

a little spot of green in a big red world

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a little spot of green in a big red world
Maarten Lempia

A thin cloud of red dust drifted slowly through the air. The man tilted his head slightly, a thoughtful expression lingering across his lips. Several months ago, he might have moved inside and sealed the windows, but not anymore. The dust was nothing if not unavoidable here. The mines in the mountains to the west made sure of that. But the land was cheap, and the dust wasn't too much of a hassle to deal with, at least not once he had grown accustomed to it. If anything, it was only slightly worse than it had been in the man's old home, back on Earth.

After only a few moments, the dust cloud had dispersed, and the man's attention was drawn elsewhere. Across the rolling slopes of the foothills, his nearest neighbor was starting up his machinery again. He seemed insistent on using it every day to clear the winding road leading to his house, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the dust was unavoidable. Sometimes the man hated his neighbor for his idiocy, wishing he would just give up and let the mountain sounds breathe from under his constant mechanical droning. On other days he respected his neighbor for his stubbornness, his resilience against the wild, his fortitude and unwillingness to give in. But on most days he just accepted that the neighbor had nothing better to do. Nobody did here.

Beyond the neighbor's house, the foothills continued to roll south, endlessly flowing into the horizon, following the western mountains as they towered high into the atmosphere. The red rocks and sands were infrequently dotted with homes just like his. Gray two-story structures that sat lifeless and uninspiring in a burning world. When the neighbor stopped running his machinery, the mountains breathed again. The intermittent low rumbles of the mountain mines were like thunder, heralding a rain that would never come. The man leaned his head back against the wood of his chair and closed his eyes. He listened to the low whistle of the wind, carrying with it some of those mountain sounds.

The man thought back to his arrival. His shuttle had touched down late in the red evening, and he had shuffled his way through the massive white complex with the few others that had arrived with him. Transport was provided and he loaded his few belongings on board. He would have brought with him a piece of home, but he had lost it along the way. The transport made its way up the long winding road from the central complex to his new home. Along the way, it passed the many homes identical to his that broke up the endless swath of red sand. Somehow it only made it more monotonous. Men and women who were tired of their old lives filled them all. There were no younger people here, full of

energy, eager for opportunity, ready for adventures. Just old, tired men and women. The man had never learned the names of his neighbors, nor did he plan to. They didn't matter.

The mine workers lived back at the massive white complex, where life was structured and organized. Their pay wasn't great, but they didn't care. They were living out their dreams, engineers who had spent their lives studying, hoping for a chance to one day get their hands on Mars. To shape it into whatever they desired. Building the future of humanity.

"Be a part of history!" The ads flashed bold and bright everywhere. Everyone wanted to go, but no one was willing to leave. They felt safe in the comfort of their homes, in the only world they had ever known. But to some, all it took was the promise of something new. The old, tired men and women. All most of them wanted to do was to relax and wait for their last days to come. Better to die somewhere new than to die in the same place they had lived all of their lives. Better to have something different. Something others couldn't have.

After a short while of half-sleep, the man sat up again. He scanned his surroundings, the rolling red expanse, half wishing to see something new, though not expecting to. It was somewhat comforting to him, knowing that nothing would change. At least not while he was here. He would be long dead by the time the many corporations of Earth would dig their claws into Mars. Then they would raze the gray houses and raise their glass high rises. But for now, it was just the government. The government and the old, tired men and women looking for the right place to spend their final days. Or perhaps just any place. A different place.

The man stood slowly, stretching his back as he did, wishing it wouldn't ache. The creak of the porch underfoot did its best, but it could never match that of his joints. He took a few deep breaths, shivering despite the beating yellow sun on the burning red rocks. He made his way across the porch and stepped down the few lonely stairs, steadying himself on the railing, making his way onto the flattened path that led down to the greenhouse.

His boots left light imprints in the dust coating the path, the particles finding a resting place in the grooves on the bottom. The greenhouse was a curious place for the man. A piece of Earth, but not the Earth he had lived in. The harmonies of sirens and the slamming of doors were absent. The air was clear and crisp, not thick and gray. There was no homeless man lying beneath a dirty, stolen red blanket, begging for his change and scowling when he was ignored. No shop owners boarding up their windows and gating their doors before the sun even had a chance to hide. No, it was full of green.

Greens the man had seen all his life, but only through the tv, or through the shop windows. Greens he had never felt.

When he had agreed to pack up and ship himself across the stars, one of the questions the government had asked was if he wanted a greenhouse. The man had no answer, for he had no idea what a greenhouse even was. Nor did he ask. It was something different, so he had agreed. He had no idea it would turn out to be his little corner of peace in his new home.

He closed the first door behind him, turning the handle to seal it shut. The air hissed as it drew out whatever red dust had crept its way inside with him. The panel flashed, and the second door clicked open. He stepped inside. He stood and stared for a while. A little spot of green in a big red world. Not a bad place to be, he thought to himself. Perhaps when he felt his breaths coming slower, and his knees giving out, he would come here and lay on the floor. Staring at the green canopy that wound its way across the ceiling, he would draw his final breaths. Better here than that same burning red.

A noise drew him out of his trance. The man exited the greenhouse and stood outside, staring up. He could see the little traces of flame hurtling across the sky. Like someone had given a child an orange crayon and left him alone. The debris was falling again. No one really knew what it was. No one except the government. Perhaps some waste product ejected high into the atmosphere. Maybe a failed experiment that had broken to pieces. Maybe another government's military had gotten too close. It didn't really matter. The debris fell either way.

Some 20 yards from where he stood, a scrap of metal lay half-buried in the sand, smaller than a man, yet still larger than him. The dust it had kicked up carried away to the east, floating along the wind among the mountain sounds. Though the debris had fallen before, it had never come this close. He preferred to watch as it floated slowly down the distant sky and into the western mountains. There he could watch the flowing clouds of dust they kicked up, traveling ever eastward.

The orange trails in the sky were much brighter today. It seemed they had decided to settle among the foothills today, following in the footsteps of those old, tired men and women. The man stood there considering them, his brow furrowed with concern. After a few short moments, he started up the path back toward the house. The basement was 20 feet below, the ground above it reinforced. The government had built them that way. Whether out of caution or out of necessity, only they could say. They had never instructed him whether or not he would need to use it. In fact, they had never even

mentioned its existence. The door that led down beneath the ground had been open when he arrived and had remained closed every day since.

The man stopped. He stood there, about halfway up the path, facing his gray “home.” He cocked his head slightly sideways and stared at it. From a distance, one might have thought he was conversing with it. That momentary feeling of fear had disappeared. He shrugged slightly, then turned around, towards the greenhouse. Another hunk of metal slammed into the dust a short distance down the hill. He paid it no mind. He pushed his way through the dusty red door, which had once been shining and white. He turned the handle to seal it behind him, and air hissed as the dust was once again sucked out. He made his way inside.

He stepped to the center of the greenhouse. Joints creaking, he slowly lowered himself to the floor, extending his legs and laying his head back. He folded his hands together across his chest and let his eyes wander. He followed the vines as they wound their way upwards, wrapping themselves around the support beams. Eventually, his eyes settled on one of the many small flowers that dotted the ceiling, like the stars that ran across the sky, hiding from the burning sun.

The man smiled and closed his eyes. Maybe he would awake in a few hours and make his way out the dusty red door to study the metal that would line the landscape. Or maybe he wouldn't. Not that it mattered. The debris would keep falling either way, and come the morning, his neighbor would be clearing the road, just as he always did.