

## The present

The taxi would be here shortly. My bags were packed: micro-cameras, lenses, foldable and extendable tripods, an old metal watering can, a few dried up bulbs, packets of seeds, seed balls and a catapult.

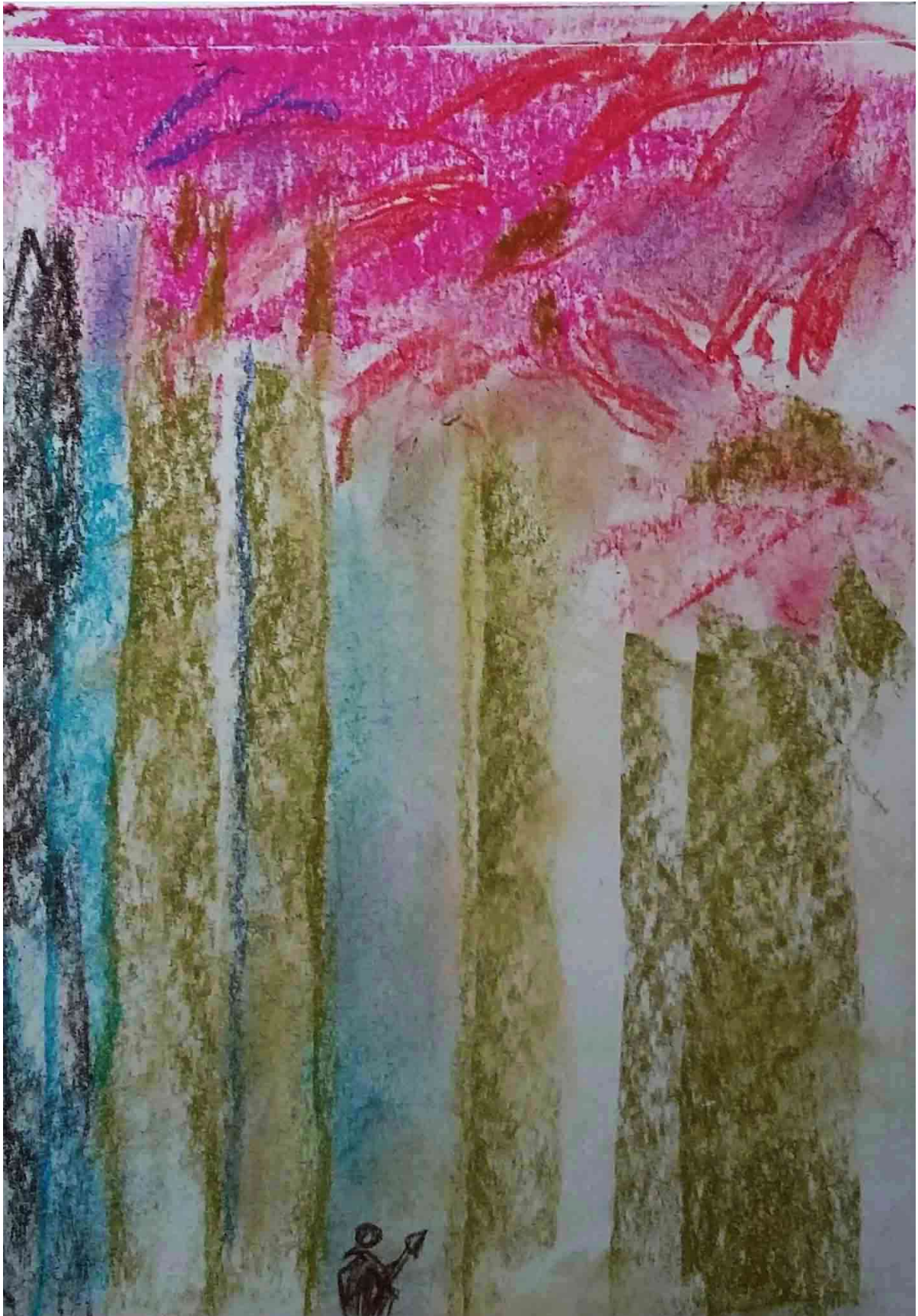
I sat back on the squashy white sofa in the living room and waited. First the blue planet, then the green one, next the red. I was excited. I could already imagine the title sequence and the music... the Red Planet: Life on Mars.

