

MISSION TO MARS

A FABLE
by Greg Taylor



The retired monkeys who had traveled to space, once upon a time, were bored and got to chatting.

They were irritated with humans trying to reach Mars with their remote control go carts that kept failing. They could do better. After all, the monkeys had made as many trips to space as humans.

So the monkeys broke out of the zoo.

And built a spaceship.

Half-way through the project they ran out of funds, so they sold candy bars to children and candles to old ladies to raise money to complete the spacecraft.

The ladies and children were quite impressed with the monkey's entrepreneurial spirit.

The monkeys even attracted quite a crowd as they completed their spaceship. They only hoped the zookeeper wouldn't happen along and find them!

After weeks of building and dozens of trips to their helpful hardware man, the day came when they would launch their craft and cruise to Mars.

They loaded the spaceship with enough food for the trip, as long as it didn't take longer than a week, and prepared for launch.

Before the three monkeys—Bob (smart), Skip (cool), and Dave (dopey)—entered the spacecraft, one of the ground space crew threw...uh, a monkey wrench into the project when he asked a perplexing question.

"What is our mission?" Dan, a young grounds crew monkey, asked.

Bob the monkey-naut scratched his chin, Skip scratched his head, and Dave was picking nits off Bob.

"Indeed," said Bob, "What is our mission?"

Skip looked up into the air, waved his arm out as if sprinkling magic dust across the crowd, and said, "Our mission is...to go where no monkey has gone before..."

Dave shook his head in agreement and tried to separate his fingers with two on each side and hold it in the air, but his timing was off and he couldn't get his fingers configured just right anyway.

The old wise monkey, who they just called, "The Monk" tried to speak—which he did not often do, but his voice was drowned out by the countdown, which was set on auto.

10—9—8— time was wasting! No more time to think about the mission, Bob, Skip, and Dave had to get in the ship or it would take off and aimlessly drift without them, just like those un-Monkeyed missions the humans always sent to Mars. No, they had to get in.

"All aboard!" shouted Phil, the second grounds crew member.

The monkeys scampered onboard and took their positions, Bob in the drivers seat, Skip in front of the mirror, and Dave in the kitchen checking what would be served for the in-flight snack.

Dan, who had asked about their mission, shrugged and went to the controls to monitor the take off.

7—6—5—

From the window in the capsule, Bob stuck out his head.

"I've got it!"

"What?" said Dan and Phil at the same time.

"Our mission! It's to tell them about life on earth," Bob said.

So with time counting down, everyone agreed they would teach the Martians (or whatever lifeforms—so passé to call them Martians—they found there) the most important facts about earth.

Bob's suggestion that they tell about life on earth stuck, because they knew more about that and could easily take some photos and prepare some fun projects for the monkey-nauts to take along.

But, the countdown! 4—3—

"Hey!" said Phil, "remember when Dave was so into scrapbooking?"

"How could we forget!" all the monkeys said in unison.

"Well," he continued, "Dave gave me that great book of pictures of us swinging from trees and eating bananas on the fake zoo island, right?"

"So?" said Skip from the window of the craft.

"And the funniest picture: when the zookeeper found out we'd borrowed the zoo camera without asking and she chased Dave through the gift shop and Dave knocked down an entire display of stuffed zoo animals—yikes, I hate those—"

"Phil!" Bob said. "The countdown! We don't have time for you to get off track."

"But where is the scrapbook?" Dave hollered out the other side of the command module.

"It's in your bag! I decided you'd need it more than I will on your trip. You can use it to show the Marti—uh, the lifeforms EVERYTHING that's important about life on earth!" Phil said.

"You! Why did—what?! Why didn't you just say so!" Bob said.

"You didn't ask," Phil said, pulling his lips down over his teeth to keep from smiling.

"The countdown!" they all said, as if collectively remembering themselves and their mission.

2—1 BLAST OFF!

The monkeys were on their way to Mars.

