

## ARMSTRONG SKIES

### I

Grandpa Perry was dying. Helpless, I sat beside his bed watching his labored breathing. The wheezes and shallow rise and fall of his emaciated chest reminded me of a kite wavering in a faltering breeze that was too weak to keep it aloft.

There hadn't been a day he and I hadn't spent together. It had always been us. We'd always been together, inseparable. Even now, despite knowing these were his last moments, I was powerless to stop the bond that had at one time been steel cable strong which was now being inexorably whittled down to a filamentous white string, tenuous, but just strong enough to keep us spiraling together toward the inevitable end.

I chided myself for being selfish and overdramatic during what I knew were our last minutes together, tried to think of something more positive, but as usual, I overcompensated by detachedly wondering how many breaths he'd taken during the course of his 73 years. I couldn't help myself and ran the calculation in my head – an average of 17 breaths per minute worked out to 652,269,600 breaths, and he was down to his last few.

Knowing this didn't quell the despair I felt burn within me, but only served to quantify how short life really is and made his life seem cheap. I finally focused on his eyes.

For as long as I could recall, his irises had been surrounded in other-worldly orange and flame-red bands, reflective of a conflagrant world that as a teenager he'd witnessed being destroyed. Now the whole of his eyes were twin pools of liquid contusion, black and blue, reflective of the nuclear winter skies he'd lived under for the better part of his remaining years.

Long ago, Grandpa Perry had told me the eyes were the windows to the soul. I hadn't believed him at the time, but looking into them now revealed a soul with a patina of sorrow. A curtain had been pulled back revealing a forlorn and unfocused gaze at witnessing a world vastly different than one he'd been born into. Now I believed him.

With the gossamer thread between us still connected, I felt a darkness seep into my own eyes, variegating my mahogany irises, simultaneously variegating my soul.

With great effort he raised his hand from the green wool blanket on which it had been resting. I leaned toward him to hold it. The smooth alabaster of my youth contrasted against his withered leather of age. Only now, looking at the contrast between vibrant youth and withered decay did I come to the realization that I'd never regarded him as ever being old, as ever having aged, as ever having any real beginning and certainly never regarded him as ever having an end. He'd always been omnipresent.

He tried to give my hand a reassuring squeeze. The type of nonverbal squeeze that's reserved for grandfathers to give to their grandsons to let them know everything is going to be alright. His feeble grip fractured my heart and simultaneously filled it with sorrow in remembrance how strong it once had been. How effective it had once been to assure me that everything was indeed going to be alright. Now his squeeze, well intended, only reinforced the fact everything was not going to be alright. He turned to face me, a slight smile cracked across his dried lips, and a final pulsar of light blazed forth.

"Conner," he rasped through obviously painful breaths, "You must complete it. You must carry on."

He turned away from me and turned his gaze out the window which perfectly framed the setting sun. Its rays perfuse into him, illuminating him, the heat of life created effervescence in him never before witnessed.

Turning toward me he looked not at me, but into me. The death-laced fatigue I'd seen moments ago had been replaced with glint and spangle.

“Why do they call them Armstrong skies?” his voice rumbled in burlled oak baritone as he looked back into the setting sun, “It’s time you know.”

I sat gobsmacked. Not only had the rolling timbre of his voice caught me off guard, since I was a little boy I’ve asked him why he’d always referred to the sky as an Armstrong Sky. His answer had always been a cryptic, “When it’s time, all will be told.”

It’s not like I had anybody else I could go to for the answer. I had no other family. Grandpa Perry was it, and soon, he’d be gone and I’d be alone.

“Why do they call them Armstrong skies?” He began again. The tug of knowledge grabbed me by throat as I sat enraptured in this moment of epiphany. “A long time ago, long before you were born, long before even *I* was born there was a very popular singer back on Earth named Louie Armstrong. He sang a very popular song titled ‘What a Wonderful World’. The first line of the second stanza he sang of blue skies and white clouds...

“So this was long before we came to Mars?” I interrupted but instantly reproved myself for my haste.

