

In the bedroom of his second-floor apartment sat the man with greater vision. On a big table and pinned up on the walls were various charts, maps and artists' renderings of Mars. The man sat at his window with a telescope propped before him on a tripod.

Tonight the man with greater vision strayed from his probing of the heavens to allow himself a peek at earthly sights. Mars had lately received competition from a couple of windows just visible over several rows of house tops in the neighborhood behind the apartment. The windows were on an old two-story house, one in a row of old two-story houses that suddenly rose above the flatter houses that preceded it in the apartment's horizontal line of vision.

The man with greater vision had been observing the left window, lately, especially in the hours after midnight, because behind the window was a being of spectacular build, with white hair that shot out of her head like the tendrils of a sea anemone. This earth woman was almost always, after midnight, nude or semi-nude, and when she wasn't, she was wearing the sloppy, revealing clothes characteristic of certain groups that the man with greater vision had heard described as counter-cultural.

Tonight—this morning, to be precise, since it was after midnight—the man with greater vision found the favored window dark, and so turned his attention to the other window, to the right. A light was on and he focused his telescope on the interior. He looked into his eyepiece and was amazed to see the colors red and white in familiar patterns. He realized they were the bars of the American flag. He scanned, and when he pieced together the picture, discovered that it was a poster on the far wall of the room. The poster was a photograph of three coffins covered with American flags, and beneath them the words, "Join the Marines." Then the circle of vision went black.

He looked up from the eyepiece, and saw a human figure in the window. He returned to the telescope, changed focus. It was the white-headed girl, and sure enough, she was pulling off her shirt. At this moment, something else appeared at the bottom of the window. It was a head. The head moved up, followed by a body. The man with greater vision watched as a second female presented her slim, bare back, and embraced the white-haired female. He moved to their faces, which were locked in a kiss. The man with greater vision slid his hand up his leg.

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In the dark, Mollie felt nothing. She was strong, elusive and bored. Physical sensations could not penetrate, not yet. Within her soft armor she was unswerving, untamed.

She would resist affirming any offer, any attempt. She would not bite at any hooks.

Jola was drunk and pushy. For an instant, Jola seemed to be groping her as presumptuously and self-indulgently as a man. Jola had a pretty harsh manner, anyway. Perhaps, then, it was only the swelling of the liquor or some drug that caused her to go tender, suddenly, ease her stroking. But the tenderness was purely physical, and as Jola no doubt slid further into a trance of booze and sex, Mollie gazed out the window at the stubborn speck of light that was a nasty, vainglorious star and amused herself by imagining that she was on another planet, where all the inhabitants ran around in bikinis and did the twist on the beach and out of the water came monsters with very phallic protruding tubular mouth organs, one of them grabbing her and throwing her on the sand, whereupon the beast spreads her legs and probes her with great slimy abandon.

Mollie's bed was a mattress on the floor, and when Jola suddenly hoisted herself up next to Mollie, she didn't realize that she was heading toward a spot next to the mattress instead, on the floor. She rolled over on the carpet, one knee making a terrible thud, barked out "Awf uck!"—then released a series of throaty exhalations that were the drunken equivalent of her sinister giggle.

Mollie propped herself up on one elbow during the silence that followed the sounds and realized after only a short time that Jola was sound asleep. Mollie lowered her back onto the pillow, feeling slightly relieved, and began to imagine the proud ceremony of the marriage to her own, perfect monster, whose mouth-tubes were the envy of many other monsters, a ceremony with much pomp and bloody sacrifice, and Mollie dressed in a stunning white bikini with a red veil over her face.

Mollie would turn 18 in a few more months and in her short lifetime, which she considered to have begun at the age of 14, the most memorable, if not the most beautiful, thing she had ever seen were giant smokestacks in Philadelphia. Her father died in military service, her mother continued to date and travel with servicemen, and many people considered Mollie precocious. Just recently, her mother had left for Florida, had not returned in a week, as she had promised, and thus Mollie had decided to move out, so that her mother would not find her upon returning. Jola and her roommates were kind enough to take her in and give her a room that had been unexpectedly vacated only a few days earlier when the former occupant overdosed on heroin ("he was kind of stupid," Jola had said). Unfortunately, after much traveling with—being pulled around by—her mother, Mollie was stranded in Symptomatic City, a place she disliked only slightly less than many of the natives did.

