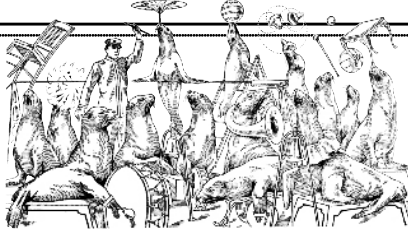


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# To the Good People of Mars



Amelia, my daughter, became obsessed with outer space the summer my husband and I separated. Three nights after I moved out of our house and into a co-worker's spare bedroom, my husband called to tell me that Amelia was building herself a space suit from aluminum foil and that she would only speak to him if their conversations revolved around astronauts. *How do astronauts breathe in outer space?* she wanted to know. *How do they become weightless? How do they learn to float? Once they leave for a space mission, how long do they get to stay away?* When my husband was unable to answer her questions, Amelia started spending all her free time reading books about space travel, and requested her after-school snack and supper be left outside her bedroom door. *This wouldn't be happening if you hadn't left,* my husband told me during one of our conversations (we had agreed to talk on the phone every other night, to try and work things out). I was sitting on my co-worker's living room sofa, staring at the fishbowl on her coffee table. Its sole occupant, a fat, orange goldfish, kept bumping against the glass and then drifting back into the water, as though stunned by the impact. I could hear my co-worker putting away clean dishes in the kitchen, and wondered how hard she was trying to not listen. I reminded my husband of the time he dreamed of being a racecar driver, or when I wanted to become a world famous figure skater. *This is just a phase, one*

*of those things that kids do*, I said. *You're not seeing what I am*, he replied, then hung up the phone.

Amelia's fascination with space didn't end when my husband and I got back together just after Labor Day, when we tore up the divorce papers and I promised to ignore his moods and he agreed to forget my fling with the man who delivered office supplies to the interior design firm where I worked, helping people choose between granite and marble for their kitchen counters, between sand dollar and silver sage for their bathroom walls. *This goes beyond the imaginings of a normal nine-year-old*, my husband said a few months after we'd reconciled, and by the time the slate-gray skies of winter had come and gone, I was forced to agree. Wandering the house in an aluminum foil space suit and refusing to take off her father's old motorcycle helmet at dinner, the face shield pulled down and gleaming like obsidian, was strange enough, but I didn't start worrying until she lost her appetite for anything but freeze-dried foods, like the astronauts ate, until bricks of dehydrated Neapolitan ice cream, ordered in bulk from a space center in Florida, replaced chicken fingers and meatloaf. She grew paler and smaller; darkness shaded the delicate skin beneath her green eyes. In the night, I would wake to rustling noises coming from her bedroom, and worried she wasn't getting enough sleep. We were called to her elementary school for a conference, during which the principal informed us that Amelia was failing to thrive, and when her report card arrived, it showed her failing every subject except math and science. That evening, my husband shouted—a clear violation of our reconciliation terms—that he'd been right all along, waving the report card over my head. I resisted telling him that I didn't object at first because I didn't want our daughter to inherit his lack of imagination, that I wanted her to keep growing her big, bold dreams.

Each time a billionaire or schoolteacher declared their plans to travel to space, Amelia tried to track them down. When Charles Simonyi, a Microsoft executive, paid the twenty-five-million-dollar orbiting fee and started training at a space center in Kazakhstan, she



prepared a letter addressed to his office, asking him to consider her for adoption. I accompanied her to the mailbox, under the guise of helping her send the letter, but returned after she'd left for school and tore open the envelope. I was pained to read that she not only demonstrated her extensive knowledge of planets and moon rocks and told him about keeping photographs of Roberta Bondar and Shannon Lucid tucked underneath her helmet for inspiration, but also wrote about her parents—our bickering about who forgot to refill the salt and pepper shakers, the stacks of files and folders from our offices that competed for room on the kitchen table, the books with titles like *Building the Affair-Proof Marriage* and *The Path to Healing* that cluttered our bedroom floor. *Help me*, I whispered to no one in particular, standing in the driveway, pressing my daughter's letter to my chest. In the end, I threw the letter away and said nothing when Amelia became distraught by Mr. Simonyi's failure to reply. *You'll be ten soon*, I told her. *Don't you think it's time to grow up?* She didn't answer, and when I lifted the black shield of the motorcycle helmet, her head was bowed and tears were streaming down her freckled cheeks.

