

# ARTS & LETTERS

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE



ISSUE SIXTEEN • FALL 2006



LUCY FERRISS

## THE PEOPLE INSIDE MARS

### I.

As I cruise into Roanoke, Virginia, off Highway 460 west from Lynchburg, spring is unwrapping its presents. Buds flower on the trees; swaths of forsythia flame by the roadside. The sun's warmth, I'll report to Mark when I see him back in New York, is no passing, delicious cocktail but a steady promise, bathing the side of the Blue Ridge with bone-softening rays.

Richard, whom I'm going to visit, was Mark's best friend when we lived here. He sat next to Mark in the bass section of the Roanoke Choral Society. I sang with the altos. After performances Mark and I went out with Richard and his wife Carol to the Italian place at the Roanoke Market and drank Chianini with our creamy pastas. Richard had a job as a commercial chemist; Carol, who did not sing, was a plastic surgeon. They seemed vibrant and attractive to me. Living with their two young children in an elegant section of Roanoke, they seemed to share with each other the lens through which they looked at life. I envied them. Mostly, I envied Carol, who had calm, responsible Rich for a husband.

I follow the directions Rich has given me over the phone. He lives in the west end of the city now, in the foothills. On the phone he was excited for me to meet Liana. Liana has been in this country only 3 weeks. She comes from a small town in Russia, and she has traveled to Roanoke in the hope of becoming Rich's new bride.

The street Rich lives on is unremarkable. The houses are all split-levels or ranches, with small fenced yards and blooming trees. The air smells of dogwood. I step out of the car with the basket I've brought of cheese and fruit. I hope Rich will like it. It occurred to me, shopping, how little I know Rich, how little I've ever known him. Is he allowed to drink, on his meds? What were his interests, 5 years back, beyond his wife and his kids and his singing, none of which are in his life any longer?

When I ring the bell, the door opens wide, and Rich looks as I remember him—only, like all of us, 5 years older and 15 pounds heavier, his hair thinning at the crown. “There’s the traveler!” he says, and we air-kiss.

“A little something,” I say, handing him the basket.

“Come in! Come in!” he says. “You must meet my Iliana.”

The house is sparsely furnished—a plaid sofa and TV set in the living room, a round Formica table in the kitchen. Unpacked boxes line one wall. The place has the resigned sterility of a bachelor’s pad, but it’s clean, well-lit, normal.

“You look great, Rich,” I say.

“So do you, so do you,” he says. “How’s Mark?”

“He’s okay,” I say. “Things have been difficult. You know?”

“Yeah,” he says. “How are the kids?”

“Oh, they’re great,” I say. “They’re huge.” I hesitate, then say, “Yours?”

“I get to see them,” he says. “Sundays. Every Sunday. They can’t come over here yet, but we’re working on that.”

A thin, young woman, her straight hair chopped rudely and dyed lemon blond, appears in the doorway.

“Iliana,” says Rich.

We exchange introductions. I put her age at about twenty-two. Her teeth are brown and crooked, one gleaming with a gold cap. She speaks soft, very halting English. When I ask about her family in Russia, she smiles for the first time. “Three sisters,” she says, “and my mother. Is beautiful, where we live. Little town. Not Moscow. In south. Not like here.” She looks around her like a prisoner.

“You’ve just been through the winter,” I say. “Virginia is lovely now. It will be lovely for a long time.”

I can tell she doesn’t believe me. I want to offer her the basket of cheese and fruit, to show her the kindness of Americans, but Rich has put it away.

“Have you been teaching Iliana English?” I ask Rich.

“Oh, yes. She’s learning. She understands so well, now, that I was able to explain to her about the extraterrestrials.”

“Oh,” I say. I look at Iliana. She is concentrating on a crack in the Formica top. “That’s great,” I say.

It was about a year ago that Mark got the news from Rich. Mark was still undiagnosed then. I thought he was spending way too much time on email, but he had always been gregarious, and we were living in a small college town in upstate New York. Let him have his cybergossip, I thought, though I was slowly preparing a demand that he earn a little money.