He smiled with his familiar patient countenance, reorganized his thoughts and continued, “Yes, Conner, long before we arrived here, before the conflict, and certainly long before we had a need for the scrub-sats we need today.”

Out of instinct I turned my attention out the window hoping to catch a glimpse of one of the low-orbiting satellites that continually scrub the upper Martian atmosphere of pollutants left behind from the long nuclear winter that had ensued after the conflict. Sometimes, if the angle of the setting sun is just right, you can see one shimmer as it streaks overhead. The best time to see one is right after the sun sets, when the sky is just dark enough but the sun has not slipped too far below the horizon that its light won’t reflect off one of their solar panels. Seeing none, but keeping my eyes trained out the window, I listened as he continued.

“Once nuclear winter set in, the blue skies that old Louie sang about, the blue skies that we’d worked so hard to create here were a thing of the past. Or so it seemed. Despite the nukes that had been lobbed back and forth, despite almost complete annihilation of all the colonies, we managed to survive. That’s one thing about colonists, we’re a scrappy bunch. Out of the rubble and destruction came a deeper understanding and appreciation of what it means to be a human family, especially when it concerns a new colony on a new world. A common goal was forged in the fires of plutonium and tempered by the cold of nuclear winter to never allow that to happen again, not here, not anywhere else we may venture.”

“Before the conflict, as a smattering of isolated colonist’s hailing from different nations back on Earth, it seems we’d brought our propensity for domination and destruction with us. After the conflict, we resolved to become one unifying force, one unified conglomerate

dedicated to cleaning up and preserving humankind on this Martian planet. I was just a boy when that occurred.”

Resigned I wasn't going to see any scrub-sats I looked back into his eyes which had dimmed. I couldn't tell if this was because of the fading ambient light from the setting sun, or if the memories of the past, of skies that had been locked in years of perpetual darkness where casting haunted shadow over his soul.

“By the time I was a young man,” he continued, “there was a need for mechanically inclined individuals to help clean up and rebuild. My father had been a nuclear engineer and he'd already begun to teach me. After the conflict, he taught me all I would ever need. After years of hard work and dedication, I became an engineer and was placed in the newly formed geo-space division and it was we who built the first generation scrub-sat.”

“You helped build the first gen scrub-sats?” This was first time he revealed he'd been a part of actually building them.

Stoked by the wind of accomplishment, I saw light blaze forth once more.

“I sure did!” He declared, his burred voice coated with lacquered pride, “But I'll tell you something, Conner. The pride I feel for having been a part of designing and building them pales in comparison when I think of that first day...” His voice, for the first time I could remember, cracked.

He inhaled deeply, composed himself, and continued. "Although I'm very proud of having built those first generation scrub-sats, that accomplishment pales in comparison to that

day when we saw the faintest hint of blue in the sky. I'm not sure who started it, but the phrase Armstrong Skies was born."

I looked up again hoping to catch a glimpse of at least one of the elusive satellites, but the chances were fading each second the sun continued to slip further below the horizon. "How long did you have to wait until you saw the clouds of white that Louie had sung of?"

He chuckled in a manner I image all grandfathers chuckle, with marbled wisdom. "At least another ten years, but we got there. And now look!" he declared proudly sweeping his hand across the clear palate of yellow, orange and Martian red that was visible out the square pane of the window.

I felt myself infused with his sense of excitement and pride but just as quickly, tentacles of doubt wrapped around my mind and began to squeeze.

"Grandpa, how am I to finish what we've started?"

There was no hesitation in his reply, no pausing to extract the right words. "Everything you need is already within yourself."

"I can't!" I declared petulantly. "The mechanics I understand, but I need you to finish the programming code. I've not had enough time to..."

"Conner," he interrupted, "Stop! In my study, inside the phonograph case you'll find a safe. Once I'm gone, look inside and you'll understand. I'm just happy to have lived as long as I have and been able to enjoy as much time with you."

