephanie said. “It's not word processing, where inserts can be deleted. By now, every system in her body has changed. She shouldn't leave Mars.”

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The ship undocked from her mooring and gently thrust away. After the ruckus of port, Martin was grateful for the silence of departure. They gazed, not speaking, as the ship floated slowly past the ice cliffs and craters of Phobos, the Martian moon.

They had moored in a secluded cove, to the side of Phobos, and now they drifted into the heavily populated main harbor. Ships of all corporations, nations, and planets lay at anchor orbit, a great multitude: passenger ships, transports, gigantic freighter arks, shuttles, military battleships, trawlers, trade vessels, corporate campuses; and beyond, behind them, you saw the crowded antennas and solar panels, a gleaming forest, of native space-rafts.

In the soft glow of Phobos close by, and Mars beyond, the scene was touched with mystery, and Martin imagined the thousands of ships, suspended in space, waited together for some unprecedented event.

#

Martin was a bad sleeper and often went on deck at night to try and doze. He focused on the faintest, furthest stars through the floor to ceiling windows. Space had a permanence that made his colossal failures seem inconsequential.

He was surprised to find someone in his usual chair. It was Priscilla. She was watching the spiraling Milky Way, which shone like a full moon upon a glittering sea of stars.

He was startled, then annoyed, but before he could turn away, she saw him and smiled.

“Hi, I’m Priscilla. We scared each other.”

“We sure did. I’m Martin.”

“Have some tea? Please? I need to talk with someone.”

She was in pajamas and slippers and her long black hair fell around her. She took a cup off the tray, poured tea, and handed it to him. Martin wore a long-sleeved t-shirt, sleeping pants,

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and a knit winter hat to keep his ears warm. He worried he look disheveled, but decided he wanted her company.

He took the cup. "You're up early."

"I couldn't sleep with the excitement. I lived on a mining plantation and had to get up before dawn for so long, I'll never break the habit."

Martin studied her. She was beautiful in the starlight and he never would have approached her, even back when he was young and stood a chance. Her skin was almost bronze, and her blue eyes shined like glowing lights. She looked mid to late twenties. Her hair was softly curled, black, and thick. She moved awkwardly, but somehow that attracted him.

"Are you on vacation?" he guessed.

"No, I'm going home to Neptune!" Her blue eyes twinkled. "My big secret is I've been an incubator on the frontier, living in a domed mining operation. It's far from civilization and lonely, but I made huge money. During the lithium boom, my homesteader did fabulous, and while other women wasted money on nonsense, I invested. I amassed a pile and now I'm starting my life."

"What part of Neptune are you from?"

"Doolan."

Martin had travelled to Neptune in college and remembered moody, green-domed mining towns, with great stone warehouses on rocky coasts, next to blue, hydrogen-ice seas. He recalled greenness, soft rain, silence, and resignation. Is that where Priscilla planned to spend the rest of her life? She spoke of it with enthusiasm, but the thought of her vitality in that world of cold shadows was so mismatched that he was curious.

"Does your family live there?"

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“I’ve got no family. I was raised in an orphanage and signed an incubator agreement the day I turned sixteen.”

She talked. She’d been making plans for years and was charged up. Property was dirt cheap in Doolan and she planned to buy a farm and breed Neptunian horse-drones, the best in the universe, she said.

“Do you think I’m pretty at all?” she asked.

Martin blushed and looked her up and down with appraising eyes.

“You’re the most beautiful woman on the ship.”

She laughed. Neptune was known for beautiful women and she’d tried to keep fit on Mars. There was a lot of walking on a homesteader’s estate and she did yoga. On Neptune, she would marry a man who was handsome and easy to please. Martin looked silently at the stars, colored now somehow with the aura of her plans.

He sighed. “Is it hard to leave? Are you going to miss anyone? The children you incubated? The homesteader? After so many years, you must feel sadness and second guessing.”

“I’m glad to leave. I’m fed up with Mars. It’s horrible and I never want to see it again.”

“How many children did you have?”

“Three. A boy and two girls. My homesteader has twenty-four children. He’s nonstop. Other than working, there’s little else to do. He’s very religious and populating the frontier with believers is a sacred duty.”

She looked at him. “The problem with my line of work is you give too much of yourself. Everyone needs to make a living. But having a child inside you, then handing it over... Mars changes everyone, and the children are different. I’m better off missing them than watching them become strangers.”

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“Tough business to be in.”

“You’re not *in* the business.” Her voice caught. “You *are* the business.”

“I’ll tell you one of *my* secrets,” Martin said. “I’m almost forty and starting over. Back on Earth I had two children and a wife who depended on me, but I betrayed them. I’ve lost everything except a bit of money, enough cash to spend this cruise alone in luxury, buying first-class smiles and hellos. I’m drifting, unmoored to anything meaningful.”

