

“Dream Big”

“Welcome Home”

By Emma Larkin

A severe jolt awoke my once calm nerves. The heat around me was unbearable. After hours of absolute chaos, everything was silent, beside the beeping of my own suit. The change of sound was quite relaxing. The bright colors all around us blinded our eyes. After seven months of nothing but darkness and fluorescent lights, my straining eyes were overjoyed to see so many variations of red and orange and even a little of brown. Through the window to my left, I could see the dust form a protective circle around our base, enclosing us in its embrace until the dust dispersed into the air. Ignoring the ache in the back of my head I pushed myself out of the capsule and into the bright light that seemed to call to me like the pull of a magnet. I knew what the light meant. I knew what it meant for all of us. It meant taking the first step into something bigger than ourselves. But most importantly, it meant saying goodbye to everything I have ever known. I knew that the moment my feet landed on the rocky planet below me, there was no going back. It had taken me three years before I even boarded the rocket to accept the fact that my old life was gone. I wasn't sure I was ready to say goodbye to the only place I have ever known. The thing that really scares me is I'm still not sure.

As I walked to the end of the long corridor, my mind raced to my past. I thought about how long it had taken me to get to where I am right now and what I was about to do. I thought about my high school teachers who always told me to never give up. My college professors who gave me way too much homework, but undoubtedly helped me on my journey to get here. Everyone at SpaceX who encouraged me to apply for the opportunity of a lifetime. And for my old boss, who told me about all my potential. That it would be a shame for Mars to miss out on me. But most importantly, I thought about my grade school. Academy of the Sacred Heart. The place where my love of the cosmos started and was fueled for a life stuck in the stars. My obsession started in the third grade when we first learned about our solar system but grew in sixth. My teachers smiled whenever I rambled about different space facts and shared with me what they knew. A couple of my teachers would even give me their old books about astronomy. I treated those books like the bible and read them every night. I definitely think I would not be here today without the Academy, and I am forever in debt to it for that.

The light had faded into nothing by the time I reached it. All that was left were the thousands of buttons and controls on all the walls of the rocket. A green light flashed behind me, signaling everything was ready for opening. My pulse was racing. My lungs took in a deep breath, thankful for the supply of oxygen to them. After what seemed like a forever of routine checks, we were finally ready to open the doors. We all stood there, eyes wide, while butterflies had a party in our stomachs. A loud clunk was heard probably for miles as the latch was opened, and we were ready to take our first steps onto the new world.

In the beginning, there was a long debate over who would take the first steps. During the seven months it took to get there, the question was on everyone's mind. *Who gets to step out first?* Of course, we all wanted it to be ourselves. We had a couple arguments, a lot of fights, and some debates until the conversation died due to lack of interest. I guess seven months of fighting was too much for our stressed minds. But once we stood there, doors open, the new world waiting for us, the question was back on our minds.

The next moment was the moment that would be remembered forever, even by me. The moment man became interplanetary. But never in a million years did I think I would be the one to start it. By the arms of my own colleges, I was pushed off the platform and onto the red soil of the new world. The sunrise over the red mounds was all I could ever hope to see. Tears slipped from my eyelids as I took more steps on the ground of my new home. As I saw my colleges, or as I still like to call them, my friends, I turned and said two simple words to them. Words I know will be recorded and remembered for a long time to come. My hand reached out to hold those of my new family. "Welcome Home."