Life, abundant and with simple joy

Found in translation.

Sarah K. Castle

Eshe Mintz was one of the lucky millions who experienced the martian first contact as it occurred. She was up giving the Batemans' baby, Madeline, a bottle at 09:13 GMT on 7 November 2018.

She'd been following one of the consensus-driven decapodes on the I-TV in the nursery. The decas were her favourite of all the robots dropped on Mars for the mission dubbed Robot Rain. A big, six-legged mother would go as far as it could, then reel out the decas. At half-a-metre long and ten centimetres wide, the ten-legged wonders could go anywhere.

This deca was exploring a lava tube near Tharsis Montes. The views were mostly of rough, black rock, but there was an action vote about every half-hour, which made it more exciting than the longer-ranging surface robots.

The viewers were considering whether to wiggle through a rock pile, hoping to find a side passage, or to continue down the main tunnel. The consensus-tracking bar showed opinions almost equally divided and bouncing towards the side exploration. Everybody loved mapping new passages, but the chatterbox showed strong opinions that they'd fallen too far behind the International Space Cooperative's scientist-driven decas. They'd gone farther down the main tunnel.

Because the side passage was slightly favoured, the deca poked its head into openings in the rock pile while the debate continued. During one of these pokes, Eshe thought she saw something light-coloured, unusual in a basalt tunnel. She leaned forward, tapping the screen to change her vote to favour the side passage, and her torso pushed Madeline's bottle aside, breaking the baby's suck.

Madeline cried. For her first few weeks as the Batemans' nanny, Eshe had taken the crying personally, thinking she'd done something wrong. Now she knew it was just a reaction to some discomfort the baby felt. As soon as she could make it right, the crying would stop. By the time she got the nipple back in, the chatterbox was filled with shouting.

"IT'S ALIVE! IT'S ALIVE!"

The consensus-tracker showed 96% had changed their votes to the side passage at

the same time Eshe had. The consensus was so strong, the ISC decas had turned in their tracks and were coming back.

Eshe maximized the window, her hand shaking on the mouse. The deca had wriggled through the rock pile and come into a wide new tunnel. A line of slumped, lumpy figures stood in the view, glowing with faint white-orange light. They looked like white-sheet ghosts, sagging under the weight of their bulky heads. The deca triangulated to report a height of 1.3 metres.

Still as statues, they might have been stocky stalagmites except for the roughly oval areas on each figure's crown, fading from pale pink to yellow. The colours streamed across their heads, travelling down the tunnel and out of sight, like lights along a runway.

Traffic jumped in the chatterbox. It switched to sample mode, randomly displaying from the submitted comments. Everyone shouted.

"STROMATOLITES?!?!"

"IS IT MOVING?"

"IT'S TRYING TO COMMUNICATE!"

The ISC decas arrived. Their cameras swept the scene methodically. One skittered towards a white figure and poked it with a tiny, tubular sampler. The lights on the figures' crowns quickly faded to a uniform deep red. The comments stopped streaming for long seconds until the colours returned to their paler shades, fading and travelling from figure to figure.

A new comment finally flashed on. "IT SPOKE. IT'S ANGRY."

Links appeared in the chatterbox, leading to sub-discussions with titles like 'What Is It Saying?', 'How Does It Eat?' and 'Can It Know God?'. Madeline fell asleep, but Eshe couldn't take her eyes from the screen. She kept the baby cradled in her crossed legs. Comfortable, Madeline slept, her quick, wet breaths keeping a steady rhythm.

The results streamed in all night. The figures stood on a mass of water ice. The tunnel's atmosphere had a significant methane component. A steady breeze blew through, bringing dust particles from the surface, which caught on the figures' sticky skins. The sampled cells were prokaryote, but with a number of exotic cell types of unknown function.

When the sky turned from black to deep blue outside the nursery window, Eshe was tracking the 'What Is It Saying?' discussion. Thousands of amateurs and dozens of professionals were analysing the sequence of colours modulating along the figures' crowns. Many claimed they'd identified patterns. Some experimented with transforming the flashes into sets of integers, trying to parse mathematical or grammatical syntactic units. Eshe thought she saw one or two figures keeping a steady tempo for short periods of time, but otherwise it looked random.

The morning's first birdsong surprised her. The night hours had flown by. Regan, the Batemans' two-year old, began singing softly in the adjacent room. Eshe imagined the small girl, lying in bed, enjoying the sunrise colours lighting up the walls. Snippets of *Frosty the Snowman*, *Did You Ever See a Lassie* and *Are You Sleeping, Brother John?* were strung together in no particular order. Madeline stirred in Eshe's lap. It would be time for another feeding soon. Before she stood to get the bottle, she submitted her first and only comment to the discussion.

"They sing with simple joy," she typed, resisting the urge to shout. She carried Madeline to the window. Eshe looked up at the brightening sky, laughing quietly with giddy wonder.

Sarah K. Castle (www.skcastle.com) is a geologist and science-fiction author in Flagstaff, Arizona. She's been published in *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* and *Helix: A Speculative Fiction Quarterly*.

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