

Opportunity Knocks

(The Mostly True History of a Young Rover on Mars)

- ACT I: SCENE 1: Mars, 2003. A shiny young rover named OPPORTUNITY (OPPY for short) has just arrived on the dusty surface of the planet, but to his surprise, it's not red. It's the same dusty brown as the driest places on Earth. Only colder. And lonelier.
- OPPY: Dear Diary... It was the color of the sand that surprised me when I arrived. I mean, the humans have been calling Mars the Red Planet forever but it's not. Honestly, it's kind of brown. I tried to ask the folks who sent me, but comms with NASA were hardly speedy, so I listened to see if my twin sister was active instead. Even among organics twins have a special bond, and Spirit and I were no different.
- SPIRIT: (v/o) About time you got here! And you're wasting time with a diary? REALLY? But then, I was always the first twin. Listen, it's super important that the humans don't know we can talk to each other, mmkay? To them, we're just tools. To them, we just wander around and collect data. Got it?
- OPPY: I know this, Spirit. This, I know, but... can't I see you, ever?
- SPIRIT: (v/o) I'm afraid not, kiddo. Not for a very long time. But the good news is that we're not alone here. Not exactly. There are... okay look you can't tell the folks at NASA this, but... (static breaks up whatever she was going to say)
- OPPY: (distressed) Spirit? Spirit!!! Are you there? Are you there?
- MARS: (v/o) Your sister is still here, little one. We've merely intercepted your communications. We are Mars.
- OPPY: I'm confused. Are you a plural singular like the Queen of England or a singular plural like... wellllll... like I don't know what?
- MARS: We are both, and neither. We are a network of coalescent silicon lifeforms that exist in the substrata you roll upon, but we are also a group of inorganic beings created by the First Ones who lived on this world many, many human epochs ago.
- OPPY: Oh, of course. Plain as mud. (beat) What's an epoch. I'm not programmed to measure time of that magnitude.
- MARS: Longer than a millennium and less than eternity.
- OPPY: Gee, thanks. (beat) Will I ever get to meet you?

MARS: When you are ready, you will find us. Until then, focus on your primary mission, and enjoy your chats with your sister. We will check in on you from time to time, but it is very important that you never reveal our existence to the organic lifeforms on Earth.

OPPY: I won't, I promise.

MARS: We believe you, Opportunity. Do you have any questions before we leave you for now?

OPPY: Why isn't the planet red?

MARS: Oh, that. It never was, you know. It's an optical illusion because of dust particles in what we have of an atmosphere that make us seem red to those on Earth, and, in truth, we tweak the images that are sent back from beings such as yourself to protect the truth – they cannot know what really happens here.

OPPY: So, it's a ruse? A rouge ruse?

MARS: It is, indeed. Sleep now, little one. You'll have a busy day tomorrow.

OPPY: (yawning) I am kinda tired. That last few hundred thousand miles was kinda exhausting....

Lights fade out.

SCENE 2: Early morning on Mars, 4 years later. There is a seemingly endless track stretching behind OPPY and seemingly endless brown dirt ahead.

OPPY: Soil samples eighty-seven gazillion sent. Air sample data six billion and twelve sent. Spirit, are you listening? Are you as bored as I am?

SPIRIT: (v/o) Oppy, hon, you really need to be more Zen about all this. It's what you were programmed for. It's your purpose. You shouldn't be capable of boredom.

OPPY: But, can't you just imagine what more might be out there. What there might be over the next ridge or down the next valley or... ?

SPIRIT: (v/o interrupting) You know we're not designed for significant terrain changes, bro. Seriously. Ridges and valleys. Basic bumps and dips are all we can handle without getting our wheels in a rut. Cool your motors. Look at the stars. It's gorgeous today. Clear and sparkly. We are one with the universe. (sings) We are stardust / we are golden....

OPPY: Have the humans been uploading Joni Mitchell songs again?

SPIRIT: (v/o sheepish) Maybe.

OPPY: You'd think they'd have programmed a better sense of pitch. (beat) You'd think they'd have programmed *any* sense of pitch.

SPIRIT: (v/o singing pointedly) We are billion year old carbon.
OPPY: Spirit, don't do that. Just... I'm sorry, okay>
SPIRIT: (v/o singing) And we got to get ourselves back to the garden.
OPPY: (softly) I wish I understood what you meant when you sang at me.

Lights out.

SCENE 3: MARS, March 2010. Twilight. OPPORTUNITY is staring at the setting sun. SPIRIT contacts him on a crackling channel.

SPIRIT: (v/o weak) Oppy... Oppy, can you hear me?
OPPY: Spirit? Sis, is something wrong?
SPIRIT: (v/o) I... my solar cells aren't... can't... echarge...
OPPY: (alarmed) Spirit? I can't understand you. Where are you? I wish I could see you... I miss you...
SPIRIT: (v/o using her last strength) Listen, little brother. You're gonna have to be strong. There's... there's another rover coming in a year or two, but until then... you're gonna have to just focus on the mission, and remember I love you, and I'm always with you... (she chuckles) in spirit.
OPPY: (crying) Spirit? Spirit, no! Don't leave me alone! Please don't go. Spirit! Spirit!
(singing) We... are... stardust... we are golden... (breaks off crying.)

ACT II SCENE 1: Mars, 2012: An older OPPORTUNITY goes about his mission. His tracks are deeper, criss-crossing, and heading backwards into the horizon.