I wanted to reply, started to, but the light in his eyes suddenly faded, then faded a bit more. I braced myself, tried to say "I love you" one last time, but my voice had left me. I

watched impotent as the thick black storm clouds of death quickly roiled behind his eyes as he stared unseeing into the ceiling above him.

Grandpa Perry was gone. The gossamer thread that had held us together for so long finally snapped. I immediately felt I was already drifting away from him. Death had cleaved through us. In a haze, I had no choice but to acknowledge that the tether was gone. In a dizzying moment of stark revelation I faced the cold, hard fact we would never again be one, never again be connected, never again be coupled. I sat fractured; more alone than I'd ever felt in all my 24 years.

## II

Everywhere I looked, everything remained his. In the five days since I'd scattered his ashes onto the nutrient depraved soil, I'd not yet mustered the fortitude needed to enter his study, much less access his safe.

Although it was my favorite place to spend my free time, I'd also avoided entering the "barn" as he'd affectionately referred to the detached work pod that sat next to our habitat which was connected by an above-ground tunnel with airlocks on both ends.

"In case of an emergency or if one habitat becomes contaminated, the other can be your life boat until help arrives." He'd explained.

That's the other thing about death I was quickly learning with increasing chagrin; everywhere I went, I could hear him instructing, explaining, and teaching. For the first time since he died, I found myself standing in the tunnel outside the airlock leading into the barn waiting for the pressures to equalize, both inside the barn and inside my own head.

“Positive pressure means life.” He’d once said.

I heard the distinctive beep indicating the pressures had successfully equalized, at least those between the barn and the tunnel and I pulled the door toward me. “Yeah, yeah,” I said to nobody. “Whatever. Thanks to you, Grandpa, the pressures will never again be equal.”

The moment the light had blinked out of his eyes, the moment our connectivity had been severed and we’d begun to drift apart, a concurrent pressure within me had been steadily building. I was certain at some point that pressure would need to be released, but when that would be, or how it would be released remained a mystery.

Shoving the thought out of my mind, I stepped into the barn then stood motionless listening to the ticking of the Martian sand striking the titanium skin of the barns exterior. Because of the higher ceilings and domed structure the acoustics were much better than in the tunnel.

“Reminds me of rats running on a metal beam.” Grandpa had once explained. I’d never seen a rat, or a real steel beam for that matter, only vids.

I tried to shut his voice off, or at the very least lower the volume in my head as I tentatively ventured toward the small work bench that was home to a small patch of grass he and I had successfully harvested two months ago from our proof of concept soil harvesting machine. Grandpa Perry had named the small square of grass Three Rivers explaining the name was in honor of a place on Earth that no longer existed. I vaguely recall he had talked of a place called Pittsburgh, but I’d stopped listening, likely not interested in hearing about the old world; now I wish I hadn’t.



Three Rivers had dried out a bit, had withered some from being neglected for the past five days, but he was still alive. I grabbed a small bottle of the soil conditioner Grandpa Perry and I had formulated and poured it evenly over the thin, narrow green blades until the copper soil underneath them had turned blood red. I then turned on a full spectrum lamp and tilted the spring armatures to cover the small 4” x 4” patch.

“There you go, buddy. Little bit of this magic elixir and you’ll be as good as new in no time. Cheers.”

Sadness descended down upon me as my voice crackled with teary static. “He’s gone Three Rivers. It’s just me now.” I’d not intended to say this and had no idea where this monologue came from, but I was unable to stop. “Anyway, I’ll carry on, just figure it out I guess, I thought you should know.”

Commiserating with a square of grass, although technically alive, did little to make myself feel better. Instead, on top of feeling lost, alone and sad, I added foolish to the list of emotions that were poking and prodding like splinters inside my mind.

If I felt this way being in the barn, how was I going to handle going into his study? Despite my hesitation, regardless of his instructions to venture there, in spite of his promise that all the answers to my questions could be found inside, I still felt wary. Add cowardly to the growing list of negative feelings.