The door bell rang. I always use ET Taxis for interplanetary travel. The driver was suspicious. 'You what? You want to go to the red planet? Are you sure? No one, but no one, goes there. It's totally inhospitable. I can take you to Alendronic, it's not far away and it's a much nicer place to visit'. But I was insistent. 'Mars is where I'm going.'

The driver stowed the gear in the boot of the shuttle we set off. It was a difficult landing in the middle of a raging dust storm but the coordinates were spot on. I booked my return journey for 1.34 Aeons into the future (around 4 decades in 'old' time) and waved the driver goodbye.

The dust settled and I took stock of my new surroundings. It was certainly true, this was not yet a perfect climate. In fact, it was decidedly chilly. No problem. I know all about climate change and how to bring it about. It would take a while, but with my experience and with the seeds I had brought with me, I would soon turn this around. My 'pioneer' plants were experts in taking advantage of new habitats, even very harsh ones like this. Once they were established I'd have the makings of a tropical paradise. Rain forests on Mars: that was what I had in mind.

I set to work. Aha, so there *was* water. Not far from the landing site I found traces of water bears – grub like creatures sometimes known as moss piglets. Judging by the footprints, the Martian versions were very much larger than their tiny cousins on Earth. So much for those stories about Mars being barren. What nonsense. It just required a bit more oxygen, then a bit of transpiration, then the clouds would form, the rains would come and the plants would swiftly evolve. I could already envisage thick forests of Amaryllis, stalks as big as tree trunks – the giant sequoias of my brand-new ecosystem.



I lay down on the ground and reached into my knapsack for the roll of kitchen paper and the little wooden mould that I used to make a dozen or so ecologically sound pots – excellent for giving my plants the best possible start in life. I watered them carefully with the can I had brought with me. After lunch I experimented with another method, firing off nutrient coated seed-balls with my catapult. Few living organisms can survive without the help of others, and this was my contribution.

Half an Aeon later, there was a pleasing fuzz of green. The plants were doing their stuff - adapting and competing with each other like mad. The war was on. The Martian rose was busy clearing space for itself by wielding one of its buds like a club. Its competitors were pushed aside. Some were crushed, or skewered.



The red-ground elder was thriving and there was some kind of enzyme dissolving method being developed in the undergrowth at the back of the potting shed.



The water bears had finally come out of hiding and were to be seen scuttling about, enjoying their new habitat.

The climate was noticeably more comfortable. On good days I took off my battered Barbour jacket. To be honest, I liked the calm atmosphere and the solitude of life on Mars. I was free to play around with the cameras and to record the wonders of the natural world. I watched in awe as the fronds, the ferns and the fruits developed, moment by moment. Some evenings I worked on the script. Sometimes I just gazed at the slow dance of neighbouring planets: Nicorandil, Gabapentin and Lansoprazole.

Another half Aeon passed. The taxi would be coming back soon. Just as well. The jungle was getting a bit out of hand. Some of the plants were getting a strangle hold on their neighbours - wrapping them in a seemingly tender embrace and then

draining the life out of them. Some were setting traps. There were now parts of the forest that the water bears avoided.

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The ET taxi arrived exactly on time, as always. The driver got out and looked around. There was no one about. He checked the booking. Yes, he was right, (Mars, T+1.34 Galaxy Standard Aeons).

The place looked different. He had landed in a grove of Hippeastrum, some of them nearly 50 metres tall. The entire surface of the planet was smothered in vegetation. Tendrils were already weaving around the wheels of the shuttle. No sign of David, just a watering can and a pool of liquid fertilizer behind the potting shed. There was an old Barbour jacket on a hook and what looked like databanks stuffed in the pockets.

The flowers were fantastic, huge red blooms. The climate was delicious – so much nicer than on Earth. But despite the warmth and the pleasant aroma the driver got the shivers. Time to go. On a whim he grabbed the jacket. It would have to do instead of the fare. He jumped back into the shuttle and sped off home to Leicester.

## THE PRESENT

Virgin tours are proud to offer once-in-a-lifetime safaris to Mars. A fantastic opportunity to visit the famous rainforests of the Red planet, created and filmed by the late David Attenborough. Don't miss it. Tickets available now.