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STUDENT WRITING SAMPLE

Alone on a Red Planet

by Jake Van de Walle, Grade 8, Brady Middle School

It woke up, and the first thing It met was a red rock.

The next several thousand things It met subsequently were also red rocks.

After a while, It began to wonder if everything on the planet was a red rock. Past data certainly said so. But correlation did not imply causation, so It went in search of something that was Not A Red Rock.

It searched for a long time.

Back home, Houston reminded It of what It was searching for. It already knew. Two parts hydrogen, one part oxygen. Not a Red Rock.

And It searched for Not A Red Rock in the only way It knew how.

Scoop.

Examine.

Red Rock.

So. Drop it. Continue.

It picked up, examined, and later dropped a whole lot of Red Rocks over time. The stars were a brilliant display above It, but not once did It decide to look up. It rolled along.

Scoop.

Examine.

Red Rock. Red Rock. RED ROCK.

On and on and on.

Every so often Houston would say, "Three more months till you come home. Two months. Twenty days. Ten. You're coming home soon."

Home? Happy thought. It began to count the days.

"Five days," Houston would say, "till you can come home, buddy."

Five days!

"Three days left," said Houston.

Two!

One!

...

Nothing.

Houston was not speaking.

Home today? It tried.

Perhaps It had counted incorrectly.

Three days went past in silence.

Maybe, It thought, maybe I am not doing my job well enough to come home. Maybe I need to find Not A Red Rock before I can.

So. Scoop.

Examine.

Red Rock.

Drop.

Repeat repeat repeat.

It rolled very far. It picked up many red rocks. Once or twice, It nearly went to sleep. But It pushed on, always on, until It could find one and go home.

Houston? It would ask. Can I go home now? I think I picked up that last rock very well.

Houston?

I am tired. There are too many Red Rocks. That is all that's here, I think.

Can I go home?

Red Rocks.

Repeat repeat repeat. And the years passed thusly.

It grew tired, so tired. It felt unable to roll at all, not an inch more.

It stopped dead in the dust one day, treads jammed.

Scoop.

Examine...

Red Rock.

Drop.

Scoop...

Drop.

Houston? It wondered weakly. The sun is going out. I really want to go home now.

Houston? It's getting dark. The dust is red, it's making me tired. I did not find a Not A Red Rock. I can't look anymore.

Houston was silent. He pitied the small thing, alone on an alien world, Red Rocks forever. Always wanting to come home.

A channel clicked open, one that had been welded shut by time and Red Rock monotony.

Houston?

"I'm sorry."

It's getting dark.

"I know. It's time for you to go to sleep now."

Will I come home?

"You need to sleep. It's for the best."

Houston?

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

And he was.

Home?

It went to sleep. Like a bed and a blanket, red dust settled around it. Red Rocks. Red Dust. Red Wind. A Red World. It slept and did not wake up, not when the dust crawled into Its circuits and Its brain, not when Its treads fell off, not when Its arm fell limp.

"I'm sorry," said Houston again.

Click. Silence.

He was sorry wondering whether It could please come home. But it was for the best. Better to sleep than to roll around forever, wondering when It could come home. Alone on a Red Planet. 🌌