Just when my husband and I thought we couldn't take it anymore, our midnight fights about Amelia wearing our marriage down faster than any black mood or affair, she gave us this test after dinner. *Knowledge of space*, she told us, *was essential if we wanted to keep being her parents*. Amelia had always been an advanced reader, which pleased us until we saw her test, the questions, both short-answer and multiple choice, listed neatly on college-rule paper, and realized, thanks to the tower of space books in her room, how much more about the solar system—and probably many other things—she knew. Right away, we were flummoxed by questions about the most volcanically active planet in the solar system and how long it takes a space shuttle to reach its orbital speed and the length of Mars's largest valley. Of course, we did not admit defeat, but dutifully wrote a paragraph for each short-answer and circled random letters for the multiple choice, figuring we had a twenty-five percent chance of picking the right one. We consulted

each other for some questions, but could never agree on what to select, and I almost always picked a different answer than my husband, just to show him that I wasn't going to be bossed around. *Parents are supposed to know more than you do*, our daughter said after reviewing our test results and announcing she would clearly have to build the space machine on her own, since none of the billionaires or schoolteachers or NASA personnel had replied to her letters—I said nothing about my interceptions, which had not stopped with the letter to Mr. Simonyi—and her own parents didn't know enough to be of any use. *Quite right*, my husband said, then went into the kitchen, opened the bottle of champagne we had been saving for my birthday, and started drinking straight from the bottle.

One weekend in early spring, we decided something had to be done. Since dawn, we'd been listening to Amelia hammer away in the basement, even though neither of us had any idea when she, at nine years of age, had learned to use tools. I argued that telling her to stop thinking about space, that nothing beyond earthly travel is possible, would be a terrible thing, but the astronaut ice cream was getting expensive and I knew I couldn't endure another one of her tests, so I followed my husband down the basement stairs and didn't protest when he threatened to stop her allowance if she didn't curtail her interest in the cosmos. The lights were out in the basement. I heard Amelia working with what sounded like cardboard and wood and maybe a small saw, saw the fleeting beam of her flashlight. *Maybe we need to have an X-ray taken of her brain*, my husband whispered, but before I could reply, Amelia raised the flashlight to her face. Her aluminum foil spacesuit and motorcycle helmet gleamed silver and black; she looked as foreign as a deep-sea creature, and I tried hard to picture the child underneath—pale, frightened, desperate to leave. *You don't understand*, I told her, *your father and I are here to help*. I moved towards her, my arms outstretched like a sleepwalker. My husband trailed behind me, swearing when he stepped on a sharp piece of wood. It was then Amelia shrieked and started waving the flashlight back and forth, as though she was trying to signal a rescue plane, her tin-man arms

flapping. It was only after I grabbed her shoulders in the dark and my husband scrambled to hit the lights, only after we pushed aside the lopsided mass of plywood she'd erected in the center of the basement and took off her helmet and saw a flutter of white paper, that we found the next letter, this one addressed to the good people of Mars, caught in her hair.

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## Inside “To the Good People of Mars”: Experimenting With Language

“To the Good People of Mars” emerged from a writing exercise given during a short-short fiction workshop, taught by Pamela Painter, at Emerson College. The exercise Pam gave us was called the “ABC Story.” Each sentence of the story had to start with a letter of the alphabet, moving sequentially, so the first sentence began with an “A” word, the next with a “B” word, and so on. The story also had to be written in the first person, but a limited number of sentences could begin with “I.” Additionally, we had to have one sentence fragment, one sentence that was exactly one hundred words, and one sentence that was only one word. *And* the story was supposed to be good.

To be frank, this exercise kicked my ass. I remember sitting at my desk and banging my head against the proverbial wall as I struggled to conjure a sentence that would take the story where it needed to go and—as if that wasn't difficult enough—start with the letter “K.” Or “O.” Or “Q.” And we won't even talk about “X” and “Y.” Between the assignment of the exercise and the due date, I gathered at the usual MFA watering hole (home of the cheapest drinks and the dirtiest bathrooms in downtown Boston) with my workshop comrades and complained about the exercise. *What's the point of all these rules?* we whined. *Why can't we just write a story?* But we soldiered on and when it came time to read our exercises aloud in class, I was struck by several things. An unusual amount of stories contained the

word *Xanadu*, and more than one narrator was a fan of the Xylophone, but that wasn't all! The writing I heard, from myself and from my peers, sounded different. We were trying new sentence structures, new rhythms. Our prose had gotten more ambitious. We were experimenting. Simply put, our linguistic horizons had been broadened. And, of course, this had been the point of the exercise. To make us beat our heads against the wall over language, the very thing we build our fictional worlds and characters from, to push us toward greater invention on the sentence level. In my own draft, I had gotten rather carried away, with a number of hopelessly overstuffed sentences to show for it, but, despite all the kvetching at the bar, I had enjoyed the challenge and was happy to have gotten something on the page that I wanted to keep working with.

