Earlier that morning, George left Shallot's home willingly with the medics. It would be embarrassing and futile doing anything else—he would have preferred running, buying himself some time. Instead, he complied—he would be hunted–and quietly rode in the van to the Clinic. At the front desk he filled out a questionnaire, had blood taken, was ultra sounded, then taken to a modest room with no lock on the door. He was in the wing for new patients. It was quiet, perhaps he was the only patient.

From what the front desk told him, he understood most of the Clinic was a morgue.

His room had a large TV and a small notebook computer, a bed and an armchair, an adjacent washroom. No windows, plain walls. They told him he was free to decorate the room, and they had available posters. They took his clothing and handed him the off-white robe and pajamas of a patient.

George pretended he was not nervous, not frightened. He knew he was expected to appear calm and compliant. After he was dressed as a patient, with an ID tag around his neck, one of the staff gave him a brief tour of the facility: labs, staff cafeteria, offices. He saw no windows, no other patients. He drew his robe tightly around him, feeling sealed in.

He was allowed no visitors, no phone calls. Several of his friends, over the last couple of years, had entered the Clinic. None left. They showed him the small gym, empty, unused. He was told exercising was voluntary; in fact, everything was voluntary. Nothing was expected of him except to be there. Watched. Every area he could enter had surveillance cameras in the ceiling.

He had a TV and a notebook so he could play ***Mars and Me***. George was told to relax. He received no medications. They told him, for now, all they would do is watch. He was not suitable for the new remission medications.

Great. This was it? His life from now until he died—in a few weeks?

"Our head physician is waiting to see you. He has some introductory information. And your care plan."

He was taken to a man in his seventies, gray hair tied behind his head in a ponytail. He wore the standard white jacket and pants but over his heart was a smiley face.

(C) Victor Schwartzman 2025. All rights reserved. http://www.VictorSchwartzman.ca

When George was led in, the doctor stood, shook his hand, then sat with him on a small couch. There were no windows here either. The doctor smiled, not hiding he had sat with a new patient many times.

“Welcome…George,” he began, to his credit trying to make this speech sound different. The patient had never been through this before, the doctor a hundred times. “I know you’d rather not be here. And you think this is a dead end. It is not. Although you should know, off the top, our new medications have not been effective. That’s why you haven’t been given any.” He smiled, appearing engaged. “I’m Dr. Thomas Setter. I run the Clinic. I have hopes for you. You may be different.”

George looked at him steadily, hands in his lap, gripping each other. He had already been fed so many lines. “Oh? How?”

Dr. Setter showed George his blood tests, the scans. His blood and hormone levels had reacted differently from other patients. The eventual collapse of the body physically was not occurring in George—maybe would not occur at all.

George listened. “Uh huh. What the hell’s inside me?”

Dr. Setter leaned forward and patted George’s clenched hands. “Martians. They are not microbes. We do not know much. There is no indication of a problem until physical symptoms appear. The boils. The moving lumps inside you. We think the moving lumps are the microbes joining together. What they would form, we do not know. Unfortunately, no one has lived long enough. The tissues we have recovered are…confusing. Human and alien.”

“Tissues? If I die, you dissect me?”

“I’m certain that will not be necessary.” Pat pat.

“I’m becoming a Martian? I’ve heard the rumours.” George shivered.

“You tell us.”

George sat forward. “I’d like to tell you to go to hell.”

“That is understandable.”

(C) Victor Schwartzman 2025. All rights reserved. http://www.VictorSchwartzman.ca

“If you can’t help me, what the hell am I doing here?”

“Being observed. Every case is subtly different. And isolation is important until we understand more. We do not believe your situation is contagious, but…” Dr. Setter leaned back, composed. This was going as well as it could. Although George was smarter, more arrogant than most.

“Lucky me. So what do I do now?”

“Live as long as you can. With our help. There’s no evidence the organisms intend danger. We think they are parasites, trying to use you as a host. But the human body has trouble adapting. The organs collapse first. When it hits, it is quick.”

George put his hands over his face and began to cry.

The doctor gave him some orange juice and a Fizz pill.

George refused the pill. “There’s no one here, in the gym, anywhere. Is there anyone like me I can talk with?”

“There’s one young woman, your age, admitted two days ago, but I don’t think she is ready to see anyone. And there is one, but he can no longer talk.”

Dr. Settler led George out of the office and down the hall. They turned a corner, opened a door to a long, clean corridor. George’s corridor. There were four doors on either side, all closed.

“Eight rooms,” Dr. Settler told George. “The doors are not locked.”

“What will happen to me?”

“One down the hall is wasting away. We don’t know why some are affected and others aren’t. Why you are infected. Clues point to individual DNA, body chemistry, hormones.”

George looked at the closed doors. He thought of opening one and looking in but did not want to see his future. “I want to talk with my friends.”

“Sorry,” Dr. Setter replied. “Isolation protocols are necessary.”

(C) Victor Schwartzman 2025. All rights reserved. http://www.VictorSchwartzman.ca

“Uh huh. Even though you don’t think I’m contagious. Thanks for everything, doc. I know you’re doing your best.” George left him and went to his room, closed the door, and turned on the notebook, to get lost in ***Mars and Me***.

He needed to get lost, away. He had too much to think about and nothing he could do but wait.

He shook a little, looked at his hands tremble. Wanted to get up and put his fist through the cheap wall. But what good would that do?

He looked up and saw a surveillance camera in the ceiling, looking back.

He was in health jail.

He had done nothing to deserve this. All he did was drink water. He had dreamed about his future. Maybe joining the dome workers, theirs was the most dangerous, exciting work. He had never volunteered; his interest was more…philosophical. But he did think about it.

Now he’d never find out.

He was thirsty. He opened the small fridge and spent a long time looking at the bottles of water waiting for him. And a package of simulated baloney.

He wished Shallot was here. He could talk with her, share. He had a real connection with her, before he became sick. Then he went a little crazy.

What would happen if he went a little crazy *here*?

He looked at the walls, alone, wishing Shallot was with him. Maybe she’d find a way. She was resourceful.

(C) Victor Schwartzman 2025. All rights reserved. http://www.VictorSchwartzman.ca