While Jola and her acquaintances were self-styled misfits, Mollie felt that only she literally lived on the fringes of society, and, despite being a teenager among them, Mollie was not easily intimidated by Jola and her clan. Besides, Mollie had associated with many and more aggressive types in bigger scenes than Symptomatic City.

Who is looking at her, now?

In this bed, now, alone—in that particular solitude next to someone unconscious—Mollie breathes, and for a moment, listens to the sound of her breath. Outside, under the light of a million arrogant stars, a landscape of artifice asserts itself with a dumb presence. From far above, say in an airplane or some other airborne craft, the city is a splatter of luminescent dots on a dark relief; from far off at some other point on the earth, the city is a halo on the horizon, a fuzzy dome of a glow. Mollie listens to the sleeper's breathing and longs for the ability to penetrate the corporeal Jola and play on the landscape of her dreams, to see in the uncanny way of another. Then, through what seems to be an easy association for Mollie, she looks again at the star and imagines herself sleek and aerodynamic: a nuclear missile diving toward the city, striking, and piercing all the corporeal with one orgasmic blast of energy. Dreams are released. All heat and light. The dome on the horizon leaps like a solar flare. There is an immediate pilgrimage by all who see this new star of Bethlehem. They march and melt. The bodies give off a hiss, one final, emphatic sigh of relief.

But this is not enough. The ever-distant stars fail to notice, remain vainly unaffected. She must be the sun, and nova.

There is a siren. Mollie's visions are displaced. The siren fades, taunting, and mundane evidence continues: the swooshing of other automobiles, the barking of a dog, the banal twinkling of the star, Jola's snoring.

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When heaven explodes, as it does in endless repetition, probably about once every seven seconds, the first reaction is to run and pick up a piece of it. Unfortunately, the fragmentation of heaven can only reveal what a ludicrously infinite place it was. No matter, nor does it matter that heaven has lost its completeness, its super-universality. One piece will suffice. For somehow, one piece of heaven must retain all the properties of heaven, even the property of infinity, of grand all-ness, of all-ending never-endingness. So it is that pieces of heaven are lovingly cultivated so that there is no longer one all-pervading heaven, but a vast number of distinct heavens and an infinite possibility for more.

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He would like to have had Mars peopled with sea anemone-headed beings. But that dream was shattered by an apparent sexual preference discrepancy that might be an obstacle to such progeny. His dream switched off with a light in a certain distant window, and the man with greater vision was left alone in his imagination. But not hopeless. There were others, others who might even share his greater vision. Or, who knows? Given the chance to expound upon the virtues of Mars, maybe he could convince this magnificent specimen to contribute to human proliferation there.

He was not close-minded. He realized that clinging to this planet for so long caused human civilization to explore in other ways. Man's innate desire to explore was at the root of all

so-called perversity, superseding, as it did, the specifications of all other natural desires. Confronting pain, affecting the body with all sorts of organic and synthetic materials, affecting the mind as well, cutting sexuality from its natural effect, even usurping the survival instinct to plunge into the greatest unknown, were all seen by the man with greater vision as manifestations of the proud heritage of the evolution of consciousness: curiosity, an inquisitiveness on the grand scale.

Science refused him moral schemes that were the ornate version of old, primitive superstitions. The man of greater vision could see things as they were, grounded in fact, harnessed by science, the truest form of thinking. Not believing, or fearing; but thinking, confronting, embracing.

Therein did the man with greater vision find hope to be salvaged. He glanced at an image of the red planet on his wall, visible in the rays of a street light that filtered through his window, and as Mars was setting over his consciousness, he whispered to himself, "Beam me up, Scotty," and fell asleep.