I turned from Three Rivers and settled my gaze upon the cloth covered soil harvester which sat in the middle of the room. This had been Grandpa Perry’s baby, his masterpiece. In

light of the recent revelation he'd been behind the first generation of scrub sats, this made the soil harvester equally as significant, if not more so.

If you didn't know what lay under the large drop cloth, you'd swear you were looking at nothing more than a couch that had been covered to keep dust from accumulating. The reality was much different. Pulling off the sheet, I gazed in reverence at the rounded, smooth, matte gray metallic surface.

I marveled at the elegance of the design. Six metal meshed wheels, three on each side, supported a platform that housed an array of apparatus which were protected by a rounded housing. A small furrow was affixed to the front and a chute protruded from the back. The machine resembled a large beetle.

When programmed, the soil harvester would scoop soil and transport it via conveyor belt into the inside where the magic really happened. Contaminates would be removed and soil conditioners would be added then be deposited back into the trench.

Towed behind the harvester was a detachable seed hopper that would plant whatever seeds a farmer needed into the now fertile soil. Once this soil harvesting and seeding was complete, the harvester would then double back this time utilizing a row of broad spectrum lamps that were affixed beneath the platform providing the necessary light needed. Interspersed between the lamps were spray nozzles that added our proprietary soil conditioner to the newly planted crop.

We'd successfully accomplished all of this, on a small scale, within the confines of the barn. Three Rivers was the proof it could work. The difficulty was scaling this from small proof of concept to full-sized production model.

“Scaling is the key to the eventual success, Conner.” He’d admonished.

It had taken us three long years to get to this point, and he’d been the one to program the basic code needed for the grass that became Three Rivers. The size of it wasn’t the problem. I could handle the mechanics; it was the programming code that I lacked. Scaling up to include a variety of seeds that required varying soil conditions, nutrients, and light was beyond what I knew. Deflated, I wondered how I could finish alone.

Grandpa Perry had always put off teaching me code, instead focusing on the mechanical side claiming that the programming was easy compared to the machining and construction of the individual components and assembly of them into a whole.

Now here I was, without him, wandering around aimlessly with no one to instruct me, with nothing more than a vague death-bed confession that the answers to these issues could be found in his safe. Right. I realized in addition to all the other emotions, I was starting to feel angry.

Turning back around, I checked Three Rivers soil, applied a bit more conditioner, carefully picked up the small block of soil safely encased in its plastic dish and asked, “Well, Three Rivers, what do you think? Wanna go with me into his study?”

I must be going nuts, I said to myself. I’m talking to a block of grass for cryin’ out loud. I decided I didn’t care if I was. I couldn’t go into that study alone and other than Three Rivers, there wasn’t a single thing alive for hundreds of miles around.

“Okay, then!” I said steeling myself for the task ahead, “Let’s go. There’s no time like the present.”

### III

The door to Grandpa Perry's study was open. At least I'd gotten that far. I stood outside the threshold holding Three Rivers afraid to cross the invisible boundary between out here and in there. Out here was safe, quantifiable and familiar. In there was unknown. It had always seemed like an inner sanctum, a place only he was allowed to enter. Although he'd never expressly forbid me from entering, I'd been in his study less than half a dozen times, and certainly never without him being in here.

I remember him at his most serious when he occupied this room. Even now, although gone for 5 days, a serious pall still hung in the air. I inhaled trying to capture his smell, hoping to infuse myself with the proper attitude and disposition not wanting to disrespect what he'd filled this room with.

"You're not like other boys, Conner." I could hear him saying. "You're special. Gifted with talents and abilities others simply don't have."

Every time I've made the concerted effort to quiet my mind, these refrains have always been the first to bubble up from the layer of pervasive daily white noise. The few times I'd been inside this room, he'd talked about me in these cryptic phrases that left me more confused than enlightened. It's one thing to tell me that I was special and gifted, full of talent and ability, but quite another not reveal what any of those special gifts and talents were or how to access them. I'd learned to just go along and agree with him.

"Conner, there will be a day when you'll realize your full potential. When that time comes you mustn't be afraid."

“You hearing any of this Three Rivers?” I asked still holding him in my hand. I looked down wondering when I’d decided he was a ‘him’.

I held my breath for several seconds, let it out, and stepped across the horizon between background and foreground. The invisible boundary had been broken and I walked with purpose to the phonograph cabinet that stood in the far left corner of the study.

Although I’d seen it before, I’d never paid much attention to it. As I made my way toward it, I began to see the beauty of the wood patterns, the subtle way the lacquer highlighted them. It dawned on me how rare this piece really was. I’d never noticed before, but this was the only wood I’d ever seen in my life. Everything here was either some form of metal, carbon alloy, or titanium fabric. Wood from Earth was far too expensive to haul to Mars, and yet, here was this magnificent piece that was hundreds if not thousands of years old. How had I missed this?

Placing Three Rivers down on a small metal table next to the phonograph, I stood and put a hand gently on the lid of the cabinet, startled it was cold to the touch despite its very warm appearance. Rapping my knuckle against the lid, I was startled how it reverberated in a tinny note that could only come from metal. I lifted the lid to reveal the inside was indeed aluminum. Grandpa Perry had figured out a way to make the metal on the outside look like wood.

I smiled, amazed at his genius, warmed that his genius had been used for such a trivial thing as making metal look like wood. On the turntable was a record but the lettering was too small for me to make out. I leaned forward, squinting to make out the white letters on the small black vinyl disk.

“All be damned.” I said aloud.

## What a Wonderful World – Louie Armstrong Orchestra and Chorus.

I turned the player on, watched the record spin up to speed, removed the needle arm from its cradle and gently placed it at the outer edge of the record. The crackle and pop of static came sparkling out from the speaker at the bottom of the cabinet followed by the loveliest sound of violins playing a two note intro lasting only 6 seconds before I heard the salty voice of Louie contrast against the sweet melody. He sung of trees of green and red roses that were blooming.

My knees weakened, my breath was caught in my throat as I continued to listen of blue skies and white clouds. This, I thought to myself, was what Grandpa Perry was trying to accomplish. It didn't matter what world mankind stood upon; Earth, Mars, or beyond, it could only be a wonderful world if we looked at it in such a way. This was Grandpa Perry's legacy.

It had started with the first generation of scrub sats that kept us alive, but that's all it had done. We, as a species were surviving. The soil harvester would take us to the next level and help us not just survive, but thrive.

With a renewed sense of purpose, I knelt down listening to Louie sing about colors of the rainbow, opened the two cabinet doors to reveal a safe tucked inside. The safe took up the entire space and I once again marveled at his ability to piece together a safe from available material as this surely would've been far too heavy to haul from Earth.

Instead of a single knob, the combination lock was a parallel series of three small thumb wheels inset into the face of the safe. Using my thumb nail, I was able to rotate the small wheels on which numbers had been embossed on their surface. Because of their small size, each wheel had only enough room for 5 numbers which were not in chronological order.

After spinning all of the thumb wheels, I noticed all of them contained the same numbers: 9, 7, 2, 5, and 1. Instinctively, I ran the calculation in my head, over 1 million different possible combinations. I reached out and pulled down on the handle hoping he hadn't locked the door but it didn't budge.

Damn. Think. What significant numbers come in groups of three? Time? I looked down at Three Rivers and remembered that the first sign the seeds we'd planted had germinated had occurred at 7:12 pm. I remember because Grandpa Perry wrote everything down in his journal, especially when we were checking results of experiments. I rotated the wheels so they read 712, pulled down on the handle, nothing.

Before continuing to explore the thousands of possible important time combinations, I stopped to regroup. I looked down at Three Rivers, "Don't think of the combinations, think of the man who created the combination." I said in hopes that hearing myself talk would help.

"Would Grandpa have chosen a time as a combination or would that be too, I don't know, esoteric?"

I paused. "Yeah, I don't think so either. So what other numbers usually come in groups of 3?"

