

ACTUARIES FROM MARS!

A chartreuse aurora danced on Averie's ceiling. She knew the glow was from the radiated lake outside her bedroom, but each night as she fell asleep, she preferred to imagine this effervescent ballet was a portal to another dimension.

Somewhere, in the beyond, fairies danced among flowers. Elves sang songs that sounded like babbling brooks and felt like summer winds. She longed for a guardian spirit who could whisk her away from the charred trees, unforgiving heat, and gray ash that rendered the world colorless. One of these night, a sprite might escort her from wasteland to Neverland.

None ever came - until tonight.

The figure appeared suddenly and silently in the corner of her room. He was thin and pale and awkward. He wore khaki pants and a checkered shirt that had more wrinkles than a bag of raisins.

Averie rubbed her eyes and slowly sat up to address the imposter.

"Who are you?" She crossed her fingers hoping he'd reveal himself to be Oberon, Peter Pan, or maybe Gandalf the Gray.

"Bob." The man said, seeming to prefer the expressionless threads of the carpet to Averie's inquisitive gaze.

"Are you sure?"

He shrugged. Averie felt flicker of hope. Maybe he had forgotten his true identity. Amnesia was a common consequence of soured dalliances with spiteful deities.

"How did you get here Bob?"

"GUBER."

"What?"

"Galactic Uber. Well, that's what we call it anyway. It has a more technical name that I never pronounce correctly. They only drop off at Earth though. So I'm kind of stuck without a ride back."

"Back where?"

"Mars."

Averie shivered with excitement. This stranger was from outer space! It may not be the fantasy world she had hoped for, but things were headed in the right direction.

"What do you want?" She hoped he'd say 'take me to your leader.' It was cliché, but she wanted an excuse to meet the president. Maybe there would be a parade.

"I, um, need a pen." Bob raised his head. He squinted his eyes and bit his lip. The poor thing reminded her of the three eyed lizard she had found mummified in the school yard last month, so frail and pathetic.

"You travelled across the solar system, just for a pen?"

Bob shrugged again. "Yeah. I need one with blue ink. We don't have any on Mars."

"Let's pause for a moment on the pen issue. You said 'we' - there are more of you out there? Is there life on Mars?"

"Well, we are there." Bob was staring at the floor again.

"What are you exactly? Are you a Martian? Are you human?"

"I am an actuary."

"So...neither?"

Averie pursed her lips as she tried to decide what to do with Bob the actuary from Mars. He seemed relatively harmless, maybe even more scared of her than she was of him.

"Ok Bob. I'll help you on your intergalactic quest to find the rare and elusive blue ink pen and then find you a way home. But first you need to start at the beginning and explain everything. Come sit next to Mr. Snuggles." Averie patted a spot on her bed next to a plush toy unicorn.

I was born in Oklahoma, which in many ways is a lot like Mars, just slightly less red. I went to school and got a job at an insurance company in Iowa. I was living the dream.

One day, I was having lunch with my fellow actuaries. A particularly rude guy from sales came by and started lecturing us on our aloofness, called us 'introversionists' and blamed us for the "extrovert shaming" that had become so prevalent in the media.

It was at that moment we decided that humanity had lost its marbles. However, like good actuaries we did our research and made some projections. Our analysis convinced us that the trends were disturbing enough that we needed to get off the planet. It was the best way to mitigate the impending collapse of humanity.

I had met the space minded entrepreneur Elon Musk on a spring break trip when I was in college. I bailed him out of a rather embarrassing situation, so he owed me a favor. Long story short, we all hopped on a rocket destined for the red planet. It seems we escaped just in time, since shortly after our departure the Great Reset happened, and the new Ministry of Social Affairs deemed Musk's work excessive and wasteful.

You'd be amazed at what a dozen actuaries left to their own devices can do. Within a few months, we had a fully operational mini colony and had adapted quite well to life on the fourth rock from the sun. I guess we had done so well, that we caught the attention of the Intergalactic Group for New Organisms Relocating Elsewhere, aka IGNORE.