Rich had dropped out of touch for an unexpected eight months, and then written Mark a tale of horror. He had developed a crush on a woman in the Choral Society. After a few months of mooning over her, he had confessed to Carol. Carol had gone ballistic. Her jealousy had morphed into rage, and from rage into vengeance. She had persuaded a psychiatrist that his little dalliance—and it was hardly that—was a sign of serious mental illness. To please Carol, Rich had consented to go for an evaluation at the local psychiatric institution, and when he was finished, he found that he had been involuntarily committed. They put him on mind-numbing drugs. Only through patient determination did he locate an attorney and manage, after six months, to get out. Now, he wrote, they were getting divorced, and he hoped only that he would be able to get custody of their children.

“Carol did this?” I said to Mark.

Mark shook his head and said what a bitch that Carol had turned out to be. He had never trusted her, he said. Now she made his blood run cold.

“We should have lunch,” Rich says, as we sit in his kitchen.

“I am not so hungry,” says Iliana.

“Doesn’t matter to me,” I say.

It’s only 11:30. I’d be glad for a walk, or a tour of the split-level house. But Rich is rising, making what seem like jerky motions to me.

“I must comb hair,” says Iliana.

"We'll take my car," says Rich. And I know enough, from my own experience with Mark, not to quarrel with what has obviously been Rich's Plan A. While Ilana disappears down the hallway, we step onto the front porch. A haze has come over the sun, and a light breeze has kicked up, but the air is still balmy.

"Ilana seems nice," I say to Rich.

"Does she? I don't know her well yet."

"How does this—this arrangement—work?"

He doesn't mind the question. He talks about his bride purchase as if he were talking about the organization of the Choral Society. "I chose her from a picture, of course, and then we corresponded. The organization translates the letters. I went to Russia to meet her family, then I paid to bring her here. She lives with me for nine weeks, at the end of which we decide whether we want to try sex together. At the end of three months, we either decide to marry, or she decides to go home."

"And do you think you'll marry?"

"Far too soon to tell," says Rich. "We haven't even tried sex yet."

"She seems a little homesick."

"Oh, she misses her mother. We'll have to bring her mother here, if we marry."

Mark's told me that Rich decided to buy a Russian bride because his experience with Carol put him off American women—too pushy, too self-centered, frigid, materialistic. "By 'American women,' he means Carol," I said.

"Carol, American women, whatever," said Mark. "He wants something easier."

Mark doesn't accuse me of being like American women. Just a few months ago, the doctors managed to put a name to Mark's condition: bipolar disorder, the same disease that plagued his father as well as a brother who killed himself. With a great deal of coaxing he has gone into therapy and on lithium. But what we euphemistically call mood swings have abated only slightly. Last month, we began talking divorce. In the moments when

the emotional clouds clear, he tells me that his venal emails, his harangues in the wee hours, the names he calls me are all symptoms of the enormous pain he feels, still loving me as he does and unable to have a life with me.

My therapist tells me that what Mark calls love is not love at all. But it is the love I've known, and I am a wee bit addicted to it. I don't know if others who become intimate with mentally ill people are similarly drawn into their beloveds' cycles. I am curious about Carol, but I will not look her up on my trip to Roanoke. Just as she once seemed more gifted than I at husband-picking, she could now seem more adept at separating herself from the madness that has overtaken the father of her children.

Mark has shown me most of the emails he's been receiving from Rich. They are long and obsessively detailed with the gross injustices he received at the hands of Carol and the mental health system of Virginia. Mostly they make sense, albeit a biased sense, the grain of salt we always sprinkle onto one-sided tales of marital or bureaucratic woe. More recently, however, there have been new indications. The email a few weeks back, for instance, in which Rich reported that Carol had blocked his visitation rights because he knew that his son Tyler had ESP. He suspected, Rich wrote, that Tyler had been abducted by aliens while Rich was in the hospital, but he needed to run some tests to be sure.

Rich drives Ilana and me through the sprawl of southwestern Roanoke, where the irrepressible vegetation of the South pushes through guardrails and asphalt cracks. This is the last place where Mark and I were happy, though we didn't know it at the time. I'm in the back seat of Rich's Saab, which he still drives, just as he still holds his position at the pharmaceutical company. The matchmaking organization that found Ilana may have asked for psychiatric history, but I doubt they checked Rich's version.

Lunch is at Rich's favorite deli, mostly empty at this hour, decorated with a garden-party cheerfulness and uncomfortable wrought-iron chairs. Ilana orders a small salad with a boiled egg, and Rich chides her. "She doesn't like any of the food in America," he says.

"Oh, surely you can find something." I smile encouragingly at Liانا. I wonder how much money she has promised to send back to her mother every year.

"It's not good," she says. "I need things. For to cook. I make good food."

"Potato turnovers?" says Rich, who has ordered a corned beef sandwich. "Her mom made them, over there. Best you ever tasted."

"Did you like Russia?" I say.

He shrugs. "I didn't see much of it. Just met the family. Met Il." He squeezes his fiancée's hand. She looks ready to cry. "Anyhow, all this stuff about countries, visas, nationalities. It's just temporary."

"I hope you're right," I say.

"Because," he says, "by then the Martians will be in charge."

"Will they?"

I concentrate on keeping my eyes steady, my mouth slack. I steal glances at Liانا. To arrive in a new country and begin your study of your adopted tongue with your fiancé by translating *extraterrestrial, spacecraft, abduction, intergalactic war*.

"Oh, yes. It's all written down."

"Where?"

"You can get copies on the internet. Our government has copies. All the instructions on how to surrender, what communication channels to keep open, that sort of thing. They've known about it for years."

"And you're sure these instructions are talking about—Martians?"

"No doubt of it. They'll be here in 2004, at the latest. Probably the fall. There may be a few skirmishes before then, but world governments know it would be suicide to resist. You remember TWA Flight 800?"

"Martians?"

"The CIA has absolutely no doubt. As we speak they're pumping vaccines"—he holds up his lemonade glass—"through our public water systems, so the alien viruses don't wipe us out as a species."

His tone is patient as a schoolteacher's. I'm reminded of the small cluster of born-again Christians I knew in college, who spoke of the second coming uttely without embarrassment, as if their spiritual truths were as universally acknowledged as the price of milk.

"I thought," I try, "that the Mars probe had failed to find the minimal conditions necessary to biological life on Mars. I mean, appropriate gasses in the atmosphere, that sort of thing."

Rich rolls his eyes in the direction of Liانا, as if he and she have faced this nonsensical question together before. "They're not on Mars, Lucy," he says. He takes a big bite of his corned beef sandwich.

"They're not? But I thought you just said—"

He holds up a hand. I let him finish, swallow, take a draught of the vaccinated lemonade. "They're *in* Mars," he says. "They live within the planet. They pump in their own oxygen. Carbon dioxide for the plants, artificial sunlight. It's perfectly simple."

"Oh," I said. "I see."

## II.

One sunny day when my son Luke was five, he looked up at the sky and said, "I just wish we could get through."

"Through what, honey?" I said.

"The sky," he said. "To see what's on the other side."

"Well, honey," I said, "there really isn't another side. There's our atmosphere, and it ends. But you can see past it. That's how you see the sun, the stars."

"They're on *this* side," he said.

"Side of what?"

"Of that—that hard blue thing. The outside part. Of the earth," he said. I crouched so we were eye to eye. "This exchange took place in Roanoke, our first year there. We lived next to a meadow. There was plenty of sky. Luke, we live on top of the earth," I said.

"No, we don't. We live inside it!"

His lip had started to quiver. I reached for his hand. "No, honey. Inside is all the rocks and stuff. We're on the surface. Then there's the air, and—"

"I don't want to talk about it!" Snatching his hand away, he clapped both hands over his ears.

"Aren't you worried," I ask Rich, "about this imminent invasion?"

"Not at all." He slides his pickle into his mouth, "It's going to happen, is all. You might as well say it's history, already. No point being worried about history." He looks at Iliana, who has barely touched her salad. She makes an effort to smile. "But you might say we're preparing," he says. "They will want married couples. Getting together with Iliana—well, it's been more efficient, you might say, than dating and all that."