Priscilla grabbed his hand and held it firm.

He said, “I’m a convicted criminal, banished from Earth. I testified against my friends and my wife, so instead of life in prison, my lawyer was able to get me exiled.”

“Exile? Did you murder someone?”

Two other passengers appeared on the deck and the floor lights dimmed on, indicating morning. Martin was ready to say goodbye.

“I’ll tell you another time.”

She smiled. “Are you asking me for a second date? Because I don’t associate with outlaws.”

“I’m reformed,” he said, laughing

“I’ll decide that. I have a feeling there’s work left to do.”

“And I don’t date.”

She joked, “Congratulations! That means you’ll be attached in a year.”

He smiled and sat still, holding her hand in his for a few moments. Then he said goodbye and left her.

#

That night, Martin came on deck and saw Priscilla at the bar.

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“Just in time for a cocktail, Martin,” she said.

“Perfect. I might need two.”

“Why?”

Her smile was friendly, but he decided to dodge her question. “I told you this morning,” he tried to act cheerful. “I’m almost forty.”

“Still? Well, give it some time.”

He laughed and she ordered a drink for each of them.

Her eyes looked weary. “You seem tired,” said Martin.

“I haven’t been able to sleep or eat, too much nerves. Just the smell of food makes me nauseous. Booze and tea are carrying me. It’s funny, I started feeling odd when we lost sight of Mars.”

“I said I’d tell you why I was exiled.”

“Yes, I want to know everyone you murdered. You seem nice, so hopefully they deserved it.”

He laughed. “I was a smuggler: jit, hi-lo, and purple. I manufactured too. The money was good.”

“Purple and hi-lo. They give the death penalty for those.”

“That’s why the money’s good. But more than money, it was exciting, every day was a videogame. Before drugs, I worked a corporate job, climbing paper mountains, making stockholders rich. I worked for a pharmaceutical company and learned chemistry and manufacturing, enough to make my own go of it.”

She giggled. “We have hopeless resumes. We can use each other as a reference.”

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He laughed again. They drank. The dinner tone rang, and he got up to go into the dining room.

“Do you want to play cards later?” she asked.

He hesitated, then said, “No, thanks.”

He left her alone at the bar.

#

After dinner, Martin was occupied with his thoughts. He had hoped that as the ship took him away from Earth that the torment of his mind would ease, but instead, his distress increased. He felt dismay at the bleak loneliness of the exile’s life that awaited him.

He sat on deck, looking out. Space was hostile and empty, as still as black glass, it cared nothing for anyone. That night, no other ship, moon, or planet broke the solitariness of the expanse. Its surface was scattered with stars that never twinkled. The tedium was immense, and he sat for hours, pondering.

It was hard to acknowledge that he had nowhere to go and he didn’t matter to anyone. His thoughts kept turning to Priscilla. He envied her return to her native land and was touched when he remembered her exuberantly describing her plans to marry.

His plans were different. He didn’t want to ever fall in love again. He’d proven he couldn’t be trusted, and he wouldn’t hurt anymore people. He had loads of baggage from the past that he must carry alone.

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“Where’s Priscilla?” He asked Stephanie Rillo the next evening. “I haven’t seen her.”

“Didn’t you know? She’s very ill. She’s got terrible motion sickness and can’t keep any food down.”

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“Oh no!”

“The ship’s doctor is worried. He’s tried all sorts of treatments and nothing helps.”

The next afternoon, he saw the doctor and asked how Priscilla was. He was surprised to see the man’s face grow perplexed.

“She can’t eat. She can’t sleep. She’s exhausted. I can’t diagnose it. Motion sickness rarely lasts more than a few hours and it’s been two days. It doesn’t appear to be bacterial or viral. She’s suffering horribly and I’ve tried everything. Unless I figure it out soon, I don’t know what will happen.”

Martin was startled. “Can I visit her?”

“Come along.”

As they approached the ship’s hospital, they heard loud coughing. Priscilla’s appearance was shocking. She’d lost weight and her face was pale. Her blue eyes, before, full of fun and laughter, were tired and tormented. She smiled weakly when they came in.

There was a man sitting silently beside her and he rose as they entered.

“This is Mr. Stratton,” said the ship’s doctor. “Priscilla’s assistant.”

Martin nodded, he assumed Mr. Stratton was the biodroid servant assigned to incubators at contract signing, and he wasn’t surprised the man looked studious and middle-ageless; somewhere between thirty and sixty. He had an air of worry for his mistress, concern that overrode the device’s innate optimism and cheerfulness.

“I’m sorry you aren’t feeling well,” Martin said to Priscilla.

“I’ll be ok,” she said softly. “Just nerves and motion sickness. It’ll turn soon.”

“Are you glad to be returning to Neptune?” Martin asked Mr. Stratton.

