

SILENCE AND SURRENDER

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I want one of the Mars One Mission Design-winning t-shirts with its steadfast rocket encircled by a planet whose lower half is Earth blue and upper, Mars red. The rocket's main body standing firm on the blue while its tip sprouts branches and leaves like a tree blossoming into a red sky above. The full half-and-half planet, a metaphysical globe, floating in black space with naught else in view but two small, red moons. I covet the colorful beauty of the t-shirt with its theme of expedition into the unknown, but find it seems to be permanently out of stock, unavailable, elusive, beyond reach, leaving empty space in its wake, a kind of solar systematic metaphor.

Despite overreaching ardor for the alluring shirt, it is nearly inconceivable for me to imagine embarking on the Mars One Mission itself. Being so inspired as to want to leave Earth forever (which more than 200,000 people from around the world volunteered to be considered for). To travel for nearly a year to reach the distant planet so many millions of miles away. To stay there permanently with less than a handful of other people (and no dogs) to have as friends, companions, coworkers for a lifetime. To explore alone forever. Yet, I do. I do imagine it.

I imagine standing on that distant planet, one of Earth's nearest neighbors, some 142 million miles away from home. Standing there and looking out into space, where somewhere so far away, my home and all that I know would appear to be but a dot. Standing there, my feet planted on that planet whose atmosphere is thin enough to cause my blood to boil if I were to walk on its rocky surface unprotected, not to mention that I

would also be disturbed by the extreme cold (average daily temps minus 81° Fahrenheit—and that's average), plus, the sun's killer radiation—undeflected by the thin atmosphere—would also be harmful. So, I imagine myself standing on that distant planet, some 142 million miles away, a planet half the size of Earth, where extinct volcanoes tower three times higher than Mount Everest, where canyons plunge four times the depth of the Grand Canyon, where solar caps display frozen carbon dioxide, I imagine standing on the red soil of that planet sporting a fashionable and utilitarian protective spacesuit, which would not be unduly heavy as gravity is far less there than here and would carry only one-third its earthly weight. (Plus, I would weigh far less too, and would no longer have to diet.) So, no sweat.

I imagine standing there on that rocky, red surface and staring out into a pink sky, a pink sky that at sunset would turn surprisingly, in that world, blue. Standing there, staring out into space, searching for sight of my home, of Earth far beyond both my vision and reach, staring still beyond the sun's set (a sun appearing much smaller in that sky, 50 million miles farther away from Mars than it is from Earth), into the dark as two small moons come into view, one circling every seven hours, the other every thirty, and if my stay there were too long (like say, 50 million years), the larger, closer moon might crash the planet as its minimal distance away (only 3,000 miles) shortens by six feet every century, orbiting ever nearer. These two moons, Fear and Panic, named for the two sons (or was it two dogs? or maybe two horses? there's some dispute). Well then, these two moons, Fear and Panic, named for two beings of some kind belonging to or related to the Roman god of war, would appear so much smaller there than our own moon does here, are so much smaller, twinkling in that nighttime sky as stars only.

Do they carry their named essence? Would I feel it? Would I feel fear and panic? So far from home. From everything I'd ever known. Everyone. Remote, removed, far-flung, outlying, beyond the boonies. Alone. Even a satellite call to my mother (if she were still alive) would carry a 24-minute delay. Making conversation somewhat tedious and distant. How did my own grandparents feel, I wonder, when they left Russia never to see or speak with their families ever again? Perhaps it was the promise of a new life that supported them through the lifetime separation. Perhaps if I chose (and were chosen)

for the Mars One Mission, I would be supported by the adventure of it all. The thrill of delving into the unknown. The exploration and discovery. The science. The dream. Being a pioneer. Making history. Perhaps these would be the greater gain. Would weight the balance.

Still. Could they appease the near-infinite distance? Or would loneliness burgeon? Would fear take hold? Would I be regretful? Or, would spiritual awe, silence, and surrender take my hand as I traveled a mission to explore and colonize the red planet with only but a few others, for a lifetime, traversing in sparse company that new land. (We'd have to be good at getting along with others, as well as enjoy the opportunity to embrace quiet time). High priorities, these, in choice of mission candidates: "emotional and psychological stability supported by personal drive and motivation along with capacity for self-reflection." Which I would have to have, would have no other choice, could make no change or alteration, because I could never return, never come back, never come home, never talk to my mother again (if she were alive) without time delay. It would be a one-way trip.

So there I would stay, 142 million miles away (on average—for it could be as close as 33 million miles or as far as 249 million miles, what with elliptical orbits and all) in that strange, distant land it would take seven months traveling tens of thousands of miles per hour to reach after seven years of training and from where, once there, there would be no possibility, ever, for return. I imagine myself there, alone with small company. All else forsaken. Possibilities unknown. My only choice, silence and surrender, my new destiny in this strange, foreign, faraway land.

Though I cannot lie—even on this planet, on my street, in my home, my man beside me in bed, my dogs both so near, often, I feel like that here.

I wonder, will the elusive Mars One t-shirt ever be within my reach?