

Sway

Barbarians of the Red Planet

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The Martian stood outside the open window, watching and listening as a white haired woman sang along with her phonograph. The operatic tones rushed across the translucent skin of the Martian, seeming to cool him even as the sun blistered directly overhead. She could not see him—such was the effect of Martian skin on weak eyes. It rendered them wraiths to humans, visible only as shades and shadows.

He was a saboteur for the Martian tribes, appointed to be a petty criminal and a nuisance to the humans. The Martians used sabotage as a form of civil protest, anonymously working against the presence of humankind. In terms of power and numbers the Martians were dwarfed by the humans, but the Martians' natural camouflage made it easy to inconvenience them. Certainly, they could assassinate the humans with relative ease, but more would arrive in their place, thirsty for revenge. There were always more. Therefore, unofficially, the Martians created

small one-man squads to cause minor accidents throughout the human settlements. Clothes developed holes, toilets backed up, crops either drowned or suffered attacks from “Martian rats”. The Martians became gremlins and ghouls, masters of minor mishaps.

It was on one such mission that the Martian first discovered the music—he had slipped through an open window into a house he thought empty, only to hear the sudden scratch of a needle on vinyl. He did not recognize the sound at the time, but he came to associate it with euphony. Quickly, he leapt out the way he came and circled the house, coming to another window through which he saw an old, fragile woman.

The elderly woman sat on a wooden stool as she sang, her voice bold and smooth despite her age. Music was the last of her worldly pleasures, but it comforted her well. Her husband would often join her in the music parlour, pull her up into his arms, and rock gently from side to side, fully bearing her diminished weight in the only dance that remained possible for her. Today he did just the same, his eyes smiling with a damp gleam, and the Martian watched.

The music would play for the span of a few hours during the middle of the day, changing in form and style as the elderly woman switched out the black discs. Opera set the Martian’s soul ablaze, bringing to his mind the vast armies of the Martian past. They would march together as a shimmering shadow, a vast and violent shade without tree or cloud. Those were days long past, when Martian tribes warred against each other, before the disquieting peace came with humankind’s dull iron ships and far-reaching diseases. Jazz effected a deep longing which took root in the Martian’s stomach and grew up into the top of his skull. From there, it bore fruit of the memory of his beloved, long since dead from plague. Thus, the fruit grew ripe and rotted on the branch, falling from his mind as a dead lump back into his stomach, where it left him overflowing with sorrow.

The last record was always of simple songs, string quartets playing gentle, happy tunes to which the old couple danced. The humans’ method of dancing seemed simple and uneventful to the Martian, but nevertheless he swayed back and forth, synchronized with the vibrating strings and slowly revolving couple. After a few minutes of this music and dancing, the Martian would leave, uninterested by the dull tones which to his ears lacked the vivacity and thrill of other more passionate music. True, it differed enough from the Martian style of rhythmic, tonal drumming, but even the most foreign sounds lose their potency with familiarity.

Every day the Martian would visit the open window and listen to the music, letting his thoughts wash away with the wave of sounds. The music refreshed his soul as water refreshed his body, and both were rare on the desert planet. He came to rely upon it, rushing to the house daily, fearing that he would miss a single strain. Over time, the woman entered the room later and later, her every movement slowed and belaboured by pain. One day, she reached over to set the needle upon the record but dropped it too quickly, producing a harsh screech and damaging the vinyl disc. Thereafter, the old man would enter at the end of each record to change the phonograph and place the needle, remaining in the room only for their final dance.

The day came when the woman no longer entered the room at all. The elderly man still came and started each record, changing it as the needle hit the end of the disc and buzzed quietly. The woman was bedridden, as the Martian could see from another window outside the house. The man would wander about the house, preparing meals, washing dishes, doing various chores as the music played, until it was time for their dance. Since she could no longer rise even to be held aloft in his arms, the old man would sit on a stool next to the bed during the various waltzes. He would take her fragile hands in his and smilingly rock them back and forth, back and forth. She no longer sang along with the music, but gazed sternly at the ceiling, peering into a far off land which the Martian could not see. Once, the Martian saw a man clothed in black visit the ailing woman. He fed her a bit of bread and wine and spoke softly with her. She seemed more at peace after this.

The Martian quickly abandoned his mission, at least concerning this couple. Let all the other humans leave, let them die of starvation, let their families call them home. These two must remain for the sake of their music. Thus he turned away other saboteurs, telling them of all the vicious deeds he had already done to the old pair—he provided more than enough trouble on a daily basis, or so he claimed. It was his favour to them for their unknowing gift to him.

Finally, a few days after the man in black visited her, the elderly woman lay in bed and let out a low moan. Her body tensed up like a cramped muscle and then grew still. She had died. The old man took no notice until he passed by the room to change the record. Seeing the dead woman, he paused for a moment in the hall. Slowly, he walked over to her side and sat down next to the bed. The record whispered white noise for hours.

The Martian continued to visit the window, but the music no longer played, and after a few despairing minutes, the Martian would leave. Every day he arrived and stood outside the window, hoping that the old man would set his soul ablaze with opera, or plant longing in his heart with jazz, but the old man never so much as entered the music parlour. The Martian felt as if his body was stretched thin and tight, as tense as a bubble upon raging waters, threatening to burst at any moment. Nothing would satisfy him except the waves of music. The music had to begin again, even the dull waltzes would suffice. Therefore, the Martian resolved to restart the music himself. It was a simple enough affair to enter the house through the window—he could hardly be seen by so elderly a man, and so he did. The room felt strange to him, filled with wood and carpet, stark contrasts to the burgundy bricks of Martian buildings. After orienting himself, he crept quietly to the phonograph and initiated the ritual he so often witnessed. There was already a record resting on the turntable, but the Martian could not read the human runes. Carefully, he lifted the needle and turned on the phonograph, and the record leapt to life with its circular dance. When he placed the needle he let it drop a little too quickly and it produced a sharp screech, but this was soon replaced by a dark, lusty voice which sang over atonal horns and thumping bass lines. It was jazz. The familiar longing overcame his body, and the Martian reclined against the wall next to the open window. The music had begun anew.

The music had only played for a few moments when the old man slowly opened the door. His face quivered with fear and wonder, and he marvelled at the revolving disc. Warily, he looked about the room and out the window, but to no

avail: he saw no one. The elderly man walked over to the phonograph, gawked in amazement, and lifted the needle. The Martian's heart sank. The music, it seemed, had died with the woman. It was for her alone that the old man played the music. If she was gone, so was the music. However, the old man removed the record, placed it back in its sleeve, and, poring over the collection for a moment, selected another thin black disc and placed it upon the phonograph. A waltz leapt to life and filled the room, and the old man smiled. He stepped back into the centre of the room and lifted his arms in front of him as if holding something precious in his aged hands. Slowly, he began to sway, back and forth, back and forth, and it seemed to the Martian that the old man wept as he danced. From the side of the room the Martian swayed along with the old man and the music. For half an hour the two gently rocked, the Martian staring at the man, the man staring at his open palms. The record ended, and the Martian crept back through the window and left the elderly man alone.

The next day, the music resumed its former cycle, the old man entering the music parlour only to change the records, except for the last disc, during which he would stand in the room and sway with outstretched hands. Outside the window, the Martian swayed along.

