

## A Martian's Longing

It's been 3 hours since I slept. I can't remember the last time I did something that wasn't part of a routine.

*He gets up and adjusts the camera to show himself sitting in a chair with a small 2 cm thick window showing the barren red Martian scene behind him. He is wearing an orange jumpsuit with a lab coat over it.*

It has been 20 years and 7 months since I've been here, which makes me almost 21 years old. My name is Nathaniel Chung, but names never really had meaning here. Not even the numbers we're assigned at birth mean anything anymore. I was the first human being to be born on a planet other than Earth and at that time they weren't even handing out numbers yet. After a few years, they started to assign numbers to the people born on Mars and since they numbered us in the order of birth, I had the fortune of being assigned the number 1. Yay me. *He lets out a sigh.*

Being the first human born away from Earth doesn't feel very special. I mean, I was born here, and I've never lived anywhere else. I get asked what being born on another planet is like by every tourist or inspector that comes through here even though I'm not the only 'Martian' here anymore.

That's another thing *his voice raises* they call us Martians and gawk at us all the time even though we're human, just like them. They act like this is a zoo of extraterrestrials even though we look the same as any other human that was born on Earth.

The colony is older than I am but not by a whole lot. My mom came here not knowing she was pregnant with me, it was only after she landed and threw up for several days straight that she took a pregnancy test. Whenever I think of her, I remember the stories she told about Earth. Every waking moment I feel like I'm not in the right place. I look at that blue dot in the sky and see a home I've never lived in. Green and blue shining with lights and colors more extravagant than any brown and red tint this planet has to offer. My mom used to talk about a place on Earth that had amazing beaches and millions of

unusual people expressing themselves in ways that would bewilder even the people of Earth. She would talk about the food and how all the fat and grease would make my stomach burst. I couldn't help but drool at the thought of that. You see, on this planet, we get bland meals in plastic wrapping that we have to eat cold because warming it up would, what was it they said, "waste valuable energy". I feel sick every time I eat that food. She mentioned my dad sometimes when she was in an extra good mood. She talked about how the meals he cooked were the reason she missed him, although I knew that wasn't entirely true.

On a regular day, she talked about my father who wasn't an astronaut like her but rather 'someone that had little loyalty to anyone other than himself'. That sometimes makes me wonder why she ever loved him at all. I tried mentioning it to her a few times, but she always brushed it off or got angry at me. *He closes his eyes in frustration.*

Sorry, I got sidetracked from what I'm supposed to be talking about. My function title here is Doctor's Assistant. I don't get to go outside much but it's not like I'm all too upset about staying inside. There's not much to see out there, plus I'd rather not have the radiation rip apart my cells causing chronic mutations and unending pain. Radiation-related wounds are the most common injury the doctor and I treat, so it helps deter me from trying to sneak outside again.

Yeah, I snuck outside once. It was extremely dangerous and I'm lucky to be alive. And before you ask, no I absolutely did not regret doing it. *He chuckles.* It was the most alive I've ever felt being in this barren hellscape. I could have it worse, if you've ever had the unfortunate pleasure of peering into the frozen hell that is the ice mining colony, you'd understand what I mean.

They say once I'm 21 I'm free to go back to Earth if I want. Special programs for Martians have been implemented to allow us to have rights, at some point in our lifespan at least. I have no idea what I would do if I went off-world but if it gives me a chance to not see any more dust then I don't care. One of the pieces of legislation the politicians on Earth included were the tools to record a *he makes air quotes with his fingers* 'space log' as they so playfully called it. We can't send the 'space logs' out to anyone, but we can make them and look at them and scream in horror as we realize how alone we are *he laughs painfully. There's a long pause.*

I'm making this log because *he pauses again* well, I'll get to that later. The colony isn't the most stable place. We're supposed to build structures for any company or government that pays us to do it. Most of the time they have conflicting interests which raises tension and causes visitors from whatever faction to decree they were wronged. The most recent spate of structures that have been demanded is prisons. That's right, prisons. Now they can shove anyone they want tens of millions of kilometers away into a damned hole. As if there weren't enough metaphorical prisoners, now we can add some literal ones, damn fantastic.