"They say arranged marriages work out approximately as well as love matches," I say. I'm glad I don't know this young Russian woman very well. It would be harder, otherwise, to tamp down this instinct to snatch her out of here, to rescue her.

"I do not like this sauce on salad," she says. She hasn't understood a word we've exchanged. "Richard is wanting me fat," she says, and sips her iced tea through a straw. "Like pig."

I refuse to think about this comparison. "Why will they want married couples?" I ask Richard.

"You know. To go there. To live among them for a while."

"Inside Mars?"

"Or on an interplanetary vehicle. This isn't just about the Earth," he says.

We like to imagine civilization as a laboratory, and a laboratory is contained. I think of the first *Star Wars* film, where Harrison Ford walks on the bridge of what appears the interior of a gigantic aluminum bubble; about Huxley's *Time Machine*, where the beautiful Eloi of the Earth's surface are raised as cattle while the industrious Morlocks underground "had retained perforce rather more initiative, if less of every other human character."

When the Europeans first came to America, one of the things they thought entitled them to dominion over the land was its inhabitants'

tendency to dwell uncontained upon it. They tried to teach the Indians to fence their lands, to palisade their villages, to set their houses upon foundations sunk into the earth. Danger, to the settlers, dwell relentlessly out of doors, on the limitless prairies and outside the encircled stagecoaches.

I sometimes think, riding my bike to work or walking my dog, how poor our imagination is when it comes to the environment of other worlds. We can conjure other beings, like C.S. Lewis's Venetians in *Perelandra*, made of "a very faint rod or pillar of light . . . [speaking] in a strange polysyllabic language." We can give them buildings, certainly, and vast underground bunkers of the sort Rich has mentally tunneled into Mars. But the only things moving through the imagined air are machines or pterodactyl-like birds. Here, we have milkweed pods, winged maple seeds, swarms of swallows and bees, leaves, clouds, pollen, precipitation. Yet no one asked of the movie *The Truman Show*, "What did they do about migrating butterflies?" In spite of lessons on atmosphere, we think of the air as empty. Even ecologists referring to "spaceship Earth" forget all this uncontained stuff.

My husband is mentally ill, like Rich. Although bipolar disorder is rapidly becoming a fashionable disease, the favorite disability of artists and composers, Mark's symptoms are primarily a puppy-dog friendliness followed by paroxysms of rage. In my more skeptical moments, I attribute Mark's dysfunction less to chemical imbalance than to the accumulated bad habit of invading other people's "space." I've found myself establishing and firming up what therapists call my boundaries, the emotional limits beyond which Mark may not pass, a sort of psychic force field I am supposed to set up around myself.

Believing in spaceships, in this sense—in underground Martians, in floating labs for interspecies reproduction, and so on—is one way to believe that certain places are safe and others not, that we can close up the hatches and tend to business, venturing out only when we choose. And if we are caught in someone else's enclosed space—well, it's like boarding

TWA 800. You've put your fate in their hands, so relax.

Before I leave Roanoke, Rich and I talk about the Choral Society. The conductor was out last year for back surgery. The group traveled on tour to Romania last summer, while Rich was in the hospital. Since then he's been too busy to rejoin. Getting his news off the internet, he explains, takes about 5 hours a day.

Choral singers tend to have little confidence outside the rehearsal hall, and few social skills. Mark's exceptionality to this rule was part of what drew me to him, and part of what drew him to Rich. What I remember from the weekly rehearsals we all attended was how heartily Mark and Rich laughed at the mid-rehearsal break, and how they both flirted with women—Mark more aggressively, Rich with a slow gleam. A few times, back in our sections, I glanced at the basses. His resonant voice held hostage to musical ignorance, Mark hooded his eyes and bent his head toward the text as they ran notes. Rich, by contrast, held his music at shoulder-level and kept his eyes on the conductor. "You look like a groupie," I teased him once, as we headed out of the hall.

