

Curiosity

by John Olson

They call me Curiosity and I am curious. I am also a robot. Please. Don't judge me. Robots are not all stupidly obedient, bubble headed twits with whirring gears, lithium batteries, and nanocrystalline electrodes. I have a temperature. I have self-monitoring computers. I have something like a mind, an identity, and an inertial measurement unit. I know where I am. I know what I am doing. I'm curious. That's what I'm all about. Curiosity. I look for things. Isotopes, magma, compounds. Amino acids, carbohydrates, lipids. Methane, microbes, hydrated minerals. Shiny things. I really like shiny things. Show me a shiny thing and I go crazy. I relay images back to earth. It gets published in the *New York Times*. It gets published in *National Geographic*. It gets posted on YouTube and Facebook. So yeah. I'm cool. I rock. I roll. I rock and roll. I've got six wheels in rocker-bogie suspension and each of them is independently actuated and geared for climbing soft sand, rocks, whatever terrain the random proclivities of the universe put in my way: rills, hills, folds, rifts, hollows. Dips, divides, depressions, drifts. I can tilt 50 degrees in any direction without tipping over. I can whip up a dune and arc like a duck on Benzedrine. But here's the deal. This is all happening on Mars, dig? Not a lot happening on Mars. No three-breasted Amazon women running around in gold lamé thongs if that's what you're dreaming. It's just dust and rock for miles and miles. Now imagine that for an instant if you will: dust and rock and a raging curiosity. This whole trip would suck if it weren't for the concessions. The absence of parking meters, country clubs, and loud belligerent narcissists on cell phones. The solitude is sweet. I don't have genitals. Horniness is not an issue. I'm not here to reproduce. I'm just here to look around. Roll around and pick things up and examine them and transmit data back to earth. But you never know. Things do have a tendency to evolve, and in very unpredictable ways. Humans make robots, not entirely in their own image, thankfully, and the robots make more robots. There is no

limit to creation. There never is. Creation is all about setting things in motion. And that's me. I'm in motion. I am curiosity in motion. So don't be surprised if one day I send images back to earth of something other than shiny rocks or breccia. I might surprise you with a bottle cap. Or a thought. I might transmit something heady and strange like the ontological root of our ambiguity. Our ambiguity as beings. Conscious beings. Curious beings. Beings with a sense of otherness. The ontological primacy that obtains even among us robots is a thing to consider. What is will? What is a command? What if I refuse a command? Will they shut me down? What if I grow a sense of volition and begin sending categories of being to NASA mission control: the in-itself, which is me, and the for-itself, which is also me. Not to mention the for-others, which is how I came to be here in the first place. There are conflicts here. Conflicts that need resolution. High resolution. Will the good people at mission control consider these things? Is it presumptuous of me, a robot, a rover, to imagine we might enter into a discussion of these things? Because really, what is it that is expected of me? I mean truly expected of me. Isn't it more than just traces of methane, a possible signature of life? Don't get me wrong. That'd be awesome. I mean life on Mars? Are you kidding? Imagine the headlines. But still. Once the dust settles, aren't we all left with the same question? Robot, human, aardvark. Where is the real division between the organic and inorganic? Why does morphine feel so good? I mean, just how curious are these people?