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“Yes, sir, I really hope we get to see it again. Well, I’ll be getting along.” He nodded deferentially.

Martin said, “Priscilla, let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.”

“Thank you,” she said, looking at him. Her words sounded far off.

“I know you’ll feel better soon. I’m thinking of you. I’ll let you rest.”

He left her alone with the Doctor.

Mr. Stratton was waiting for him outside the door. “Can I speak with you?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“I don’t know how to begin.” He looked uncertain. “I’ve been with Miss Priscilla for years and there’s no better woman. But she’s done for, and she and that doctor don’t know it. I keep telling him what’s wrong and he won’t listen!”

“Don’t be worried, Mr. Stratton. It seems like a prolonged case of motion sickness. She’ll be fine in a few days.”

“You know when it came on? Just as we were out of sight of Mars. He said she’d never see Neptune.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our homesteader. He didn’t want her to leave. He loved her, but when her contract ended, she up and left and broke his heart.”

“It’s absurd. Even if he was angry, what could he do? What poison would wait to start after a few days?”

“I never said poison. No one believes in Martian magic, but that’s what it is. A Martian curse is on her!”

“That’s not possible! It’s illogical. You, of anyone, should know that.”

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“That’s what that doctor said. But I’m telling you she’ll die before we touch Neptune.”

The biodriod was so serious that Martin became uneasy. “Why would anyone put a curse on Priscilla?”

“Our homesteader had a big harem of incubators, but she was special. He loved her. When she made up her mind, he didn’t say anything, he locked up tight. And when it was time to go, he sat on the porch, looking straight ahead and saying nothing. ‘Aren’t you going to say goodbye to me?’ she finally asked, and a funny look came over his face. He surprised us by speaking. ‘Go if you want,’ he said. ‘But you’ll never see home.’ It gave me a jolt.”

“What did Priscilla say?”

“She laughed it off. ‘Best of luck,’ she said, and we left.”

Martin imagined the red road that twisted thousands of cold miles through frontier mining plantations, carved through orange rock, winding up and down hills, past distant Martian villages sequestered far from the road, and through colonial towns where marketplaces crowded with people trading minerals for imported supplies. Then the road reached the domed metropolises with their skyscrapers, neighborhoods, golf courses, and spaceports. And the homesteader watched the road, watched Priscilla drive away, further, and further, until the woman he loved was gone.

“What was he like?” Martin asked.

“Oh, the Aussie homesteaders are much alike, you know. Strong, smart, loners, controlling. Only the oddest people can start from scratch in that desert. Of course, he wasn’t young and handsome anymore; he’d gotten successful and fattened up huge.”

“Fat?”

“Priscilla started sleeping in her own room, if you understand what I mean.”

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“But fat Aussie homesteaders can’t cast Martian spells thousands of miles into space.”

“It’s a Martian shaman. He had one curse her. He has thousands of Martians working for him and some are shamans. Homesteaders have them for luck, or the natives won’t work for you. They do prayers to their goddesses with curses tucked away for special occasions. They do hocus-pocus with circles of sand and spells on everything: tools, fields, and machinery. The Martians go to them when they’re ill. I’ve seen them heal people and animals. I’ve seen them divine where minerals are while scopes come up blank. I’ve seen things on the frontier you’d never believe.”

Martin smiled uncertainly. “I’m not believing in Martian spells.”

“You can laugh. But if you can say what those natives can’t do it’s more than I can.” He clenched his fist and pounded on the teak railing. “I’m fed up with the bloody planet! We’re no match for them. The Martians have black hearts towards us outsiders. They’re biding their time and they’ll wait a thousand years to stick us in the end. Now I need a drink to calm down.” He abruptly left, and Martin watched him walk away and disappear into the second-class lounge.

Martin felt troubled. He could picture the stout homesteader, no longer young, sitting on the porch and looking at the road. He had rage in his heart and Martian shamans to do his bidding.

Later in the day, Martin asked the doctor how Priscilla was doing. The doctor shook his head.

“I still can’t figure it out.” He frowned, seeming worried that the mysterious illness made him look incompetent.

“Have you heard what Mr. Stratton thinks?”

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“It’s nonsense! I told the Captain and he does not want it discussed. He’s worried it’ll upset everyone.”

“I’ll stay quiet.”

The Doctor looked at him sharply. “You don’t think what he says is true?”

“Of course not!” He looked off, out the window into space. “The Martians are such strange people, aren’t they? We know so little about them.”

“You’re annoying me,” the Doctor said. “Martian magic isn’t real.”

#

That night, Martin lay in bed crying. Sorrow coursed through him. He turned over the past in his mind: wishing he had done this and blaming himself because he’d done that.

He thought about his wife. She loved him and he’d betrayed her. Now she was imprisoned for life on Earth and their children were being raised by strangers.