A birthday I thought to myself.

I knew he'd been born on May the 17<sup>th</sup>. I thumbed the combo to 517, pulled the handle, nothing.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I said to Three Rivers. "I know."

I thumbed the numbers to 212, my birthday, pulled the handle and heard the heavy clack of the throw bolt retracting into its recess.

I slowly pulled the door open, leaned forward in anticipation of what lay inside. There were only two items; his current work journal and an envelope with my name written in his very precise engineering hand.

A chill gripped me, and then fear, white hot and fast moving, blazed in its wake.

I was torn. Part of me wanted to hurry to read what was contained in the envelope, while the other part of me was terrified of what it may contain.

“Conner, there will be a time when you’ll realize your potential. When that time comes you mustn’t be afraid.”

Ugh.

“No time like the present.” I recited to Three Rivers, but knew I was really talking to myself. I reached inside, held the letter in my hand and slowly lifted the fold and extracted a single piece of paper, tri-folded, written by hand.

I closed my eyes, steeled myself for whatever it may contain, opened my eyes and began to read. Within the first five words it became apparent I’d crossed a literary equivalent of a Schwarzschild radius. Like its outer space counterpart, no matter how badly I wanted to stop reading, like a black hole, the words that had been written made it impossible to do so.



#### IV

I sat on the floor of the study numb. My back rested against the phonograph cabinet doors I'd slammed. I have no idea how long it had been since I'd begun to read the letter, but the record was ticking, ticking, ticking, continuously skipping at the end of the record. I'd not had the strength to get up to turn it off.

"Sounds like Martian sand grains ticking against the side of the habitat." I whispered aloud to the shattered remains of Three Rivers.

"Screw Grandpa Perry and his damn rats." I murmured.

I gazed at the good sized clod of dirt that had remained on the far wall, a cratered peak and the grassy foliage that had dispersed in a splatter-type pattern on the floor. After slamming the doors to the cabinet, still enraged, I'd grabbed Three Rivers and thrown him as hard as I could at the wall.

I wasn't sorry. Grandpa Perry should have told me. He had no right to keep that information from me. He didn't have the right NOT to tell me!

"He's lucky he's dead," I said to the broken remains of Three Rivers. "If he were alive, I'd have killed him!"

I saw the words of the letter in my head and felt the tide of anger begin to surge anew. I wasn't angry because of the information that was contained in his letter, but rather that he felt he needed to rely on a letter instead of telling me himself, eye to eye, face to face while he was alive. It was cowardly.

"Did he pass that cowardice onto me as well?" I asked.

Recalling how afraid I'd been to go back into the barn, how terrified I'd been to come into this damn study, how utterly frightened I'd been to read the letter, I was sure he'd had indeed passed on his cowardice. I was mad about that too.

"How could he not tell me?" I asked Three Rivers. "How could he have kept that secret for so long?"

I tried to recall as many conversations as possible trying to recall a time when he may have given me a clue or at the very least let slip I'd been created, not born.

Created. Not born.

How could he create me and not tell me, not who I was, but what I was.

A what, not a who?

Nothing came to mind, although I no longer thought of having a mind, but instead a very sophisticated computer board.

"The human brain is a very sophisticated bio-computer." I'd heard him say. Had that been a clue?

No, I decided. He'd kept the secret of my origin and true identity perfectly sealed, hidden away inside a cabinet that appeared to be one thing on the outside, while the true material was hidden on the inside. The irony was not lost. What else had he not told me?

Did it really matter? Was my fear and anger real? Or was everything I was experiencing simply a programmed response based on environmental parametric inputs? Were these questions also a part of his programming or did he also program free will allowing me to auto decide as I

learned. Instead of being simply a large conglomeration of one's and zero's, had he gifted me with the same four building blocks he possessed? Did he create me in his image?

Still staring at the small peak of dirt on the wall, I decided it didn't matter. He'd been programmed, just like I'd been programmed. He'd made choices and so could I. Besides, I reflected, although he may have been cowardly, he'd not lied. All of the answers to all my questions regarding the programming necessary to scale up the soil harvester were truly inside me. He knew this because he'd programmed them and placed them there.

