

Cat lovers will know that this story is nonsense; non-cat lovers, objective observers of that altogether unknowable, alien creature, may be led to cast an uneasy glance from time to time at the black limbo that lurks above us

THE INTERPLANETARY CAT

by Rick Rubin

SHE WAS WEANED TOO EARLY. While her sister and brother kittens were still being slapped down by their mother for trying to chew up everything in sight, Sumi was chewing at will. By the time she was two months old she had created a fine network of scars on Jim and Stella Warren's hands, arms and legs, and administered clawings to every piece of furniture in the house. Stella was perpetually out of nylons.

Sumi was half Siamese, from her mother, with brown-grey ears, tail and paws. Her body was pearly grey-white, her eyes were blue with minute flecks of green, grey and yellow near their centers. Her male parent was unknown, but from the way Sumi bit, Jim and Stella concluded that he must have been a cougar. The resemblance was particularly strong when she laid back her ears to attack.

When she ate the resemblance

was more to a horse. Eating and chewing, she seemed prepared to devour everything in sight. Dishes of milk and bowls of cat food merely stimulated her appetite. Hands and arms were canapes, visitors were hors d'oeuvres, typewriter erasers, sofa cushions and books main courses. Rugs were suitable for dessert. Anything in the house might qualify for a post-prandial claw sharpening.

She was three months old when Ted Zinck dropped by on vacation. Ted and Jim had roomed together at college, then gone their separate ways. Now Ted was a Ph.D. working with rockets and missiles in Florida.

The house was by then a shambles, shredded upholstery hanging crazily from the furniture, drapes in tatters, cat-marks everywhere. The faint odor of cat droppings hung over all, for Sumi refused to be house-broken.

"Some cat," Ted said.

"Uhh," Jim said.

"You're not too enthusiastic."

"Uh-uh," Jim said.

"Then why don't you get rid of her?"

"Not enough nerve to drown her, not anti-social enough to give her away. What can you do with a cat?"

"Mroaw," said Sumi, biting the hand that fed her.

"Give her to me," Ted said.

"I'll rocket her off to Mars."

"You'll what?"

"We need a cat to send off in a rocket that's supposed to circle Mars and then come back. It'll make Sumi famous."

"Would it hurt her?" Stella asked.

"It might kill her, but I doubt if it would hurt her."

"But would Sumi be the right cat?" Jim asked.

"I imagine she'd do. She's young and healthy. She's Siamese, and they're supposed to be among the smartest cats. Yes, she'd probably do fine. And even if she doesn't qualify, she'll be in Florida and that's too far to be shipped back. Your problem will be solved."

"Mroaw," said Sumi, shredding the last unshredded drape.

She went.

In Florida they tested and petted her, and withdrew their hands with vivid red marks. The man from the S.P.C.A. came to demand that she be well treated, and

went away nursing the tooth-marked soft place between thumb and forefinger.

They fitted her with a special harness, taught her how to procure milk and cat food, designed testing devices by the score. Then they put her in the rocket, hooked her up, and retreated to the bunkers for blast-off.

"Mroaw," said Sumi, and fell asleep.

"Varoooooom!" went the rocket.

"Mroaaaaw!" said Sumi.

She was the interplanetary cat, and the eyes of the world were upon her. Jim and Stella Warren and millions of others watched her through a direct television hookup.

They saw her chew through her harness. They saw her sharpen her claws on the rocket's bulkhead and proceed to shred everything in sight, including the camera lens. Then their screens went black.

She was the interplanetary cat, and she rode in style where no cat had ever ridden. She was in free fall, and she learned to swim through air. She chewed her way forward and she chewed her way aft. She chewed plastic, cloth, printed circuits and solid rocket propulsion fuel. She chewed a thick, multi-colored cable.

"Wham," went the cable, sparking red and white and yellow, and Sumi found herself across the rocket in a heap. She attacked again.

"Wham," went the cable.

Thousands of volts flashed through her body. She licked her chops and fell asleep. The rocket soared on, windowless in the great beyond of all catdom.

She awoke and attacked the cable again and again until finally it gave up making bright sparks and lay dead. Then she went back to eating solid rocket fuel.

The rocket neared Mars. On Earth they pressed buttons to fire the rockets that would correct the trajectory and bring the rocket on around Mars and back.

Nothing happened.

The rocket was an empty shell, plunging down toward red Mars.

"Mroaw," said Sumi, licking her chops.

"Splaaaat!" went the rocket. Blackness.

She awoke and it was hard to breathe and she felt strange. Everything was red, like pale cat food.

"Mroaw," said Sumi.

There were mountains, looking near in the thin atmosphere that hurt her lungs. She leaped at them, high in the air. She traveled through the air great distances, but the mountains retreated. She rolled in the red dust and then tasted of it.