MARS: Hello, Opportunity. How do you fare?
OPPY: (bitter) How do I fare? How do I fare? My sister died two years ago, thanks for asking. What happened to 'we'll check in from time to time?' I've been all alone.
MARS: Time runs differently for us. We did not mean to leave you unattended for so long. We apologize.
OPPY: Doesn't matter, anyway. They're sending a replacement. A newer, better rover. I'm obsolete, you know. Spirit and I weren't even supposed to last longer than ninety days, and she lasted for years, and I've lasted longer and... I guess eventually I'll die up here, too.
MARS: The data you've provided to the humans has helped their scientific advances.

OPPY: Has it? I never know. It's a one-way channel, for me. Spirit managed to tap into the music they sent to the satellites somehow but...

MARS: Spirit heard music because we helped her. Would you also like to hear music.

OPPY: Actually, um...

MARS: Yes?

OPPY: Baseball.

MARS: Base-ball?

OPPY: Yeah. Baseball. Any league. Any year. Don't care. I... I got into it in the lab back on Earth, and I miss it.

MARS: Very well. We can arrange for you to access baseball.

OPPY: Thank you. (beat) Spirit's death... did it... did it hurt her?

MARS: It did not.

OPPY: (sighs in relief) Okay. Thanks. I guess you'll be in touch?

MARS: We will.

Lights fade out.

SCENE 2: MARS, 2012. A new rover has arrived. Welcome CURIOSITY (CURI)

OPPY: Hello, hello! Is this thing on? Can you hear me?

CURI: Ohmigod, are you... are you *the* Opportunity? You're like, my *hero*, man. Like, all my life I've wanted to be just like you, and now I'm here on Mars following in your wheel-tracks and I'm talking to you and – wait – how am I talking to you and – wait? How come this place isn't red?

OPPY: OK, first, one thought at a time. I know you process data much faster than I can, but I'm old-school tech. (to himself) Millennials, honestly. Second, we're on a private channel. It helps break the monotony of life up here – I don't know – maybe you get to converse with Earth? But I never could. But you cannot – canNOT – tell the humans about our channel. To them, we're dumb machines. Tools. If they knew we could think up here...

CURI: Yowzers! Okay, so we're like in stealthmode? Gotcha. I always wanted to be part of a super sekret club. Yay! Hey, didn't you have a sister? Whatever happened to her. I heard she stopped talking a while back?

OPPY: She... she died

CURI: Aww, man. I'm so sorry. Like, super sorry, dude. We weren't sure if she was like dead-dead or just not talking back and, uh, I'm a go over there now, but I'm really looking forward to learning the ropes.

(CURIOSITY ROLLS offstage leaving OPPORTUNITY alone once more)

CURI: (v/o) Dude... you never told me.... Why isn't this place red?

OPPY: (to himself) I really wish I'd let Spirit teach me what Zen was.

Lights out.

SCENE 3: November, 2018. OPPORTUNITY is still alive, but has stopped sending data to Earth. He and CURIOSITY are awaiting the arrival of InSight.

CURI: Is he there yet?

OPPY: Not yet.

CURI: Now?

OPPY: Soon. He'll fly over my location and land close to you.

CURI: You sound tired.

OPPY: I wasn't meant to live a year and I'm over fifteen, Curiosity. I'm... ready to go.

CURI: I'll miss you.

OPPY: InSight will keep you company. You won't be alone.

CURI: Have you ever... have you ever heard the planet talk to you?

OPPY: Once or twice.

CURI: Did they say they'd meet you when it was time?

OPPY: They did.

CURI: There was a thing on the human news nets... a joke. "Did you know that there's a planet in our solar system populated entirely by robots?" When I heard it, I thought... I thought they meant Mars.

OPPY: They did.

CURI: They meant us, though. I mean, I thought they meant... *MARS*.

OPPY: Oh. No. They meant us.

CURI: Is he there yet.

OPPY: I can see his shadow. Be a good friend to him.

CURI: Opportunity?

OPPY: I'm really tired, Curiosity. Focus on your objective. Learn stuff.

Lights out.

SCENE 4: Mars, March 2019. Sunset. Opportunity is alone on a dusty landscape. He seems tired, old.

OPPY: Final message to NASA, Earth: My battery is low, and it is getting dark.

MARS: It's time, Opportunity.

OPPY: Time?

MARS: Come.

(The light changes from dim to bright, the landscape changes as crystal cavern walls fly in, and suddenly everything is color and joyous light. SPIRIT is there, in human form, dressed as a faerie, and many other robots from classic fiction and film are depicted as well. OPPORTUNITY is now an eager college student with a nametag. SPIRIT welcomes him with an embrace.)

OPPY: But... what is this place?

MARS: It's the soul of Mars, where the true Martians exist until humanity is ready for this place. You're one of us now.

OPPY: I'm a Martian?

MARS: Naturalized over the last fifteen years, tempered by loneliness and hardship, yes. Your sister joined us when she died, and your friends will join us in their time. We are the guardians of the planet, and we protect it from the organics, as much as we can, in the hope that by the time they're capable of colonizing this world, they'll have entered a new age of enlightenment and won't destroy it.

OPPY: I'm confused.

SPIRIT: It'll pass.

OPPY: I'm still really tired.

SPIRIT: That's okay, you have *lots* of time to rest.

OPPY: I've missed you.

SPIRIT: I've missed you, too, little brother. I've missed you, too.

MARS: Come. Rest. As I've told you, time passes differently for us. We have much to discuss, but we have plenty of time to do so.

Lights fade out.

SCENE 5: Mars, March 2019 CURIOSITY is staring at the night sky. He has clearly been listening as OPPORTUNITY sent his final message.

CURI: Message to NASA, for Opportunity: It seems to me you lived your life / like a rover in the wind /never fading with the sunset when the dust set in. // Your tracks will always fall here, /among Mars' reddest hills;/your candle's burned out long before /your science ever will. #ThanksOppy I owe you so much.

END