The trip was uneventful, that is, if you consider Dave opening the hatch to try and retrieve a loose helium balloon that had risen to space, uneventful. They barely got the hatch closed before they all flew out with the balloon.

The moment they had waited for couldn't have come too soon for Dave, Skip, and Bob. They'd had enough of their cramped quarters and if for nothing else they were happy to see Mars in the windshield of the rocket to simply have hope of stretching their legs and hang from whatever trees they might find on Mars.

Bob engaged the landing gear, Skip combed his hair, and Dave nearly lapped the window like an excited puppy when he saw the ground of Mars.

"Think we'll see Martians, do you? Do you?" Dave was talking a light year a minute, nervously excited at prospect of finally landing and telling the Martians about life on earth.

Landing safely, the monkey-nauts attached the ladder they'd customized from an old playground monkey bars and climbed down. The surface was spongy, light but the air was not unlike that of earth.

Dave cleared his throat, made sure Bob and Skip were listening, then said "Uh, that's one small step for monkeys—"

"Whadayatalk whadayatalk whadayatalk!" Skip said, making fun of Dave. Skip had no idea Dave was trying to be historical.

They all breathed deeply and Dave jumped up and down and sprinted hand over legs back and forth toward a large boulder he'd seen ahead.

When he reached the boulder, he saw a pair of eyes peering from behind it, and it spooked him. He ran as fast as he could back to Bob and Skip and motioned but couldn't speak.

"It—uh—there—what—I saw—"

"Come out with it!" Bob said.

"Yes, Dave, settle down, what?" Just then Skip looked over at the boulder where Dave had been and himself saw the eyes. But this time more than eyes appeared. A dozen creatures about the size of the monkeys emerged from behind different boulders, and the one who appeared to be the leader approached Bob.

"What is your mission?" the Martian said in Universal language the monkeys somehow understood.

"To go where no monk—" Dave began. Bob slapped him back.

"Um, our mission," Bob said, "is to tell you about life on earth." The leader translated for Bob and the Martians all cheered. They'd been wondering about that blue ball in the sky for centuries, and now they would find out everything about it!

Bob and the Martian leader—Dave called him Marty and it stuck, though that wasn't his real name—decided to they would plan a seminar for the next day. They would need a day to rest. The Martians ran different ways to prepare food for the monkeys and cook Martian food, but the monkeys told them they'd brought their own food, thank you, and in fact they would show them this food as part of the seminar. Very important part of the presentation.

The monkeys decided they'd sleep better in the rocket, even though it was cramped. They were afraid of the small flying creatures that seemed to be biting the Martians and figured they couldn't get inside the rocket. They bit them anyway, and Skip seemed to garner the most whelps from the flying minions. They woke not as refreshed as they'd hoped but ready nonetheless for the seminar, which would be held in a crater, a bowl-like arena where thousands of Martians gathered.

After being introduced, Bob said, "Thanks, Marty," and launched into his presentation while Skip and Dave stood behind him with props they'd brought—bananas and the larger photos from the scrapbook.

"We came to tell you about life on planet earth!"

More cheers.

"We want to keep this simple, because you seem to be simple people—much like the zookeepers we used to keep on earth," Bob the monkey said.

"This," Bob said holding up a yellow oblong object, "is a banana. The most important food on earth."

"And this!" Dave said, grabbing the banana out of Bob's hand, "is how to eat a banana." He ate the banana so quickly that some of the Martians didn't even see him swallow. They just noticed he was now holding a limp something that Dave then tossed over his shoulder.

Skip tripped on the banana peel and whumped down on his backside. He cut his eyes up toward Dave from the ground.

The Martians laughed uproariously, slapping one another on the tops of their heads and turning extremely green while doing so.

Bob wanted to get back on point, so he swiped the photos from next to Skip, who had dropped them when he slipped on the banana peel.

"Next we'll show you photos of life on earth, then finally we will demonstrate how to swing from trees, and since you have no trees, we'll swing from the spotlights," Bob said. He showed them photos of the zookeeper, their island, the other monkeys, and more bananas.

The Martians oohed and aaaaahed.

Dave and Skip, meanwhile, were climbing up the side of the spotlight frame and met in the middle, swinging each other like flying trapeze artists to the crowd's delight. They gave them a standing O.

But shortly after the seminar, when all the Martians had gone home, Dave said what all three Monkey-nauts were thinking.

"I miss home," Dave said. He curled and pressed his lips together to keep from crying.

"Don't cry!" Skip said, slapping Dave on the back. Then seeing a nit where he'd slapped Dave, he picked it off, thought of eating it then thought better of it. Could be a Martian nit.

"Yes, you know what they say about visitors and fish?" Bob said.

"Yip," said Dave, "they both have gills."

"Whaaa?" Skip said scrunching up his eyebrows.

"No—Dave—no, they both stink after three days. I think tomorrow we shall go home," Bob said, taking pride in being the one to set the course for their adventures.

The next day the monkeys blasted off to the applause and wistful watching of the Martians who had once again gathered to see the earthlings and learn just another bit about life on earth.

Out the window Dave shouted one last parting word of wisdom to the Martians:

"Don't take any wooden nickels!" Dave had heard a zoo visitor say that and he'd always wanted to repeat it somewhere for posterity.

The Martians scratched their heads as the rocket ship lifted and zoomed out of site toward the big blue ball.

Days later the monkey-nauts were again swinging from zoo trees but now were very popular with the other monkeys. They bragged about how impressed the Martians were, how much they'd made them laugh, how one Martian—Marty—told them that they'd been convinced bananas were a very fine food that they should try to plant themselves. They figured if they succeeded in getting even one Martian to eat bananas, their trip had been a success.

The Monk was sitting quietly, taking all of this in. He'd heard all about their trip several times. Yet best he could tell, Bob, Dave, and Skip had said nothing about what life on Mars was really like. He knew Marty wanted to plant bananas, but that said nothing about Mars. As the sun set low and Phil and Dan were lighting tiiki torches for the night, The Monk threw up his arms in resignation to speak. He sidled over near the fire and sat down by Dave, put his hand on Dave's leg to still him, looked at Bob in the eyes then glanced over to Skip. He had their attention.

The Monk did not say much, but what he said left them speechless.

"You, uh, say you went to Mars, eh?"

They all nodded their heads.

"Taught 'em a lot up there, eh?"

"Oh, yes," Dave said nodding wildly. "You'd never believ—" The Monk's hand went up and stopped him in mid-sentence.

The wise old monkey thought for a long time while they waited to hear what he had to say. All the monkeys came closer.

"What," The Monk said. "What did you *learn* when you went to Mars?"

Dave had gotten nervous and started grooming Skip, and Bob was the only one who seemed to really hear the question, but he didn't know what to say. Bob looked at his fingernails, scratched his side, curled his lips then, more silence.

"You taught much. But what did you teach?"

"About life on earth," Bob said.

"About bananas, swinging from trees, but you didn't—you never thought to tell them about anything outside this zoo, never thought to bring back even a sample of the Martian life, to learn something of what they might teach us?" The Monk said, then he was silent again.

All the monkeys pulled their mouths down and nodded in agreement with the wise old man. Then Dave got an idea.

"We'll go back!" Dave said.

The Monk turned his head and scratched the side of his neck. He took a deep breath.

"Go back?" The Monk said.

"Yes, go—we'll blast off again and—" Bob said. It was the first of Dave's ideas he'd liked in quite some time.

Skip yawned. He feared the boredom of a return trip and relinquished his spot in the rocket to Dan or Phil. The two ground crew members played rock, scissors, paper to decide who would go. Phil won two out of three and would join Dave and Bob.

They also squeezed in a fourth seat for The Monk, who would lead them in first learning about Martian life, understanding their environment, then showing them more useful things about the big blue ball, like what monkey and zookeeper families are like and how they were created by someone called God long long ago. That would be a start.

10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1-BLAST OFF!