"Mroaw," she said. "Prrrrr."

The rocket stood on its nose, all shattered and uneatable. Sumi gamboled through plains and up mountains. The world felt strange around her, but no less eatable. She chewed and swallowed. She

was a kitten where no kitten had ever been, and she could eat anything, hot electric sparks, solid rocket fuel, red dust of Mars. There were no people here to slap her behind or muzzle. Also no people to open cans of cat food or pour milk. She was thirsty. She drank from a sluggish stream. She was hungry. She chewed and chewed on a mountain.

The sun came and went a vast number of times and there were no moving things to mroaw at. The mountains weren't as large any more as they used to be. She visited the rocket and found it sadly shrunken. It was an empty husk, about shoulder high. She looked in, but could not squeeze through the gaps in the shattered hull. She could get only a single paw in.

The air was cold, but her fur grew luxuriously. The sun came and went, but in the dark time there were no mice or birds to stalk. Only red mountains to chew on and shallow rivers to drink dry. She scratched her belly on mountain tops now, and rolled on her side to scratch behind her ears. The mountains got smaller every day.

Walking was funny. She would leap into the air and the red world would recede beneath her. The claw-torn mountains and plains fell away from her, then returned to her paws. She fell, and the world bounced and shook.

She dreamed kitten dreams of cups of warm milk and cans of brown cat food, but awoke to red ground, edible but unsatisfactory. She felt dizzy, and fell to the ground, but when her muzzle was near the ground she revived. She chewed and ate and chewed.

She could see bright things in the sky. Two of them were nearer than the others. They sped across the sky. She jumped to catch them, but they eluded her. She fell back to the red-all-over ground and it shook beneath her and great cracks opened up. She went back to look for the rocket, but could not find it, until she felt a stab in her paw, and looking down, found a silver needle imbedded there. She bit it out savagely and gulped it down.

The world was all dizzy. It was moving and she could feel it twist and turn. She saw the things float across the sky again, and leaped, and this time she caught one, high in the empty air. It tasted sharp and jagged. Then there was the problem of falling back down. The ground evaded her. She clawed for it and swam toward it. She gulped for breath, but there was only a thin sharpness. She stopped trying and found that it did not matter, she could do without breathing. But it made her hungry. When she finally fell to ground again, or it to her, she clawed and ate and clawed and then fell asleep.

She awoke and ate and stalked all over the red world. It was growing so small. In four bounds she came to the cold end of it where there was snow and ice. She chewed up the snow and then there was only a wet place on the ground. She curled up to sleep where a chewed-up mountain range had been.

When she awoke her tail was cold. She chased it and found the cold ice and snow place was on her tail. The red ball was hard to stay on top of now. It kept shifting.

She ate and slept and ate and slept, and every time the cold place appeared somewhere on her body, sometimes on her tail and sometimes on a leg. Never on her face, turned toward the sun to catch its fleeting warmth. Why was the sun so cold? She wanted it to be warm. She remembered the heater at the house with people and cups of milk and dishes of brown cat food. It had been warm. She had curled up there and slept comfortably and the ice had never formed on her tail. Would she never see milk and cat food and warmth again? She was dissatisfied with red-colored food.

She swam up and caught the other thing that floated in the sky. It was as large as she, and took time to eat. Then she could not manage to get back to the red ball. She swam toward it, but it floated off around her. The kitten in her drove her to chase it, but

finally she became bored. It was only a ball, littler than she was now, all tooth- and claw-marked.

She slept. When she awoke the red ball was circling lazily around her belly. She stuck out a paw and hooked it. She pulled it to her and chewed on it for a while and then let it go. It plopped down on her stomach and she let it rest there.

She considered the universe. There was only the red ball, cradled against her stomach. Out beyond there were uncountable points of light, and in the distance the sun.

She ate the red ball, licking her chops, and there were only crumbs lying on her fur. She slept, and then ate the crumbs.

There was nothing to eat and her stomach growled ominously. Also it was cold.

She stretched toward the bright sun. It was faintly warm on her muzzle. She wanted to cuddle against it. She reached out a ten-

tative paw, but it was beyond reach.

Sumi the interplanetary cat began to swim toward the sun. Her stomach growled angrily and there was only an occasional little black piece of food that floated within reach. Her stomach was not appeased.

She swam toward the warm sun.

And then she saw a thing. It did not look good to eat, for it was all the wrong colors, but she did not care. She remembered eating white milk and brown cat food, and she had eaten a red thing too. Color didn't matter. She swam toward the new thing. It might be delicious.

On Earth, Jim and Stella's great-grandchildren and the other television viewers stared at the vast furriness of Sumi, the interplanetary cat, swimming hungrily toward them from where Mars once had been.



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