IGNORE helped us establish our colony as a trading post for other beings that might be passing by. They give us building materials and food supplies and we assess the solvency of their insurance companies. It is a beautiful system. If things keep going well, they will be giving us tutorials on space travel so we don't have to completely rely on GUBER.

"Time out." Averie got up and paced the room. "Are you saying that aliens are real?!"

"As real as Mr. Snuggles." Bob picked up the stuffed unicorn and began stroking its rainbow mane.

"What are they like? Little green guys with big eyes? Or humungous blobs of purple goo?"

"I can't tell you."

"What?"

"I'm not allowed."

"Says who?"

"IGNORE. I've already said too much."

Averie stomped her foot on the ground and folded her arms across her chest. "Not fair! That's like taking a kid to an ice cream store and telling her she has to wait in the car. She can't even go inside to look at the flavors."

"Sorry kid, I don't make the rules. Do you have any ice cream by the way? I haven't had a good cone in ages."

Averie blew a rogue strand of hair out of her face. She gave Bob the same look she gave her parents when they ask her to clean her room.

"Why can't any of these alien buddies of yours give you a blue pen? You'd think there be others out in the galaxy."

"Beats me. Earth is the only place that has them."

Averie had a million other questions, but she figured they could wait until after breakfast. She needed a bowl of chocolate flakes and a stiff glass of orange juice to try to get her mind right.

Her parents, Ned and Katie, were already enjoying coffee as she came downstairs with Bob.

Averie's mom saw Bob, who was still holding Mr. Snuggles, and her eyes went wide, imagining the worst. She smacked her husband on the shoulder, causing him to spill coffee on his lap.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"Ned, call the Distress Squad. There is a creepy man behind our daughter and I am about to freak out!"

"Calm down Katie," Averie's dad said as he patted his wife on the leg with one hand and mopped up the spilled beverage with the other. "I am sure there is an emotionally satisfying explanation for this. Averie, what is going on?"

Averie recapped the night's events. Her mother chewed on her fingernails the entire time. Her father frowned. Bob shifted uncomfortably.

"Come here sweetheart, before you're kidnapped or killed." Katie beckoned her daughter to her side, her voice trembling.

"He's not dangerous mom." Averie protested.

"Listen kiddo," her dad took her hands, "normal people do not randomly appear in little girl's rooms in the middle of the night. I don't care what the backstory is. And even if he is who he says he is, we still can't be sure he doesn't want to put you in a feather suit and keep you in a cage. Let's get the Distress Squad to escort him to a neutral zone."

"Dayaad! I am not going to be his pet human bird. He just wants a blue pen."

"That is too simple of an explanation, so I cannot trust it."

Her father attempted to press a button on his watch, but a loud siren blared outside, followed by an announcement voiced by a mechanical sounding female.

ATTENTION CITIZENS. IF YOU HAVE A STRANGER IN YOUR HOUSE, DO NOT TALK TO THEM. PLEASE ALLOW THE **BEUREAU OF DISTRESS SCENE MANAGEMENT** TO ARRIVE. AND REMEMBER, THERE IS NO FUSS WHEN YOU TRUST US.

Averie's parents had a smug 'I-told-you-so' expression on their faces.

Ned caressed his wife's shoulder. "You can take a deep breath now Katie, the government will be here soon and everything's better after a BDSM session."

Averie scowled, tilted her head up towards Bob, and implored him for an explanation. Bob didn't get a chance.

The doorbell chimed and the front camera broadcast an image of three men in black rubber hazmat suits branded with the BDSM insignia, standing in the entryway.

Ned gave a vocal command to open the door. The men passed through the decontamination chamber and made their way to the breakfast table.

Katie went to the food synthesizer to generate some more coffee.

Out of the suits, each member of the Distress Squad looked a trio of clones: skin painted gray, shaved heads and eyebrows, and they wore charcoal lipstick. The whole concept of the aesthetic was to look as neutral as possible, muting out anything that might trigger someone's passions or bias. To Averie they looked like a bunch of creepy corpses.