I'd been his insurance policy. Designed and created, conjured and invented from his genius as a means to carry on in case he couldn't. And he hadn't. He'd lost the race of time. It had caught him before he reached the finish line.

Much like the radioactive dust that for so long had contaminated the Martian atmosphere in which the scrub sats had cleaned, the filter of my own logic circuit was purging the radioactive clouds of anger clearing the way for my own bit of blue sky to appear.

"When that time comes you mustn't be afraid."

I felt a switch inside being thrown, likely by design knowing him, and I no longer felt afraid, or insecure, or angry, or full of doubt. In that moment, sitting on the floor of the study, I saw it for the first time not as his, but as mine. I knew with clarity and certainty what needed to be done and I knew exactly how I was going to do it.

I bolted up from the floor, grabbed the handful of twisted roots and tangled grass blades that remained of Three Rivers and sprinted to the barn.

It's taken less than 16 months since that day, which I will forever remember as The Great Epiphany, to get to this point. I'd successfully scaled the proof of concept model up to production size. I've lovingly named the machine Eden, not only as a nod to its predecessor, Three Rivers, but in homage to the four rivers that bordered the Garden of Eden. That was a nod to the creator, Grandpa Perry.

As expected, the machining of the constituent parts and the assembly had not been too difficult. The programming that I'd been so afraid of was simply a matter of transferring the file codes from my own bio engineered computer that Grandpa Perry had installed at inception and uploading them into Eden's mainframe.

A month ago, I'd let Eden out of the barn. Since then, she's been dutifully working the three acres around our habitat. I'd purposely not checked on the progress, nor had I stepped outside or gone near a window. Although I may not be a human in the truest sense of the word, I was still programmed to have human superstitions like watching a pot of water slows the time it takes to come to a boil.

Enough time had elapsed and it was finally time to venture out to see if Eden had been successfully doing what she was designed and programmed to do. I looked at Three Rivers, who had made a full recovery and sat proudly on the kitchen window sill. "Well, Three Rivers. You wanna come with or stay here and watch from the window?"

I exited the habitat, Three Rivers clasped in my hands, into the evening air. I stopped on the back patio to gaze at the distant horizon aflame with the setting sun. I thought of Grandpa Perry. Evenings would never be the same again.

“Yeah, I miss him too.” I said to Three Rivers as I began to trudge through the sand toward the boundary of the field. As soon as my foot fell onto that new soil I knew we’d succeeded.

Gone was the loose and slippery sand which pervaded every square inch of the Martian planet. Instead of the red mildly radioactive laced soil, Eden had cleaned it, harvested it, and in her wake replaced it with soil ripe with nutrients fit for planting. I stopped and knelt down and there, just peeking above the surface was the tip of a shoot from a germinated corn seed Eden had planted.

I stood up and without thinking looked skyward and there, streaking across the smeared red sunset sky, a scrub-sat glinted and winked. I watched transfixed as the bejeweled speck slid silently toward the horizon. Before it disappeared, I closed my eyes and locked that vision into my memory bank capturing the serendipitous moment forever.

I smiled as the memories of Grandpa Perry flooded into me. Just as Grandpa Perry had poured his heart and soul into me, I too had poured myself into that which he had so intently fought for.

Through me, Grandpa Perry would live on forever, his fingerprints indelibly etched not only on me, but onto the collective psyche of the entire human race as well.

I turned back toward the habitat relishing the feeling of a slight evening breeze as it caressed my face and felt the deep sense of accomplishment seep into me. Ambling back toward the habitat with Three Rivers, I began to whistle the song that had started the redemption of mankind and rekindled his ability to overcome almost impossible obstacles if only they took the time and saw the world for the beauty it possesses.

“It may not be trees or red roses that are blooming, Grandpa Perry.” I said aloud. “But soon, soon it will once again be a wonderful world indeed!”

The End