



1. The Back Seat Kids

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Whenever retired science teacher Malcolm Brimble got a ‘bad feeling in his water’ it was usually a pretty accurate portent of doom. For eight months, in spite of some powerful antibiotics, the feeling had been worsening.

“It’s going to be a disaster, Barb,” he moaned through the open door of their en suite bathroom.

“They’re saying it’s looking good,” Barbara countered. She was perched on the end of the bed, nursing two freshly made mugs of tea and staring at the TV. The pictures from *Mayflower III*, in orbit above Mars, showed the crew of Britain’s first manned mission to the Red Planet high-fiving one another.

Malcolm looked up from his ablutions and caught sight of the shaven-headed Mission Commander Flint Dugdale. “No, I can’t look at him!” He nudged the bathroom door shut to block the offending view of Dugdale spraying the contents of a can of *Stallion* lager into the zero-G atmosphere.

“People change,” his wife called through the door.

“Not that one. Not him. Five years I had him. Bottom of the bottom science set.”

“Come on, he was a teenager. The mission’s so close now; what could possibly go wrong?”

Malcolm cracked the door open. “I think you’re forgetting the *Beagle 2* disaster.”

“You don’t know for sure he was responsible.”

Malcolm snorted. Flushing the toilet, he strode out of the bathroom and across the bedroom, pausing only to grab a pair of oily overalls as he took himself off to the garage.

“Don’t forget your tea,” Barbara shouted after him. Too late, he had already made it downstairs and out the front door.

As she followed her husband with his mug, the TV transmission cut to a commercial break. An astronaut holding a can of lager was perched on the back of a rearing horse, set against the backdrop of a red desert. “*Stallion*, sponsors of *Who Wants to go to Mars*,” said the voiceover. The handsome space-cowboy lifted his visor and took a gulp from his can before thrusting the label towards the camera. “*Stallion* extra-strength lager. Putting *men* on Mars.”

In the garage, Barbara found Malcolm in familiar pose: on his back with his Hush-Puppies feet poking out from under the jacked-up MG Midget Mk III sports car that was his pride and joy.

“No use hiding under there, you silly old goat,” she said, heading for the business end of the car.

The sound of his wife’s approaching flip-flops made Malcolm retreat even further under the protective mass of the vehicle.

She toe-poked his protruding feet. “Listen. You should be proud of yourself. In a few hours’ time, one of *your* former pupils will be the first man on Mars. You’re a neighbourhood celebrity. I’d milk it if I were you.”

“Celebrity, my foot! What happens when the mission goes pear-shaped because Dugdale doesn’t know one end of an Ion Drive from the other? What will they say about his science teacher then?”

Barbara sighed. Peering through the open bonnet, past the high tension leads, spark plugs and coolant hoses, she could just make out the oily scowl on his face.

“That school trip to Stevenage in 2002 still haunts me, Barb.”

“That was twenty-seven years ago, dear.”

“Single-handedly, he destroyed *Beagle 2*. I know it.”

Malcolm’s mind drifted back to the Airbus, Defence and Space Establishment in Stevenage. The trip to see the construction of the *Beagle 2* Mars lander had seemed to go off smoothly, despite the continual misbehaviour of the thirteen-year-old hoodies in his charge. Back then, before cynicism had set in, Malcolm believed he could turn even the roughest of

Grimley Comprehensive's pupils into potential scientists. In particular, he'd regarded Flint Dugdale as something of a Challenge.

On the way back to Huddersfield, the coach had been stopped by the police following a display of mooning from the back seat. A weary-looking Malcolm had stood alongside the police officers as they searched the gang of undersized thugs for drugs, weapons and stolen goods. He barely batted an eyelid at the stash of contraband emerging from their pockets. But there was no hiding his shock at the small collection of space-age locknuts that had been discovered on the young Dugdale, hidden inside a packet of cigarettes tucked into his left sock. Malcolm had been too stunned to say anything, wondering how – and from where – Dugdale had obtained those fixings.

The bad feelings in his water had started soon after and quickly turned into a guilty obsession with the *Beagle 2* mission. He found himself following every update, every newsflash, dreading the worst. And, sure enough, on Christmas Day 2003, contact with the lander had been lost during its descent to Mars.

For years Malcolm had been plagued by nightmares, convinced the young hooligan had removed some vital fixings. And then, one cold January morning in 2015, he awoke to hear his radio alarm announce that the lonely little lander had been spotted on Mars, its petal-like solar panel still closed due to failed, or missing, fixings. Solid evidence, as far as he was concerned, that Dugdale had sabotaged the mission.

And now, by some monstrous twist of fate, that same boy had grown into the man in charge of the spaceship carrying the first group of colonists to Mars. *How could that be?* Malcolm asked himself, not for the first time. *How had they allowed Dugdale to take over after the unfortunate death of Commander Lionheart?* Malcolm could only think that the brute had somehow bullied his way into command.

Barbara tutted at the distant stare in her husband's eyes and searched for a conveniently flat surface on which to deposit his morning cuppa. Malcolm snapped out of his trance and shook his head as he became aware of her plans. "No, not on there!" he cried.

Too late. She had plonked the mug on top of the car battery, sloshing hot tea over the terminals and causing sparks of electricity to snap, crackle and pop.

Malcolm groaned and laid his head back on the cold, hard concrete as he gazed past the drips to watch his wife flip-flopping her way through the open garage doors and across the lawn. Next door, he could see the lovey-dovey couple making last minute adjustments to their Union Jack bunting. A street party had been scheduled to coincide with the descent to Mars.

Malcolm heard the woman call out from the top of a stepladder being steadied by her husband. “Hiya, Babs. Not long now. Malcolm must be so proud to think he taught the first man on Mars!”

“Oh, yes,” answered Barbara with a cheerful wave. “Chuffed to bits.”

Under the MG Midget Mk III Malcolm grimaced. “First man on Mars? Worst man on Mars, more like!”