"I am Major Tom," one of the group said in a voice that was higher and more feminine than Averie had expected. "My associates are Major Tim and Major Dom. We are here to remove your Distress."

Major Tom turned toward Bob.

"Come with us."

Bob didn't budge. "Why?"

"Come with us." The major repeated, his voice seemed to quiver a little.

"No. Not without a logical explanation."

"Come. With. Us."

"I won't go anywhere unless you give me a good reason."

Averie noticed beads of sweat beginning to form on Major Tom's forehead. The other majors squirmed in their seats. Averie's mother's hands were shaking as she took a sip of coffee. Was her dad crying? Meanwhile, Bob had taken on a new air of confidence.

"Come with us. Now." Veins bulged on Major Tom's neck.

"You are just repeating the same thing, only a bit louder each time. It will not change my position. It wouldn't take much to get me out that door, just a simple rational argument."

The men at the breakfast table passed out. Major Tom buckled at the knees. He leaned on the counter for stability. He reached into the breast pocket of his shirt and passed a packet of pills to Averie's parents.

"Take these," he rasped, "they will remove your Distress." Then Major Tom collapsed.

Moments later, Averie's parents were stoned. Averie fixed herself a bowl of cereal and drank two glasses of orange juice in silent awkwardness.

"What just happened?" She finally inquired.

"I challenged Major Tom to rely on reason and logic. It seems this skill has atrophied just as we predicted it would before we left Earth. He collapsed under the strain."

Averie walked to the front door, stepping over the fainted majors, and slid her feet into her hazmat suit.

"Come on Bob, let's go find your pen. You can wear my dad's suit."

"I won't need it." Bob twisted his hand and popped off his arm, revealing wires and circuits instead of flesh and blood.

Averie, paused and gave Bob an open mouthed stare.

"What you see in front of you is an avatar, a synthetic version of myself. It comes in handy for exploring worlds that might have toxic atmospheres or extreme temperatures."

"Are you controlling it from Mars?" Averie poked at the detached arm. "It feels so real!"

"Yup, it's like full immersion video game."

"Cool. So I guess you aren't stuck here then."

"My avatar is, and I would really like it back. They take a while to build. And I need it to retrieve the blue pen."

Bob reattached his arm and Averie finished putting on her hazmat suit. It was custom painted to make her look as if she were a panda.

"Anything else I should know before we go?"

"You might have figured out that I'm not the only actuary who arrived last night. Like many things, we actuaries like to act with caution. We felt we had a better chance of success if we sent a group of us, a distribution of actuaries, if you will. We chose houses with kids because the adults are too irrational and wouldn't ever accept our presence."

"That would explain the Distress Squad."

Bob nodded. He and Averie passed through the air lock and out of the house. Outside, the world had a sepia tint. Citrine clouds blanketed the sky, punctuated by staccato flashes of blue heat lightning. At first, Averie and Bob were the sole entities on the street. That didn't last long.

"Hey Averie, wait up!" Averie's best friend, Ziggy, struggled to run in his bulky protective gear. Behind Ziggy was woman with short black curly hair, glasses, and a notable absence of radiation repelling equipment.

Ziggy caught up and as he caught his breath Bob introduced Averie to Barb, another actuarial avatar from the colony on Mars.

"Are you looking for a blue pen as well?" Averie asked.

Ziggy answered for her, having finally caught his breath. "Barb said she needed a better coffee mug. She apparently left her favorite one behind when she left Earth, and hasn't found a decent replacement since."

"Well then, I think we know what needs to happen –"

"To the Amazon pod!" finished Ziggy excitedly and he took off running again.

At the end of the next block was a rocket shaped tower. Flying drones entered and exited like bees from a hive, carrying packages instead of pollen. By the time Averie and Ziggy arrived, there was a small queue of children and their actuarial companions.

A shadow passed over the crowd. A government hovercraft landed near the tower. A dozen machine-men emerged from the ship. Their exoskeletons clicked, whirred, and whooshed as the operators shepherded the group away from the tower.

Once the group was sufficiently corralled, another figure emerged from the ship. It was a Grand Counselor. She was inside a translucent orb that provided her transportation as well as visibility. She wore gray robes and had the same gray skin paint as the Distress Squad. Her voice was amplified through her bubble's membrane.

"My dear children. We do not blame you for participating in this disruption. You do not know any better. These unexpected visitors are elevating Fear and Panic levels amongst our citizens and in order to restore Tranquility, we must insist that they leave at once."

"They don't scare me." Averie stepped toward the Grand Counselor, "and they were going to leave anyway. If anything, you are the one getting everyone all worked up about it by freaking out. Bob here just needs a blue pen, it is no big deal."

Ziggy whooped in encouragement and stuck out his tongue at the robed official.

"You are a child. You are not susceptible to Fear the way adults are. Sometimes you are completely immune from it, other times, it will be catastrophic. Your parents however, must be ever vigilant to avoid catching Fear and spreading it. Like a cancerous tumor, we have found that the most effective way to stop Fear is to cut out its source."

"But I already told you, these actuaries are nothing to be afraid of. They are gentle." Averie held Bob's hand.

The Grand Counselor wheeled the clear ball closer, she dropped to one knee to be eye level with Averie, and stared at her for a few seconds.

"This is worse than we thought. You have been brainwashed. Let me guess, you heard a story that was logical, used reason for the basis of decision and minimized emotion."

Averie did not respond. She squeezed Bob's hand a little tighter. He squeezed back.

"Thinking is dangerous my dear. For so long, humans mistook our brain power as an evolutionary advantage. Our overreliance on thought numbed us from our core instincts. We share these intuitions with every living creature, to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Emotion is linked to instinct, occurring prior to thought. For example, we don't rationalize our way to love. It is emotion that guides us. Imagine how much more comfortable we will feel when this is all over."

Bob stepped in front of Averie and knocked on the Counselor's orb, making it ring like a bell. There was no trace of the timid individual that first appeared in the corner of her room.

"Hello? Anyone in there? Take a look around. Things aren't a blissful paradise here. You nuked the sky to control the weather. Your war on thought has generated incalculable collateral damage. You want to talk about brainwashing? Your 'No fuss, trust us' propaganda is first class manipulation. You actively sedate your population in the name of feeling good. Soft blankets and warm hugs will not fix the root causes of any of your problems. I don't want to be in this insanity any longer. Get me a blue pen and I'll be happily be on my way."

"Halleluia!" Ziggy shouted.

The rest of the crowd was quiet. The Counselor closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. Then she spoke again, in a calm measured tone.

"So you are saying emotion is pointless."

Bob threw his arms in the air.

"Don't put words in my mouth your grandness. I said no such thing. Of course emotions and desires are important. A world without them would be lacking art and humor. The danger lies in trying to over emphasize emotion to avoid feeling uncomfortable. Fear isn't 'bad'. It can lead to skepticism and caution, which in the right measure are very constructive. All I am saying is that we can apply logic to compliment emotion. We will find a better course of action by being critical thinkers, and by encouraging healthy debate to challenge our biases. I will be clear. We've run the numbers, we've studied the models. If you continue on your current course, you will bring on your own demise."

The Counselor laughed, her cackles were sharp and caustic like a crow.

"You prove my point. You just applied reason to threaten me, and all mankind. I now have the authority to silence you and those you came with. So whose demise will we see today?"

The machine-men's exoskeletons hummed as they shifted into extermination mode. Each actuary was dotted with a red laser beam.

Bob gave Averie a kiss on her head.

"I'll be back," he whispered in her ear.

There was a quiet hiss and Bob crumpled to the ground. Averie sniffed and tried to blink away her tears.

There were never any news articles written about the day the actuaries from Mars came to visit. The world went on, pretending as if never it happened.