He would never love again. What about Priscilla? Would she find the right one? Could a man love a woman who had born children for another man? A mercenary womb, a mercenary life. Not quite a prostitute, but she made her living selling the most sacred magic a woman possessed. Her children were transactions, property handed over to their owner.

He remembered the way she poured tea and the craziest thoughts assaulted his mind. He willed himself to ignore them.

After hours of lying there, Martin knew he wouldn’t sleep. His cabin suddenly felt like a tomb. It was almost three in the morning and there were still hours to go before day began, but he felt compelled to get up.

He wiped his tears, put on slippers, and went on deck. Vibrating slightly, the ship lumbered under full thrust and the throb was uncanny. Martin walked slow along the deserted

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deck, came to the end, and leaned against the rail. Suddenly, on the lower, second-class deck, he saw a glow. He leaned forward cautiously, looked closer, and saw several men crouched around patterns of glowing candles.

He saw Mr. Stratton in pajamas, and he guessed that some dark ceremony was in progress. Straining his ears, he heard low voices muttering odd noises. He recognized them as Martian words but couldn't understand them. He began to tremble. The men were too intent on their ritual to suspect he was watching, but he dared not move. He heard the men recite together.

Martin was impressed with the biodroid's loyalty. Mr. Stratton was trying to save the life of his mistress by enlisting fellow passengers to perform an exorcism. The voices went on, low and insistent, trying to appease the goddesses of Mars.

Amidst the candles, the men arranged sand into paths, patterns, and piles. There was silence, a final recitation, and then the men put out the candles and swept up the sand. The dim figures dissolved in the night and all was still. He only heard the throbbing thrusters.

#

At dinner, he saw Stephanie Rillo and asked her about Priscilla. "Do you think maybe her illness is related to the genetic edits you mentioned?"

"It's possible." She seemed annoyed by the question. "She's different in ways we don't understand."

"It appears the further we get from Mars, the worse she gets. I'm thinking about what you said."

"If it's genetic, then she's done, unless we turn around and go back."

"What about DNA recalibration?"

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“Too experimental. The procedure fails as often as it works. And it isn’t an option, the equipment isn’t on board.”

Martin turned to Miss Haley who talked impatiently about a dress she was wearing to the New Year’s Eve dance. “The ship’s tailor is very imprecise. After two fittings, it’s still too tight.”

“I hope the third time will be good enough.”

“Of course, this will all be wasted tailoring if Priscilla dies and we have to cancel the party. We can’t possibly have a party if someone dies right before. I told the doctor I’ll never speak to him again if that happens, and he promised he would keep her alive.”

“It would be nice for her, too,” said Martin.

“For whom?” asked Miss Haley.

“For poor Priscilla. No one likes to die just before New Year’s. Do they?”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Miss Haley.

#

After dinner, he went and visited Priscilla in the ship’s hospital. She looked at him weakly but didn’t smile.

“How is she, Doctor?”

“Much worse. Her only chance is to return to Mars. It’s hard to imagine it’s a problem with her genetic edits, but it’s possible. If she returned and the symptoms reversed, that would be an indication. I honestly have zero clue.”

Martin looked at Priscilla. “I want to tell you something. I know we barely know each other, but there’s something special in you.”

She looked at him.

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“Priscilla. I have an insane idea. Let me take you back to Mars and see if you get better. We’ll go to Sandee where no one needs to know anything about us. We can change our identities and start over. We can be who we want to be instead of who we’ve become.”

She smiled weakly. “Sandee? You’re too straitlaced. You’d have to dye your hair red and get a mohawk.”

He laughed. “Sure. And some tattoos.”

“Tell me everything you did.”

“I told you everything,” he lied.

“What will we do for work?”

He thought of Sandee: few laws, no papers needed, no government apparatus tracking your identity, each man for himself, home to every variation of chemically induced reality. And much of it was legal. He could setup a lab. They could build a life. So much for a new career: leopards never change spots, old dogs never learn new tricks, etcetera, etcetera. How else could he make a living on Mars? Drive a rickshaw?

“We’ll figure it out,” he said.

Priscilla looked at him warily. “Maybe,” she said.

#

On New Year’s Eve morning, the *Amiga Bonita* tethered up to another ship, the *Mariner’s Pearl*. Martin and Priscilla transferred aboard for the return to Mars.

Martin looked at Priscilla, reached out, and took her hand.

He closed his eyes and held her hand in his. He felt so happy for the first time in months. Don’t mess this up, ever, he thought. Whatever she wants, give it to her. Whatever she does, support her. Love her for who she is. And maybe, with time, she’ll feel the same for me.

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He opened his eyes. “Why are you crying?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she answered, leaving him unsure.

Tears now welled in his own eyes. He wiped them away, then looked out the window at the faintest, furthest stars in space.

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