

The Further Chronicles of Mars (tribute to Ray Bradbury)

by Alison Wells

In the long years of silence he waited, not knowing he waited. Ears that had been turned to him closed, the dust lifted and fell. He looked through the clearing for signs. He saw nothing, heard nothing, without knowing he wanted to see, or hear. But his hands sought the gravel instinctively as he stood, sentry to the silence, to the stillness, to the waiting. He dug, unearthed.

There is a special kind of loneliness that might trigger a metal tear. There became a feeling in him, his long arm, his fingers, digging. There was a sound, Soi, Soi, another sound, Spi, Spi. His fingers in the soil as red as blood tingled. *Fingers.*

Followed then, a sense of what was old and over. Echoes. *Flash memory...Deletion...Rebooting.*

Sleepy Hollow. Yes. Humphrey Rock. Bonneville Crater.

Dust devils, this whirlwind of fire sand. Soi, Soi, Spi, Spi, Sil, Sil.

His fingers leapt. Sicila, they said, hot springs, fumeroles, microbial life. Life.

Precipitated then, a sense of what was possible and probable. Opportunity. *Opportunity.*

It was the judder and tug he needed, he opened his eyes, looked with his long metal eye. *Spirit. I am Spirit.*

In the long years, all the orbits, the moons of Phobos and Deimos, spinning.

In the long years of silence. Not knowing but now knowing, sentient, conscious. He remembered. Sol, Sol, Soil, his name, *Spirit*, his lost companion, *Opportunity*. Mars explorers.

For the last time he waited for the Transit of Earth, that tiny marble tracing across the sun. If there could be a metal tear... He

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had been stranded in the loose soil, in the red dust and they prayed for him, there was a memorial. He did not know that but their love had been evident, he felt their efforts, reaching out. He watched the marble cross the sun and disappear. He might live forever, he might see it again.

First he travelled Olympus Mons, named for the home of the old gods. Down he went into the caves named by the Earth men for their loved ones. The final ray of the sun through the gathering dust. He disappeared into the caves to begin.

So many years, *Opportunity* retrieved perhaps, oh joy then, or conjecture, (that is all the Earth men have). They wonder where life began and where it ends and can it start again.

In the caves he began for love, for the Earth people who had sent him there, that *Rover* mission for their constant attention and their prayers. What would he make, his long arm capable of lifting rocks, making monuments, pyramids in the shape of the descending sun? Monuments already existed on the surface in the memory of souls lost in human atrocities. The twin moons were named after Fear and Panic, the lackeys of Mars, that god of war. Now. No. New. Not Fear, Not Panic, Not War.

In the long years, he spoke, he built, he became. And in the dark caves a new secret, hidden from flyby probes and the imagination of men. In these new caves, names for the loved ones, *Bradbury*, *Clarke*, *Rover*, in these new worlds, old landscapes, terraformed pastures and glades and the enduring sea and under that miraculous water not sand, not dust, not yet, not ever. Instead the red Martian rocks, deep hue, deep hewn, everlasting. To the sound of the water on rock, *Spirit* thought and unravelled his infant imagination and began, and began and began.