"I lift up my eyes unto the conductor," he said, "from whence cometh my help."

"Rich sucks up," said Mark.

"At least," said Rich, "I won't be doing any unexpected solos at the concert, like one guy I know."

We stepped out into the sweet night air of the Blue Ridge. We all felt cheerful, then. The music cheered us. We would say things like, "I'm in a good space."

### III.

Four months after I leave mad Richard and sad Liiana, waving through the screen door of their split level, I hear they have tied the knot.

Mark and I move apart. By the time of the World Trade Towers attack, we have divorced. In the news are the Raelians, who believe that human beings were produced by cloning from extraterrestrials, and that it is our duty to clone ourselves in preparation for our foreparents' return. I am certain that Richard has joined this cult, or at least subscribed to its tenets. Last I heard, he believed that the 9/11 attacks were perpetrated

either by aliens or by CIA striving in vain to thwart aliens.

I don't understand this sort of belief, but I do understand the lure of it. How much more satisfying to locate that act of terror in the master plan of an alien race! How much firmer a foundation for humankind, the replication of others! Any child tracing a drawing knows the stress-relieving freedom of following the lines through the thin paper. Any congregant mouthing "made in God's image" expresses her desire to be a clone of the divine. To say, in the case of invasive extraterrestrials, "I want to believe" is to say, "I want to be mad"—but do I not also want that exception? Why, oh why must I participate in human responsibility?

Likewise, I want the exceptions the world yields to Mark. Of course I do. To release my inner brat, alternately overstimulated and flung into tantrum—now there, I think, is a liberating disability. To stop wrestling with my emotions but to let them, like giant waves, sink or lift me to shore—I'm tempted. I'm ready. I'm there.

Only I'm not there, of course. Not because I don't want the world regarding me as a mental cripple—the world's regard, especially in these upside-down times, seems a paltry thing to cherish. And not because I think the logic offered by Rich's cosmology or Mark's pathology is too ridiculous to stand up. For all I know, there are extraterrestrials among us. For all I know, the hostilities in the Middle East are merely a sham fight disguising a powerful disagreement among warring alien tribes as to who should have dominion over the Earth in—what is it now? 2008? 2011? And for all I know, I should—like Mark—blame my genes, my childhood, and the forces arrayed against me for all the wrong turns in my own life.

So neither social prejudice nor intellectual judgments steer me clear of my desire to go quietly, happily, off my bean. Rather, I think, my enjoyment of Rich's beliefs lies in their very fictionality. Mundanity is the soul of reality. Rich is not excited about the Martians, about their intricately executed world inside the red planet, about their galactic plans. To him, these are cosmic policy, from which he draws both his dread and his course of action: marry the Russian girl, be prepared for the spaceship kidnapping. To me, the whole thing is great—it's an alternative, a lark, an occasion for frisson.

My refusal to join Mark in his manic swings is different, mostly because I have lived so close to those swings that their allure comes always with the depressive's keen awareness that the bubble will explode, the parachute rip. His reality is not so much factually wrong as it is plastic. The world's colors, shapes, sizes depend on his manic or depressed state of mind. Thus, the same thing that tempts me to the liberation of my twin-poled self—the release into mood—cautions me against it. If I give myself to my moods, then my moods own me, and I have no desired to be owned.

I sing in a different choral group now, but the faces and personalities are much the same. The women have bad haircuts and sit heavy in the hips; the men are balding and beer-gutted. We tackle the same warhorses—Bach, Verdi, Mahler, Dvorak, Brahms. When we come together in the Tuba Mirum of the Verdi Requiem or the Agnus Dei of the Bach Mass, we lift out of our lumpy bodies. For those few moments in the concert hall, the music abducts us, and we are momentarily formed in the image of some wild, blissfully manic creator. Fixed within the boundaries of practice, of meter and harmony and dynamic, we break into a space where nothing is contained but everything contains us, and at those rare moments we are not afraid.

I do not know if Rich or Mark is still singing, but I hope so. They were beautiful when they sang, like the spring in its exuberance, and equally sane.

OR