In revision, I broke away from the "ABC" format, but the exercise was nevertheless an illuminating experience. As someone who frequently writes in the first person, I hadn't realized how entrenched I had become in the habit of beginning most sentences with "I." The exercise caused me to question old habits, to utilize the same level of imagination with the shaping of my lines as I would with my characters and plot. It made me think harder about every word, the construction and purpose of each sentence. Unlike most of my drafting, during which I usually resist the impulse to line edit, subscribing instead to the "plow through" approach, I wrote "To the Good People of Mars" line by line; I trusted the language to lead me to the story.

But, of course, there were other challenges. Since Amelia's antics build steadily throughout the story, I was somewhat flummoxed by how to end the thing. When a character keeps outdoing herself, how do you bring that momentum to a successful conclusion? How do you not let the story spin out of control, or create an ending that closes things down too much, causing the narrative energy to drop off in an unsatisfying way? Ultimately, I decided to end when things are still really on the brink, and with some ambiguity, as opposed to

reaching for a more definite resolution. I just did my best to follow the story, line by line, into a place that I hoped was vibrant and true.

There was, however, one thing I did know from the start: I wanted to write about childhood, about growing up. I wanted to capture the unfettered imaginative powers that children tend to possess and, because of their creative prowess, how their meltdowns are often acted out in more interesting fashions than adult freak-outs—which typically just lead to people getting drunk or gambling or having inappropriate sexual encounters. Bo-ring. There's also often a hopefulness in young children that can be very poignant and, in Amelia's case, that hopefulness comes in the belief that she can, at nine years of age, create a plausible means of escape from these nutty adults in her life. Naturally, her parents are at a total loss of what to say or do or think, because, presumably through the process of growing up and dealing with adult disappointments, they've lost their sense of imagination and optimism—though, at the same time, they still somehow manage to be pretty immature. I've read that Marilynne Robinson once called plausibility “purely a matter of aesthetics.” I love that quote, and I think it also speaks to the essential difference between Amelia and her parents in “To the Good People of Mars.” They have different life aesthetics, if you will, different ideas about what is possible.

Perhaps hanging on to a more elastic sense of plausibility is part of what makes writing so appealing to us grown-ups. While most of the writers I know have “grown up” in the sense that they are gainfully employed, pay their taxes promptly, and do their own laundry, the act of writing, of imaginative creation, preserves the part of ourselves that “adult living” can all too often kill off—the unbri-dled imagination, the reckless hope. And while some elements of our childhood selves might be prone to getting lost as we tread the path of adulthood and at a certain point we're supposed to put whatever happened in our youth behind us, I'm not at all convinced we, for better or for worse, ever fully extricate ourselves from the people we were as children; rather, I think those people remain fundamental

parts of our human fabric. We sculpt and adapt and finesse our childhood selves, but they never really disappear; they just become muted, like shadows, a persistent reminder of our origins. And, of course, this comes up in writing, or at least it does for me. Flannery O'Connor said (I'm paraphrasing) that anyone who survives childhood has plenty to write about. This has always felt true to me, and not because we go through so much in childhood, but because of the ferocity with which those early years linger. The notion of "resolving one's issues," particularly the maladies that date back to the days when we didn't pay taxes or do our own laundry, seems, to me, like an absurd joke. Sure, we can resolve our issues enough so they don't actively interfere with our adult lives, but can we ever really be rid of them? Do we enter the adult world already saddled with unshakable baggage, whether it be satchel-sized or more like a steamer trunk? Fifteen years from now, will Amelia still be hatching elaborate escape plans? I don't know. But, if all goes according to plan, I have plenty of time to find out. And, if I'm lucky, to write it down.



## WRITING EXERCISE

Write a story in the first person, aiming for about a thousand to fifteen hundred words, with the following stipulations:

1. Begin only three sentences with "I."
2. Have a single-word sentence.
3. Have one sentence that is a hundred words long (no semicolons).
4. Have one sentence that is twenty-five words long.
5. Have one sentence that is three words long.
6. Use two sentence fragments.
7. Have one sentence that comes in the form of a list.
8. Think about what grammatical configurations you tend to avoid and use them. Dashes, colons, semicolons (except in the hundred-word sentence!), et cetera.

## YOU MUST BE THIS TALL TO RIDE

Do your best to craft the prescribed sentences in a way that forwards the story organically and effectively, and remember that you can always disregard these stipulations in revision, if it better serves the story (I found it necessary to do so when revising "To the Good People of Mars"). The point, in the exercise phase, is to push the language, to experiment with sentence rhythms and structures that you might not ordinarily use. If you tend to be an impatient, hurried drafter, I would also suggest really taking your time and, as you write the first draft, thinking more than you perhaps normally would between lines.

Also, if you're interested in seeing the "ABC" exercise that inspired "To the Good People of Mars," it can be found in *What If?* edited by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter.