



One Martian Afternoon

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THE CLOD burst in a cloud of red sand and the little Martian sand dog ducked quickly into his burrow. Marilou threw another at the aperture in the ground and then ran over and with the inside of her foot she scraped sand into it until it was filled to the surface. She started to leave, but stopped.

The little fellow might choke to death, she thought, it wasn't his fault she had to live on Mars. Satisfied that the future of something was dependent on her whim, she dug the sand from the hole. His little yellow eyes peered out at her.

"Go on an' live," she said magnanimously.

She got up and brushed the sand from her knees and dress, and walked slowly down the red road.

The noon sun was relentless; nowhere was there relief from it. Marilou squinted and shaded her eyes with her hand. She looked in the sky for one of those infrequent Martian rain clouds, but the deep blue was only occasionally spotted by fragile white puffs. Like the sun, they had no regard for her, either. They were too concerned with moving toward the distant mountains, there to cling momentarily to the peaks and then continue on their endless route.

Marilou dabbed the moisture from her forehead with the hem of her dress. "I know one thing," she mumbled. "When I grow up, I'll get to Earth an' never come back to Mars, no matter what!"

She broke into a defiant, cadenced step.

"An' I won't care whether you an' Mommy like it or not!" she declared aloud, sticking out her chin at an imaginary father before her.

Before she realized it, a tiny, lime-washed stone house appeared not a hundred yards ahead of her. That was the odd thing about the Martian midday; something small and miles away would suddenly become large and very near as you approached it.

The heat waves did it, her father had told her. "Really?" she had replied, and—*you think you know so doggone much*, she had thought.

"AUNT TWYLEE!" She broke into a run. By the Joshua trees, through the stone gateway she ran, and with a leap she lit like a young frog on the porch. "Hi, Aunt Twylee!" she said breathlessly.

An ancient Martian woman sat in a rocking chair in the shade of the porch. She held a bowl of purple river apples in her lap. Her papyrus-like hands moved quickly as she shaved the skin from one. In a matter of seconds it was peeled. She looked up over her bifocals at the panting Marilou.

"Gracious, child, you shouldn't run like that this time of day," she said. "You Earth children aren't used to our Martian heat. It'll make you sick if you run too much."

"I don't care! I hate Mars! Sometimes I wish I could just get good an' sick, so's I'd get to go home!"

"Marilou, you *are* a little tyrant!" Aunt Twylee laughed.

"Watcha' doin', Aunt Twylee?" Marilou asked, getting up from her frog posture and coming near the old Martian lady's chair.

"Oh, peeling apples, dear. I'm going to make a cobbler this afternoon." She dropped the last apple, peeled, into the bowl. "There, done. Would you like a little cool apple juice, Marilou?"

"Sure—you betcha! Hey, could I watch you make the cobbler, Aunt Twylee, could I? Mommy can't make it for anything—it tastes like glue. Maybe, if I could see how you do it, maybe I could show her. Do you think?"

"Now, Marilou, your mother must be a wonderful cook to have raised such a healthy little girl. I'm sure there's nothing she could learn from me," Aunt Twylee said as she arose. "Let's go inside and have that apple juice."

The kitchen was dark and cool, and filled with the odors of the wonderful edibles the old Martian had created on and in the Earth-made stove. She opened the Earth-made refrigerator that stood in the corner and withdrew an Earth-made bottle filled with Martian apple juice.

Marilou jumped up on the table and sat cross-legged.

"Here, dear." Aunt Twylee handed her a glass of the icy liquid.

"Ummm, thanks," Marilou said, and gulped down half the contents. "That tastes dreamy, Aunt Twylee."

The little girl watched the old Martian as she lit the oven and gathered the necessary ingredients for the cobbler. As she bent over to get a bowl from the shelf beneath Marilou's perch, her hair brushed against the child's knee. Her hair was soft, soft and white as a puppy's, soft and white like the down from a dandelion. She smiled at Marilou. She always smiled; her pencil-thin mouth was a perpetual arc.

Marilou drained the glass. "Aunt Twylee—is it true what my daddy says about the Martians?"

"True? How can I say, dear? I don't know what he said."

"Well, I mean, that when us Earth people came, you Martians did inf ... infan ... "

"Infanticide?" Aunt Twylee interrupted, rolling the dough on the board a little flatter, a little faster.

"Yes, that's it—killed babies," Marilou said, and took an apple from the bowl. "My daddy says you were real primitive, an' killed your babies for some silly religious reason. I think that's awful! How could it be religious? God couldn't like to have little babies killed!" She took a big bite of the apple; the juice ran from the corners of her mouth.

"Your daddy is a very intelligent man, Marilou, but he's partially wrong. It is true—but not for religious reasons. It was a necessity. You must remember, dear, Mars is very arid—sterile—unable to sustain many living things. It *was* awful, but it was the only way we knew to control the population."

MARILOU LOOKED down her button nose as she picked a brown spot from the apple. "Hmmp, I'll tell 'im he's wrong," she said. "He thinks he knows so damn much!"

"Marilou!" Aunt Twylee exclaimed as she looked over her glasses. "A sweet child like you shouldn't use such language!"

Marilou giggled and popped the remaining portion of the apple in her mouth.

"Do your parents know where you are, child?" Aunt Twylee asked, as she took the bowl from Marilou's hands. She began dicing the apples into a dough-lined casserole.

"No, they don't," Marilou replied. She sprayed the air with little particles of apple as she talked. "Everybody's gone to the hills to look for the boys."

"The boys?" Aunt Twylee stopped her work and looked at the little girl.

"Yes—Jimmy an' Eddie an' some of the others disappeared from the settlement this morning. The men're afraid they've run off to th' hills an' the renegades got 'em."

"Gracious," Aunt Twylee said; her brow knitted into a criss-cross of wrinkles.

"Oh, I know those dopes. They're prob'ly down at th' canals—fishin' or somep'n."

"Just the same, your mother will be frantic, dear. You should have told her where you were going."

"I don't care," Marilou said with unadulterated honesty. "She'll be all right when I get home."

Aunt Twylee shook her head and clucked her tongue.

"Can I have another glass? Please?"

The old lady poured the glass full again. And then she sprinkled sugar down among the apple cubes in the casserole and covered them with a blanket of dough. She cut an uneven circle of half moons in it and put it in the oven. "There—all ready to bake, Marilou," she sighed.

"It looks real yummy, Aunt Twylee."

"Well, I certainly hope it turns out good, dear," she said, wiping her forehead with her apron. She looked out the open back door. The landscape was beginning to gray as heavier clouds moved down from the mountains and pressed the afternoon heat closer, more oppressively to the ground. "My, it's getting hot. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if we didn't get a little rain this afternoon, Marilou." She turned back to the little girl. "Tell me some more about your daddy, dear. We Martians certainly owe a lot to men like your father."

"That's what he says too. He says, you Martians would have died out in a few years, if we hadn't come here. We're so much more civili ... civili ... "

"Civilized?"

"Yeah. He says, we were so much more 'civ-ilized' than you that we saved your lives when we came here with all our modern stuff."

"Well, that's true enough, dear. Just look at that wonderful Earth stove," Aunt Twylee said, and laughed. "We wouldn't be able to bake an apple cobbler like that without it, would we?"

A RUMBLE of thunder shouldered through the crowded hot air. "No. He says, you Martians are kinda likeable, but you can't be trusted. He's nuts! *I like you Martians!*"

"Thank you, child, but everyone's entitled to his own opinion. Don't judge your daddy too severely," Aunt Twylee said as she scraped spilled sugar from the table and put little bits of it on her tongue.

"He says that you'd bite th' hand that feeds you. He says, we brought all these keen things to Mars, an' that if you got th' chance, you'd kill all of us!"

"Gracious," said Aunt Twylee as she speared scraps of dough with the point of her long paring knife.

"He's a dope!" Marilou said.

Aunt Twylee opened the oven and peeked in at the cobbler. The aroma of the simmering apples rushed out and filled the room.

"Could I have some cobbler when it's done?" Marilou asked, her mouth filling with saliva.

"I'm afraid not, child. It's getting rather late."

The thunder rumbled again—a little closer, a little louder.

The old lady washed the blade of the knife in the sink. "Tell me more of what your father says, dear," she said as she adjusted the bifocals on her thin nose and ran her thumb along the length of the knife's blade.

"Oh, nothin' much more. He just says that you'd kill us if you had th' chance. That's the way the inferior races always act, he says. They want to kill th' people that help 'em, 'cause they resent 'em."

"Very interesting."

"Well, it isn't so, is it, Aunt Twylee?"

The room was filled with blinding blue-white light, and the walls quaked at the sound of a monstrous thunderclap.

The old Martian glanced nervously at the clock on the wall. "My, it *is* getting late," she said as she fondled the knife in her hands.

"You Martians wouldn't do anything like that, would you?"

"You want the truth, don't you, dear?" Aunt Twylee asked, smiling, as she walked to the table where Marilou sat.

"Course I do, Aunt Twylee," she said.

Her scream was answered and smothered by the horrendous roar of the thunder, and the piercing hiss of the rain that fell in sheets. In great volumes of water, it fell, as though the heavens were attempting to wash the sins of man from the universe and into non-existence in the void beyond the void.

MARILOU LAY beside the other children. Aunt Twylee smiled at them, closed the bedroom door and returned to the kitchen.

The storm had moved on; the thunder was the faint grumbling of a pacified old man. What water fell was a monotonous trickle from the eaves of the lime-washed stone house. Aunt Twylee washed the blood from the knife and wiped it dry on her apron. She opened the oven and took out the browned cobbler. Sweet apple juice bubbled to the surface through the half moons and burst in delights of sugary aroma. The sun broke through the thinning edge of the thunderhead.

Aunt Twylee brushed a lock of her feathery white hair from her moist cheek. "Gracious," she said, "I must tidy up a bit before the others come."

THE END

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