Averie didn't forget. She would often spend evenings in her room, wielding her blue pen like a magic wand. She would sketch pictures of what she imagined the Mars colony would look like. She drew aliens of all varieties and shapes.

She was drawing when Bob came back.

"Hey there kiddo."

She turned to see a shimmering image of Bob. He was some sort of hologram. He reached out his hand, inviting her to escape from Earth and travel to another realm.

Averie grabbed a couple of blue pens from her desk and reached for the flickering portal. Her skin started to tingle, she got light headed and a bit ill as if she had just spun around in a thousand circles. She started to float toward the ceiling. Her heart beat faster and faster as she approached it. She felt the roof of the house pass through her. It was like swallowing something too big, but instead of in your throat, you felt it all over. She continued her ascent.

Above the house she could see her neighborhood. The sun was setting and the houses took on magenta hues. As Averie's gazed drifted towards the heavens, she saw an endless amount of flying saucers speckling the sky. It was as though someone had spilled a jar of loose change into the atmosphere. Some of the shimmering ships had children below them, being summoned upward in invisible elevators.

Averie passed through the ship's hull and felt her weight return. Bob was next to her, working a series of controls and checking monitor displays. The concave wall in front of Averie served as a projection screen. She could see the other vessels zipping around above the suburban sprawl.

"I thought you guys didn't have spaceships." Averie's thoughts fell out her mouth.

"They're brand new, pretty cool huh?"

"It's splendiferous!" She gave Bob a big hug, and noticed he felt a bit softer than his avatar version. "What are you doing?"

"Cleaning up." Bob pressed a button and two chair-like structures emerged from the floor of the ship. He sat and gestured for Averie to do the same.

"Our visit back to Earth was more than just a retrieval of household objects. We needed to assess the state of humanity. Was it progressing the way we had anticipated? When I got blasted, we realized the rate of decay was occurring faster than what we had modelled. We assessed what might be going wrong, and we realized we may have overestimated our ingenuity factor. Human history is marked by moments of illumination that drastically changed the trajectory of human survival. Think of the printing press, the enlightenment, the industrial revolution or the internet. With me so far?"

Averie nodded. She thought a glass of orange juice might be good right about now. The armrest on her chair buzzed and a refreshing glass of OJ with a fun twisty straw materialized.

"Well, one of our teammates is a guy named Gary Seldon. His son Hari is insanely brilliant. They were working together and realized that our forecasts were incorrectly assigning ingenuity as an intrinsic ability of humans. It turns out that inspiration is something that comes from outside of us. As soon as we made that discovery, were visited by a representative from IGNORE."

"Can you tell me what they looked like now?" Averie took a sip of her OJ.

"She was a dolphin!" Bob smiled. "Anyway, have you ever been in the shower and suddenly the world just seems to make more sense, or you get a really good idea for something?"

"Yes! Just the other day I thought of a new idea for my hazmat suit."

"Turns out, that showers are as close as you can get to simulating extrinsic inspirational energy."

"I don't follow."

"Here's how the dolphin explained it. The universe is full of energy – X-rays, gamma rays, light, gravity, and so on. One of those frequencies, simply called 'the buzz', tends to spark higher cognitive abilities. It occurs naturally and travels through the universe just like anything else. However, it can also be generated synthetically. That is what we are doing right now, dosing the Earth with high concentrations of 'buzz' energy."

"Is it harmful?"

"It's not any different than radio waves. Apparently, the dolphins have done this from time to time to help give humanity a little boost. Think of it like watering a garden. This is the first time we get a chance."

“Will it work?”

“We’ll find out. Our primary hope is that once the Earth is buzzed, people will erode the toxic notion that any other human is their enemy. I’m hoping for some breakthroughs that improve how humans treat their planet. The buzz is a powerful energy force, but it still needs to be absorbed by the target. Ideally a good amount of it will stick.”

Bob took Averie by the hand and walked to her to the control center. She saw an image of her house in the middle of crosshairs.

“Would you like to get your mom and dad totally buzzed?”

Averie squealed and jumped and clapped.

“Let’s blast `em!”