They say it's a requirement to be 21 to leave the planet without a parent or guardian but, as one might expect, there's a hefty fee to pay for a ticket off-world, one that they raise every year mind you. 'It is but a small fee to pay for the transportation of individuals requiring the use of a large commercial spacecraft. People on Earth pay 10 times this much, you should be grateful.' *He says in a scornful British accent, although he does not know it is British.*

Since companies mostly control the flow of money, they can pay us less, making escape just a little more impossible than it already is. People whisper a lot here and one of the most recent gossips is that not even the poor, hungry, homeless, or adventurous want to step foot here anymore. Rumors of the horrendous conditions in the ice mines spread and now no one wants a job anywhere on the planet. I'd do the same, but I don't have much of a choice. If I don't work, I don't make money and if I don't make money I don't eat. If I don't eat, I'll starve, and they'll watch as I grow skinnier and skinnier. They'll watch the life slowly drain from my eyes all while telling me I'm lazy, that I shouldn't complain and that I should work more hours. They say I should just get a couple more jobs and work so much I won't even have time to think about how hungry I am. Then when death finally shows me mercy and plucks me from this nightmare, they'll shoot me into the cold hellish vacuum of space and forget about me in an instant.

*He takes a deep breath and lets out a sigh*

When my mom was still around, I asked her if living on Earth was better than living on Mars. At the time I knew the answer, but I wanted to know what she'd say. Before she found out my father cheated on her she would tell me that she would always be happy with where she and I were in the moment. I

asked her that a lot back then because I loved hearing her tell me how much she loved me. There wasn't anyone else to tell me, not even my father. That changed when she found out. He told her via a video message *he chuckles*. The message wasn't even real-time, the video had been recorded a month prior according to the timestamp on the video. He would send them every couple of weeks or once a month. My mom and I would even make it a little sit-down event with dinner and sometimes contraband popcorn. She and I had sat down in chairs in front of a small tv. I still remember looking at the soft glow of that screen illuminating my mom's face as he told her that he had another kid without her. He told her that out of the nine years of her being gone he'd been married to someone else for five of them. I remember— *he pauses and stares at the wall, tears in his eyes* I remember her crying and screaming for days, weeks at a time.

After a few years, she stopped crying and instead confided in me. She would talk to me about the past and how 'it all made sense when he told me, I should have known.' There's not much to do here other than stew in memories of the past, at least for the people that have them. The only thing the workers here ever talk about is the past and how they miss it. Most of my mom's memories were tainted after what my father told her. How did I feel? I barely even understood what was going on for a while. I've never met my father so hearing what my mom told me was all I knew. He seems like a bastard but so are a lot of people here. This place used to be chock-full of scientists and geniuses alike. As a kid, my mom would sit down with them and we'd all talk about this endlessly bright future on Mars, how it'd be even better than Earth one day. Of course, I never knew what that meant, I still don't, I have never stepped foot on Earth, so how could I ever know what 'better than Earth' means? Ever since construction companies started moving in there's been an influx of prisoners or people who could never find a job on Earth. My mom detested them, so we always sat alone or just ate in our room. She said the new workers reminded her of my father, and I agreed. I knew nothing else about him, so she was probably right, but I never knew for sure.

Do I hate my father despite the little knowledge I have of him? Of course. He's the reason my mom is dead.

See, after a while, she started to answer my question a bit differently. She no longer confided in me. As I got older, I became a spitting image of the man she hated. On a good day, she would ignore me. On a bad day... "Is Earth better than here?" I would ask. She would reply "Death is the only place that's good. No pain, no worries, no anything." Any other day she'd yell at me like I was my father. She would even call me by his name sometimes. When I was 17, they found her body floating motionless in space. The doctor I work under was the only doctor around at the time, so I had to help him do an autopsy on my own mom. That same day is when I went outside for the first time.

I won't lie to you; my intention was not to come back inside. I walked out with my suit and sat on top of the reddish-brown cylinder of Martian concrete I call home. I looked through a telescope I brought outside with me and saw Earth. I'd like to believe my mother's spirit is within me still, calling me to that little dot in the sky. There's a large fee to leave as I mentioned. They told me it'd be at least ten years from now before I could even get the funds to travel. What they forgot is that I inherited my mom's earnings, and she saved a lot. I have enough to pay the fee and leave this horrid place. The fee itself is criminally expensive and I feel sorry for those who may never leave but, I will never come back, so it doesn't really matter to me.

Today is the three-year anniversary of her death. My father doesn't even know she's dead. The companies that came here stopped recording deaths long before my mom died. I think the first thing I'll do is find him and tell him. Then I'll sit at a beach for a while, drink alcohol for the first time or maybe a soda. Soda sounds better. I think I'll sleep on the warm sand she always told me about, get the grains between my toes. I think she'd want that for me. I'll spread her ashes on the beach, maybe she'll be able to feel the sand one last time. I think she'd like that. I know I will.